

All eyes on Iona

A sailing along the Norwegian coast offers an ideal introduction to the cities and scenery of the fjords, finds **Alice Barnes-Brown**

bleary-eyed, I slid the cabin curtains open, doing a double take as I soaked in my first sight of the day. Before me lay a still, blue fjord reflecting red-barned farms that led up to icy, rocky peaks the higher my eyes moved. It remains the closest thing to Middle Earth I'd ever seen – the fortresses and marshes of Southampton Water, from where I'd sailed two days earlier, seemed alien now.

I was on board *Iona* in its most popular destination, the Norwegian fjords, on P&O Cruises' *Shine at Sea* sailing, which brought 50 agents together for one of the largest fairs the line has ever hosted.

ALL AT SEA

The first full day is spent crossing the North Sea to the Norwegian coast – which gives us time to take part in a training workshop and fit in a visit to the bridge to learn about the logistics of the 5,200-capacity ship.

First officer Nuala O'Donnell explains: "We're restricted from certain ports, due to the fact we run on LNG [liquefied natural gas]." Some ports don't carry the alternative fuel but Norwegian ones usually do – and considering Norway is tightening rules on cruise ships, requiring them to meet zero-emissions standards by 2032, *Iona* is well placed to serve this route. ➤

DESTINATIONS

CRUISE | NORWEGIAN FJORDS

AGENTS' verdict



Sam Meakin,
cruise
specialist, Iglu
"D&O Cruises

is good for first-timers. It leaves from Southampton, there's no tipping on board and it uses British pounds. Drinks are reasonably priced – just a little more than you'd pay in a pub – and the speciality restaurants are worth every penny."



Linda Reynolds,
personal
travel agent,
Your Co-op

"It was interesting to see how many babies and multigen families there were. When you get on board, it feels like you're invited into someone's palatial home. The interior design makes the ship feel spacious."



Dale Robinson,
cruise
concierge,
Cruise118

"My balcony cabin is a great size for two people. Don't discount the metal-fronted balconies at the bow or stern – if you're doing the fjords, the front and back offer the best views, which is a USP."



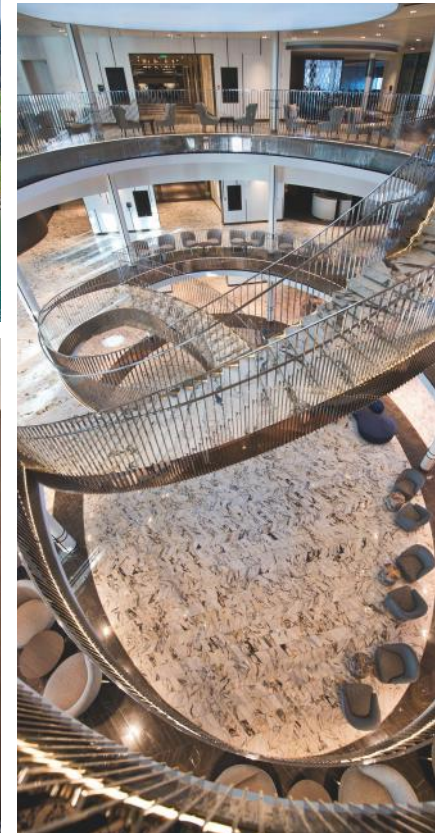
Kelly Latham,
Travel
Counsellors

"Our final port of call was Haugesund. It was easy to navigate into the town – just a 15-minute walk over the bridge or you could take the bus very cheaply from the ship."



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Nordfjorden; Iona's atrium; a Conservatory Mini Suite

PICTURE: Ryan Wicks; Alice Barnes-Brown



I spend the rest of the sun-soaked first day at the adult-only Beachcomber pool area, where chatter is focused on the evening's Celebration Night, when guests don black tie. As I hurry over to the Limelight Club for cabaret by West End singer Louise Dearman, I spy dapper passengers posing for photos at the foot of the spiral staircase in the main atrium. Spanning three decks, the atrium is light, airy and glittering with silver streaks, giving Iona a tasteful social space – the perfect backdrop for a new profile picture.

ROCK STARS

Disembarking at Stavanger puts passengers directly in the heart of the old district, where 173 white, wooden cottages decked out with hanging baskets line the cobbled streets. There's enough time to soak up the hygge-ness before heading to steep-sided Lysefjord.

This inlet is best known as home to Pulpit Rock, a flat-topped precipice jutting out more than 600m above the water. A five-hour hike is the typical way to reach it, but one excursion – a sailing on 1950s ferry-turned-pleasure-craft Sandnes – offers an easier alternative and the chance to admire it from the waterline.

