

As a travel writer I've been lucky enough to embark on a multitude of cruises around the world. As a Scot I'm proud to say that the most dramatic and beguiling coastline I have ever sailed is in my native land. I'm in good company as the British Royal Family regularly charter one of the cruise ships that open up the epic scenery of the Hebrides, an epic land of mountains, isles and big skies. Composer Mendelssohn was so enchanted he penned a symphony in their honour. Join me now as I show you how you can embark on your very own Hebridean odyssey.

Few Scots even realise that their coastline is home to over 800 islands or that even without those islands it is three times larger than that of England's coast and twice the size of the Spanish and French littorals. The 'Hebrides' is the Scottish Gaelic word for the isles that lie west of the Kintyre Peninsula on the country's wild western coast. There are the less remote, smaller isles of the Inner Hebrides, the largest of which is Skye. Beyond the Minch (an often tumultuous stretch of water) lies the otherworldly Outer Hebrides, a 210km long archipelago where the locals cut peat to heat their homes and man plays second fiddle to the vagaries of nature.

The Hebrides are alive with wildlife. The mineral rich waters – which are warmed by the Gulf Stream – are home to everything from porpoises and dolphins, through to massive basking sharks and all manner of whales, including killer whales. The waters and skies are also full of a multitude of seabirds, with one rock stac in St Kilda housing a quarter of the world's gannet population. The Hebrides is one of the few places in the world where you can see sea eagles in the wild, an impressive sight from the decks of a ship.

The trick to cruising the Hebrides is to find both a vessel that suits you as well as the right itinerary. For utter luxury it has to be the Queen's choice, the *Hebridean Princess*, but we will come to that most



Above: Majestic Lines operates the *Glen Massan* and *Glen Tarsan*, with the *Glen Etive* coming on stream next year.

Right: Port Ilein is one of numerous small harbours scattered across the Hebrides.

palatial of ships later. There has never been a greater number of options to explore as operators realise just what the Hebrides offer.

Family-run Majestic Line operates two wooden ships. I've been on both the *Glen Massan* and her sister ship the *Glen Tarsan*, elegantly converted former fishing boats that sleep a maximum of 12 passengers in some luxury. With so few passengers everyone bonds quickly over the communal meals and you get to know the crew of four very quickly. Passengers are always welcome to pop up to the bridge to chat to the captain. I spent many hours up there poring over the charts and learning how to plot a course.

Their cruises are supremely relaxed with a couple of shore visits a day. A highlight of my Inner Hebridean trip was

