# Italian cruise line criticised after gastroenteritis outbreak passengers disembark unannounced in Shetland



An Italian cruise line has faced significant criticism after thousands of passengers experiencing gastroenteritis symptoms were allowed to disembark in the Scottish town of Lerwick, Shetland. The Costa Favolosa, part of Costa Cruises, had been on a seven-day voyage from Hamburg when reports of “mild gastrointestinal illness” among passengers arose. This incident, which occurred on 20 May, has raised concerns about public health protocols in the cruise industry, particularly regarding communication and preparedness when health issues arise on board.

Dr Susan Laidlaw, director of Public Health at NHS Shetland, indicated that the local health authority was informed of illnesses aboard the Costa Favolosa only late on the day of the vessel's arrival. Although the ship's medical team was addressing symptoms among a “small number of passengers,” the lack of timely notification led to a worrying situation in Lerwick as close to 3,000 passengers took to the town's streets. Local businesses were unprepared for the potential health risks, with one manager expressing frustration that more precautions couldn’t have been enacted in advance. Sonia Robertson, managing director of R. Robertson and Son bus company, described the immediate cancellation of tours after a passenger became visibly ill on a coach, which she noted could have severely impacted the local business and its staff.

The Lerwick Port Authority emphasised that cruise liners must declare any health concerns before docking. However, this protocol was not followed in this case, underscoring a critical gap in operational safety. Local coffee shop owner Celia Smith lamented the absence of precautionary measures like hand sanitiser and face masks in her establishment, stating that the community had received “absolutely no warning” about the outbreak. This incident poses broader questions about the responsibilities of cruise companies and port authorities in safeguarding public health, especially as cruise travel ramps up in popularity post-pandemic.

The resurgence of gastrointestinal illnesses on cruise ships has been an ongoing issue, with reports of multiple outbreaks in recent years. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has been monitoring these incidents closely through their Vessel Sanitation Program, which mandates that ships report outbreaks if they exceed 3% of passengers or crew members exhibiting symptoms. Earlier this month, high-profile cases, such as the outbreak on P&O Cruises' Ventura, which affected over 500 individuals, highlight the challenges that cruise lines face in managing health concerns effectively.

Indeed, 2023 has seen a record number of gastrointestinal illness outbreaks, surpassing pre-pandemic levels. Officials noted that by mid-year, the number of outbreaks reported had reached eleven, coinciding with the resurgence of cruise travel. These outbreaks not only create health risks for passengers but also threaten the reputations of cruise lines, which often face scrutiny over their health and safety protocols.

In response to the Lerwick incident, Costa Cruises claimed that they had followed the necessary guidelines and implemented enhanced disinfection and sanitation on board. However, stakeholders at the Lerwick Port Authority have communicated their intention to tighten procedures to ensure that documentation concerning health is completed correctly and promptly before ships dock in the future.

Public health officials recommend basic hygiene measures, such as thorough hand washing and the use of bleach-based disinfectants, to mitigate the spread of gastrointestinal infections. As cruise lines continue to navigate the complexities of operation amid rising passenger numbers, these preventive measures will remain critical in protecting both guests and local communities from outbreaks of illness.

