

Sailing Scotland's Hebridean Islands, with a princess fit for a queen

David Swanson, Special for USA TODAY 7:35 a.m. EDT October 14, 2016



(Photo: David Swanson for USA TODAY)

OBAN, Scotland – I thought I'd sailed on small cruise ships.

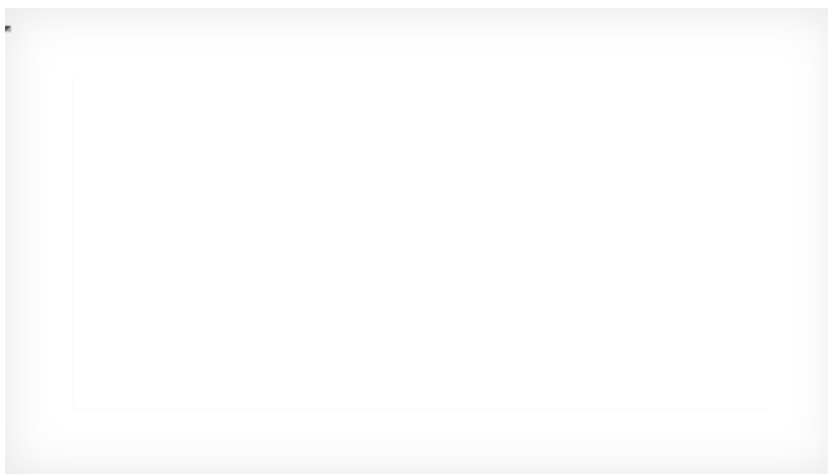
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With lines like Windstar and Seabourn under my belt, the easy camaraderie with fellow guests, the unique, far-flung itineraries, and the more personalized attention a **Cruise ship tours Hebridean Island Cruises' Hebridean Princess** are assets I covet.

Then I stepped aboard [Hebridean Princess](/picture-gallery/travel/cruises/2016/09/28/cruise-ship-tours-hebridean-island-cruises-hebridean-princess/89531868/) (/picture-gallery/travel/cruises/2016/09/28/cruise-ship-tours-hebridean-island-cruises-hebridean-princess/89531868/).

Formerly a car and passenger ferry built in 1964 to serve Scotland's remote islands, the vessel was converted into a cruise ship in 1989. Today, Hebridean Princess provides a truly one-of-a-kind cruise experience, with visits to the highlands and islands of Scotland ignored by most cruise lines, one-off shore excursion events, and an open bridge where guests can look over the captain's shoulder to peruse the navigational charts. It's the one cruise ship I've been on that might best be labeled with that overused sobriquet, charming.

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And, Hebridean Princess carries just 50 passengers.

At dinner a senior officer would join our table—usually Zoe Gaunt, the ship's purser. But on the first evening, with last-minute preparations still underway, assistant housekeeper Doreen Thomson sat in for Zoe. After 17 years sailing around the world with Princess Cruises, Doreen had started with Hebridean just a few months earlier.

Compared to the big ships of Princess, how is it, working on a wee 50-passenger ship, I asked?

"It's chalk and cheese," said Doreen. "With Princess, we used to start embarkation at 12 noon, and it would take five hours. Here, it's more like 20 minutes."



Hebridean Princess explores islands and ports around Great Britain, particularly the Inner and Outer Hebrides of western Scotland. (Photo: David Swanson for USA TODAY)

To be sure, Hebridean Princess caters to a well-tended crowd and most of them wouldn't be caught dead on a mass-market line. After the decommissioning of her own ship, the [Royal Britannia](#) ([picture-gallery/travel/cruises/2016/08/03/photo-tour-inside-the-royal-yacht-britannia/87241000/](#)), Britain's Queen Elizabeth II chartered Hebridean Princess for her 80th birthday. She enjoyed it enough to book it again four years later, and a Royal Charter hanging in the Lookout Lounge attests to her fondness.

Fares are dear, generally starting north of \$600 per person, per day. The rate includes all taxes and gratuities, beverages (including dozens of single malt whiskies), and daily shore excursions.

And yet the ship is not flush with many of the amenities found on most of today's big cruisers. For anyone seriously in need of spa facilities or sushi bars, Hebridean Princess is probably not for you. You'll find no theater, no disco, no casino, no bingo, and no photography crew plaintively asking for poses.

