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All aboard for a cruise to nowhere

In tightly restricted Hong Kong, 'seacations' — round-trip jaunts into international waters — are proving popular, but do they offer a sense of escape or underline the city's isolation?

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© Bill Butcher

Thomas Hale OCTOBER 28 2021

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For most of the coronavirus era, Genting Dream, a Hong Kong cruise liner that looks from a distance like it might exert its own gravitational pull, has been out of action. Now, while it can't visit anywhere, it can at least go somewhere.

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The so-called "cruise to nowhere" is an improvised solution for an industry hit early and hard by the [pandemic](#). While landing at other ports is still prohibited, Genting Dream has from July been permitted to set sail each Wednesday and Sunday evening, cruising out into international waters, only to retrace its route a few days later. Genting, the Malaysian conglomerate that owns the ship, has already run similar expeditions from Taiwan and Singapore and its competitor, Royal Caribbean Cruises, has launched its own version.

At a time when much of the world is opening up, a cruise to nowhere is a nautical embodiment of Hong Kong's response to the coronavirus. Even though travel is technically possible, it is fiercely disincentivised. Anyone entering the territory from anywhere other than mainland China, Taiwan or Macau is subject to either two (rarely) or three (mostly) weeks of hotel quarantine. Rooms are limited, expensive and often disastrously small.



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It is unclear when this state of affairs will end because, although the city has had an infection rate of only about 0.02 cases per day since August, it has high rates of vaccine scepticism, arising in part from suspicion of the authorities. The vaccination rate for over-80s is a startlingly low 16 per cent. This contrasts with what can only be described as devotion to anti-virus measures in all other respects, from masks to temperature checks.

Genting Dream is no exception. All passengers need a negative test for the coronavirus 48 hours before boarding. All passengers also need to be vaccinated and must be Hong Kong residents. Even after all that, the ship — seemingly by this point one of the safer places on earth — can only run at 50 per cent capacity.

On this particular Sunday afternoon there seemed to be few other passengers embarking at the vast Kai Tak Cruise Terminal. There was a poster advertising an “education day” for Hong Kong’s National Security Law, a recent piece of legislation that struck down anti-government protests, that had taken place back in April. After the novelty of having luggage scanned and liquids checked or confiscated, guests were introduced to Tracy. Rather than a host or entertainment officer, she turned out to be an obligatory device to wear around your neck that flashed red whenever you went within 1.5 metres of another guest.



One of the many bars aboard Genting Dream © Lam Yik/Bloomberg



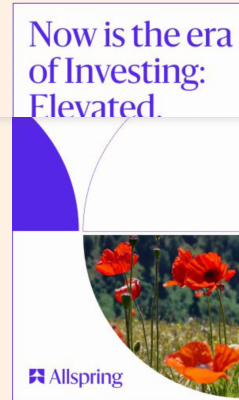
In its marketing materials, Genting mainly uses the term “seacation” (a play on words that was already pushing its luck at staycation, let alone daycation) but I preferred the widely used “cruise to nowhere”, which was more elegant and had the added benefit of raising disconcerting philosophical questions about the concepts of space and time. It also echoed my own circumstances.

I had been supposed to move from London to Shanghai at the start of February 2020, only stopping off in Hong Kong. But, other than a visa-related trip to the UK last summer, I hadn’t gone anywhere else at all. Genting Dream offered a rare chance to escape the city, even if the destination was unclear.

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I asked one member of staff how long the all-you-can-drink deal lasted. Much confusion followed until it emerged it lasted the whole trip

Cruise ships are a bit like gyms: absolutely everyone except you seems to know what’s going on. It took all of my two days and three nights on board to get a sense of its layout, which extended across a third of a kilometre and included a basketball court, helicopter pad, an entire theatre and many bars. I asked one member of staff how

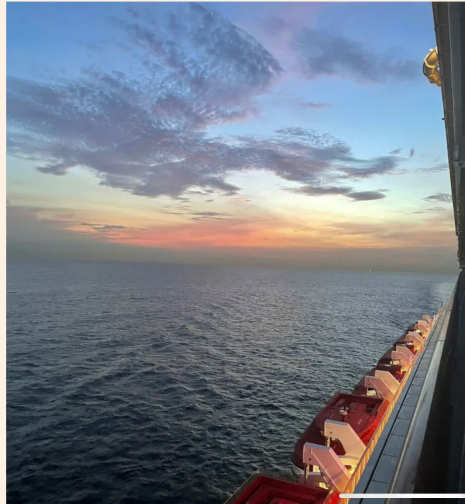
long the all-you-can-drink deal lasted. Much confusion followed until it emerged that the question was redundant because it lasted the whole trip.



