



Fit for a *princess*

It's the high life in the Highlands,
finds Ben Ireland on an agent
trip onboard *Hebridean Princess*

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Take the classy country house feel of *Downton Abbey* – complete with characters dressed to the nines and reserved yet amusing antics – and transplant it on to an intimate, 50-passenger cruise ship and you've just about got the gist of *Hebridean Princess*.


Hebridean Island Cruises bills the atmosphere onboard the cosy ship as a 'house party', and with Formula One legend Jackie Stewart and none other than the Queen among those to have been hosted, you can imagine the style of luxury. Think classy, rather than showy.

But how best to sell that sense of sophistication? The company hosted a group of agents onboard to find out for themselves.

▶ AT YOUR SERVICE

Hebridean Princess has a staff-to-guest ratio of 38:50, when at

full capacity, so service is highly valued. Everything is executed on a personal level from the moment you arrive. When boarding, you are registered, welcomed and chaperoned to your cabin with a brief tour of the ship to get your bearings.

At dinner, tables are hosted 

SAMPLE PRODUCT

Hebridean Island Cruises has a six-night cruise, Argyll's Secret Coast, departing from Greenock on *Hebridean Princess* on November 6, and calling at Great Cumbrae, Arran, Crarae, Strachur and Rothesay. The all-inclusive cruise starts at £2,500, which covers meals and drinks on board and ashore, including champagne and spirits, plus two gala dinners, guided shore visits, Wi-Fi, and transfers from the local airport or railway station. hebridean.co.uk

→ by the pursers and the captain, and there are gala dinners twice a week on typical Scottish islands sailings.

Attention to detail is critical to the delivery of the 'no request is too small' experience. Whisky, a Scottish favourite of course, is provided in a personal decanter in your cabin, but the waiting staff are more than happy to fetch your brand of choice, and will put a bottle each in your room and the lounge bar. The same applies to wine, or whatever your tipples of choice.

Even if passengers' tastes are not as refined as the atmosphere, they will be catered for. One couple asked if they could have digestive biscuits and cheddar cheese rather than gourmet crackers and a cheeseboard – and they arrived as soon as the ship was in the next port.

The all-inclusive experience puts guests at ease, but forget about long queues at crowded bars and showing your wristband to a harassed bartender. Drinks tend to be topped up before they're even halfway down the glass, so chances are passengers won't even need to ask.

In the lounge, furnished with sofas, armchairs and a 10-ton brick fireplace, you can't help but make acquaintances. Not only is that good fun for sociable couples, it's ideal for single travellers, who are seated



From addressing the haggis to porridge with whisky for breakfast, the touches of old-school Scotland make it unique

together at dinner to help them foster new friendships.

In fact, 10 of the cabins are singles, so the ship isn't just good at catering for the occasional lone traveller, they make up a fifth of the guests when at full capacity.

The social side of the cruise never feels forced, although guests would be hard pushed not to bond over the evening entertainment in the lounge, when all formalities are cast aside for a hilarious 20 minutes, as hosts read aloud jokes and humorous stories.

BONNY BANKS

With the nature of cruising through lochs and between islands, sailing doesn't typically take place overnight, as the distances covered in a day are relatively short. The bonus of

daytime-only cruising is that you don't miss a thing and, with the stunning scenery of the Scottish countryside and traditional hamlets dotted among the rolling, endless hills that stoop over maze-like bodies of water, you wouldn't want to. You might even pass a spot where the government stashes its nuclear weapons.

The daily excursions are designed to complement the rarefied atmosphere onboard *Hebridean Princess*. Mount Stewart House, on the island of Bute, for example, is a Grade A-listed building designed in its latest guise by philanthropist and architectural visionary the third marquis of Bute.

It exudes class in every corner of its Victorian construction, which includes secret doors, impressive stained glass, 'never-ending' mirrors and what it claims was the first indoor heated swimming pool in a house. Hebridean offers exclusive tours, even on days when the house is not open to the public, so passengers need not worry about missing out.

ROYAL ROOTS

Hebridean Princess sails along European rivers and the Irish coast as well as the Scottish Highlands and its northernmost islands, but it certainly doesn't forget its roots. From addressing the haggis at gala



BELOW:
Tobermory



AGENT OPINION



Beryl Gibson,
Northumbria
Travel

"Hebridean Princess is a special, unique

vessel, so it's no wonder the Queen chartered her. Everything onboard is first-class quality and the staff are second to none."



Tom O'Hara,
Mundy Cruising

"Sailing around the Scottish islands on the Princess is a real one-off

experience that you can't get anywhere else, so it's something every traveller should have on their bucket list, even if they don't think of themselves as cruisers. It is an expensive product, so you are probably going to sell this to more affluent, luxury-oriented customers most of the time."



Helen Moore,
Bolsover Cruise
Club

"This luxury small ship is ideal for passengers

who want to see ever-changing, stunning scenery, plus visit some wonderful, off-the-beaten track places. The ship is like a country house hotel and very friendly, so makes a perfect option for single passengers as it is impossible to lose yourself. The crew are as attentive as any I have come across."



Fay Holian,
Bluewater
Holidays

"I have recommended Hebridean Cruises

to so many customers, but mainly the over-65s and single travellers. The single cabins were excellent, spacious and comfortable, with the same facilities as other cabins. And there were so many of them for such a small ship."

→ dinners to kippers or porridge with whisky for breakfast, it's the little touches of old-school Scotland that make it unique.

It has a special history, too. Not only have royals slept onboard, but the ship dates back to 1964 - under its previous name, *Columba* - and for the first 25 years operated as a car ferry, carrying as many as 600 passengers and 50 vehicles.

It was converted to a luxury ship with what managing director Ken Charleson described as "posh cabins" in 1988, but was expanded in the 1990s to its current size.

"She's a working museum," says Charleson, himself a walking encyclopaedia of knowledge of the brand and its history.

The ship, which is undergoing maintenance and upgrades this winter, was last overhauled in 2010 in a £1 million refit that saw it take on its current capacity. It has to have parts specially made, has no gears and uses a telegraph to link the captain to the engine room.

But you still get all the mod cons in the cabins which, although small in size, are

designed so that they make the most of the space. Ironing boards fold out of the wall and coat hooks can be flattened to create space for more modern items such as a flat-screen television, minibar and plug sockets for all your devices.

The delicate merging of tradition with modernity is one of the reasons people keep coming back, with 65% of customers repeat bookers.

Charleson admits the experience is far from cheap, but says: "We know we charge a lot of money for the product, but we aim to please."

The cruise line backs itself so highly in its delivery of the service that it knows once customers get a taste, they'll return - or spread the word.

That's why they're reaching out to travel agents this year, hoping the dozens they hosted on a two-day fam cruise will help spread the message to customers that fit the bill: affluent, classy and reserved but fun.

Remind you of a period drama? **TW**

BELOW:
Agents on
Hebridean
Princess



PICTURES: NICK ROBB