

# 'S.S. Ebola' passengers show good humor on cruise despite viral anxiety



Christine Wade, a nurse at the University of Texas Medical Branch, greets Carnival Magic passengers disembarking Sunday in Galveston, Texas. (Jennifer Reynolds / Associated Press)

By **GEOFFREY MOHAN**

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**T**hey dubbed the ship the S.S. Ebola, bellied up to the bar to spend \$200 vouchers, and shared wild rumors for several days at sea. But when passengers of the Carnival Magic stepped ashore in Galveston on Sunday morning, their vacation smiles soon faded to frowns of wary bemusement at the phalanx of television cameras there to greet them.

The Ebola scare was over. The media infestation was in full force.

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**FOR THE RECORD:**

An earlier version of this post said the CEO of Carnival Corp., Arnold W. Donald, visited the Carnival Magic. The CEO of Carnival Cruise Lines, Gerald R. Cahill, visited the ship.

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A Dallas hospital worker had long since left the ship, escorted off shortly after 5 a.m., after blood tests ferried by helicopter from the vessel the day before confirmed what her lack of symptoms suggested: She had no evidence of infection by the deadly Ebola virus that was in blood samples analyzed by the laboratory she supervises at Texas Health Presbyterian hospital in Dallas.

Sunday, in fact, was the first time the captain or crew had used “the E word” in daily announcements informing them about the status of an unnamed passenger holed up in her cabin with her husband, according to several passengers.

“The first time that word was said was this morning,” Stephanie Kirbo, 38, of Brownwood, Texas, said as she rolled luggage toward a black pickup truck.

“We all knew,” added her friend, Billy Willis, 57, shrugging. “We had CNN in our rooms. We knew.” He and his wife, Patti, are fellow congregation members of Kirbo, who also traveled with her in-laws.

The party had been waiting to go ashore in Cozumel, on a prepaid excursion, but after several hours of waiting while Mexican authorities came aboard, passengers soon realized no one was going ashore.

“They did us right,” said Willis. “They gave us \$200 off our tickets, half off a cruise, free drinks at dinner.”

None of the group was too concerned about Ebola contagion, having learned about the disease over the weeks since a Liberian man was diagnosed with the infection, and later died of it, at the Dallas hospital.

“If I get Ebola, I’m going to buy a lottery ticket,” Willis said.

Others, however, were less blasé about contagion, and less charitable about the cruise line's response.

“Nobody knew what was going on. Carnival didn’t give us much information,” said Mike Gray, 50, an aviation worker from Wichita, Kan. “They didn’t come out and say what was going on until we already heard about it on CNN.”

He stood in line for a shuttle bus with his wife, daughter, her boyfriend and a grandson, nicknamed Turbo.

"Lots of rumors" filled in the gaps, Gray said. "We heard all kinds of stories -- everything but the truth," Gray said. "That was the part that irritated me more than anything. Other than that, it was a good time."

The family was going to swim with sea turtles during the Cozumel stopover, they said.

But ship officials soon told passengers they would be headed back to Galveston, and offered each passenger a \$200 voucher and 50% off another cruise, Gray said. "Bars were three or four deep once they made that announcement" he said.

"It's an unknown, so of course you're a little bit worried about it -- We've got kids," said Cedric Roberson, 54, of Lancaster, Texas. "But everything turned out OK. The good Lord took care of us. We're good to go," he said as he rolled luggage down an alley in the wharf area, going toward a parking garage.

"From my understanding, she was on our floor -- we were on the second floor," said his wife, Martha Blair Roberson. "They sent a letter out yesterday that [said] they were going to test everybody before they got out, but then they got the test results."

On Sunday, passengers clutched new letters, from the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta. The information sheet did not mention the negative test for signs of the virus, but said that by Monday, the passenger would reach the end of the 21 days in which Ebola generally causes symptoms.

Passengers had filed past another health advisory: A poster, near the restrooms inside the terminal, warned of symptoms of the H1N1 influenza virus that killed at least 18,000 people worldwide during a 2009 pandemic, according to the World Health Organization. Some experts believe it factored in the deaths of more than 10 times that many.

The ship was notified Wednesday of the woman's presence on board, and after she spoke with officials from the CDC, she agreed to stay in her cabin, said Carnival Cruise Lines' chief marketing officer, Jim Berra. "She was completely asymptomatic," he said. "As a matter of fact, she was monitoring her temperature even before she got on board."

Ship medical personnel monitored her condition and took her temperature, Berra said.

Passengers said the ship lingered several hours past its scheduled departure from Belize, while it appeared that officials debated whether the passenger could get off the ship there. When it arrived in Cozumel, Mexican police and port officials boarded the ship, and soon it was announced that no one

could set foot on Mexican soil.

Carnival Cruise Lines Chief Executive Gerald R. Cahill traveled to Galveston and went aboard the Magic, talking with passengers, a company spokeswoman said. He was not immediately available for comment. Carnival sent Berra and a squad of public affairs staff, bolstered with hired personnel from PR firm FleishmanHillard in Houston to handle the crush of media.

The Carnival Magic was cleared to sail again Sunday without any special cleaning required, Berra said. But workers were using bleach foggers and wiping down all surfaces, from its decks and railings down to casino chips, he said.

Its sailing offers a measure of consolation to health authorities who have faced criticism over their handling of those who may have had contact with Thomas Eric Duncan, a Liberian man who was treated at the hospital, where he died Oct. 8.

A nurse tested positive for the virus after traveling to Ohio last weekend and returning to Dallas on Monday, reporting a fever. The nurse, Amber Vinson, was transferred Wednesday to Emory University Hospital in Atlanta.

CDC officials said Vinson had been told to avoid public transportation, including commercial airlines, while she monitored herself for symptoms. Agency director Dr. Thomas Frieden said her trip, which began before fellow nurse Nina Pham had been diagnosed with an Ebola infection, violated that restriction. The agency, however, approved her return trip.

The family disputes the CDC's version, saying Vinson had approval for the round trip.

Pham was transferred Thursday to the National Institutes of Health clinical center in Bethesda, Md.

Vinson's airline travel sparked a flurry of calls to passengers who shared her flights on Frontier Airlines, and those who traveled on the aircraft on its subsequent trips. But only a handful of the passengers who were seated close to Vinson are being actively monitored for signs of Ebola, according to CDC spokesman Tom Skinner. Scores of others, however, remain under monitoring in Texas, effectively quarantined by voluntary orders.

Several of Duncan's family members, as well as others who had close contact with him, will reach the end of their quarantines this week.

Passengers appeared relieved Sunday that no such restrictions would apply to them. But several still clung to the humor that got them through the last few days of their one-week western Caribbean

cruise.

“I called my boss, to see if they wanted me to come to work tomorrow or take three more weeks off,” said Gray.

No such luck, he added.

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## UPDATE

**Oct. 21, 9:16 a.m.:** This post was corrected to reflect that the CEO of Carnival Cruise Lines, Gerald R. Cahill, visited the vessel.

**3:58 p.m.:** This story was updated with the Vinson family disputing the CDC's statement that Amber Vinson traveled without authorization. It also includes a paragraph about the 2009 H1N1 influenza pandemic.

**5:31 a.m.:** This story was updated with quotes from the cruise line spokesman.

**5:10 a.m.:** This post was updated with the Dallas hospital worker's test results and quotes from the cruise line spokesman.

This story was first posted at 3:28 a.m.

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