

Great Scot

Breathtaking wildlife and entrancing ancient history make for a thrilling expedition cruise in the Scottish Isles, finds Yolanda Zappaterra

Puffins greet *Seabourn Venture* in Fair Isle
PICTURE: John Shedwick

It's a sunny day off the coast of the Shetlands when, as I'm dozing in my *Seabourn Venture* suite, the sound of the waves is drowned out by an excited shout: "Whale, portside!"

In the 24 hours since boarding, I've learnt my port from my starboard and excitedly realise my stateroom is on the correct side, so I grab the *Seabourn*-supplied binoculars and make for my veranda.

Though my scouring of the seas proves fruitless, my neighbour Mandy had spotted the animal and raised the alert. Where there's one, there are often more, so we all keep a watchful

eye on the remainder of our five-night voyage to Greenwich, enjoying some rugged coastal scenery and other sightings along the way.

NORTHERN HIGHLIGHTS

We joined *Venture* in Lerwick for the last leg of a 14-day cruise that had taken in Iceland and the Faroe Islands, before arriving at the Shetlands and Orkneys. Our fam trip group has been watching puffins and numerous other seabirds whirl and wheel over Mainland, Fair Isle and Mousa in the Shetlands and Copinsay in Orkneys, all the while spotting seals and other

marine wildlife. Tracking them up close is easy thanks to the 24 Zodiacs that get us into small fishing ports and harbours, and even up onto beaches that would be inaccessible to standard transfer vessels.

The snugness of the rib boats makes for a camaraderie that soon has us getting to know our fellow travellers and the 23 knowledgeable expedition leaders, everyone excitedly sharing stories of excursions and activities they've enjoyed so far on the cruise.

Overwhelmingly, what stands out is the closeness and intimacy of the encounters with cultures, communities

GRAND VOYAGE



FROM LEFT: Ring of Brodgar, Orkney; excursion in Staffa, Inner Hebrides PICTURES: Shutterstock/Juris Kraulis; Jeremy L Fratkin

and nature, through excursions and onboard activities. Last night, young members of the local Up Helly Aa band joined the ship for an evening of song and dance in the aptly named Discovery Center on Deck 4. Complete with Viking helmets and sheepskin pelts, they taught us all about the eponymous fire festival and its Nordic roots. Onboard talks and nightly live events such as these offer compelling insights into a local culture and history that stretches back millennia.

ROCK OF AGES

On tiny Mousa, populated by some 12,000 pairs of breeding storm petrels and other seabirds, the majestic Iron Age Broch of Mousa dates from about 300BC. This round tower looms as large in real life as it does in Norse sagas. On Fair Isle, an exhilarating two-hour hike brings us into close contact with hundreds of colourful puffins. And on Orkney's Mainland, the Zodiacs ferry us into the Heart of Neolithic Orkney, where the ceremonial Stones of Stenness, eerie Ring of Brodgar and preserved neolithic village of Skara Brae are a trio of arresting, Unesco-listed sights more than 5,000 years old. Set amid the wild natural beauty and stark isolation of the Orkneys, they instil a sense of wonder and reverence in all of us.

Back in my suite, I'm inspired to watch a talk about Jarlshof, another first-class neolithic site on Mainland Shetland (each of the daily round-up talks and lectures are recorded and available to enjoy at any time).

There were many spine-tingling moments on this cruise exploring the stunning wildlife and ancient wonders tucked away on the northernmost reaches of our isles, but top of that list was exploring Orkney's waters in a submersible. I'd convinced myself that Mandy's whale was going to make a dramatic reappearance to give me a travel tale I'd be able to dine out on for years – which, of course, is not how nature works.

Still, the submersible dive under the waves and the cruise as a whole had already given me plenty of incredible experiences to treasure.

BOOK IT: *Seabourn has a 10-day Wild Scottish Isles & Iceland cruise from Dublin to Reykjavik on Seabourn Venture departing on July 6, 2026, priced from £7,898 per person based on two people sharing a Veranda Suite. Other round-UK sailings in May and June 2026 include the 14-day Jewels of the British Isles and seven-day Scottish Isles, Irish Coasts & Wales, both on Seabourn Ovation.*
seabourn.co.uk

Agents' views



Craig Sharp, sales agent, Cruise Kings/Scotland's Cruise Centre

"A UK sailing like this offers access to places not many people get to see, with fantastic guides. It's a great mix of luxury and adventure for all ages. Every little detail is thought of, including a heated cupboard to dry wet clothes and shoes in. The whole experience was a pinch-me moment."



Emma Taylor, sales manager, Panache Cruises

"I was impressed with Seabourn's service. Every crew member has a genuine desire to appreciate and enhance the experience with you. The pilot on the submersible was so engaging – it's an experience I'll remember for a long time. I'd advise agents to bring to life iconic aspects of the cruise such as the morning sailing on the Thames to dock at Greenwich."



Mandy Gaggero, marketing and communications director, MH Bland Travel Services, Gibraltar

"All the Seabourn staff were welcoming, enthusiastic and fun, and looked after us with great care. My tip when talking to customers is to emphasise the UK's many interesting places to visit, plus the added bonus of no or short flight times."