

No cruise ship cheer for Cape Town tourism amid Omicron alarm

By [Wendell Roelf](#)

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The docking of the Europa passenger liner in Cape Town on Tuesday was meant to be a ribbon-cutting celebration marking the official start of the cruise ship season in South Africa's top tourist hub, the first since the Covid-19 pandemic hit.



Tourists wave as the Europa passenger liner arrives to South African waters, as the new coronavirus variant Omicron spreads, in Cape Town, South Africa, November 30, 2021. REUTERS/Shelley Christians

But international travel curbs on southern Africa, where the new Omicron coronavirus variant was first identified, have blown expectations of a bumper tourist season out of the water.

The multi-storey luxury liner is the first to dock at Cape Town since South Africa imposed a total ban on all cruise ships entering local ports in March 2020 after the first coronavirus infection in the country.

A succession of tough lockdown curbs has hammered a local tourism sector dependent on foreign tourists as businesses closed their doors and shed thousands of hospitality jobs.

Now travel restrictions from the European Union, the UK and United States due to Omicron, designated a variant of concern by the World Health Organisation, have seen the region's three biggest markets cut off.

Owned by German-based travel company TUI Group, the ship carrying hundreds of passengers and crew was sailing from Luderitz in Namibia to Cape Town when news of Omicron broke and raised the possibility that the ship could be re-routed.

"Some passengers (will disembark) to fly home, whilst others will stay on board for the return journey," said Wrenelle Stander, CEO at Wesgro, the trade and investment agency for the Western Cape province.

"Passengers heading to the airport will have to do a PCR (Covid-19) test before leaving," she told Reuters without providing details of passenger numbers or nationalities.

It was expected that the ship's passengers would have explored tourist attractions such as Table Mountain or apartheid-era prison Robben Island, where former president Nelson Mandela was incarcerated. The ship was originally meant to stay in port until 2 December before departing.

"This has been a hammer blow to our major job-creating sector in the province precisely when we needed a recovery, to claw back jobs lost over the last 19 months," said Alan Winde, Premier of the Western Cape province.

The summer season is vital for Cape Town, which lost an estimated 75,000 tourism jobs in the pandemic, officials said.

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