

Cruisers on Keillor trip seek refunds

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The “Prairie Home Companion” faithful who signed up for a cruise that was later canceled won’t be getting all their money back. But Garrison Keillor and his team are working to make sure they’re not completely sunk.

When water-bound voyages were scrapped due to the pandemic, most passengers received full refunds or full credit for future bookings. But it’s a different story for those who registered for chartered trips like “Prairie Home Companion at Sea,” which had been scheduled to set sail on March 18.

The ship’s operator, Holland America Line, agreed in early April to write a refund check guaranteeing each would-be sailor gets at least \$1,200 back by mid-June. But that doesn’t cover the total bill, which ranged from \$2,200 to \$5,000 per person, depending on the size of the cabin.

Keillor’s company, Prairie Home Cruises LLC, which only has a staff of three people, already forked over \$700,000 to \$800,000 for a variety of expenses, including insurance, management services

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Cruisers on axed Keillor trip are seeking full refunds

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and deposits on equipment rental. The vast majority of those costs are nonrefundable.

"Delta may be able to offer full refunds immediately, but you can't expect that this tiny company in Minnesota would be able to do the same thing," said Katharine Seggerman, Keillor's personal assistant.

Prairie Home Cruises managing director Kate Gustafson said the company is looking at other ways to get additional money to the roughly 1,200 passengers, but that everyone will take a hit — including her company.

"It's taken us a while to untangle what's refundable and what isn't," said Gustafson, who was managing director of "A Prairie Home Companion" for many years. "When we're done, there will be zero left in the coffers. We're basically working for nothing."

The cruise on the MS Veendam was billed as "the last hurrah" for the "Prairie Home" crew, which had hosted nearly a dozen such trips in the past.

Those cruises had been promoted by St. Paul-based American Public Media, which dis-



Garrison Keillor's "last hurrah" sea cruise was canceled due to the coronavirus pandemic.

tributes the radio show — renamed "Live From Here" by Chris Thile, who replaced Keillor as host in 2016.

That company, which also operates Minnesota Public Radio, severed ties with Keillor in 2017 following allegations of inappropriate behavior toward a co-worker. So if "Prairie Home" was going to set sail once more, it had to do so without APM.

"We were really not planning on doing another cruise, but Garrison had heard from cruisers over and over," Gustafson said. "So we started to ask ourselves: Can we pull it off?"

Tickets went on sale last May and sold out within 24 hours. The trip, scheduled to sail from Fort Lauderdale, Fla., to the Cayman Islands, prom-

ised lots of interaction with Keillor, sketches featuring "Prairie Home" regulars and entertainment from singers and musicians including Heather Masse, Pat Donohue and Maria Jette.

The journey was initially postponed, then canceled. Keillor sent a note to passengers April 20:

"Ever so often, we look at the news and read about a cruise ship wandering the Caribbean, trying to offload the crew, and we think, 'What If' and imagine the Veendam in distress, a week's vacation turning into a story by Kafka," he wrote. "I'm grateful for the decision March 11 to cancel. I trust that you and yours are safe and well. We've heard of friends and friends of friends who've suffered, some have died, and we go onward in mystery, not knowing when normal life will resume or what normal will be. I'm 77 and I recall no precedent."

Some would-be passengers have not taken the news well.

"There is a lot of red tape," Elissa Wolfson told the New York Times. She had spent nearly \$5,000 on reservations for herself and her daughter.

Gustafson said roughly 85%

of the feedback they've received has been supportive. She shared an e-mail sent earlier this week by Jennifer Terris of Charlotte, N.C.: "We think it is most unfair that other cruisers appear to be most impatient regarding the refund. ... The cancellation was certainly no one's fault and this is a very unusual situation. We know you are doing your very best to work this out and everyone needs to just have a little patience!"

There is some good news for "Prairie Home" fans: In addition to finishing his long-awaited memoir, Keillor is using the downtime in his Manhattan apartment to work on a new "Lake Wobegon" novel. He previously said he wouldn't write any more stories about his fictional town.

He teases that the book will deal with what happens when residents "catch a virus from eating cheese that causes compulsive admission of innermost thoughts and guilty secrets."

He promised advance copies for those who signed up for the cruise. At cost. Plus postage.

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