I file through varnished teak corridors up to the top deck to watch the Nordic landscape roll by. Stavanger and all its quirky street art gives way to the tranquil harbour, before the boat passes under a suspension

“Black, jagged rock surrounds us – it's as if lightning tore through the valley or Thor took a hammer to it in a Norse myth

bridge and we are surrounded by black, jagged rock on all sides. It's as if lightning tore through the valley or Thor took his hammer to it in a Norse myth. I am so enthralled that by the time we reach Pulpit Rock, I find it hard to draw my eye up from the crevices and hidden waterfalls beneath it.

FJORDS ON FOOT

Iona's captain, Wesley Dunlop, advises passengers to wake with the sunrise and see the silent Nordfjord come slowly to life as we sail in. The village of Olden is a gateway to Jostedalbreen National Park, where Europe's largest glacier can be found, but we make a beeline for Briksdalsbreen next door. The 1.5-mile hike from the car park is paved almost to the end, so it's accessible for wheelchairs and buggies – my sturdiest walking boots may have been an over-preparation. Convoys of 'troll cars' (open-sided buggies) rumble by for those who wish to swerve the walk altogether. ➤

DESTINATIONS

CRUISE | NORWEGIAN FJORDS

WHERE TO EAT ON IONA

Epicurean

A fine-dining restaurant featuring local produce and dishes, including some from one of the line's 'local food heroes', Stavanger-born chef Kjartan Skjelde.

Six-course tasting menu: £30

Limelight Club

A delightful cabaret venue serving pre-show dinners and cocktails. Save room for the showstopping chocolate bombe.

Three courses: £25-35

Sindhu

Classy south Asian plates, paired beautifully with an east Indian punch. A vegetarian thali platter offers a taster of various dishes.

Three courses: £22

Keel & Cow

A lively gastropub featuring a surprising array of products sourced near Southampton: Hampshire-made camembert, Purbeck Ice Cream and Isle of Wight blue cheese.

Starters from £3.50; mains £5.50-£15.50

Aqua, Pearl and Coral

With menus that change daily, the main dining rooms are open for all meals. The daily soup was a warming treat.

Included

Horizon

The buffet restaurant has a pleasant indoor-outdoor layout. Choices range from fried rice to fajitas, though vegetarian options were limited.

Included

The Beach House

Fans of the Caribbean can enjoy a taste of the tropics in the Nordics, with options such as tacos and rum-glazed pineapple. £11 cover charge



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Tapas dishes on Iona; the SkyDome; Pulpit Rock PICTURES: Debby Lewis-Harrison; James Robinson; Shutterstock/PoS



However, if clients are willing and able, advise them not to miss the hike. Meadows of tall grass, rowan trees laden with red berries and wildflowers line the banks of the icy river, with the mist of cool waterfalls occasionally spritzing your face. Brown signs marking the scars of the glacier's retreat add interesting context. The hike culminates, of course, at the glacier itself, where an icy pool of fresh meltwater tempts tired walkers to a bracing dip. I forgo its freezing waters and bag a spot in one of 18 whirlpool tubs back on Iona instead, and watch Nordfjord sail sweetly by.

JOURNEY OF DISCOVERY

Not all of Iona's itineraries include Alesund, but I'm pleased to discover mine does. This town is home to one of the largest collections of art nouveau architecture in Europe – and I've chosen a self-guided shore excursion to explore it. Including entry to the

what's NEW



"New this year is the family ship visit day on October 12, when travel agents will have the opportunity to bring their children and partners on board. In product news, Britannia completed a refit in April and celebrates its 10-year anniversary next year with a round-Britain cruise. Our summer 2026 programme launch has also been well received, with two of the most popular itineraries being the solar eclipse voyages [in Spain and Iceland]."

Ruth Venn, sales director, UK and Ireland, P&O Cruises

Art Nouveau Centre & The Art Museum Kume, plus a coffee and cinnamon bun, it's decent value at £30, especially considering Norway's high prices.

Iona plies the fjords in summer, but the penultimate night of our sailing offers an unseasonal surprise. At about midnight, the officer on watch announces that the aurora borealis can be spotted from the decks – the dark, light-pollution-free skies at sea provide ideal conditions to see the solar flares. The dancing blue and purple gradient put on a dazzling show – yet it feels like just one of many 'I-can't-believe-my-eyes' moments on this scenic sailing. **TW**

BOOK IT

P&O Cruises' seven-night Norwegian Fjords cruise on Iona starts at £799 per person, departing April 26, 2025, based on two people sharing an inside cabin. pocruises.com