

Crew Travel



The annual SMI Crew Travel Round Table Debate saw eight crew travel representatives give their views on the latest developments and issues facing the Marine & Offshore travel market. Kindly sponsored by Marine Tours and with questions from SMI Editor

Samantha Giltrow, participants were: **Konstantinos Oikonomou**, CEO, Marine Tours; **Sverre Gade Husby**, Managing Director, G Travel International; **Nikos Gazelidis**, Global Head of Shipping, ATPi; **Melanie Quinn**, Head of Sales and Customer Relations, Clyde Travel; **Rogier van Beugen**, CCO, C Teleport; **Henrik Jensen**, Managing Director, Danica Crewing Services; **Mike Tibbert**, General Manager – Europe, Global Marine Travel; **Joe Pitcher**, Director of Sales, Global Marine Travel.

Samantha Giltrow

Welcome everyone to our annual Crew Travel Round Table Debate. I would like to extend our thanks to Konstantinos and Marine Tours for sponsoring our virtual meeting today. The first question I'd like to ask you is about the inability of ship operators to conduct crew changes. It's obviously one of the biggest operational challenges that we've seen during the pandemic and I'd just like to know what have been the main challenges that you've faced within your businesses and how you've adapted to meet those challenges during COVID?

Sverre Gade Husby

We had to get loads of new competencies in place quite rapidly. We had to ramp up the operation, build a platform for information sharing, look at new ways of setting up crew changes, get really acquainted with carpooling. We had to understand the need from a medical point of view and also get to know whether ports have the testing facilities basically to create a new solution for our clients. We have also set up a COVID infrastructure for some clients and set up quarantine facilities at the hotels. Some of the areas that did the crew change, don't have the necessary labs to do the testing so we have to fly the medics in and out and keep the crew contained until they get their test results back in the afternoon and then continue to onboard or disembark the crew.

Samantha Giltrow

So, it's obviously added a lot of cost and there is now a lot of logistics to do?

Sverre Gade Husby

It's a lot of logistics and a lot of cost involved but basically we have seen that we have a much tighter relationship with our core client than we had earlier.

Nikos Gazelidis

We needed to enhance the existing model. It now takes five times more for the same ticket to be produced and at the same time we needed to build an information centre for COVID-related restrictions because the existing ones at the time of COVID weren't enough, weren't updated and they were used for other purposes. So we needed to create a daily plotting of updated information of where group changes were possible. In addition, due to limitations of conventional/scheduled airline travel we had to resort to chartered flights, an already familiar practice with the energy clients but it was necessary



and to introduce it to shipping as well.. In certain cases it was inevitable, as the case with India where, in collaboration with local shipping associations, we undertook the transportation of Indian seafarers out of the country and back. During the initial stage of the pandemic, we had to go back to the old bricks and mortar ways of doing things, using multiple means of transport in many cases, trains, planes and automobiles, and creating and offering packages that included services beyond travel, (health-related, etc.)

Samantha Giltrow

So it's been very much about adapting?

Nikos Gazelidis

That's the beauty of human nature I guess.

Konstantinos Oikonomou

I think we all have run quite a few miles in this marathon to have a very clear picture of the challenges. For me, information is key. We've also set up an information centre and we constantly communicate everything from small to big with our clients. To tell you the truth, we don't see our clients as clients but as a team working together for a specific purpose and if you look at it, you're trying to travel people, you know, lives who are at risk who are being threatened by COVID and at the same time they might threat the business continuity of a vessel because restrictions are very strong. So, for me, a great challenge is information, on time information and another serious challenge is the means of transport for sustainable solutions and by sustainable I mean to travel safe at a relatively reasonable cost because cost is a great challenge, it's an extreme challenge. Another great challenge is all the difficulties that occur during the crew change from small things to serious ones, either someone to be detected for COVID or having to send a part of the crew back, all this happening after office hours. We need to be there constantly delivering sustainable results!

