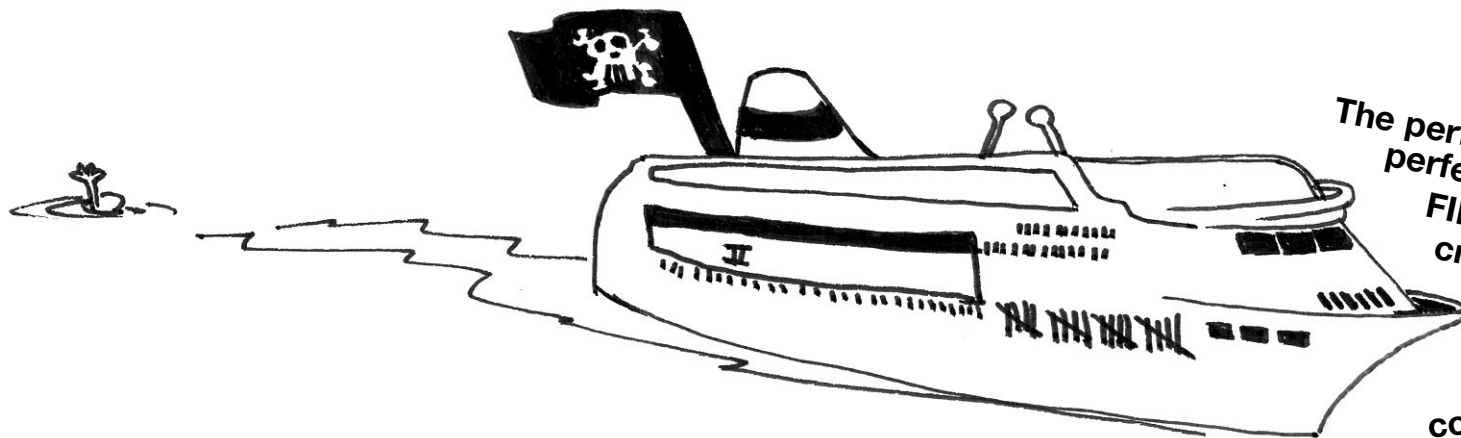


'OVERBOARD...'



The perfect place for the perfect crime? SOPHIE FINNEMORE reports on cruise ship violence and speculation on cover-ups.
Illustration by SPIKE MOUNTJOY.

A cruise seems like a dream holiday, but for some passengers their trip can become the stuff of nightmares.

Kasmira Sewpershad, 29, embarked on a family holiday to celebrate her parents' 25th wedding anniversary in December 2005.

Just a few days into the cruise, on P&O's *Pacific Sky*, things turned nasty when Sewpershad and her brother had their drinks spiked in one of the ship's bars.

Both were violently ill. Their mother later said she believed one of them was going to die that night.

Throughout the ordeal, Sewpershad's parents made repeated attempts to get medical attention.

They were told the doctor was off duty and they would have to wait until the next morning.

When Sewpershad's mother said she feared her children's drinks had been spiked, the nurse said it was highly unlikely and it had never happened before on the ship.

In any case, the ship did not have the facilities to test for it and they would have to wait until it reached its next port in two days' time.

The tests would cost \$500 each.

Sewpershad says the staff weren't prepared to help. "They just tried to brush us off."

Dr Ross Klein, of Newfoundland's Memorial University, says suspicious incidents such as these are becoming commonplace on cruise ships.

Even more worrying, his investigations have found more than 20 suspicious deaths and disappearances aboard cruise ships in the last five years.

In August, a 31-year-old Australian man died on board P&O's *Pacific Sun* while on a cruise through the Pacific Islands. Authorities are investigating the case.

And it is not just deaths and disappearances that seem to be happening at sea.

Dr Klein, a sociology professor, was in Auckland last month to speak at the fifth Coastal and Marine Tourism Congress.

He says instances of sexual predation are almost twice as high on cruise ships as they are on land.

"The rates of sexual assault on

cruise ships are 59 per 100,000 compared to an average in on land of 32 per 100,000 in the US," says Klein.

P&O Australia's spokesperson, Sandy Olsen, says she does not believe these figures reflect the experience of passengers on P&O.

"No crew member or passenger has been charged with sexual assault on one of our ships since May 2005."

But Sewpershad says her experience with P&O in December 2005 showed it was not a safe environment.

"Luckily we were with our parents. Otherwise who knows what could have happened."

She says the fact that they had their drinks spiked at all, especially on the *Pacific Sky*, confirmed that P&O has little interest in preventing crime.

Dianne Brimble, a 40-year-old mother of three, was on a P&O cruise on the same ship two years earlier.

During Brimble's voyage, her drink was spiked.

She was sexually assaulted and died from a combination of alcohol and the date-rape drug Fantasy.

"We were obviously lied to since someone actually died from having their drink spiked aboard this ship," says Sewpershad.

"Surely the medical staff should have known about this and therefore treated the matter very seriously."

She says her experience shows "it can't be left to the discretion of the ship" to make changes to prevent crime onboard.

