



*Regal Princess*  
PICTURE: Mark Katzman

# Home free

Set sail around Britain and Ireland on a Princess Cruises sailing and you can discover home turf on your own terms, discovers **Phil Davies**

**f**or agents seeking to capitalise on lasting interest in domestic holidays generated by good publicity last year, such as David Attenborough's *Wild Isles*, the King's coronation and the elaborate staging of Eurovision in Liverpool, I have a suggestion.

I recently climbed aboard a round-Britain and Ireland cruise, traditionally adored by American tourists but less popular with Brits. That was until summer 2021, when lines were given the green light to get back to business during Covid by sailing in domestic waters only, before being granted permission to return to service internationally.

The clamour to get away following pandemic lockdowns meant the prospect of leaving our shores – even if only to circumnavigate the UK – seemed more appealing than ever. People who had never contemplated taking a cruise before shook off their preconceptions, took to the ocean and were pleasantly surprised by the experience – a hassle-free getaway with all the comforts (and more) that you would expect from a resort hotel.

## SAILING THE HOME SEAS

At the time, Princess Cruises reported rising interest from Brits for closer-to-home voyages – but perhaps surprisingly, even with international travel firmly back up

and running, that demand remains buoyant. With that in mind, I was anxious to discover what the seas around the UK and Ireland had to offer.

The opportunity to explore the natural bounty of Britain and Ireland that would otherwise be difficult without multiple flights, ferry crossings and hours behind the wheel was too good to miss. So, for the first time

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ever, I found myself packing my walking boots and smart jacket (not to be worn at the same time) in preparation for the wilds around our shores, as well as the formal nights on board the aptly named *Regal Princess*.

My 12-day sojourn from Southampton was in the company of fellow passengers travelling from as far and wide as Australia, Israel, Japan, the Philippines and Canada. In fact, a total of 33 nationalities were on ➤

ASK THE  
**experts**



**Eithne Williamson,**  
vice-president UK  
and Europe,  
Princess Cruises

“The UK and Ireland are fantastic destinations rich in history, wildlife and stunning coastal views. Our British Isles cruises have always been in high demand from international guests, but have become increasingly popular with our UK guests too. When we restarted cruising in 2021 with our ‘seacation’ voyages, guests’ eyes were opened to the incredible opportunities on their doorstep. In 2022, we saw five times the number of UK cruisers book British Isles with Princess versus 2019, with similar strength continuing in 2023. The popularity of these cruises is further evidenced by the increase in ship capacity for this itinerary, with *Regal Princess* (pictured) sailing the British Isles in 2023, 2024 and 2025. For those who want to explore more of their home country, our British Isles cruises provide ease of travel, ticking off multiple destinations and only unpacking once.”



**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:** The Forty Foot rocky promontory, Dublin; at anchor by the Forth Bridge, Scotland; the town of Cobh in Ireland; statue of the Beatles at Pier Head, Liverpool **PICTURES:** Mark Katzman; Shutterstock/cowardlion; Phil Davies

the ship. Americans were by far the largest contingent at well over a thousand, however Brits were second in terms of numbers at 855, with many telling me that they would never have the opportunity to tick off so many wish-list places in one go without this kind of itinerary.

On the surface, the sailing appeared to concentrate on cities – the ship must dock somewhere – but for more independently minded travellers, the draw is mainly to strike out alone and go against the flow. For instance, many stops were handily close to railway stations, including Cobh, Dun Laoghaire, Greenock and South Queensferry.

**SEEING THE SIGHTS**

When bobbing tenders from the ship brought us into Dun Laoghaire harbour (south of Dublin), the adjacent Dart railway station made

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it simple to travel down the coast to the bucket-and-spade resort of Bray, then back to explore the coastal path to Sandycove, as well as the rocky Forty Foot swimming spot that’s featured heavily in the Irish black-comedy series *Bad Sisters*.

After investigating the James Joyce Tower – a Martello defensive tower where the author once stayed, now a museum displaying memorabilia – I got chatting to a dog walker, who recommended calling into Finnegan’s bar in the well-heeled Dublin suburb of

Dalkey for a pint and fish and chips. The area is reputedly home to Irish music stars such as Bono, The Edge and Van Morrison, although sadly none were in evidence on that sunny Irish holiday weekend.

However, as we crossed the Irish Sea, passengers on *Regal Princess* were lucky enough to hear anecdotes about the days before the Fab Four became famous during a Q&A with original Beatles drummer Pete Best, the night before we docked in the band’s home city, Liverpool.

With the city centre no more than a 15-minute walk away, exploring one of the UK’s most vibrant locations was easy, giving me enough time to enjoy an hour-long voyage on the iconic 64-year-old *Royal Iris of the Mersey* ferry, to discover more about the river and the region’s industrial history beyond the Beatles. ➤



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Honfleur, Normandy; SeaWalk on *Regal Princess*; Phil Davies in Edinburgh PICTURES: Shutterstock/andre quinou; Mark Katzman

A guided evening walk around Belfast the following evening provided a fascinating local perspective, without too much focus on the city's troubled background. Dropping into two of Belfast's oldest pubs helped me get a feel for 21st-century life in Northern Ireland.

During our next stop, rather than heading into the centre of Glasgow I took a ScotRail train in the other direction to Gourock – home of the oldest heated swimming pool in Scotland – for a seamless connection onto a CalMac ferry. The journey took me across the vast expanse of the River Clyde, with amazing views of Holy Loch, to Dunoon, gateway to the Highlands. With this kind of scenery so close at hand, it made me wonder why I'd never ventured to these parts of Britain before.

### ISLAND EXPLORATION

After a day at sea on our ship, which passed the Western Isles of Scotland, the Orkneys drifted into view the next morning. I'd prepared for my day on shore by booking an electric bicycle for the day, in advance, for £35, having been advised that strong winds can hinder progress on a regular bike.

I'm glad I took the advice of the chap at Cycle Orkney in Kirkwall, the archipelago's

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largest town. The nippy e-bike definitely took the pressure off my feet as I struck out south to explore Scapa Flow, the graveyard of many warships across both world wars. Amid the calm of a summer's morning and the backdrop of pristine sandy beaches, it was hard to imagine the destruction that took place in this sheltered body of water. I must have clocked up more than 15 miles of pedalling on my circular route, but this merely scratched the surface. Locals told me that I would need a minimum of two weeks to do justice to the entire archipelago of 70 islands.

The sparsely populated Orkneys couldn't have been more of a contrast to Edinburgh the following day. Getting a lunch table in Grassmarket was difficult, so I headed along the Royal Mile and climbed my way up to Arthur's Seat to escape the hordes and soak in a cityscape that anywhere else in the UK would be hard-pressed to match.

I was also grateful to return to my ocean-going home from home each evening, with enough time for a swim to soothe tired limbs in the Retreat Pool, part of adult-only area The Sanctuary – safe in the knowledge that I had a newly tidied cabin to collapse into after supper.

Returning back to our Southampton starting point via a stop in Le Havre for a morning's excursion to picturesque Honfleur, I calculated that I'd never previously been so active on a cruise, having either walked or cycled for miles at every one of the eight ports of call. It was just what I needed, even if it did require the purchase of new walking shoes after my original pair gave up halfway. **tw**

### BOOK IT

**Princess Cruises** offers a 12-night British Isles cruise on board *Regal Princess*, departing from Southampton on May 27, from £799 per person (Princess Standard), based on two sharing an inside cabin. Upgrade to a Princess Plus package for an extra £50 per person per day to include drinks, Wi-Fi and tips. A £50 low deposit applies to bookings made before March 4. [princess.com](http://princess.com)