Melanie Quinn

I think early on we accepted that COVID was going to be with us for a long time and quickly adopted new technology to support our consultants and just as the others have said, information has been key so the level of communication that we've had with our customers has been imperative so some of that will stick after because it's been really collaborative work that we've done with logistic officers and crew managers and has enhanced the relationship and what we've been able to deliver just having that constant communication and not just about what's changed in the world but where the vessels are heading, where the opportunities are to crew change and it's been a moving feast throughout so communication, and collaboration has been key to getting people moving. It's also the level of lead in that you have, the government make announcements and it's 4am on a Saturday morning when it's going to be implemented so that is not helpful. We are fortunate to be members of the Business Travel Association so we do get a bit of a heads up on DfT. So for example, there's a new red list coming out this week which will impact crew changes so we're just working through the detail of that and the exemptions.

Samantha Giltrow

It must be a nightmare because you're just hearing about the travel bans changing all the time?

Melanie Quinn

We don't just collaborate with our customers, we've collaborated with the business travel community as well to lobby government, find information. There's no single winner out of this. I think it was Kostos (Konstantinos) who said that at the end of the day it's human beings that are at risk of COVID. So we've collaborated with the industry as well to lobby government to, on behalf of seafarers, to get the recognition that they deserve as well.



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Samantha Giltrow

Yes, so would you say it's brought the crew travel sector closer together to act more cohesively because I think in the past we've heard that it's not been so much like that but do you think something like this has forced you to work more closely?

Melanie Quinn

Some of the people on the call here today, it's the first time that I've met them and we're meeting virtually so hopefully I'll rectify that in the future but certainly across the industry in the UK and the other markets that we work in we have collaborated with people from all parts of the supply chain just to make sure that we can get these movements done.

Mike Tibbert

Like everyone else on this call obviously we've reacted and we've adapted our systems and processes accordingly but I'll come back to that. I think our original aim was to be more proactive. Our view completely is all on the seafarer and part of that was lobbying, V. Group, which is the ultimate owner of Global Marine Travel, signed the Neptune Declaration right at the beginning and the emphasis was to recognise seafarers as key workers and give them priority access to COVID-19 vaccines etc. So fundamentally, our strategy right from the beginning was to put the seafarer at the heart and soul of it and make sure that whatever we were doing facilitated the safe transfer of crew back and forward to the vessels because that's ultimately what we're here for.

Joe Pitcher

I think Melanie touched on it and I echo what Mike says, I think an important thing in terms of how we dealt with this operationally is not only our relationship with the customer but what's proved to be vital is our relationship with the airlines and our contact within the airlines because airlines have experienced a similar challenge to us, you know, being dependent on governmental restrictions, being dependent on interpretation of rules often at a very fast pace and it's that consistency of interpretation that's sometimes proved a challenge. So I think from the marine travel communities point of view, I think that relationship with the airlines has proved invaluable, you know, the fact that we can pick up a phone or we've got direct points of contact with the airlines who are in a similar position to ourselves, often hurriedly trying to interpret and adapt based on new rules or diktats coming out. So I think from our industry's point of view that relationship or those relationships with multiple airlines has proved invaluable over the last 12 months.

Rogier van Beugen

I think we all recognise that we had to greatly adjust operations and servicing. For us, of course being more of a technology provider, that is different from other travel agents. We have adjusted our operations less as basically technology is our operations. On the other hand, we did put a lot of effort into finding the right information, finding the right information was sort of key in what everybody said before and actually brings to bear the key three things that I think happened over the last year. One was of course the scrambling and the adjusting of our operations, the second was the continuous search for the latest information and the third being the hope that this is all over soon. We're continuously looking through the next horizon whenever we can. Jumping ahead to what I have learnt, basically we should have assumed a year ago that this was going to last for a long time, we should have put our heads together and said okay, how can we, together as an industry, jointly put out a stockpile of information and keep that updated. So we don't all have to put effort in finding parts of it. So far, we haven't been able to put this up together and definitely that's something that we should take away from the last year; we need to start cooperating faster and as a travel industry but also as a with the maritime industry.

Samantha Giltrow

Yes, that's something that has been discussed in many times over in recent years, when we've been doing these round tables is whether or not you could get together and form some kind of an association just so you can lobby on things and so that might be something that you can discuss going forward. Henrik, could you just give us a perspective from a crew manager's side please because obviously you've been deeply impacted by everything that's gone on?