"We were on a ship after a woman had died and nothing had changed."

It was not until Brimble's case finally made headlines, three years after her death, that P&O took any concrete action.

Olsen says it has put in place a range of safeguards to try and ensure that what happened to Brimble cannot happen again.

The company has improved its security measures, including increasing the number of trained security guards, installing CCTV cameras and training security staff in crime scene preservation.

She says P&O now takes stricter action against passengers who engage in "excessive behavior", including disembark-

ing them at the next port of call.

Klein believes P&O's measures show the industry is doing little to change the culture on board or reduce the risks to passengers.

First, he says the majority of assaults – nearly 70 per cent – are crew on passenger, and the new regulations do nothing to address this.

And second, he says the security measures show that the cruise line has its priorities the wrong way around.

"They always respond negatively. Staff shouldn't have to know how to preserve a crime scene because it shouldn't be happening in the first place.

"Their focus should be on preventing it happening rather than teaching people what to do once it has happened.

"And anyway, I wouldn't trust them to preserve my blood."

So how have the cruise lines got away with presenting themselves as a safe and fun holiday destination in spite of cases like this?

Easily, says Klein. The cruise industry is dominated by three main players who control 90 per cent of the industry – Star, Royal Caribbean, and Carnival (who own P&O Cruises).

Klein believes the cruise lines are spectacularly good at hiding the dark side of cruising.

In August 2003, Merrian Carver stopped using her cabin on a cruise to Alaska. Her cabin steward noticed and reported it to his supervisor.

He was told to keep cleaning the cabin to make it look like Carver was still using it.

When the ship completed the 10-day cruise and returned to port, cruise line officials boxed up and disposed of Carver's personal items and her disappearance was never reported.

It took months for a private investigator, hired by Carver's parents, to establish that she had even boarded one of the cruise line's ships, let alone speak to anyone who may have seen her.

The cruise line, Royal Caribbean, insisted nothing unusual had occurred.

It refused to identify the staff members who had cleaned Carver's room and told her parents any CCTV videos of Carver

had been recorded over.

It was not until an American court forced the cruise line to release documents that Carver's parents had any details of what happened to their daughter.

What they discovered was the cruise line's employees had deliberately covered up Carver's disappearance and any information which may explain what happened to her.

Three years on, it is still not known what happened, but her family suspects foul play and it has been alleged the supervisor to whom she was first reported missing had some involvement in her disappearance.

Klein says the cruise ships simply do not report such incidents at sea and there seem to be no laws forcing them to do so.

While there are international treaties that address the safety of passengers at sea, these do not require ships to report crimes on board in international waters.

Senior sergeant Martin Padgett, head of the New Zealand Police's maritime unit, says the laws in territorial waters can be just as "loose".

What has also helped the cruise lines keep their secrets is that many of the crimes and disappearances have not made the news.

Klein says: "The industry does everything it can to keep [incidents] away from the media spotlight."

Carnival has told Klein it is not normal practice for it to disclose events, such as a person going overboard, unless specifically asked by the media.

And Klein claims the cruise lines do not flinch at using the \$US1 billion they spend in advertising a year to influence editorial decisions and to stop some stories seeing the light of day.

But they couldn't keep the case of Lorri Dishman, an American woman who was raped by a security officer on a cruise ship, out of the headlines.

Her story has led the US Congress to begin hearings into security practices and procedures on board cruise ships.

The second round of these hearings finished two weeks ago, and what has emerged so far is the sorry tale of an industry which does little to prevent

crimes and everything it can to hide them.

Klein, who was asked to appear and present his findings, believes it is important that governments begin to police the industry.

"History shows us [cruise lines] don't follow what they say they will do. There needs to be regulation to ensure something changes."

On March 6, just days before the first hearing, the Cruise Lines International Association (which represents the major cruise lines) signed an agreement with the FBI and the US Coastguard saying they will report all crimes against Americans to the FBI.

But Klein says it's all been heard before.

"In 1999 they came out with a 'zero tolerance on crime' policy to report to US authorities all crimes against US citizens, which is a reiteration of US law anyway, but a law that has never been enforced.

"And now, in the hearings that have just passed, they are saying they will do exactly what they said they would do, but didn't, in 1999.

"I just don't trust their word."

The issue for New Zealanders wanting to cruise, says Klein, is that while America is trying to look out for its citizens, no one is doing the same for Kiwis.

"The industry isn't being required by other countries' laws to do anything and what they do voluntarily is open to question."

Klein says he hopes that if the outcomes of the hearings in America make changes there, this will help other countries to protect their citizens while they are on cruise ships.

"I'm hopeful, but not really optimistic, that anything will change."

And Klein's advice for people about to embark? "Don't go with a false sense of security, thinking a cruise ship is safe."

Indeed, Sewpershad says she won't be taking another cruise.

"It's the most unsafe holiday you can take."

Te Waha Nui sought a response from Star and Royal Caribbean with regards to the claims and statistics in this article. They did not respond.