Or maybe you'll luck out sailing with John, a passenger from Southwest London. John spent much of his time perched near the bridge scouting for wildlife. Citing a keen interest in the region surrounding the Highland Boundary Fault that divides Scotland's highlands and lowlands, he told me he'd sailed about 15 times aboard Hebridean Princess.

An avid photographer, John often was asked for copies of the photos he took while on Hebridean cruises. He wasn't interested in selling, but happily shared them with other guests, asking only for us to make a donation to the International Otter Survival Fund in Scotland.



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[Cruise ship tours: Hebridean Island Cruises' Hebridean Princess](#)

(<http://www.usatoday.com/picture-gallery/travel/cruises/2016/09/28/cruise-ship-tours-hebridean-island-cruises-hebridean-princess/89531868/>)

Such gentle courtesies among passengers and crew alike were rife aboard Hebridean Princess. For an American, the cruise is more like a relaxed sojourn at a time-honored Scottish country club—one in which the backdrop changes daily. But even here, this princess charts her own course.

In contrast to traditional cruise itineraries, Hebridean Princess calls at a port every day, often two in a day, meaning there's not a lot of downtime to be filled. Sea days are uncommon. Also unusual: Hebridean Princess anchors in protected bays at night. This is probably partly because the ship's engines throb more than is typical today, but also because most distances are short, usually requiring just a few hours' sailing time.

Following that first night's dinner, we regrouped in the Tree Lounge—the ship's cozy bar, with a (real) brick (electric) fireplace and cheerfully contrasting fabrics on the sofas.

Here, guide Malcolm Milne described the day ahead. He detailed how we would be venturing from Scotland to explore Northern Ireland and the Isle of Man—Norse strongholds connected by Celtic and Gaelic ancestry.



The bar is almost always open in the Tiree Lounge on Deck 4. (Photo: David Swanson for USA TODAY)

But whisky distilleries—a staple of Hebridean cruises—would not be overlooked. Many of Scotland's distilleries are located on the small islands dappling the west coast. At our first stop, Islay—Scotland's fifth largest island, population 3,200—there were no fewer than nine producing distilleries, Milne explained.

"Sadly, we'll only be visiting one of them," he deadpanned.

However the Laphroaig distillery the next morning was a choice one. The whisky is renowned for its strong, peaty flavor, and it's the favorite single malt of Prince Charles. It's also one of only seven distilleries in Scotland that still does its own barley malting, using peat carved from an island bog (peat gives Scotch its distinctly smoky flavor, in varying degrees; Laphroaig is one of the peatier). The more laborious process resulted in a more comprehensive tour than is typical at most distilleries, taking us through the classic method of whisky production.

Back aboard, I listened as a farmer—also an MBE, Member of the British Empire—mused about the outcome of the Brexit vote, and how his crop sales might be impacted. Another guest nattered on about the suitability of her granddaughter's fiancé.

Hebridean Princess, it seemed, offered the kinds of ingredients Agatha Christie cooked with: An eclectic group of British passengers, money, isolation.



The Isle of Islay is a common stop on many Hebridean Princess itineraries, famed for its eight distilleries, such as Laphroaig. (Photo: David Swanson for USA TODAY)

Hebridean Princess carries 50 guests in 30 cabins. Ten are smaller, designated for single occupancy (these often book up before the doubles, I was told). But in size and décor, no two are alike, each named for Scottish islands and other landmarks. Most are ocean-view, while four cabins have a private balcony; there is also a modest suite (no one revealed where the queen bunked). All have teakettle and minibar, a decanter of Scotch refilled on request, and Molton-Brown toiletries lining the marble bathrooms.

It's worth noting there is no elevator, and most stairwells are narrow and steep. Combined with the preponderance of shore excursions handled by small tender boats, passengers with mobility issues aren't easily accommodated aboard Hebridean Princess, though the crew goes out of its way escorting a mostly older clientele.

One interesting nuance is that cabins cannot be locked from the outside—no keys are provided to passengers (cabins have a deadbolt). Correspondingly, when going ashore, each guest is given the tag with their cabin name; at re-boarding, when all the tags have been returned to their slot on an easel the crew knows all have returned from shore safely.

Our first stop in Northern Ireland allowed for a full day at Grey Abbey House, the estate of the Montgomery family since 1606. A detailed tour of the first two floors of the house was provided by the owners, followed by lunch in the dining room, and then exploration of the extensive gardens and an adjoining 12th-century abbey.