Henrik Jensen

From our perspective, of course, it is not only flying from one airport to another airport. The travel agency is of course important, but we are one step deeper into all this. I would say we are now in a new normal. Crew changes in general are possible. It requires a lot more planning before, and coming back to where I started by saying it was an operational issue before, today a crew change is moved to a completely different level in the companies. So, when our crew operators before talked to somebody in the operations department and somewhere with the port agents and so on today we have to make decisions, so it has put a lot on our more senior management, and then suddenly when you have to stop a ship or take it off or even deviate a ship, it is also not any longer a decision on our client's side, on the operations side, it's a CEO

or Managing Director decision suddenly, so we get completely different involvement with our clients. Obviously, I think also as some of the travel agencies here said suddenly in the whole system we have to monitor the ships with the captains are reporting today, every day they are reporting where they are going and so on so we can follow exactly where it's best to take the crew off again. So that has been a big challenge for our office staff. Of course, it's stressful for the seafarers who could not be relieved also.

Samantha Giltrow

We've heard some, you know, quite horrific stories about people being left on for a long, long time. What would you say is your experience?

Henrik Jensen

We have mainly senior officers onboard and many are on a four-month contract. On average last year they were onboard five months and five days so it was not a long time. On the business side, we are then seeing that some of our clients have moved, have subcontracted more to us and we've got new clients on this also because simply they did not have the resources. If you have only five to 10 ships you don't have the resources to keep up on all these ever-changing rules, yes, so that way we have somehow benefitted from it.

Samantha Giltrow

What needs to be done do you think to get back on track? We've heard a lot in the media about vaccine passports. What do you think will happen with those, do you think they're likely?

Mike Tibbert

Definitely some kind of Track and Trace strategy is what's required and there are a number of different products out there in the market. There's the CommonPass, IATA Travel Pass amongst others. From the travel industry perspective the IATA option would be the one that we would obviously recommend. I've seen a presentation on the IATA pass and it's really excellent. It takes the process all the way through from A to Z and it collates the information of where you received the vaccine, it understands all the GDPR requirements, it interfaces with the airline, etc., and essentially it also, and this is the most important part, gives the traveller confidence because they can cross-reference everything that they require, visa, vaccination, any other requirement and gets people travelling again, gets the confidence to know that when they turn up at the airport they won't experience any difficulties with the lack of clarity sometimes between different authorities on the conditions to travel. So for me, there has to be some kind of process but

the biggest kind of hurdle for all of that is getting agreements between different governments, I mean, even getting the synergy within Europe at the moment far less expanding that to a global basis is going to be very, very difficult indeed. The vaccine rollout is at different speeds in different places and that's going to obviously be a problem as well but 100%, we definitely need to have some kind of vaccine passport and politically that's sensitive, there are a lot of people that are against the term passport because of the implications on privacy but I do believe that, for example, the IATA App is the way forward.

Samantha Giltrow

Yes, I think it's probably one of the only things, you know, that is going to open things up isn't it really?

Konstantinos Oikonomou

I'm going to second what Mike said and there needs to be a global coordination at least from the big federations, the big countries like China, the US, Europe, to coordinate some homogenous policy on travel and in order to avoid quarantines. I think quarantines are the basic measure that destroys travel and it makes crew changes impossible in many cases and the only way to avoid that is some sort of health passport or vaccination. It's like the one when you have to travel in certain countries, you know, in South Africa, for example, or in Africa and other countries you need to have specific vaccinations otherwise you don't get onboard. It's not something too complex, I mean, it's something the travel industry knows for many years and has implemented. Now, the difficulty here is logistics, and of course the political will to agree on it. Unfortunately, and that's a personal opinion, what we have seen is countries trying to use COVID as a political tool for other strategies because it makes no sense eleven months after the outbreak and we haven't managed as a civilisation to find some common rules on global travel. I mean, how difficult can it be?