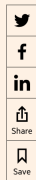
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My first act was to ascend through the 20 decks to watch the ship leaving Hong Kong, ideally during the sunset. On the top deck, I bumped into an Australian pilot for Cathay, the city's flagship airline, who had been grounded for 14 months. The conversation quickly turned to the severity of the Covid-related rules onboard, which included not only closing each of the four Jacuzzis but covering them in some form of rigging, perhaps to ensnare any trespassers. Hong Kong is no longer a gateway to the world, he said. I suddenly recalled the existence of Tracy, who was flashing violently red.



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The ship was running at less than a third of its 3,348-passenger capacity but early on there were constant introductory events in the lobby, which often involved games requiring volunteers from the audience. But because everyone was wearing masks, it was almost impossible to hear anyone's muffled answers to the questions through the microphone, which also seemed to be turned to incredibly low volumes, as though even the sound waves might transmit the virus.

Genting Dream must have an actual engine somewhere, but the true engine of the ship is its casino. It turned out that, far from the spiritual invocation of Icelandic sagas to the edge of the world I had mistaken it for, one key objective of cruising to international waters was to allow the casinos and duty-free shops to open. Such trips also occurred pre-pandemic; one elderly guest told me he had already been on the ship six times.

Genting Cruise Lines later told me that many of its sailings in September and August were sold out, and that 50 per cent capacity was "still economically viable". "Cruise resumption has been crucial for the financial health of the company," its president Kent Zhu explained by email.

PACE

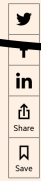
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The main pool deck of Genting Dream © Lam Yik/Bloomberg

The fact that most of the guests were gambling most of the time meant the ship felt relatively unpopulated. I met Zee Deneck, the headline act at the onboard theatre and billed on the ship as “the only ventriloquist in the Czech Republic”, at an event where he explained several tricks. His specialism was in pickpocketing – he half-demonstrated with my watch – but that form of magic was largely banned worldwide because of the coronavirus. Our conversation alternated between the principles of magic and the principles of the pandemic.

It was difficult performing to small crowds, especially when they were wearing masks, but he still considered himself lucky to have work. Growing up in Soviet-controlled Prague in the 1970s, he’d devoured travel books, and had gone on to work on cruise ships for decades. As with pickpocketing, the crucial part of any trick was the distraction, he said. The best distraction was laughter, because anyone who laughs is “for a little glimmer of a second . . . out of this world”.



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A restaurant aboard Genting Dream © Lam Yik/Bloomberg

Out on deck again later, while once again trying to catch a glimpse of the sunset through the high windows, I spoke to a German IT worker. It turned out he had researched the ship as a potential method of leaving Hong Kong and returning without quarantine, in order to activate his visa. The plan had failed but he’d decided to come anyway. It was his first cruise, and he was struck by the lack of new impressions, though he had lived in Suzhou, one of China’s most storied cities, and noted how much the ship reminded him of the mainland. It was true: the grandeur of the dining hall, the carpets, the staircases.

FT Globetrotter



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By now the voyage was almost at an end. It was unclear whether we had ever arrived in nowhere, a term that I had become slightly obsessed with because of the difficulty of translating it into Chinese (one colleague suggested an entire Tang dynasty poem). Beyond space, it seemed to convey some of the strangeness of time in Hong Kong. One of my first memories upon arriving at my hotel last year was an elderly British couple, who were waiting for updates about their ultimately

cancelled cruise. Across the city, the waiting has become existential.



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After three missed sunsets, the returning Genting Dream at least provided a clear view of dawn. The health declaration forms seemed unnecessary but it was hard not to admire the authorities' dedication to the process. Back in the still largely empty Kai Tak terminal, some guests were greeted by the alcohol they had not been allowed to take onboard. The company had kindly placed the bottles in see-through plastic bags, as though partly to protect against the coronavirus and partly to commiserate over it.

Thomas Hale is the FT's Shanghai correspondent

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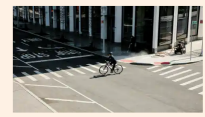
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