

Cruise ships still find a Haitian berth

Luxury liners are still docking at private beaches near Haiti's devastated earthquake zone for holidaymakers to enjoy the water
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Royal Caribbean Cruise Lines faced a difficult decision over whether to dock as per itinerary at Labadee Beach, Haiti after last week's tragic quake. Photograph: Daniel Morel/AP

Sixty miles from [Haiti](#)'s devastated earthquake zone, luxury liners dock at private beaches where passengers enjoy jetski rides, parasailing and rum cocktails delivered to their hammocks.

The 4,370-berth Independence of the Seas, owned by Royal Caribbean International, disembarked at the heavily guarded resort of Labadee on the north coast on Friday; a second cruise ship, the 3,100-passenger Navigator of the Seas is due to dock.

The Florida cruise company leases a picturesque wooded peninsula and its five pristine beaches from the government for passengers to "cut loose" with watersports, barbecues, and shopping for trinkets at a craft market before returning on board before dusk. Safety is

guaranteed by armed guards at the gate.

The decision to go ahead with the visit has divided passengers. The ships carry some food aid, and the cruise line has pledged to donate all proceeds from the visit to help stricken Haitians. But many passengers will stay aboard when they dock; one said he was "sickened".

"I just can't see myself sunning on the beach, playing in the water, eating a barbecue, and enjoying a cocktail while [in Port-au-Prince] there are tens of thousands of dead people being piled up on the streets, with the survivors stunned and looking for food and water," one passenger wrote on the Cruise Critic internet forum.

"It was hard enough to sit and eat a picnic lunch at Labadee before the quake, knowing how many Haitians were starving," said another. "I can't imagine having to choke down a burger there now."

Some booked on ships scheduled to stop at Labadee are afraid that desperate people might breach the resort's 12ft high fences to get food and drink, but others seemed determined to enjoy their holiday. "I'll be there on Tuesday and I plan on enjoying my zip line excursion as well as the time on the beach," said one.

The company said the question of whether to "deliver a vacation experience so close to the epicentre of an earthquake" had been subject to considerable internal debate before it decided to include Haiti in its itineraries for the coming weeks.

"In the end, Labadee is critical to Haiti's recovery; hundreds of people rely on Labadee for their livelihood," said John Weis, vice-president. "In our conversations with the UN special envoy of the government of Haiti, Leslie Voltaire, he notes that Haiti will benefit from the revenues that are generated from each call ...

"We also have tremendous opportunities to use our ships as transport vessels for relief supplies and personnel to Haiti. Simply put, we

cannot abandon Haiti now that they need us most."

"Friday's call in Labadee went well," said Royal Caribbean.

"Everything was open, as usual. The guests were very happy to hear that 100% of the proceeds from the call at Labadee would be donated to the relief effort."

Forty pallets of rice, beans, powdered milk, water, and canned foods were delivered on Friday, and a further 80 are due and 16 on two subsequent ships. When supplies arrive in Labadee, they are distributed by Food for the Poor, a longtime partner of Royal Caribbean in Haiti.

Royal Caribbean has also pledged \$1m to the relief effort and will spend part of that helping 200 Haitian crew members.

The company recently spent \$55m updating Labadee. It employs 230 Haitians and the firm estimates 300 more benefit from the market. The development has been regarded as a beacon of private investment in Haiti; Bill Clinton visited in October. Some Haitians have decried the leasing of the peninsula as effective privatisation of part of the republic's coastline.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/jan/17/cruise-ships-haiti-earthquake>