



Cruise Lines International Association (CLIA) is the global peak body for the cruise industry, representing 95% of the world's ocean-going cruise capacity. CLIA also serves as a non-governmental consultative organisation to the International Maritime Organization (IMO), an agency of the United Nations.

During the COVID-19 pandemic CLIA Australasia took the lead in engaged closely with cruise lines, travel agents, Government agencies and other stakeholders as we worked to meet the challenges presented.

While we are willing to provide further submissions over the course of the enquiry, please find brief comments on aspects of the COVID-19 response.

AHPPC

The decisions of the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC) had profound consequences for the cruise industry. The cruise industry complied with all decisions and directions of AHPPC. Like all Australians, the cruise industry's priority was health and safety during a period of great uncertainty.

Like any complex industry, cruising can be quite technical and small changes to rules can have a profound, unexpected and unintended impact. The cruise industry reaches well beyond those that travel or work on ships. Any changes to operations echo through a wide supply chain and impact hundreds of thousands of people, both directly and indirectly.

With AHPPC deliberation and decisions made without early and direct consultation, directions made (and complied with) presented major challenges to the industry, its participants and cruise travelers.

Early and direct engagement with industry ahead of decisions would mitigate any unexpected and unintended impacts.

As a global industry, working with governments and health experts in multiple jurisdictions, the cruise industry also had much to offer by way of experience and operational knowledge that could have formed part of the decision making process, particularly in relation to decisions that affected the wider industry.

Counterpart organisations in other countries, such as the USA Center for Disease Control, and equivalent agencies in the UK, Europe and Asia, actively engaged with the cruise ship industry directly to understand the operations onboard and we believe this assisted greatly in the safe return to business much sooner than occurred in Australia.

We believe many challenges could have been avoided with more open dialogue and collaboration between health authorities and the cruise industry.

Treatment of Seafarers

As the pandemic hit and the decision was made to shut the industry down, there was an urgent need to repatriate seafarers who work in the cruise industry in a safe and timely way.

Despite the industry offering many ways to safely achieve this, seafarers were not granted safe passage from seaports to airports. This resulted in seafarers stuck on ships for many months, with clear impacts to physical and mental health. In a time of great uncertainty we believe this outcome was unacceptable and easily avoided. More effort should have been made to help all maritime workers to return to their home safely, including Australian maritime workers returning home from overseas.

It is worth noting Australia was not out of step with other nations in regards to this issue. It is a great shame globally that seafarers that provide the lifeblood of world trade were not treated with any kind of priority in terms of facilitation of movement. On this point we wholeheartedly support the submission made by Maritime Industry Australia Ltd.

Long term focus

The travel industry is subject to long lead times and the cruise industry is no exception to this. Cruises are often booked years in advance, and ships make decisions on itineraries to cater for this. As the pandemic reached its later stages, the industry sought to understand the future settings post-COVID for 2024 and 2025. However, no vision was shared and no certainty was offered.

Furthermore, the ban on cruise was continually extended in rolling three-month blocks, leaving the industry and those who depend on it unable to plan for their future. Despite advising the restart of cruise requires significant lead times for preparations, notice was provided just one month prior to the ban lifting and many months after the rest of the economy and society returned to pre-COVID settings.

This left the industry unable to effectively plan for the lifting of the ban. While we appreciate the future was always unclear, a good faith attempt to collaborate with industry on future settings would have been appreciated. However this was not forthcoming and as a

result the industry recovery took far longer than it should have. Indeed, it was only in October 2023, some 18 months after the ban was lifted, that the industry reported that normality had been restored in their operations.

The continuation of the COVID-era protocols for cruise until September 2023, again many months after they were lifted for the rest of society, exacerbated the slow restart and added considerable pressure to the businesses providing cruise holidays and those that support them. While driven by the States and thus outside the terms of the reference, coordination by the AHPPC could have assisted to transition the industry to societal settings far sooner. The rest of the world had moved on, with Australia one of the last regions to return to normal operations.

Once again, this uncertainty, lack of transparency and delays in returning settings to normal had implications well beyond the cruise ship operators. It impacted travel agents, providores, wholesalers, hotel providers and thousands of others who rely on the cruise industry for their livelihoods.

COVID-19 Consumer Travel Support Program

CLIA would like to echo the comments made by the Australian Travel Industry Association (ATIA) in their submission to the Inquiry.

Travel agents and tour providers are a critical segment of the cruise industry, and the CTSP allowed these individuals and businesses to remain open and employed during a period of significant uncertainty. Combined with the support from JobKeeper, it allowed this industry to retain staff and ensured the restart of the cruise industry could happen as quickly as possible.

However as ATIA points out in their submission there were a number of issues with the design and administration of the program that resulted in suboptimal outcomes. The ATIA submission outlines these issues in great detail and we fully support their position.

We also echo ATIA's recommendation to release the review of the CTSP carried out by Austrade. The COVID-19 Response Inquiry should examine this review, as there are undoubtedly lessons to be learnt from the processes and approach adopted.