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Repatriation from expedition ship in South America

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Your experience during COVID-19:

This is my first hand account, being on board as part of the expedition team — in the role of a field guide / geology lecturer / zodiac driver / general naturalist — during the entire COVID-19 crisis as it unfolded on the ship. Specific names of expedition staff members have been omitted in order to protect privacy. (This document and its contents copyright J.P. Buchanan, Emeritus Professor of Geology, EWU, 2020.)

4 March 2020

I joined the expedition team onboard the *Silver Explorer* in Ushuaia, Argentina for a six-week itinerary to explore the Chilean fjords and channels to Valparaiso, Chile, then across the south Pacific to Easter, Pitcairn and French Polynesia, returning home 11 April from Pape'ete, Tahiti. We had been enjoying an adventurous schedule for the first week, of which the highlight for me was the visit to Torres del Paine National Park where the geology is in-your-face spectacular. Then, shortly afterwards, things changed very quickly.

NOTE: Much of the backbone to this story is based on email updates to my buddies at Apex Expeditions who were to join the ship in Valparaiso as the expedition team.



My favorite expedition ship, the *Silver Explorer*, in Garibaldi Fjord, Chile. I shot this as we were beginning zodiac operations, a full week before our lockdown.

12 March 2020

Beginning of crisis: We were anchored at Tortel, Chile, a tiny and charming village clinging to the sides of a steep fjord and surrounded by temperate rainforest. Neat network of boardwalks and stairs link the community. Hummingbirds zoom and work the flowers.

Guests were ashore with the expedition team, exploring the community and enjoying a cultural performance and eating empanadas and downing pisco sours. Behind the scenes, an elderly guest (82 y o) from the UK was evacuated from the *Silver Explorer* and flown to Castro, Chile for testing. Captain Tuomo Leskinen orders all pax to ship around noon for an early departure as commanded by Chilean health authorities. We were at sea the entire following day, 13 March, enroute to Castro, Chile. There we were expecting to learn the results of the COVID-19 test on the evacuated gentleman.

14 March 2020 – Saturday (Day 1 of quarantine)

Early in the morning we drop anchor at Castro, Chile. The Captain addresses the ship via public address mid-morning and you could anticipate the bad news based on his tone that the virus test was... positive. Worst case scenario. We are now f*cked and in 14-day quarantine by Chilean health authorities allowing no shoreside activities

whatsoever anywhere in Chile. Furthermore, guests are confined to their cabins and not allowed to leave by order of the Captain, with meal delivery to commence later in the day. Expedition staff and crew are pressed into service to address the new crisis as we formulate a response. Staff and crew are rotating through the mess and restaurant for their meals but otherwise we are also confined to cabins.

Personally, at this moment, I am healthy and fine and can flexibly tolerate this situation. My recent gallbladder surgery is not a problem as I am fully healed and feel great. Things can always be worse. The good news is that the ship is comfortable with good food. My attitude is fine and will go with the flow. Stiff upper lip and all that. Keep calm and carry on. What else are you going to do? By the afternoon, the entire pax, staff and crew have been screened and no fevers whatsoever.

We live in interesting times! Cheers from your onboard correspondent, John

15 March 2020 (Day 2)

We are still at anchor off Castro, Chile, now for the last 24 hours when the crap hit the fan. What happens next is still unknown but we need to make fresh water and discharge gray water so the *Silver Explorer* will eventually have to move to the open sea.

I share a staff cabin with Hilman with a porthole. He's a very nice guy with whom I've worked before, and he is a considerate roommate. I've volunteered to go to the lecture theater alone and make presentations that pax can watch in their cabins. Not yet I'm told.

Very surreal situation. I'll keep you posted.

Your humble scribe from quarantine...John

16 March 2020 (Day 3)

Is it too soon to joke? I wonder if the *Silver Explorer* is flying a yellow flag? Perhaps the ship should be renamed the "*Corona Explorer?*" The "*Silver Virus?*"

We left anchor off Castro just before noon on 15 March and have permission from Chilean health authorities to head out to sea so as to dump gray water and replenish fresh water. Will likely return to Castro tomorrow based on the captain's announcement. Situation is fluid to say the least. (Apparently there is a very good hospital in Castro where the evacuated gentleman is receiving care.)

Captain Leskinen and Expedition Leader Danny Edmunds are making regular addresses to the ship keeping all as informed as possible without any speculation. We have the usual TV news on board and access to internet and are well aware of developments in the world. I am told we made CNN.

Regarding meals for the guests... Menus are slipped under pax cabin doors then collected from hallway a short time later. Meals delivered about an hour later after preparation in the galley. Trays are left on the floor with a knock on the door, then the delivery person retreats with no real interaction with the guests. Empty trays are returned to the hallway and collected later and immediately washed.

Staff and crew circulate through restaurant at prescribed times for their meals. Dining room is now very spartan. There is plastic sheeting on all tables, and plastic plates and utensils are used and tossed. Table seating limited to 2 or 3 individuals, then quickly wiped down when done. We all wear masks whenever we are out of our cabins. Very surreal.

