



THE FEDERATION OF NATIONAL ASSOCIATIONS OF
SHIP BROKERS AND AGENTS

Funchal, 26th February 2026

CLIA European Summit 2026 - Madeira

Thursday 26th February 2026

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Ladies and gentlemen, distinguished guests, dear colleagues and friends,

It is an honour to address you today at the CLIA European Summit here in Madeira.

We gather at a defining moment for European cruising – a moment of transformation, investment, sustainability ambition and renewed policy focus.

Over the last few days, we have heard, *Bud Darr, the President and CEO of CLIA* reminding us of something fundamental. He said:

“Every voyage runs on partnership.”

“It’s the work of millions of people across thousands of touchpoints, making something complex feel effortless.”

And then again *Pier Francesco Vago, Executive Chairman of MSC Cruises*, confirmed that *“Partnerships are key to cruising.”*

Those words capture the essence of our industry.

And as *Nikos Mertzaniadis, CLIA Europe Director*, put it yesterday, *“Cruising is perhaps the most complex consumer product in global tourism”*. It integrates hospitality, transport, logistics, infrastructure, environmental regulation, border management, diplomacy and community engagement – all synchronised to the minute.

And yet, for the guest, it feels effortless.

But let us pause and ask a simple, operational question: What would actually happen at a port call if the port agent were not there?

Who aligns pilots and tugs?

Who confirms berth allocation?

Who coordinates immigration and customs clearance?

Who arranges bunkers, fresh water, provisions and waste removal?

Who manages crew changes?

Who organises a medical evacuation at 2:00 in the morning?

Who handles sudden itinerary changes due to weather, geopolitical events or congestion?

Who balances the expectations of the cruise line, the port authority, the municipality and the local community?

The port agent has a big role in all of the above...

When Bud speaks about:



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“Problem solving that happens fast, quietly, with a smile,” “Service that stays one step ahead,” he is describing the daily reality of ship agents.

To put it in the words of Alexander Napp, MD of PWL in Germany: *“the port agent is like the conductor of the orchestra”.*

Every stakeholder plays an instrument.

But someone must hold the music score.

Someone must ensure harmony.

Someone must absorb the pressure when complexity threatens to become chaos.

And that responsibility is increasing.

The European Context: From Strategy to Quay

We have just heard from the *EU Commissioner Apostolos Tzitzikostas*, whose portfolio now unites transport and tourism – a powerful and necessary convergence.

The European Commission is shaping a new direction for European tourism and maritime policy:

- A sustainable transport investment framework
- A renewed EU Port Strategy
- A Maritime Strategy
- A Tourism Strategy focused on balance, resilience and competitiveness

The Commissioner has challenged the language of “overtourism.” He spoke yesterday instead of *unmanaged tourism*.

The same viewpoint expressed by *Pierfrancesco Vago*, when he talked about *imbalanced tourism, as a consequence of insufficient coordination*.

And this is a crucial distinction.

Tourism becomes problematic when it is not aligned. When capacity is not synchronised. When stakeholders operate in silos.

Just because a port has space for ships does not mean the destination has space for visitors.

The port agent is someone who understands both sides.

Someone who operates precisely at the interface between ship, port and destination – the “strong link” that connects arrival to experience.

If we pose for a moment and reflect you will agree with me that European strategies are not implemented in Brussels. They are implemented in ports.

By professionals who understand local regulations, local politics, local infrastructure constraints, local sensitivities.

When the Commissioner speaks about ESG – environmental, social and economic sustainability – that balance is operationalised at quayside.



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Port agents are not policymakers.

But they are operational “enablers of sustainability”.

They coordinate shore power connections.

They facilitate alternative fuel logistics.

They manage waste streams and environmental compliance.

They support local employment.

They connect cruise lines with local SMEs.

They mediate when communities raise concerns.

Sustainability does not happen in a document. It happens in a port call. And in every port call, someone must make it work.

The Invisible Complexity

Let us be honest about today’s operational reality.

Port agents operate in an environment of:

- Regulatory acceleration
- Fuel transition uncertainty
- Infrastructure gaps
- Data reporting requirements
- Labour shortages
- Geopolitical volatility
- Increasing ESG compliance demands looming

They absorb last-minute berth reallocations.

