

MSNBC

How safe is that cruise ship anyway?

By Rob Lovitt

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□ To hear some folks tell it, cruising is one of the safest forms of travel in the world.

To others, it's an exceedingly risky proposition where you run the risk of robbery, sexual assault and death.

The truth? Few really know and those that do, aren't talking.

The subject of the relative safety of cruising is once again in the news. On Nov. 22, Kert Clyde Jordan, 35, of Grenada was charged with engaging in a sexual act with a minor while he was employed as a waiter on the Carnival Liberty.

That news comes on the heels of several other incidents, including an outbreak of Norovirus that sickened 148 on Holland America's Ryndam, the death of a Celebrity Eclipse passenger after a parasailing accident in the U.S. Virgin Islands and reports of a dead newborn found on the Carnival Dream in mid-October.
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Worse, say industry critics, such seemingly isolated incidents are indicative of a much larger

problem. “I would say that what the cruise industry claims [in terms of passenger safety] doesn’t correspond with the reality,” said Ross Klein, a professor at Memorial University in St. John’s, Newfoundland, and the publisher of CruiseJunkie.com.

“It’s probably a little better than it was in previous years,” said Klein, “but it still has a long way to go.”

That gap was supposed to be closed with the passage of the Cruise Vessel Security and Safety Act last year. In addition to mandating 42-inch guardrails, peepholes in all passengers’ and crewmembers’ doors and on-deck video surveillance, the law also seeks to improve the process by which cruise lines report thefts, sexual assaults and other alleged crimes to the Coast Guard and FBI.

But despite the new law, the way incidents are reported is already generating controversy.

“The number of cases reported are in line with those reported in previous years and are fully in keeping with the requirements of the law,” said Lanie Morgenstern, director of communications for the Cruise Lines International Association, a cruise industry trade group.

Not so, counters Kendall Carver, chairman of the International Cruise Victims Association: “Instead of reporting all alleged crimes as required by law, they’re only reporting cases where the FBI opens a file and decides to take action — minus cases that are still open,” he told msnbc.com.

According to Carver, whose daughter, Merrian, disappeared from the Celebrity Mercury in 2004, the problem is much larger than the posted numbers suggest.

As evidence, he points to historical data that shows at least 100 alleged crimes per quarter on board cruise ships as recently as 2007–2008. By comparison, the most recent reports, which are compiled by the FBI and posted online by the Coast Guard, show six incidents in the second quarter of 2011 and none in the third quarter.

Part of the discrepancy lies in the way the numbers are reported. “There is potentially a slight disconnect between the number the public sees, which is the number of closed cases, and the number of cases that actually occur,” said Alana Juteau, spokesperson for Rep. Doris Matsui (D-Calif.), who introduced the bill. “There could be many open but those numbers don’t go on the website.”

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Cases in point: Neither Kert Clyde Jordan’s alleged sexual assault nor the dead newborn found on Carnival Dream would show up in the statistics. Nor will the FBI discuss the cases due to their open status.

“The reporting of an incident doesn’t automatically mean there’s been a crime,” said Kurt Schmidt, a supervisory special agent in the Bureau’s violent crimes unit. “If someone is saying that we’re supposed to report all incidents, that’s not true.”

What is true is that when it comes to determining the number of onboard incidents, there’s a gap in the new law that you could steer a cruise ship through. On the one hand, the cruise lines are required to record all onboard complaints; on the other, the FBI is only empowered to report cases that are no longer under investigation.

So what’s a concerned cruiser to do? Given the disconnect between reporting and recording, the scale of the problem will remain a point of contention. As result, potential cruisers would be wise to take the precautions necessary to ensure their own safety and security:

- * Sexual assault: “Public restrooms are a significant risk factor,” said Klein. “A woman should never go into a public bathroom alone after midnight.”

- * Physical violence: “If someone is being belligerent or in your face, walk away,” he said. “It’s not worth ruining your vacation.”

- * Robbery: Don’t flash large amounts of cash or expensive jewelry and be extra cautious about big winnings in the casino. “Big winners are targets,” said Charles Lipcon, a maritime lawyer and the author of “Unsafe on the High Seas: Your Guide to a Safer Cruise.”

- * Child safety: Despite the “happy bubble” atmosphere on board cruise ships, the reality is that they’re like floating cities full of strangers from around the world. “If you were in a city, would you let your 13-year-old go walking around alone at midnight?” asks Lipcon. “I don’t think

so.”

* Foodborne illnesses: Norovirus and other gastrointestinal problems are transmitted via fecal-oral contact, which is why it’s important to wash your hands regularly and avoid touching your face. Furthermore, advises Klein, “Avoid foods that people can get without using utensils.”

* Shore-based accidents: When it comes to parasailing, ziplining and other activities, be cognizant of your own physical limitations. “Be aware of your normal activity levels,” said Klein. “If you’re not likely to do it at home, don’t do it on vacation.”

And, finally, says Lipcon, be aware that the best defense is simple common sense: “Keep in mind that 10 to 12 million people go on cruises every year and, for most of them, it’s very safe,” he told msnbc.com. “The No. 1 thing I see where people get into trouble is when they just do something really dumb.”