

PORT IN A STORM

THE LITTLE CITY OF EASTPORT TRIED FOR YEARS TO LURE MEGA CRUISE SHIPS TO ITS DOCKS. THEN, AMID A GLOBAL PANDEMIC, IT GOT ONE, ALONG WITH A SKELETON CREW OF CORONAVIRUS EXILES.

BY JAED COFFIN | PHOTOGRAPHED BY RYAN DAVID BROWN

Passenger amenities on Oceania Cruises' *Riviera* include a casino, afternoon tea accompanied by a string quartet, and croquet courts.



ONE SUNNY AFTERNOON in late July, 12-year-old Zachary Wallace stood on a float beneath the Eastport pier, fishing for mackerel. To one side of him, lobsterboats bobbed

at their moorings, backdropped by the low buildings of Water Street's downtown strip. To the other, the profile of the cruise ship *Riviera* rose 16 decks high and stretched nearly 800 feet long, a gleaming barrier between the boy and the wide expanse of blue water beyond.

The fishing, Zachary said, was okay — a few pollack, no mackerel. Nothing like the day a few weeks back when *Riviera* had left for 24 hours to distill potable water from seawater in the channel. He'd filled a 5-gallon bucket with fish. "It was drop 'em and catch 'em," he said, pointing to a piling above him. "Right off that corner."

"We've got trash bags full of them in the freezer back home," Kristen Wallace, Zachary's mother, said.



After Eastport's breakwater pier collapsed in 2014, it was rebuilt to the tune of \$15 million, partly in hopes of attracting large cruise ships.

Riviera had arrived six weeks earlier by way of Miami, where it had been laid up ever since a federal no-sail order put the cruise industry on hiatus amid the COVID-19 pandemic. In June, with hurricane season coming on, the ship sailed north, toward calmer weather, and it tied up at Zachary's favorite fishing spot.

Kristen grew up in Eastport's South End, "across the railroad tracks," she said, from the "more pish-posh" North End. Her father worked in the customs office, and their family ran an ice-cream stand near the Motel East back when the city's sardine canneries were still propping up the local economy. These days, the city of 1,250 people gets by on commercial fishing, some tourism, and shipping at its port, which has the deepest natural harbor in the lower 48. Kristen lives in Bangor now, two hours inland, but she still brings Zachary to Eastport for much of the summer.

"We beachcombed, we fished — that's what it was to be a kid here," she said. She'd seen Navy ships, cargo ships, paper ships, and pulp ships come and go, "but nothing this big, ever. This is a whole new realm. This is a behemoth."

Kristen's brother, Jake Mumme, stood nearby with his two kids,

nodding. "It's like a floating city," he said. He showed me a picture of *Riviera* on his phone, taken from Water Street, a surreal juxtaposition of massive vessel and diminutive waterfront. As if noticing it for the first time, he contemplated the logo on the stack: a blue circle with a wavy line running through it. "I wonder what the Q stands for. Quarantine?" he joked.

His sister corrected him: The Q was an O, for Oceania Cruises, a subsidiary of Norwegian Cruise Line.

"Oh, right," Mumme said. He'd never looked that closely, he admitted, even though he drove by daily. He shrugged. "It's just part of life now."

On May 8, a headline on the front page of the *Quoddy Tides*, Eastport's newspaper, declared "Dormant Cruise Ship *Riviera* Might Berth in City for Some Time." Might? Some Time? The unknowns left many in the community confused and wary.

A day earlier, the city council had held a special Zoom session to discuss the potential arrival. For years, Eastport had been courting visits from mega cruise ships, hoping to bring money into its port and give the local economy a jolt of tourism dollars. A couple of boutique ships have put Eastport on their itineraries, and the largest to call was the 644-foot private "condominium ship" *The World*, which usually carries about 200 passengers. But *Riviera* is in another league, with a passenger capacity equal to Eastport's entire population. It's the kind of ship that would stop in Portland and Bar Harbor but pass by Eastport en route to the Canadian Maritimes.

