

Nile Cruise Case Study – Turning around the floating hospital nightmare

In 1998, a Nile Cruise was a popular holiday choice for many of UK's leading tour operators' customers. The thought of a cruise ship viewing some of the most historic landmarks in Egypt attracted thousands of tourists, Thomson alone had 11 ships commissioned for holiday use, with more than one hundred passengers on each boat.

The reality of the dream Nile trip proved an altogether different proposition: more than half of the travellers at that time were suffering from serious food poisoning, which ruined their holidays. Consequently, people were avoiding the Nile as a destination, like the plague. Tourism rates were dropping and operators were reducing their presence in the region, as revenue generation was poor. Compensation claims were having heavy impact on profits. This led to the arrival of the tour operators to Check Safety First's door to find a resolution to the problem.

Check Safety First use the Cristal standard to help organisations improve and maintain a safe operating environment. The Cristal standard is based on the HACCP system, or hazard analysis of critical control points, which was initially developed as a methodology by NASA in the 1960's. The seven point methodology has been adapted to suit the food hygiene demands of numerous industries. Cristal was developed to utilise the HACCP approach to make sure that hoteliers and *other holiday venues* did not break the law.

When the company started investigating hygiene aboard the first cruise boats, it found that even the most basic operational requirements and standards were missing, such as wash hand basins, hot water and uniforms for food handlers. The boats lacked simple water purification systems and staff were unaware of the basic good catering practices, such as the difference between soap and disinfectants or the fact that cockroaches had to be removed from salad and vegetables before use.

Given these rudimentary issues existed, Check Safety First had to start with basic food hygiene and good catering practice training courses. This involved on the job training and workshops and included advice on simple activities, such as how and when to wash hands, sanitation issues and how to use thermometers to improve

cooking safety.

In conjunction with staff awareness and training, there were onsite issues to contend with, simple water purification systems had to be set up to improve sanitation on each cruise boat. Kitchens were redesigned to a more practical, linear infrastructure with new equipment and food grade utensils. Sand, carbon, UV light, and chlorine dosing pumps were installed for the water (**what for?**).

This process took x months and led the boats into the Cristal food hygiene programme itself, which involves monthly on-site audits, continuous basic food hygiene and HACCP training (**what is HACCP training?**), to push each unit towards reaching the Cristal standard and maintaining its hygiene standards. The ongoing audit process covers everything from food delivery at the correct temperatures, storage, cooking, handling, disposal and room cleanliness. It covers food, portable water and extended services such as swimming pool safety and legionella. These ongoing checks are a central part of the Cristal standard as hygiene maintenance is key.

“We needed to act quickly so that people were leaving the Nile cruise boats with an unforgettable experience, but for the right reasons. These simple, but effective changes had a major impact on safety and improved hygiene standards beyond recognition on board each boat. By improving catering practices, food related illnesses figures tumbled rapidly,” commented **xx of the Nile Cruise Association**.

By 2000, the results of Cristal’s clean-up operation were already proving to be a big success. Overall rates of illness had fallen below ten percent. As the effects of the operation became clear, other operators began to sign-up, including operators such as Kuoni.

Alan Zering, x at CheckSafetyFirst.com, who implemented the Cristal Mark understood the dilemma facing the travel industry at the time:

“The major tour operators were keen to ensure that their ships were more than just floating hospitals. We have to remember that word-of-mouth in the holiday marketplace is a powerful marketing tool. Illness was paying a heavy price in terms of

competition and footfall on the resort and the operators knew they had to act quickly to reverse it.”

Five years on, the implementation of Cristal had turned around the resorts fortunes. The clean-up operation, has been integral to Egypt’s rise to most popular tourist destination in Northern Africa, beating the more traditional resorts of Morocco and Tunisia. In 2003, the Cristal Mark standard was contracted to monitor over 120 boats on the Nile, with illness levels at almost zero percent. Tourism levels have increased again, as operators’ work to develop new revenue opportunities in the area.

“Safety is the next key holiday criteria to price in the region. Following the success of the Cristal Mark on the cruise ships, tour operators are now pushing for hoteliers to be accredited by Cristal as well. They have seen the results on the ships and want to ensure a similar holiday experience across the region,” added Alan Zering.

Currently, all of the main cruise ships are now actively working with CheckSafetyFirst, including Presidential Nile Cruises and Blue Sky Travel. On the mainland, the key hotel chains are following suit, with the Accord, Four Seasons, Hyatt Regency and Meridien chains all operating under the Cristal standard. There are obvious advantages to the holidaymaker but there are numerous advantages to the provider as well. It promotes best practices in the staff and management. The documentation also allows a defence against nefarious insurance claims.

“Over the past four years, the Cristal Mark has become viewed as the licence on which the hotel and travel industry must operate. The hotel industry is a key trade area for us and as a country we must work to ensure that we maintain the revenue and tourist satisfaction levels that we currently have. Cristal can take a huge part of the credit for the current flourishing travel industry we have,” concluded xx at Egyptian Tourist Board.