

# Passengers with disabilities – correspondence received

## Introduction

Further to an article published in FEEDBACK Issue 51, relating to passengers with disabilities, **CHIRP** Maritime has received much correspondence on the subject both from (ex) mariners and those without any seagoing experience. The correspondence has been varied in nature both with respect to the standards that the reporters expected prior to embarking, and what was actually experienced.

The correspondence has been discussed with the cruise industry and the **CHIRP** Maritime Advisory Board, (MAB), who have commented upon the concerns and suggestions of the various reporters. This article describes in general terms the correspondence received from reporters, and the resultant advice given to **CHIRP** Maritime by the cruise industry and MAB. It should be read in conjunction with the article published in FEEDBACK 51 (link - <https://www.chirpmaritime.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/CHIRP-MFB-51.pdf>)

## Reporters' comments

The following comments are a précis of reports from several correspondents. It should be noted that there are both positive and critical comments within the various dialogues.

- at all muster stations, there are lifejacket lockers on the outside deck immediately adjacent to any muster stations where disabled passengers are liable to be called in the 'unlikely event' of an emergency, so it would usually not be necessary for a return to the cabin to collect a jacket.
- crew members assigned to muster stations scan passengers attending with a bar code reader which identifies the passengers' names and cabin number, and also any disabilities. There are crew members dedicated to looking after such passengers - and we have been assured that these crew will be alerted to 'meet and greet' should the occasion arise. Wheelchair passengers will normally be last to embark into lifeboats so that there is no need to go to the lower seating level common in lifeboats that are also used as tenders in anchorages.
- when mustering for drills, arriving passengers were checked off using a key card system (not dissimilar to the bar code reader mentioned above).
- there are suitable means on each deck to avoid the use of lifts and crew members are trained and assigned in their use. The means of getting disabled passengers down what could be many flights of stairs is similar to the arrangement that one often finds in tall buildings – a small portable arrangement which can be carried by 2 or 4 people, and not dissimilar to that used in aircraft to enable wheelchair users to pass up and down narrow aisles.
- as to grab-bags, surely every passenger would have one containing essential medicines - in fact on our most recent cruise in June 2018, our cabin steward asked without any prompting if we would need one and if so, said he would arrange for one to be supplied before the ship sailed.
- my wife has been wheelchair bound for several years - if we were not happy about the arrangements made for disabled passengers, then we would not cruise!
- specific joining instructions highlighting all issues/requirements for disabled passengers including a pre board emergency brief might be a useful idea to explore.
- trolleys blocking alleyways – This should be quite simple to rectify as it is a housekeeping issue. The industry has for years highlighted unsafe conditions where emergency exits were obstructed for a variety of reasons. Similarly, oilskins over BA sets and the like. This is not a million miles away from that line of thought and perhaps should be promoted as blocking an exit.
- it was reassuring to learn that crew member(s) are assigned to assist each disabled passenger. My wife and I had wondered if this were the case with our Muster Point not being near the disabled Muster Point. (**CHIRP** Note – *this is a case in point where the information could have been given prior to or immediately upon boarding. It also reinforces the need for passengers to ask if they are uncertain*).

- it is tempting to dismiss passenger's concerns as ill-informed whinging... I know from my days at sea I endeavoured to persuade my colleagues to take criticism constructively and not to resent it.
- as usual there was the mandatory drill when we left port and this was conducted well from our point of view, at our Muster Point. The departure drill was marked by orders being given to passengers, as they arrived, so that the Theatre filled quickly and efficiently. A good example of crowd control.
- there was also a drill later in the voyage since this was a lengthy cruise. This drill was poorly conducted, I wasn't the only person to think this, as there were retired seafarers onboard and they were also of this opinion. Other passengers looked on it as another lot of nonsense to be endured and the impression we got was that the crew thought the same.
- ten minutes prior to commencing the drill, stewards began to direct people towards their Muster Stations. The only benefit was to get people into the Muster Stations, and seated, before the bells were rung. This surely partly compromises the exercise since one of the reasons for a drill is to analyse the pattern of passenger behaviour and response times from the alarm sounding until Muster Points report everyone being present. The time, in this case, was meaningless.
- once at the Muster Point it was immediately obvious that no-one was in charge. This drill was anarchic, passengers arrived and decided for themselves where they were going to sit or, indeed, if they were going to sit at all because the aisles and stairs were crowded with people just waiting to get out as soon as the word was given. The instructions were also poor, compared to the first drill. This was the case at other Muster Points, according to others that we spoke to - hearsay evidence, I know, but believable.

## Comment from the cruise industry

The cruise industry and **CHIRP** Maritime Advisory Board have reviewed the issues highlighted above. The following comments are generic and not specific to any one cruise company. The comments show an awareness of some of the concerns raised, with steps being taken to ensure that passengers with disabilities are both aware of the procedures to follow in any given emergency and are properly assisted throughout.