If Eastport could do Oceania a solid by hosting a ship with nowhere to go — and show the industry its port could handle big-boat logistics — maybe more would follow once the pandemic was over. Or so some residents thought. Chris Gardner, executive director of the city's port authority, told me, "This was our Super Bowl right here. This was our shot to go to the Big Dance."

But first came a decision-making process that *Quoddy Tides* editor Edward French described as "frustrating for all involved": city-council meetings, public Zoom hearings, a call with Norwegian Cruise Line, approvals from the Maine Center for Disease Control, Customs and Border Protection, and the Coast Guard. Not everyone in town was on board. "Word of the possible arrival," French wrote in the paper, "has caused some apprehension among a number of residents." The concern was twofold: Would *Riviera's* arrival compromise the health of residents, after Washington County had thus far recorded few COVID-19 cases and zero deaths? And would *Riviera's* long-term presence impact the quality of daily life?

On the 123 cruise ships in U.S. jurisdictional waters this spring, 99 COVID-19 outbreaks were recorded in the months after the pandemic hit. *Riviera* reported a single case, in a passenger, but by the time Eastport was debating its arrival, its crew had been confined to the ship, without passengers, for more than two months. The onboard physician monitored

crew members' temperatures and oxygen levels twice a day throughout the quarantine protocol and detected no additional cases.

The matter of *Riviera's* broader impacts on town life were less easily addressed. Structurally, the pier — which had collapsed in 2014 and been rebuilt in 2017 — could easily accommodate a ship of its size. And running in "hotel mode" — using just one generator — the ship would produce little in the way of fumes. The pier, however, normally served as a public fishing spot and de facto community center during the summer, with families loading up coolers and fishing poles and passing entire days chatting with friends while jigging for mackerel. With the ship berthed, most of the pier would be off-limits, and the pandemic had already taken so much away, from the town's Little League games to its annual Pirate Festival. "It's a morale thing," is how Eastport native and local plumber Bub Andrews put it. "What are the locals gonna do?"

"People were always asking me for answers to these questions," French told me, when I visited him in the small, white-shingled *Quoddy Tides* building overlooking the waterfront. "But I didn't know any more than what I wrote." When *Riviera* finally arrived in Eastport, on June 14, the view from the office's east-facing windows was eclipsed almost entirely by the hulking white hull.

While Zachary Wallace fished from floats off the pier, men in white hard hats and blue maintenance suits and a man and woman in crisp white uniforms, all wearing masks, stood on the decks above, gazing across the Eastport waterfront. They waved at another family fishing below. "You want me to throw you up a fish?" the father yelled, holding up a pollack. The crew members politely declined.

"They're really quite friendly," Kristen Wallace said. *Riviera* arrived with a reduced crew of 131 (fully staffed, it's 800), and neither Kristen nor her brother believed they posed any dangers of COVID-19 transmission. Their primary question, shared by many in Eastport, had become why the crew members, many hailing from countries across Southeast Asia, Latin America, and Europe, hadn't debarked, despite having gone through quarantine. "We just keep thinking they must be incredibly bored up there," Kristen said.

Later that afternoon, I met with Chris Gardner in the lobby of the port authority's building. A former police officer, a youth-sports coach, a county commissioner, and a father of two, Gardner possesses a stubbornly optimistic disposition and a penchant for high-flown talk. He told me that, once the pandemic started, "every other community in the state of Maine said, 'All right, we have to do with less.' Our community, we had the opportunity to say, 'All right, we have to do something else.'"

Gardner was in charge of managing *Riviera's* presence at the pier, coordinating with an in-house shipping agency, customs detachment, and stevedoring services, plus the Coast Guard. But after a while, Gardner, like others around town, had started to worry about what he called the "humanitarian crisis" of having crew members stuck on board. "I guarantee you that the cleanest spot in the state of Maine," he said, pointing out the window, "is at the head of that gangway."

Oceania could have worked with health and customs officials to try to get *Riviera's* crew home on chartered flights (an expensive option for a cruise line already absorbing losses) or commercial flights

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Riviera is in another league, with a passenger capacity equal to Eastport's entire population . . . the kind of ship that passes Eastport by.