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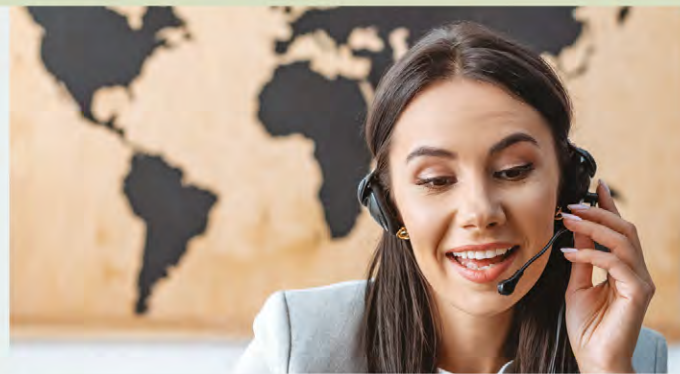
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Nikos Gazelidis

I would say a digital health passport or whatever the word might be, that can accommodate both vaccine and testing and holding data because for the moment, even the World Health Organization is not inclined to go only with the vaccine element as vaccine distribution hasn't reached critical mass. So if we want to see travel, essential travel for our seafarers resume at previous patterns earlier, we need to introduce a digital solution that also accommodates validation of testing at reputable, accredited testing and holding facilities.

Samantha Giltrow

How can they take charge though, how would you see that happening?

Nikos Gazelidis

I think we're fighting the wrong war with persuading governments to change their priorities and adopt the Neptune Declaration and IMO protocol. We haven't seen that much of a change of priorities over the past 12 months towards seafarers in major source markets. So, the industry needs to take charge on certain elements, even the vaccination of seafarers, if they will be allowed to in the future, as more vaccine supply will be available. The industry is also taking charge of the problem of stranded seafarers with expired contracts, as both shipping companies and seafarers seem to adapt to labour contract extension, at least for the interim.

Melanie Quinn

I think we're going to have vaccination and testing around for a number of years along with the IATA Pass and I just wanted to pick up on what Mike said about the IATA Travel Pass. It's a great product, I think the challenge will be the airlines wanting to pay for it because it's them that will pay for it. Etihad and Emirates have signed up to it and some of the other Gulf airlines but they haven't actually selected the modules that they'll participate in so there's still some way to go in that

but also to kind of highlight the fact that a lot around health passports in the press has been surrounding the privacy of the traveller, around health information being shared. With IATA Travel Pass, because it sits on the individual's device, it's the individual's device that owns the data, it's not stored anywhere and that's a key thing that IATA must put out to the market for travellers to want to adopt this technology to be able to travel.

Henrik Jensen

Yes, I must say, I'm maybe a bit pessimistic on these things here because first, to implement such an international thing like a passport and to accept it in all countries around the world, this is a long process, and you see how processing IMO or whatever, it's slow processes, yes, and one thing is it's designed in IMO or IATA or whatever, another thing is that the governments also implemented them and I come back a little bit to my point. We have a situation with COVID where people in some countries, I mean, in the UK I think and in Germany also and at one stage we had somebody dying every 45 seconds from COVID, yes, and when you come to this position, yes, then governments are no longer interested in 10 seafarers staying in the airport they cannot get in. So we are down on the priority list and that thing also will take some time before we get these things moving again.

Samantha Giltrow

So when do you see some movement happening?

Henrik Jensen

People are tested now, and we need to be sure that the other people sitting in the airplane have been properly tested. I think the vaccine will be a long time because we are also working with seafarers from countries who are very big and maybe not as fast with their vaccinations as for financial reasons and so on as some of the West European countries will be and the Philippines and China, India, it could take years before they are through with their vaccinations there.



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Samantha Giltrow

So it goes back to talking about the testing.

Henrik Jensen

I think in the future we have to rely on testing. Coming back to the real disaster it's of course that the one joiner onboard the ship, he brings the COVID onboard and the other crew onboard are infected by him, because onboard the ships we do not have medical equipment to treat seriously ill patients like this, so that's a real disaster.

Rogier van Beugen

What I would like to add is that it's, again, one piece of the information puzzle, yes, so going with Henrik's, I wouldn't call it pessimism, more realism that most likely it will not be one policy for countries so maybe we should take it from this meeting and create a list that we keep updated for all countries, what is required to enter, what vaccine has in place etc.

Sverre Gade Husby

The vaccine and the vaccine passport will be right in moving forward but I don't see in the foreseeable future that the testing/quarantine will be stopped. You have different versions of COVID now and it's getting harder and harder now to medicate. A lot of the countries now including Norway are on their third wave and now we see people born in the '90's being hospitalised. We didn't see that through the first two waves and from the Norwegian point of view the government hasn't accepted any or looked at any vaccine passports as of yet so it's a long process - and also on the GDPR, all the different test stations, the hospitals, where we do the testing, they seem to be live, accessible in the passport and that is hard to achieve, I think.

