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Scotland's waters Forget the Med – nothing beats cruising around our native coastline

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'A CRUISE? What, in Scotland?" is the standard shocked response I elicit from friends when I reveal my latest Scottish maritime adventure. Their utter bewilderment always strikes me as odd, as I've been lucky enough to embark on dozens of cruises around the world but the most dramatic and beguiling coastline I have ever sailed is right here.

I'm in esteemed company as the Queen regularly charters a vessel to cruise the Hebrides and Mendelssohn was so enchanted by this epic land of mountains, isles and big skies it inspired him to write a symphony. It has never been easier or more tempting for mere mortals to enjoy their own Hebridean odyssey, too.

Let us start by addressing my friends' shock. Turning it on its head, why wouldn't you want to cruise a coastline with more than 800 islands, that even without those islands is three times more extensive than that of England's littoral? Of course the Hebrides will never be as warm as the Med, but that doesn't deter people cruising the Norwegian fjords or Greenland. I have cruised both and the scenery is more impressive in Scotland.

Then there is the wildlife. Scotland's mineral-rich, Gulf Stream-warmed waters host everything from porpoises and dolphins, through to hulking basking sharks and minke, sperm and killer whales.

The skies are awash with a multitude of seabirds, with one rock stack in St Kilda alone housing a quarter of the world's gannet population. The Hebrides are one of the few places where you can witness sea eagles soaring, an inspiring sight from the decks of a ship.

The trick to cruising the Hebrides is to choose both a vessel that suits you and the right itinerary. Most allow for plenty of time ashore on your own, or with a guide if you prefer.

For sheer luxury it has to be the Hebridean Princess, which has recently been bought out by its management. All of the vessels I've been on offer superb local produce and a warm Scottish welcome, but the Hebridean Princess elevates things to another level.

This brilliantly converted former CalMac ferry is more a grand floating country house hotel than a ship, with a level of luxury fit for, well, royalty as the royal family regularly charter this in lieu of the Royal Yacht Britannia.

The Columba Restaurant is one of the finest restaurants I've come across anywhere in Scotland, never mind on a ship. Superb wines are accompanied by boat-fresh lobster, lamb from the Borders and the best Scotch beef. After the decadent



lunches and dinners (the cruises are all inclusive) the Tiree Lounge awaits with its premium single malt whiskies, best enjoyed with another lingering Hebridean sunset.

The family-run Majestic Line, meanwhile, has operated two graceful converted old trawlers, the Glen Massan and the Glen Tarsan, which sleep a maximum of 12 passengers in comfort, for more than a

A former CalMac ferry, the Hebridean Princess is the epitome of luxury and counts among its clients the royal family

decade. Both are gloriously cosy, but are put firmly into the shade by the Majestic Line's first purpose-built vessel, the Glen Etive.

I was on her inaugural cruise last year, which showcased her step up in luxury (she sports two lounges and stabilisers), as well as her greater ambition with more adventurous trips to the Outer Hebrides and beyond. As on all the Scottish ships