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Why don't cruise lines notify passengers of itinerary changes?



On The Spot by L.A. Times Travel editor Catharine Hamm

Question: I was booked on a Carnival Cruise to Catalina and Ensenada, Mexico, during the week of a big storm. When I got to the port, I learned the itinerary had been changed to Cabo San Lucas, Mexico, because of weather. I was seasick for two days because of the high seas. If I had known, I might have skipped the cruise. Why don't cruise lines notify passengers of itinerary changes as airlines do?

— Julie Bixby, Huntington Beach

Answer: Because there's no real reason to do so, at least, not until customers or business considerations demand it.

Airlines constantly deal with all sorts of issues — weather, equipment, personnel — that can result in gate changes, delays or cancellations. Not so the cruise lines.

But, you may argue, wouldn't a port change alter your trip? Its character, perhaps, but probably not its logistics. And remember, under its ticket contract, the cruise line can change its port of call at will. Translation: No refunds.

Also, itinerary changes are made close to departure times, said Jennifer de la Cruz, a spokeswoman for Carnival Cruise Lines.

Airlines have developed notification solutions for last-minute switches. Airlines once used their agents to notify passengers of problems, but that was time- and labor-intensive, said Robin Rees, the director of public relations and customer programs for Varolii, which creates systems used by such airlines as Alaska and United. "Automated communications technology can proactively reach much larger numbers of passengers much more quickly," Rees said. "If an airline contact center has 30 agents, and each agent can make 10 calls an hour, that's not very much. Varolii can do 20,000 to 50,000 in an hour."

Unlike airlines, cruise ships don't deal with those kinds of numbers (although as ships get bigger, who knows?) and they don't live and die by split-second timing. "The only time we would really need to notify guests ... ahead of time is if there's a significant delay," De la Cruz said, "whereby we would encourage them to arrive at the pier later or if the cruise is going to be delayed by a day" for some reason.

End of discussion? Not quite. Some experts think cruise lines could make better use of mobile communications. "In my opinion, cruise ships are still playing a catch-up game," technologically speaking, said Artyom Astafurov, senior vice president for DataArt, a "bespoke" software provider that also creates notification systems for travel companies. "The whole experience of being on a cruise ship is not that technologically supported. If you are notified on board, it will be done through the public address system" — not exactly cutting-edge technology, he said.

For cruisers, advanced technology could be double-edged. It might be great to learn of an itinerary change, but will you be happy when you receive a text saying the men's sexiest legs contest is about to begin? That there's a jewelry sale? That today's drink special is a sour apple-tini? If your vacation is about being unplugged, that might be, like that apple-tini, a little hard to swallow.

Have a travel dilemma? Write to travel@latimes.com. We regret we cannot answer every inquiry.

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