They resolve customs bottlenecks.

They navigate community sensitivities.

They manage crew welfare.

They coordinate dozens of stakeholders in compressed timeframes.

And they do so mostly unseen.

Bud also said as Cruise Lines: *“We rely on others for our success.”*

Cruise lines rely on ports.

Ports rely on coordination.

Coordination relies on trust.

And trust is built locally – call by call, day by day.

Why Port Agents Will Not Be Replaced by AI transformation

In every industry today, we hear the same question:

Will artificial intelligence replace human expertise?



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Technology will undoubtedly transform our sector. It already is.

Artificial intelligence can optimise routing.

It can forecast congestion.

It can analyse data patterns.

But let me bring another perspective. Recently, *Jensen Huang, the CEO of Nvidia*, one of the 5 big tech giants, offered a powerful definition of what it means to be truly “smart.” He said that: *“being “smart” is not simply technical knowledge. It is the ability to infer the unspoken. To anticipate what has not yet happened. To see around corners.”*

That is precisely what port agents do!

They sense congestion before it becomes crisis.

They anticipate weather disruptions.

They read local political signals.

They detect when a minor operational issue could escalate.

They understand the human dynamics behind regulations.

They feel the pulse of the port.

Artificial intelligence processes data.

Human intelligence manages relationships.

Artificial intelligence can optimise systems.

Human intelligence balances competing interests.

Artificial intelligence does not mediate between a mayor and a cruise line.

It does not calm a supplier at midnight.

It does not negotiate a berth when three ships arrive unexpectedly.

It does not understand the nuance of local sentiment.

Port agents see around corners, pre-empt issues before they occur, integrate data, experience, empathy and local insight.

In an industry defined by complexity, it is not only technology that creates resilience – it is human judgement. And that is why port agents are not becoming obsolete.

They are becoming more and more strategic rather!

A Strategic Recognition

If Europe wants:

- Balanced tourism instead of unmanaged flows
- Competitive ports in a global market
- Stronger maritime skills
- Social acceptance of cruising

It must be acknowledged that ports are not merely infrastructure. They are ecosystems. And every ecosystem needs a coordinator.



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Port agents are enablers, and they are “operational integrators” in those ecosystems and therefore, they must be recognised as strategic stakeholders.

Port agents are often the only actors with daily operational relationships with:

- Cruise lines
- Port authorities
- Pilots and terminal operators
- Destination managers
- Local suppliers
- Municipal authorities

They translate strategy into action.

They convert policy into performance.

They turn complexity into experience!

Before I conclude, let me briefly explain how we will tackle this important conversation today.

Because if the port agent is the strong link of the cruise ecosystem, then we must look at the ecosystem from both directions.

A port call has two operational faces. One faces the shore. The other faces the ship.

And the port agent stands precisely at that intersection.

For that reason, today’s session is structured in two distinct segments – each exploring one side of the port call.

In the first segment: Working with Ports, Destinations and Authorities, we will focus on the shoreside dimension.

We will examine:

- Coordination with port authorities and terminal operators
- The growing weight of environmental regulation and compliance
- The delicate balance between cruise growth and community expectations
- Immigration and customs complexities
- And the implementation of new systems such as the Entry/Exit System across different regions

We will also hear real examples from our panellists – including lessons learned from COVID, regulatory frustrations, and practical advice for ports and authorities.

This part of the discussion reflects the increasing regulatory, political and social interface of the port agent’s role.



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In Segment Two: Working with Cruise Lines and Ships, we turn toward the ship.

Because the dynamics change when facing the bridge instead of the berth.

Here we will explore:

- Communication and expectation management between cruise line and agent
- The operational intensity of turnarounds versus transit calls
- Safety, security and compliance pressures
- Commercial realities and contractual demands
- The challenge of maintaining sustainable agency businesses in highly seasonal markets
- And how agents manage sudden itinerary changes when circumstances shift overnight

We will also add a lighter touch – sharing memories, unexpected stories, and what makes this profession both demanding and deeply rewarding...

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