Konstantinos Oikonomou

I just wanted to say that the health passport or whatever it's going to be called, if it's not directly correlated to local lockdowns to be accepted as a means for someone to travel through without having to be in quarantine then there's no value at the end of the day. It needs to be a tool that you would use to avoid the quarantine. Now, if we look into the quarantine process into more detail, it's just an easy measure to tell you don't come, don't travel, we don't want you here. Quarantines are not related to health because you are already tested on departure and on arrival. You're tested in order to fly, you're tested at arrival and if you test negative then why do you stay in quarantine. So, the first thing is the political will to allow people to travel especially essential travellers.

Sverre Gade Husby

And also we're to keep in mind that the vaccine apparently doesn't stop you spreading the virus, it stops you being ill.

Konstantinos Oikonomo

In the meantime, what's going on now I think we can all agree, is not sustainable.

Mike Tibbert

I do understand everything that's been said and obviously we all have to accept the realism that yes, quarantine will still be in place until the different governments around the world are able to coordinate a strategy but my point is that as an industry we need to promote some kind of structure. Now, whether or not you believe in the ability of the travel pass to provide or to facilitate the ability for people to start moving again is up for debate but we have to have that structure in place and I know there's frustrations as well with governments and people feel as if they've been talking and talking and we don't get any response and we know politicians have their own agenda but fundamentally again, I still believe that we need that structure and we should keep lobbying, we should keep making sure that it's at the forefront of their agendas and ultimately the aim here, and whether it is futile or not is to facilitate the free movement of people travelling again and ultimately that's what we're all here for.

Joe Pitcher

I just want to add to that I don't think there's any profile of traveller who's more used to health screening and communicable disease screening than seafarers, you know, it's an integral part of crewing anyway so as a cultural leap for us in this sector it's not a huge one, it is the general business travel population of course, this is very visible and intrusive currently but for the crewing market, we're very well used to health screening as a prerequisite of joining. So in terms of our adaptability and in terms of as Mike say lobbying at a governmental level we can demonstrate quite



easily that with previous illnesses and health crises, the crewing industry is very adaptable and as has been proved in the last twelve months has done so and has put measures in place very quickly.

Samantha Giltrow

What do you think the lessons learned will be from all of this and how do you think it will change the future of crew travel?

Sverre Gade Husby

We see an even tighter collaboration between our clients and the travel industry. The resources that the travel agencies have been using over the last period is unbelievable and the support we offer the client has been with one eye only focusing on getting the crew changed. The crisis has also shown us how important information, the knowledge, the consultancy has become, duty of care, but also we probably need to see and create, let's say, bubbles for crew travel to minimise the risk and reduce the touchpoints during travel.

Henrik Jensen

I think if we learn from this here that it's fair to say also that the relations to the travel agencies and the information, early information about what the airlines are going to do, yes, is important, yes, and except and one thing also this is maybe a little bit not everybody will be happy but we need to diversify your procurement of travel rights so you cannot only work with one travel agency because all of you have different connections with different airlines and actually you need strategically to place yourself in the way that you work with different travel agencies who have good connections with different airlines, and that's what we have done also.

Nikos Gazelidis

What we should take after the end of this pandemic is that the right use of technology-based solutions and not technology for the sake of technology for sure. What we need, is shipping

companies to look at the crew change cycle is an integrated function and not a set of isolated and fragmented workflows as it has been until now, technology can help with the integration of the whole crew change logistics cycle. On the other hand, a crew change needs to be better planned, cannot be left at the last minute, and should not be decided on the basis a airticket tender troubleshooting outcome.

Konstantinos Oikonomou

For me the greatest lesson learned was that again people make the difference versus technology. Whoever relied ONLY on technology during COVID got the crew stuck, whoever used the people element trying to find the right solution showing care, showing sentiment in the whole service process was the one providing solutions. The technology is a tool and a great tool and we should all invest in it but the attitude through which we utilise technology and the purpose we utilise it makes all the difference. So I think that the message to our clients was listen guys, we're here for you as a team and we can make a difference for your people. Another lesson learned, travel cost is not the only priority on its own, but combined with duty of care is the number one priority because we're travelling people. So how are we going to address this travel as a cost orientation, as a service orientation, as a safety, so priorities have changed and we need to capitalise on that when the next day comes and it's on us, let's all not make it only cost oriented but also people oriented. Market demand and supply primarily defines travel costs, not TMCs, but what we control is the mindset and purpose through which we service our customers so this is the greatest lesson learned for me.