(although international flights had been restricted, most notably to the European Union). Gardner worried that, instead, *Riviera* would eventually set sail for Europe, where getting the crew off the ship would be easier — and where the cruise industry was gearing up to operate again. A departure, he said, would be costly to Eastport. Docking and service fees were bringing in about \$50,000 a month — a "windfall," Gardner called it — at a time when revenue from shipping activity was down 40 percent.

Neither Gardner nor anyone else I talked with in Eastport knew exactly why, in the meantime, crew couldn't debark. "There are more people from out of state passing through the Kennebec toll booth in an hour," Gardner said. Others described the situation with a range of pejoratives — "sinful," "shameful," and most commonly, "inhumane," often blaming an ambiguous "they."

But "they" turned out simply to be the cruise line. Keeping crew members on board had always been part of the plan for bringing the ship to Eastport, according to Oceania's public relations team and Maine CDC. The possibility of someone debarking and then bringing the virus back onto the ship wasn't worth the risk, from the company's



Zachary Rhoades and his son, Corbyn, fishing at the pier, a rite of summer in Eastport.



perspective. There was no draconian agency to blame — only a pandemic.

Across the street from the Eastport Port Authority, Paula Bouchard sat in the window of Rosie's Hot Dogs, which has been in her family for 48 years. Bouchard, who is 64, has worked at the stand since high school. As a takeout counter, Rosie's was less affected by COVID-19 restrictions than other restaurants in town, and with so many people coming to gawk at the ship, business had been pretty good.

Bouchard said she's never been on a cruise and doesn't have a desire to go, but from her window, she had taken an interest in the crew's daily lives. "We see them play darts. Ping-Pong. They exercise. Walk. Things like that. I'm sure they use the pool." She'd seen drone footage of the upper decks and was impressed. "Imagine if they were like, 'Come and see what it looks like!'" Customers, Bouchard said, had fantasized about checking out the ship too.

Eating a hot dog, an elderly man watched a tiny figure doing laps around the upper deck. "Look at him," he said. "It's just his head. Jogging. Going the whole way around." The hullabaloo around *Riviera's* arrival put him in mind of his youth, when he enjoyed going to dances at the Five and Ten. "There was always something going on back then," he recalled. Then, his attention drifted back to the jogger. "Bet it's some hot up there. Wonder how many laps he does?"

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"I guarantee you that the cleanest spot in the state of Maine," Gardner said, pointing out the window, "is at the head of that gangway."

The ship's presence didn't bother him, he said. "It can sit there long as it wants. They can fish off the other pier. Just the other day, kid got a 5-gallon pail full of them. Good-sized mackerel. He was sure proud of that."

On cue, Zachary Wallace rode past on his bike, PVC pipe attached to the seat as a rod holder. Stopping at the cement barricades on the pier, he stared at the ship. The small figure was still running. "There he goes again," the old man said. "Round and round."

Soon after *Riviera* docked in Eastport, unfamiliar names started liking pictures on the community's Facebook page. Don Dunbar, owner of a photo gallery at the end of Water Street, was one of the first to engage them. "They wanted to know basic things. Sometimes it would be 'Where's the nearest store?' or 'Are you open yet?' They'd see people walking around, hoping to get a chance to get off once their 14 days was up."

Dunbar had attended all of the Zoom meetings, listening to his neighbors express fears of the crew bringing COVID-19. "I was thinking, 'No! COVID's coming in on that road, right there!'" He and his wife, Kathleen, figured the crew must be starved for outside interaction. Using Facebook, they began communicating regularly with a woman

from Honduras, Tania Peña, who worked in the ship's housekeeping department.

They sent a picture of hot dogs they were eating, and Peña responded with a shot of the ice cream she was having for dessert — a treat, she said, the crew received only on Sundays. They began toasting her with photos of their evening cocktails and joked about floating one out to her on an inner tube. After noticing Amazon packages being delivered up the gangway, they started dropping off gifts: Eastport T-shirts, glasses, and postcards, although food and alcohol weren't allowed. When Peña mentioned that she hadn't packed for the cool Down East evenings, they sent her an Eastport sweatshirt. She sent them a picture of herself wearing it on the deck.

