

## Shipping

# Luxury cruise liner's launch delayed as dozens of ships face potential safety hazard

Faulty fire-resistant panels recalled on MSC's newest ship about to set sail



The Explora I, a 248-metre-long vessel. MSC cancelled the ship's maiden voyage scheduled for next week © Explora Journeys

**Silvia Sciorilli Borrelli** in Milan, **Oliver Barnes** and **Oliver Telling** in London  
YESTERDAY

The launch of the world's newest luxury cruise liner has been delayed because of faulty fire-resistant panels, sending shockwaves across the shipbuilding industry after it emerged dozens of other ships at sea were also affected.

Italian shipbuilder Fincantieri was first informed at the end of May that a supplier had lost its safety certification for one type of panel used to equip Explora I, a 248-metre-long vessel to be delivered to Swiss cruise operator MSC, according to people with knowledge of the communication.

Helsinki-based Paroc, the supplier, subsequently informed Fincantieri that a second type of panel had lost its certification, said the people, who declined to be identified because of potential liabilities. This week the panels started being recalled by their local distributor, prompting MSC and Fincantieri to cancel the boat's launch at a day's notice.

Paroc has identified 45 boats in operation with the faulty panels, including other types of ships run by other companies, the people said. Globally, there are fewer than 300 cruise ships in operation, according to the Cruise Lines International Association, an industry body which represents 95 per cent of the world's ocean-going cruise capacity.

The discovery comes as the cruise industry enters the crucial summer season, which will make or break cruise companies' hopes of surpassing annual passenger volumes from 2019 for the first time since the pandemic dealt a severe blow to the industry.

The International Maritime Organisation, the global regulator for shipping, sets requirements for shipping equipment to be tested for fire safety. The IMO said it is up to the ship's flag states and ports to detain a vessel or decide if it is fit to sail or not.

One of the ships affected is the MSC Euribia delivered by French shipyard Chantiers de L'Atlantique at the end of May. Another vessel built by Fincantieri for MSC has the same fittings.

Carnival, the world's biggest cruise operator, said the panels in question were fitted on one ship in its fleet but they had passed "all required certifications at the time of installation". However, it said it was aware of the recent test failure.

"While we have seen no indication of any issues with the insulation actually installed on our ship, we are looking into the test results and discussing them with the relevant flag state regulators and authorities," said Carnival. "We will, of course, take whatever action necessary to ensure the continued safety and security of our guests and crew."

Cruise operator Royal Caribbean International and German shipbuilder Meyer Werft have also used panels made by the same supplier, according to Paroc's website. Meyer Werft said none of their ships were affected. Royal Caribbean did not respond to a request for comment about whether their vessels were fitted with the faulty Paroc panels.

The problem came to light on Wednesday when MSC, the world's largest privately owned cruise ship operator, cancelled Explora I's christening scheduled the following day in Civitavecchia, a few miles north of Rome. MSC also cancelled the ship's maiden voyage scheduled for next week.

Explora I, one of four luxury vessels Fincantieri is building for MSC, boasts 14 decks, swimming pools, spas, nine restaurants and hundreds of luxurious suites with whirlpool baths on their own private terraces. Replacing all the panels, fitted to the floors and the walls, would require huge work as the boat was readying to launch.

Fincantieri said in a statement on Wednesday it had agreed with MSC to delay the delivery “by a few weeks to make further enhancements” to the vessel, without elaborating.

In a communication to travel agents, Michael Ungerer, chief executive of MSC subsidiary Explora Journeys, said the ship builder had “identified a critical issue that must receive immediate attention”.

“Certain materials from a third-party supplier do not meet the required safety certifications and we therefore could not take delivery of the ship as planned,” he said, adding it was working with Fincantieri on “resolving the situation to ensure that Explora I will meet the highest safety standards”.

New York-listed Owens Corning, Paroc’s parent company, told the FT: “Paroc recently became aware of concerns related to one of its insulation product lines exclusively serving the marine industry.”

“We are currently working with both customers and regulatory authorities to address any potential risks arising from their use,” it added.

Without a valid conformity certification the panels cannot be fitted on ships for fire insulation, under EU law. The panels certification normally have a five-year validity. Paroc certifications were issued in 2020 and had been due to expire in 2025, according to four people close to the discussions.

It is unclear why fresh tests on the panels, which are made of non-combustible stone wool and are designed to resist flames for extended amounts of time, were run this year.

MSC, the Geneva-based group owned by Italy’s billionaire Aponte family, and Milan-listed Fincantieri declined to comment further.

Chantiers de l’Atlantique said it was taking the situation “very seriously and is working in full cooperation with classification societies and shipowners to understand and treat [it]”.

*This article has been amended after publication to include a response from Meyer Werft*

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