

Cruise travel likely to restart in August once SOP is finalised

By R. SEKARAN

rsekaran@thestar.com.my

GEORGE TOWN: With Malaysian borders opening to international tourists on April 1, August looks like a likely date for cruise liners to come calling once again.

Penang Port Sdn Bhd chief executive officer Datuk Sasedharan Vasudevan said the Transport and Health Ministries and National Security Council were finalising the Covid-19 standard operating procedure (SOP), which would probably be ready in the second week of April.

“The Singapore-Penang-Phuket bubble will most likely be the first international cruise once the SOP is in place,” he said when contacted.

Sasedharan said the *Royal Caribbean* liner would be the first to call on Penang Port.

“We can only start ‘talking’ with these parties when we have the SOP, with another few months for the agents to work on bookings, and August looks good for the bubble to take off.

“As mentioned by the Health Minister

(Khairy Jamaluddin), international travellers can look forward to seamless travel when the borders open.

“We are looking at a simplified SOP for cruise travel. Since we are not a home port and only transit cruisers will be here, it will be easier to manage cruise passengers as they will only be here for a few days,” he said.

Sasedharan said the *Royal Caribbean* has been in constant contact, enquiring about when the bubble can take off as Penang Port has completed the first phase of its RM155mil terminal expansion.

The upgraded Swettenham Pier Cruise Terminal is now about 30% bigger and will be able to handle 50% more passengers.

According to Penang Port Commission chairman Datuk Tan Teik Cheng, the wharf would be able to handle 12,000 passengers from the existing 8,000.

He added that the terminal’s berthing area could accommodate two Oasis-class vessels at the same time.

Malaysia issued a blanket ban on cruise ships in March 2020 when Covid-19 cases broke out.