Another shop owner, David Oja, and a local tour guide, Tessa Ftorek, struck up their own communications with crew via social media. The more that Eastporters got to know the people on the boat, the greater their sympathy. Dunbar started planning a small concert on the pier, but as soon as he mentioned the idea on Facebook, staff from the local health center, concerned about a crowd gathering, advised him to call it off.

On the day that the ship temporarily left the port to distill drinking water, Don and Kathleen Dunbar welcomed the crew back by waving big, red, hand-shaped cutouts made of plywood, while crew members waved back with oversize hand cutouts of their own. Peña messaged for them to "stay right there" before coming out with a banner that read THANK YOU, with a heart over the O. It was meant for using during the harborside concert that never happened.

At one point, a crew member caught and posted video of a right whale swimming off *Riviera's* stern. With fewer than 300 right whales estimated to still exist, this one's presence felt meaningful, a fellow creature drifting far from home. Every local I met made mention of the footage, delighted that it had been captured by one of the crew.

On July 28, roughly six weeks after the ship arrived, I walked to the end of a small auxiliary pier, close enough to *Riviera's* stern to bounce a tennis ball off it. Two crew members stood on the top deck. I waved. They waved back. One held up a piece of paper that read: "Erick Pineda." Then he shouted, "Facebook!" Later, I learned that he was 25 years old and from Guarita, a remote, inland mountain town in Honduras. "The company," he said, was "taking care of us." Everyone, he assured me, was still being paid. He was on his second seven-month contract. When I asked how he was doing, he replied with a smiley-face emoticon that had a sweat droplet beading down its forehead.

Towards midnight, I went back to the pier, stopping where Charlie Lepin manned a guard booth. He was a few hours into a 12-hour shift, and it was a quiet night — most nights had been, he said. He often passed the time watching movies or exercising. Several decks above, on a balcony, a man was smoking a cigarette, and we could just make out his silhouette. Someone else scrolled through a phone. Farther up, through

darkened windows, five crew members stood in a line, rotating through what looked like an eternal game of darts.

Lepin had little contact with the crew. He sometimes saw them string-fishing off the bow. One night, he watched a virtual tour of *Riviera* on his phone. Though he said he wasn't inclined to go on a cruise, he remarked on the putting greens and driving cage, and the shuffleboard, croquet, and paddle-tennis courts. What he found most impressive was the 1,500-square-foot Vista suites. "Just one room," he said. "Bigger than my entire apartment."

The ship gave off an austere glow that was quickly swallowed up by the black water around it. One night, weeks earlier, a man had steered a skiff under the ship's bow, curious about the single bright bulb hanging from the end of a long chain. He didn't notice that, at waterline, the keel protruded past the bow. That's what the light was meant to show, and he damaged his boat when he bumped into it. Otherwise, Lepin said, he saw little in the way of action.

› CONTINUED ON PAGE 90



Cherry Island Light, on the Canadian side of the maritime boundary, is just visible under *Riviera's* bow. Facing page: Without passengers aboard, crew make use of guest quarters.

Then, two women he'd graduated with at Eastport's Shead High School pulled up to the barricade. They were on their way home from the Happy Crab, a local bar, and one of them checked to see if any members of the crew were on Tinder. None were. "Maybe we should just throw rocks at all the windows with lights on?" she asked.

"Thanks for visiting," Lepin said, and the pair took the hint and left.

Another car pulled up an hour later. It was the sixth or seventh trip that Kenny Carr, owner of Carr's Taxi, in Bangor, had made between Bangor's airport and Eastport's port, delivering new crew members to Riviera. It's two hours each way, and he made \$225 every time. Carr said he had trouble pronouncing many of the names of his passengers, and because of their limited English, he couldn't converse much with them. "They gotta be a little confused," he said. "Their company wants them to come work on a boat that's not doing anything but sitting."

He lit a cigarette, stared up at the decks. "Not like they're roughing it on that boat." He took a drag. "But they've done their isolation. You can only surf the internet so long before



The view from Rosie's Hot Dogs.

you gotta find something else to do."

The first time he drove into Eastport and saw the ship, it came as a shock. "It was freaky," he said. "When I come over the top of that hill, all I could see was the boat, dwarfing the town. You could see it over the

buildings. Good golly, I says, look at that. This must be like Noah's ark to these people."