The cabins on Hebridean Princess are named for islands, lochs and castles in Scotland. Isle of Iona is one of the largest. (Photo: David Swanson for USA TODAY)

"You've all had the experience of touring National Trust houses for 45 minutes or so," owner Bill Montgomery mused. "But how often do you have the opportunity to spend a day with the actual owners, with all of their expertise about its history?"

Next up was the Isle of Man, a quirky outpost perched in the Irish Sea between Ireland and England. Despite a population of 85,000, the island sees barely a dozen small cruise ship visits annually. Over two days we made three stops here, and at the first I joined up with another passenger to cycle across the island's hilly spine on one of the ship's bikes, rejoining the group at our second dock.

We anchored for the evening in the pretty bay facing Douglas, Isle of Man's main town, and in the morning traveled by horse-drawn carriage and electric tram to the Laxey Wheel, an enormous working water wheel built in 1854 to pump water from a lead and zinc mine. The elegant machine is the largest working water wheel in the world, a striking piece of Manx heritage the island is quite proud of.

At Rathlin Island, we observed tens of thousands of seabirds—puffins, kittiwakes, common guillemots, razorbills—nesting amid dramatic sea cliffs that wrapped a lighthouse. Rathlin was a terrific landing for birdwatchers, yet this rugged outcrop off Northern Ireland is another no-show on cruise itineraries.

All our meals were served in the Columba Restaurant. A few two-person tables were available on request, but most of us shared tables of seven or eight. Evening dress was refined, never glitzy, and on the two formal nights, Scottish kilt was adorned by a half-dozen men and a few crew members.



Home to tens of thousands of seabirds, Rathlin Island in Northern Ireland is a popular landing for birdwatchers, and for guests of Hebridean Princess. (Photo: David Swanson for USA TODAY)

Meals were generally very good, sometimes excellent, and always beautifully presented. Entrées included such fare as roast saddle of venison, butter poached fillet of lemon sole, roast beef, and pan-fried breast of duck; vegetarian options were also offered.

And haggis, Scotland's most infamous dish? Yes, it was an appetizer served with fanfare on the final evening and accompanied by a recitation of Robert Burns' poem, *Address to the Haggis*.

My verdict: Haggis' bark is worse than its bite, but the glass of Scotch to help wash it down was welcome.

Our last stop brought us to the Isle of Jura, close to Oban—a brooding outpost with a population of just 180. As we eased into a bay the night prior, Malcolm explained that Jura was named by Norse settlers for its deer.

"With patience, if you're up early, I can virtually guarantee you'll see red deer," Malcolm said.

The planned shore excursion for the day was informal, on foot, and logistics were simple. "There is only one road, so from the dock, you turn left, or you turn right. And, you'll be walking on tarmac, farm roads, footpaths, so stout footwear is recommended."

With big dark clouds looming, it was only natural that a guest asked about the forecast.

"I haven't got it yet," Malcolm replied. "But, like today, it's the middle of summer, so we can expect a little of everything."

I didn't come to Scotland for the weather—no one does. But I did come for the Scottish experience. And from whisky and wildlife to haggis and hospitality, Hebridean Princess packaged a little of everything we hope to encounter on a Scottish journey into one wee ship.

If You Go ...

Hebridean Princess sails March through mid-November. Most cruises depart from Oban, a small town on the west coast of Scotland, two-and-a-half hours by coach from Glasgow.

Although no two itineraries are alike each season, frequent stops include the islands of Islay, Jura, and Skye. Several cruises each summer visit the remote, abandoned outpost of St. Kilda, Scotland's first UNESCO World Heritage Site, renowned for its birdlife. In 2017, three itineraries will take in the fjords of Norway. The most popular cruises sell out a year or more in advance.

Per-person rates for seven-night cruises in 2017 start at \$3,814 based on double occupancy; single occupancy cabins start at \$5,235. A few shorter itineraries at the start and end of the season are priced lower on a per-night basis. Fares include all meals and drinks (including many notable single malts), guided shore excursions, on-board internet, bicycles, fishing trips, speedboat rides, port taxes, and the coach transfer from Dublin. The ship maintains a strict no-tipping policy.

Information: [hebridean.co.uk](http://www.hebridean.co.uk) (<http://www.hebridean.co.uk/>); 877-600-2648.

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