The recent outbreak on Costa Favolosa serves as a poignant reminder of the vulnerabilities inherent in the cruise industry and the need for stricter adherence to health protocols to safeguard public health.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/travel/news-and-advice/costa-favolosa-lerwick-shetlands-sickness-outbreak-b2760538.html), [[2]](https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c3ggrxly85no)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/travel/news-and-advice/costa-favolosa-lerwick-shetlands-sickness-outbreak-b2760538.html), [[5]](https://www.travelandtourworld.com/news/article/more-than-175-people-on-board-a-cruise-ship-fell-sick-in-a-norovirus-outbreak/)
* Paragraph 3 – [[3]](https://www.cdc.gov/vessel-sanitation/cruise-ship-outbreaks/index.html), [[4]](https://qz.com/2023-is-the-year-of-getting-sick-on-a-cruise-1850450081)
* Paragraph 4 – [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/travel/news-and-advice/costa-favolosa-lerwick-shetlands-sickness-outbreak-b2760538.html), [[3]](https://www.cdc.gov/vessel-sanitation/cruise-ship-outbreaks/index.html)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.independent.co.uk/travel/news-and-advice/costa-favolosa-lerwick-shetlands-sickness-outbreak-b2760538.html), [[4]](https://qz.com/2023-is-the-year-of-getting-sick-on-a-cruise-1850450081), [[6]](https://iiab.me/kiwix/content/wikipedia_en_all_maxi_2023-10/A/COVID-19_pandemic_on_cruise_ships)

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.independent.co.uk/travel/news-and-advice/costa-favolosa-lerwick-shetlands-sickness-outbreak-b2760538.html> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c3ggrxly85no> - In August 2024, a norovirus outbreak on P&O Cruises' Ventura ship affected over 500 passengers and crew members during a voyage from Southampton to the Canary Islands. The outbreak peaked with 519 cases among approximately 4,200 individuals, representing about 12.3% of those on board. Passengers were isolated in their cabins, and the ship underwent deep cleaning upon returning to Southampton. This incident highlights the challenges cruise lines face in managing gastrointestinal illnesses on board.
3. <https://www.cdc.gov/vessel-sanitation/cruise-ship-outbreaks/index.html> - The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) monitors gastrointestinal illness outbreaks on cruise ships through its Vessel Sanitation Program (VSP). Ships are required to report when 3% or more of passengers or crew exhibit symptoms. The CDC provides guidelines for preventing and managing these outbreaks, emphasizing the importance of prompt reporting and effective sanitation measures to protect public health.
4. <https://qz.com/2023-is-the-year-of-getting-sick-on-a-cruise-1850450081> - In 2023, the number of gastrointestinal illness outbreaks on cruise ships reached a record high, surpassing pre-pandemic levels. The CDC reported 11 outbreaks by mid-May, with the Nieuw Amsterdam cruise ship experiencing 160 cases. Norovirus was identified as the cause in some instances. The resurgence of these outbreaks coincides with the return of cruise ship ridership to pre-pandemic levels, raising concerns about public health on board.
5. <https://www.travelandtourworld.com/news/article/more-than-175-people-on-board-a-cruise-ship-fell-sick-in-a-norovirus-outbreak/> - In June 2023, a norovirus outbreak on Celebrity Cruises' Summit ship affected 152 passengers and 24 crew members during its 15 May voyage. The ship was travelling to Bermuda and South Carolina when the virus spread among guests. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported the outbreak, noting that the main symptoms included diarrhoea, vomiting, abdominal cramps, and headaches. The ship's crew implemented increased cleaning and disinfection procedures to manage the situation.
6. <https://iiab.me/kiwix/content/wikipedia_en_all_maxi_2023-10/A/COVID-19_pandemic_on_cruise_ships> - The COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted cruise ships, with numerous vessels reporting cases among passengers and crew. For instance, Costa Favolosa, which departed from Guadeloupe, had six disembarked occupants test positive for COVID-19. On 26 March 2020, the U.S. Coast Guard evacuated seven sick crew members from the ship. These incidents underscore the challenges cruise lines faced in managing infectious diseases during the pandemic.
7. <https://crew-center.com/fifth-norovirus-outbreak-strikes-cruise-ship-single-year> - In 2024, Fred Olsen's cruise ship Boudicca experienced its fifth norovirus outbreak in a single year, affecting over 80 out of 763 passengers during a ten-day cruise in Scandinavia. The company acknowledged the recurrence of such infections, emphasizing the importance of hygiene and disinfection protocols. The ship underwent intensive cleaning, including fumigation by an external company, to address the outbreak and prevent further spread.