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Norwegian Cruise Line to start Florida sailings in August with vaccine requirement for now

By RICHARD TRIBOU
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Norwegian Escape sea trials

Norwegian Escape completes sea trials in the North Sea off the coast of Norway ahead of its official handover to Norwegian Cruise Line in October 2015. (Michel Verdure for Norwegian Cruise Line)

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Norwegian Cruise Line revealed Monday that more ships will return to sailing, including from both PortMiami and Port Canaveral this year, and it will stick with plans to require passengers to be vaccinated for now.

Norwegian Gem is slated to begin seven-night Caribbean sailings from Miami beginning Aug. 15 with Norwegian Escape from Port Canaveral beginning Nov. 13.

“All initial voyages will operate with fully vaccinated guests and crew,” according to a company press release, although just how the ships sailing from Florida will deal with the state’s “vaccine passport” ban is still in the works.

Norwegian Cruise Line Holdings President and CEO Frank del Rio thanked Gov. Ron DeSantis for efforts to get cruising running again in the state. Del Rio had previously said that the company that also runs Oceania and Regent Seven Seas may have to avoid Florida because of the state’s stance on vaccine requirements.

“We are currently in communication with his staff and legal counsel to ensure that we can offer the safest cruise experience for our passengers departing from the cruise capital of the world,” del Rio said.

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An existing executive order from DeSantis as well as a law he signed that goes into effect July 1 would fine companies that require proof of vaccination to the tune of \$5,000 per instance.

The two Florida ships were among a larger swath of planned sailings announced by the line, and they do include sailing from New York, California and Alaska in the short-term.

Norwegian Breakaway will sail from New York to Bermuda beginning Sept. 26; Norwegian Bliss to sail from Los Angeles to the Mexican Riviera beginning Oct. 24; and Norwegian Encore to take over the previously announced plans to sail Bliss from Seattle for a shortened Alaska cruise season beginning Aug. 7.

With the update Monday, 23 of the 28 ships across the Norwegian, Oceania and Regent brands have announced plans for resumption of service. Several ships among Oceania and Regent also have plans to sail as early as November from Miami. Other ships such as Norwegian Getaway, Epic and Jade are being deployed in Europe.

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The line also has sailings on its website from Miami on Norwegian Sky beginning in September and Norwegian Joy beginning in October, and from the port of Tampa on Norwegian Dawn beginning in December.

All sailings require the ships to have their conditional sailing certificates from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The CDC's requires cruise lines to either go through test sailings to prove out their COVID-19 safety protocols or ensure that at least 98% of crew and 95% of passengers are vaccinated.

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Cruise lines that cater to families with children not eligible to be vaccinated would not be able to meet those thresholds, so companies such as Disney Cruise Line and Royal Caribbean have opted to perform the simulated sailings in order to get the OK from the CDC.

Other lines such as Celebrity Cruises are sticking with the vaccination requirement. Celebrity Millennium sailed with such a requirement from its home port on the Caribbean island of St. Maarten this past weekend, marking the first major cruise ship to return to action in the Caribbean since the industry shut down in March 2020 as COVID-19 grew into a global pandemic.

The line plans to sail Celebrity Edge from Port Everglades on June 26, which would make it the first major cruise ship to sail from a U.S. port since the shutdown.

Ships were first blocked from sailing from U.S. ports by the CDC with a no-sail order, that morphed into a conditional sail order that does not expire until Nov. 1, 2021.

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