The voyage is fully booked so expedition staff is double bunked. Of course a single room would be desirable but I feel fortunate having Hilman as my roomie. Life is ok...not great. I'm reading and tweaking lectures and watching a movie now and then. Biggest wish is for fresh air and outdoor exercise but entire ship is on lockdown.

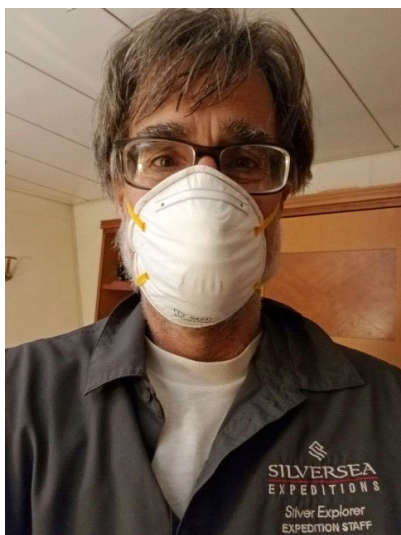
I spent a couple of hours in expedition office with another staff member this afternoon, ringing all the pax cabins for a welfare check and to boost morale. Most guests are very very understanding and tolerant of the situation. Some are selfishly complaining about no definite information about returning home and flights yet they all heard we are under an unprecedented quarantine. Sheesh.

So here I am, indeed living through the worst-case scenario, and washing my hands frequently.

Thanks, APEXers, for your messages and well wishes. Makes me feel less alone.

Cheers from the plague ship off the coast of Chile...John

PS I'm smiling beneath my N95 mask!



17 March 2020 (Day 4)

Circles. We had been sailing in circles all day yesterday. A ship without a port. Midway between Castro and Puerto Montt.

Few announcements today from the captain. Chilean health authorities apparently don't know what to do with us.

Yellow sheets of paper are now being taped to some pax cabins under watch by the doc. Hallways are fumigated a couple times a day and doors have been sprayed with a disinfectant.

I assisted restaurant staff in delivering lunch to the guest cabins, masked and gloved. Again, leaving the tray on the floor...knocking...then retreating.

I saw that we were mentioned in the Wall Street Journal yesterday. Not the fame that one desires.

We finally anchored in the middle of the large bay for the evening, far from sight of land. Hopefully tomorrow will bring news of some progress. Know that I am well and fine. Good night.

NOTE: Danny Edmunds (EL) in isolation, as well as Lizelle, due to fevers. Amanda also sequestered since she was rooming with Lizelle, but no fever.

18 March 2020 (Day 5)

The *Silver Explorer* anchored about eight miles off Puerto Montt in the dark of night on 17 March, well away from view from land. The two Mark VI zodiacs were lowered and side gate prepared. The expedition team had been briefed and were on standby, having already packed earlier in the day. We were sworn to secrecy about telling anyone about The Plan...what I am calling Operation Repatriation.

Around 10 PM a ferry approached with six buses and an ambulance already on board with the forward ramp lowered into the sea, like an amphibious landing craft, maintaining a position about 200 meters away from the ship. Floodlights were turned on and we went to work.

Around 11PM several of us on the expedition team, including me, jumped in to the zodiacs with our gear, wearing headlamps, surgical gloves and masks, and transferred to the ferry. A team of health authorities in full protective clothing met us and explained the procedure to follow. Several police officers and the bus drivers were all in similar garb.

The doc on board the ship, with other Chilean health officials, were taking temperatures and issuing papers only to those guests who were not already in isolation (about 20 individuals were not allowed to disembark the ship.) The transfer of screened and approved guests and their luggage were dispatched as quickly as possible by zodiacs and immediately placed in isolation on the buses. They were only given a couple of hours to pack with a stern warning from the captain to not comment to anyone via internet. All guests were also in gloves and masks...on the zodiacs...on the buses...and on the aircraft.

Once the transfer was complete, the ferry made its way to the Chinquio ferry terminal and the buses off loaded to the pier where countless police officers and military personnel were waiting to escort the convoy to the airport. Time is now about 1:30 AM on the 18th. Lots of officers on motorcycles and even a SWAT-like vehicle leading the way.

We made our way to the airport taking about 45 minutes enroute, with strategic roadblocks already in place on the road. Several film crews must have been tipped as I could spy several along the way.

We were driven through a back gate at the airfield and directly onto the tarmac where more medical and immigration officials checked our papers and passports as we left the buses. Silversea had chartered a LATAM Airlines Boeing 787 to fly about 40 of us back to the States. Two other aircraft were similarly chartered to Australia (for ~ 20 pax) and the UK (for ~40 pax), leaving a little later. Our luggage was never loaded as nobody would handle it and it was apparently returned to the ship. Fate unknown at this time.

Wheels up around 3 AM and arrival at Miami at 11 AM. We were all placed in the center cabin on the aircraft. Crew all wore gloves and masks. We were allowed to lower the mask when eating dinner and breakfast. I actually slept for about six hours.