Mike Tibbert

I think there are lessons learned from both ends of the spectrum, from our customers we have learnt how important it is to have a reliable professional travel management company looking after their people but also from the suppliers as well, the airlines have realised as well that it's not all about people booking online, it isn't all about the technology, when it came to it, they wouldn't have been able to facilitate the changes and manage all the bureaucracy that came with it that the travel management companies did without blinking, we picked up the baton on that and we ran with it both for the suppliers and for the clients and I think people are starting to realise now there is a place for the travel management company and to be perfectly frank, they couldn't have managed throughout this without us.

Rogier van Beugen

I wanted to add on something that Konstantinos said about the technology not being sufficient at this point. I think it's one of the key learnings that if you look at the current status



of technology, not just our technology but I think technology in general, it doesn't suffice to cope with this crisis. So if you look at all the online sources now, none of them, none of them is complete, none of them works fully automated, has a decent API to it and as a technology offer a full solution. I think, if anything, we have learnt over the last 20 years is that technology is evolving really, really fast. If I look at what is actually starting to happen at this moment, and I know some of you are partners with them, there's one company I like to mention as an example, which is Sherpa, who are at the moment building this data base with almost complete travel information. They have a couple of weak spots, that's why they're not perfect for us yet. For instance they don't have seafarer exemptions, etc, but they are pretty close to delivering an all-round solution. So my bet is that with the next pandemic, technology will be able to show the information need and the human element will become less important, and that's fully respecting all the efforts that everybody put in over the last year because I do realise that technology did not cut it completely this last year and it's not cutting it completely at the moment. I think we're coming a long way, but obviously, it's not cutting it completely anymore.

Henrik Jensen

I think there are some great technologies moving on also on the travel sites, but in many cases the work of the travel agency is pushed to the crew manager. So it's great that you can book your own tickets, you can issue them and so on but actually we need a technology solution which is making things easier not just pushing the job from the travel agency to the buyer. Technology cannot solve the situation, right, that needs some personal contact and we need as travel buyers to rely on travel agencies who have the right contacts in the airlines who control the problems for us.

Samantha Giltrow

How do you see the crew travel sector coming out of the pandemic?

Joe Pitcher

I just wonder whether we'll see any sort of rationalisation in terms of crew change locations or consolidation in terms of crew change locations, you know, focusing on ports, focusing on regions at least in the short to medium term that have more effective ground infrastructure, ability to position crew and quarantine crew if necessary along with testing and health screening. At the moment, as we have mentioned, you know, the traditional model for crewing has been to a certain extent

reactive in terms of where we facilitate the crew changes and if we see a rationalisation in terms of it being based around hub locations, even to the extent of perhaps making non-cargo related port calls to facilitate group changes well that would have an impact on everything we do in terms of the destination served by the airlines, in terms of the types of, or the profile of flights we're booking. So, I mean this is a speculative comment but I'm interested in the group's view on that, I mean, this relates much wider than just us involved in marine travel, this involves airlines, it involves the crewing sector in itself but I'd be interested to see how that maps out.

Mike Tibbert

I'd just like to say as well that I think that during this crisis it has come to the fore how important seafarers are to the whole world economy and I genuinely hope and pray that at the end of this, post-pandemic, we still put the same emphasis on the safety and the crew changes and making sure that we look after these people because these people are vital to the industry so let's hope that that emphasis on their safety continues.

Sverre Gade Husby

Yes, the seafarers' wellbeing need to be the core for the future. We also see earlier before the pandemic we know that a lot of the clients were happy to send crew the longest routing around to achieve lower cost, happy to sit and spend four to six, eight hours in an airport to reduce on cost. We, after twelve months know that, the risk of getting COVID on an aircraft is close to zero, to nothing, but getting it actually at the airport and the touchpoint in the airport is higher, I also see that there has to be a change in how the clients accept more direct routes for less time spent in an airport to reduce their risk.

Samantha Giltrow

Thank you everyone for your comments today and thanks again to Marine Tours for sponsoring our debate. ●