Carr helped his passenger lift a suitcase over the barricade. Lepin and the man spoke briefly, observing security protocol. I overheard the conversation. The man's

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name was Georgiev. He was from Bulgaria. He worked as a plumber. All he asked was, "Is virus on board?"

Then, several of the crew met Georgiev at the end of the gangway, and Lepin went back into his booth. Carr finished his cigarette and drove back to Bangor.

The next day, I found Don Dunbar sitting on the steps of his gallery. He'd just heard that *Riviera* was leaving for La Spezia, Italy, in three days, although the departure hadn't yet been announced publicly. To bid the crew farewell, he said, he wanted to make good on hosting live music at the pier. This time, though, he'd keep plans quiet. Meanwhile, several puffs of black smoke floated from the ship's stack. "Never seen it do that before," Dunbar said. "They must be firing things back up again."

The farewell concert took place at dusk on Friday, July 31, the day before departure, set against purple and orange skies. The crowd was small — maybe 30 people, all spaced 6 feet apart. A local fiddle-and-guitar duo, Ross and Brandy Argir, serenaded the crew with Celtic songs. The melodies were melancholy, bittersweet, well suited to the occasion.

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"All I could see was the boat, dwarfing the town. . . . Good golly, I says, look at that. This must be like Noah's ark to these people."

David Oja wept. "Every morning," he said, "I've been talking to them. I feel for them. It's just so sad. No matter how much you love being on a ship, there comes a time when you need to get out and touch the ground." He stomped the pier to demonstrate. "Besides," he added, "seeing that they're gone, there's going to be an empty space in the morning."

The Argirs finished their set. Several crew members yelled, "Eastport, we love you!" They turned on the flashlight functions on their phones, held up the THANK YOU banner, and waved their big hand cutouts. People on the pier shouted back, "We love you too!" One of the crew began shout-singing John Denver's "Take Me Home, Country Roads." Someone on the pier picked it up: "To the place, where I belong . . ."

The next morning, Oja, Dunbar, Ftorek, and chamber of commerce president Kevin Raye crossed the barricade and met Tania Peña at the end of the gangway. Dressed in her housekeeping uniform, she presented a plaque commemorating *Riviera's* maiden call to Eastport. "It was a pleasure to meet you," she said through her mask. "Even though we cannot hug, I hope one day we will come again. We will invite you on the ship. You really make us feel like we are home."

The contingent of Eastporters presented her with a gift bag emblazoned with the logo of Sea Foam Brand Sardines, a long-gone canning company, and a variety pack from Raye's Mustard, a business that's been in Kevin Raye's family for 120 years. By the time Peña turned to walk back up the gangway, she had spent all of 10 minutes off the ship.



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A crane lifted the gangway, and Chris Gardner and several port employees loosened the lines, which retracted into *Riviera's* hull. "Lines are going!" Ftoek shouted after each one. "There goes one! There goes another! Lines are gone!"

The crew waved from the decks. From the far pier, the harborside footpath, and the waterfront amphitheater, a few hundred people waved back. "Good luck! Take care! We love you!"

Three horn blasts later, *Riviera* slid into the channel. "Let them all come on," Gardner shouted to the crane operator, who proceeded to lift the concrete barricades. For the first time in six weeks, locals walked out toward the end of the pier. Right behind them, a car containing two stony-faced older men eased forward. Looking unmoved by the send-off, they parked, then set about tying mackerel jigs to their fishing poles.

As the crowd dispersed, Zachary Wallace was sitting on a piling by himself, watching the ship dissolve into the distance. "Never in my life have I seen a ship that big," he said. "My cousins and I were talking last night about how we would want to go up there, to the pool, and just swim around." His eyes stayed fixed on the ocean. "They're going all the way to Italy. It's just weird," he said. What was weird? I asked. He shrugged. "They just wouldn't let them off." ■

Jaed Coffin is the author of the memoirs *A Chant to Soothe the Wild Elephants* and *Rough-house Friday* and teaches in the University of New Hampshire's MFA creative writing program. He lives in Brunswick.

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