We taxied to a remote location at MIA and were met by CDC and DHS personnel for further screening and clearance into the county. Our group of 40 were herded onto a bus and driven to a private aviation terminal for private jets. Once inside a Silversea rep greeted us and presented a lavish buffet of good food and drinks. Masks and gloves could finally be removed. Another doc issued us papers allowing continuing travel to our destinations...by private jets this time.

So I am pecking this out on my phone while taking photos of the Mississippi delta and other landforms as we zoom across the country at 43,000 feet. Geologists always get window seats...especially easy on a private jet! There are six of us on this flight to the Pacific Northwest. It will be difficult to fly commercial again!

Needless to say that we're all exhausted from the four days of confinement on the ship, and the late night escapades that brought us from Chile and back home. I'm looking

forward to self-isolating for a bit at home in Spokane, then a road trip to my red rock paradise in Castle Valley, Utah to enjoy the coming spring.

Like our shared experience at Port Charcot in Antarctica last year, all in all this has been an epic adventure...now ~440 days or so into my "retirement."

That's it for now from your tireless scribe from high over the Rocky Mountains...all the very best...John

NOTE: Expedition team members Danny, Lizelle, Alan, Hilman left on board *Silver Explorer*.

19 March 2020 (Day 6)

Hi Daniil and all other team members...

Hope everyone is well and fine, at least as well as you can be. A great expedition team and a terrific group of understanding guests, coupled with Silversea office staff working tirelessly behind the scenes, made this unprecedented and epic repatriation a success. I feel badly for those left behind on the ship, or struggling to find a way home.

I did have to book an ongoing flight from SEA to GEG and arrived home a little after midnight. I'll send the invoices.

What. An. Epic. Adventure.

Cheers and thanks to all involved,
John

FINAL NOTE: Hats off to Silversea for working with the Chilean officials and coming to an agreement to repatriate the healthy guests. I can only imagine the cost of chartering three large aircraft and a half dozen private jets to get everyone home. Kudos.

And... I am well and fine at home in self-isolation for another week. Helps to be an introvert.

UPDATES

21 March 2020

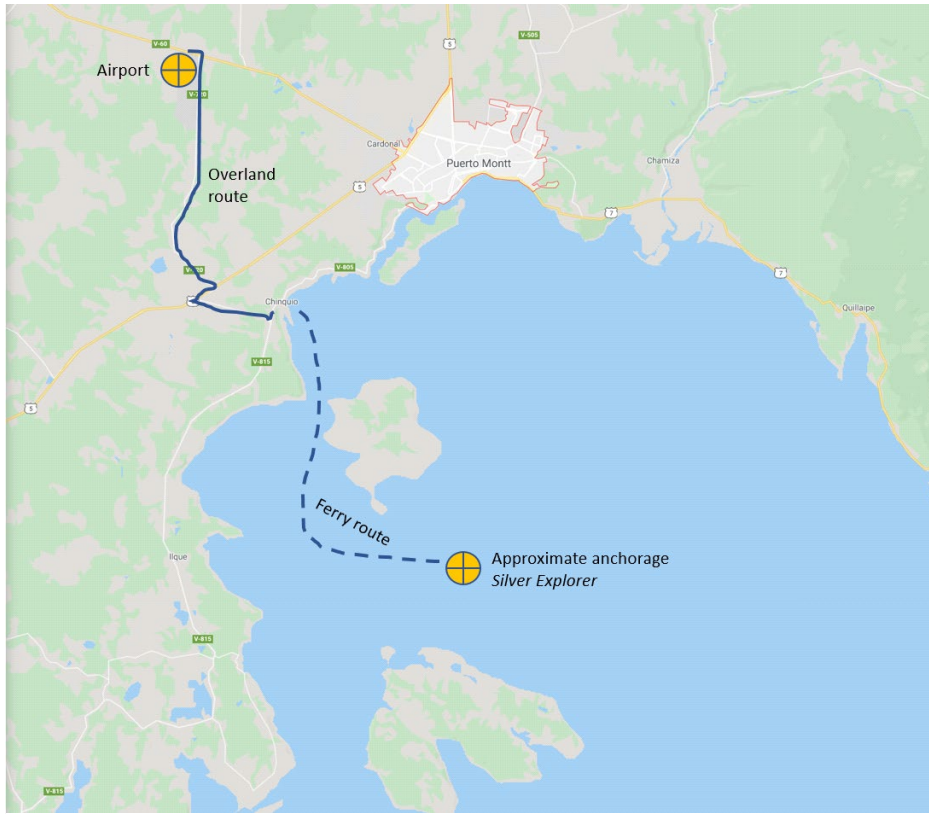
All expedition team members are now off the ship. Seven guests remain on board under medical observation. Luggage will be shipped home when last pax depart.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The release of healthy staff and guests from the *Silver Explorer* was no doubt done with full cooperation and guidance of the Chilean government. The police escort to the airfield was most likely for our own protection from protesting mobs, hence the secrecy in the dark of night and the request to not broadcast the plan on social media at the time.



Image captured by Ross McDonald, expedition photographer. That's me, masked with a headlamp on the zodiac, heading to the ferry with the *Silver Explorer* in background.



Rough map showing evacuation route from anchorage to airport at Puerto Montt, Chile.