- when passengers initially consider booking a cruise it is important to identify the precise individual needs. Whilst this factor might not be fully considered by travel agent(s), it should certainly be mentioned by the passenger(s). If the travel agent is not able to answer queries, the cruise industry suggested that direct contact be made with the individual company – many of the major cruise operators have specific personnel to assist with resolving any concerns that disabled passengers may have. There is a concern that some passengers fail to declare their disability which lends itself to problems when actually on board a vessel.
- the cruise sector stressed the importance of the vessel and her crew being aware of specific disabilities both prior to boarding and immediately upon boarding. The following comments were highlighted;
  - it is important to identify the exact nature of the disability – vibration pillows, flashing lights, etc. can be provided to assist with awareness in emergency situations, but prior knowledge is required.
  - there are a restricted number of adapted cabins available at any one time. This may include passengers who are travelling for therapeutic respite as an integral part of their recovery.
  - prior to boarding, passengers should ensure that they are on a list indicating that they would need assistance in the event of an emergency.
  - from both the crew and the passengers' perspective it is important to fully engage upon boarding. Many cruise operators have specific crew personnel to assist with disabled passengers – these personnel become the key contact throughout the voyage. An emergency briefing highlighting specific actions to take in an emergency should be given by the key contact. This may well be dependent upon the exact disability but could be “stay in the cabin and assistance will come, or if not in your cabin then proceed to the muster station”. If not in a cabin and unable to proceed to a muster station, then ask the nearest crewmember for assistance – trained crew will then be able to come to help. From the passenger perspective, if at all in doubt as to what would be required in any given emergency, then ask.

- one cruise company highlighted the fact that their nominated disabled cabins were clustered around one muster station. Another company mentioned that their cabins are spread out so that they are **not** clustered. The rationale for this is as follows;
  - with the majority of disabled personnel in a single location, trained expertise can be at hand to assist with boarding.
  - Conversely one of the biggest challenges is boarding a lifeboat rapidly and effectively. The last few passengers, (disabled) will take the longest to board.
  - SOLAS requires 30 minutes maximum to evacuate – this is based on a lifeboat capacity of 150 persons. Lifeboats (marine evacuation systems) can now hold 400 persons. Add in worried passengers and this becomes challenging.
- one of the biggest changes being considered is the use of lifts. The thought process of “do not use” is being challenged due the larger number of personnel to evacuate which might be as many as 6,000 on some of the larger passenger vessels. One line of thinking is that **if** the lift in question has an independent power supply **and** the emergency is not fire, then it might be considered safer and more effective to transfer passengers up ten decks in 10-20 person lifts. It would be a judgement call for each company as to the safety of doing this and as to prioritizing disabled passengers. However, the subject is being widely discussed across the cruise sector.
- many cruise companies have “stair chairs” at every stairwell for use in an emergency for those passengers who have severe mobility issues.
- one cruise company mentioned that they do **not** advise passengers to go back to their cabin to collect lifejackets. Many operators are moving away from this “historic” practice which might potentially send persons into danger. Lifejacket lockers may now often be found by the muster point and/or lifeboat / liferaft embarkation point. In part the ability to do this is linked to the age of the vessel, and the physical practicality of relocating jackets from cabins to locations near to the lifeboats or rafts.
- one cruise company commented that they specifically train crews in “Crisis Management and Control”, including refresher training. With respect to the comment of passengers being directed towards muster stations prior to commencement of a drill, this is done simply because passengers often turn up early. Thus, a part of the crowd control is settling the early arrivals prior to the onrush when the bells are rung.
- the industry confirmed that best practice with the management of disabled passengers is up to the individual cruise company. The regulations in the US (American Disabilities Act [ADA]) and similar EU regulations are followed to the letter but anything above this is entirely down to the company.
- without specific knowledge of the exact nature of a passenger’s disability or disabilities, then there remains the potential problem of having trained crew to cater for the exact requirements of the passenger – a case in point is manual handling of a passenger. **CHIRP** received one comment to the effect that there is a thought process where if a passenger cannot board without limited assistance, then travel may not be permitted.

The Maritime Advisory Board also commented that although the more well-known cruise companies do implement good practice with respect to disabled passengers, there is a huge diversity between best and worst in the industry. The airline industry limits the number of disabled passengers for flights – but one passenger vessel was stated to have 89 disabled passengers amongst a total of 2,500.

## Conclusions

Overall **CHIRP** would comment that in the absence of any common rules or practices, possibly the best advice is to ensure that all of your requirements are known prior to boarding. If the booking agent cannot help in this respect, then go directly to the shipping company who should be able to help with any specific queries. Once on board, the specific requirements should be confirmed as soon as possible.

With respect to drills, if they are not taken seriously then they can quickly turn into chaos. This of course is universal and not restricted to either the cruise sector or disabled personnel. If drills are treated with disdain or just as a “tick box” exercise, then the conduct of the drills becomes a safety culture issue to be addressed.

Potentially, a crew member being asked a question and giving a quick “don’t worry” response rather than a considered, informative response is again a safety culture issue.

As an analogy to this article, there is a question related to hotels. “What is the first thing you do once you have checked in?” The correct answer is not to unpack, nor to head to the bar, but to carefully read the emergency instructions – usually on the back of the door or close by. In this way you become aware of the correct actions to take in an emergency **and** know the way out via the emergency exit. The same thought process should apply for passengers on cruise vessels and it does not matter whether you are disabled or not – the thinking should be “If I need to, how do I make my way to safety?”

In the unlikely event of a full emergency, the fresh, well maintained resort that will comfortably accommodate your dream holiday can quickly transform into a nightmare of chaos and confusion. Take a few minutes at the commencement of your voyage to familiarise yourself with your escape and survival plan. It may make all the difference.