

Cruise ship evacuates as precaution

A CRUISE ship let off hundreds of passengers in Yemen on Wednesday so they could fly to the other side of the Arabian Peninsula and avoid the dangerous Gulf of Aden where pirates have attacked dozens of boats.

The M/S Columbus arrived in the western Yemeni port of Hodeida, where 420 passengers and crew got off the ship. Some immediately flew on a charter flight to Dubai, while others first toured the Yemeni capital and mountain villages before flying to the glitzy Persian Gulf city, said Mohammed Abdel-Moghni, the head of the Yemen tour agency that handled their onward travel.

The German cruise liner then continued with a limited crew through the Gulf of Aden, where Somali pirates have targeted commercial ships, cruise liners and yachts.

Pirates have attacked 32 vessels and hijacked 12 of them since NATO deployed a four-vessel flotilla in the region on Oct. 24. They have netted more than \$30 million in ransoms along Africa's longest and most lawless coast.

The M/S Columbus' passengers will spend three days at a five-star hotel in Dubai waiting to rejoin the 490-foot vessel in Oman's
CM8ShowAd("336x280");

port of Salalah for the remainder of their six-month round-the-world trip, which began in Italy and ends in mid-May.

Hamburg, Germany-based Hapag-Lloyd cruise company said it took the precaution with the M/S Columbus because the German government denied its request for a security escort through the waters.

The surge in piracy in the busy shipping lane leading to and from the Suez Canal threatens to take a heavy economic toll. Some commercial shipping companies have announced plans to bypass the Gulf of Aden by taking the much longer and costlier route around the southern tip of Africa.

Ships still being held by pirates for huge ransoms include a Saudi oil tanker carrying \$100 million in crude and a Ukrainian ship loaded with tanks and heavy weapons.

The European Union is replacing NATO's anti-piracy mission on Monday. The EU mission will include six ships and up to three aircraft patrolling at any one time, and will station armed guards aboard some cargo vessels, such as ships transporting food aid to Somalia.

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