



The trick to cruising the Hebrides is to choose both a vessel that suits you and the right itinerary

which carry a small group of passengers, everyone bonds quickly over the communal meals and you get to know the crew quickly. Guests are always welcome to pop up to the bridge to chat to the captain too.

A company already pushing out to remote waters is Hebrides Cruises. I went out on one of its cruises to the archipelago of St Kilda, which was the first place to

Useful websites

hebridean.co.uk
themajesticline.co.uk
hebridescruises.co.uk
argyllcruising.com
nts.org.uk/
culturalcruising

be recognised twice on Unesco's World Heritage list.

St Kilda is the sort of unique destination you cannot get to spend proper time on any other way. The sturdy rather than luxurious Elizabeth G is an old Norwegian rescue vessel captained by Rob Barlow that sleeps a dozen guests. She can handle the big seas with stabilisers allowing a smoother passage for guests prone to seasickness.

Barlow is a qualified diver and on our trip he plunged into the waters to free up a tangled anchor. One passenger joked that he should dive down again for scallops and he duly obliged. In 2016 the company also started running cruises along the Caledonian Canal, where there are no such ocean-going dramas. I enjoyed a sun-kissed autumnal week during the inaugural cruise, making our leisurely way from Fort William along Thomas Telford's marvel to the North Sea at Inverness.

ARGYLL Cruises joined the fray in 2015. The firm's 20m-long Splendour is a converted fishing vessel that sleeps only seven. Unusually, she offers itineraries on the seriously underrated waters of the Firth of Clyde. Our cruise circled around Arran, Bute and the Cumbraes, before a rare chance to land on Ailsa Craig, that most dramatic of rock stacks. Pushing further afield, Argyll Cruises skipper Iain Duncan (an ex-Majestic Line man) is also offering trips around the Inner and Outer Hebrides, as well as out to St Kilda.

The National Trust for Scotland realised the potential of Scottish cruising a long time ago and its larger ship charters offer another world altogether. Last year I enjoyed the Isles of my Heart cruise, which swept us through the Hebrides along with an impressive onboard cast of NTS guides, lecturers and first-class entertainers, from the likes of one of Shetland's finest fiddlers, Bryan Gear, through to folk songstress of the moment Siobhan Miller. This year the NTS is heading to Orkney and Shetland in June and the Hebrides in September.

Even without onboard entertainment it's hard to get bored of the constantly unfolding drama of Scottish cruising. Indeed this summer I'm sailing on the tall ship St Hilda and on Proud Seahorse, Hebrides Cruises' new vessel, plus I'm looking to head out to ultra-remote North Rona on the sturdy Hjalmar Bjorge with Northern Light in 2018.

I wonder by then if any of my friends will have been lucky enough to eschew the well-worn charms of cruising the Med or the Norwegian fjords to try Scotland. Any who have won't be remotely surprised when I share with them my next trip around what for me is the finest cruise destination in the world.

CHECKOUT



ASHFORD ESTATE COUNTY MAYO, IRELAND

STYLE AND SUBSTANCE

Once the country retreat of the Guinness family, this 350-acre estate has a turreted castle and a 19th-century lodge. Recent refurbishment means both are impeccably finished. Ashford Castle has crystal chandeliers and oak panelling; The Lodge is bright, modern and stylish.

SPA NOTES

The castle's spa has a pool, gym, steam room, hammam and five treatment rooms. Products include Elemis and Voya based on seaweed from Ireland's Atlantic coast.

SLEEPING MATTERS

The Lodge has 50 chic bedrooms with all mod cons. The Castle's 82 rooms/suites have sumptuous furnishings, marble bathrooms and chandeliers.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Ashford grows its own fruit and vegetables and showcases local meat and fish. The Castle's lavish George V Dining Room offers French-influenced Irish cuisine by Chef Philippe Farineau. There's a choice of eight or 12-course tasting menus with optional wine pairing and dishes such as John Dory with lovage sponge cake, local pork with apple foam and wine from the hotel's South African vineyard. The Castle's buffet breakfast includes Connemara smoked salmon, rock scones and soda bread. The Lodge's Wilde Restaurant offers an alternative dining option. The menu is contemporary and imaginative, with mains such as pigeon with thyme jus, and venison with chocolate (two courses for €55).

ABOUT THE AREA

Nearby Waterford, on the Wild Atlantic Way (wildatlanticway.com), has pretty Georgian streets and family-run shops. Enjoy seafood chowder at the town's Clew Bay Hotel (clewbayhotel.com), a 40-minute drive away.

Double rooms start from £270 per night including breakfast at Ashford Castle (ashfordcastle.com). Doubles from £130 per night including breakfast at The Lodge at Ashford Castle (thelodgeac.com).

BY KAREN BOWERMAN