

## Scottish Travel

**I**cy shivers tremble down my thighs as I submerge, wetsuit-free, into the chilly waters of Ulva bay. I peer around in the crystal-clear waters, snorkelling gear firmly attached; poised above Caribbean-looking coral, a seal gazes straight into my eyes. “A unique way to discover western Scotland,” claims the cruise company tagline. You can say that again.

Over the past five years, sailing the seven seas, I’ve tried big ships, small ships, long ships, tall ships, family ships, luxury ships – relationships – but a Scottish islands cruise? It simply never crossed my mind. However, a six-night “Mull Odyssey Cruise” looked too good to resist, travelling with St Hilda Sea Adventures, a family-owned Scottish cruise operator specialising in small-ship, adventurous west coast cruising, with the odd voyage focused on themes such as golf, whisky or castles.

My home for the next six nights is the Seahorse II, a cosy, converted 82ft Norwegian ferry that sleeps a maximum of 11 passengers – just the right size to anchor in remote Hebridean coves that are off-limits to larger cruise ships. Setting off from Oban, the Seahorse II will take me out in a clockwise cruise around Mull.

Sea-to-table cuisine is prepared daily on board: fresh cod laid out on a bed of shiitake mushrooms and courgette ratatouille; filo tart with spinach and feta cheese and red-pepper egg roulade. On board with me is my vegetarian mum – she says she has never been catered for so well on holiday before.

Destination exploration is the sole focus of a St Hilda Sea Adventure: you won’t find slot machines, West End-style shows or gala dinners onboard. Instead, an intimate, highly personable experience is shared, in my case, with a Dickensian cast of Australians, Irish and – the endangered species of the group – a single Scot. Evenings are spent in heated games of Scrabble in the deck saloon or stargazing up on deck, soaking up the mountainous surroundings.

Our first stop is Carsaig Bay on the Ross of Mull. Bouncing in by tender, I hop off straight into the cool shallow cove and am immediately struck by the charcoal-black sand. There are no humans in sight, just towering, precipitous hills.

By contrast, the following morning we arrive at Iona, bursting at the seams with tourists off the mammoth Ponant cruise ship anchored not far from our vessel. I wander about the grounds of Iona nunnery, an Augustinian convent dating back to 1203, before lighting a candle in Iona Abbey. Shamefully I’m kept occupied as I discover a single bar of phone signal climbing Torr an Aba, a little hill where St Columba was said to have had his writing hut. I pass a tiny knick-knack shop, St Columba Larder, and Iona Pods, the island’s cosy, self-catering glamping huts, and stop at North End beach, coated with sandy dunes and richly coloured rocks.



# BOATLOADS OF FUN ROUND MULL

A west coast cruise around the mountainous Inner Hebrides island turns out to be an unexpectedly enjoyable adventure, discovers *Lewis Nunn*

As the sun sets, Captain John steers us to Bunessan for a glimpse of a grey heron perched on the shore, before sailing away for an overnight stay at Ulva, scene of my icy swim. Next morning, we drift slowly towards Staffa, where, following in the steps of Jane McDonald, I hobble over the rocks of Fingal’s Cave, lubricate my

throat and perform my rendition of Amazing Grace. Just kidding – though the crashing waves, gothic cavern and eroding steps seem to cry out for accompanying drama.

Less inspiringly, I still haven’t spotted a puffin. However, just in time, Leo arrives to take me on a final tender detour and, out of nowhere, a pack of puffins swarms around the boat. There must be at least 20 of them, inches from my fingertips.

As evening draws in, I sit up on deck, cradled in a velvet blanket, and take in the

**Escape the deck saloon, far left, and you may see a group of puffins on your way around Mull, top**

enormity of what I’ve been able to experience over the week.

Our final stop is Balamory – sorry, Tobermory – the famed setting for the BBC children’s TV show. Beloved of postcard-sellers across the Inner Hebrides, the town is lined with high-standing, brightly painted shops and hotels gazing down over a harbour packed with fishing boats, yachts and ferries.

From here, a 45-minute bus transfer brings us to an RSPB sea eagle hide on a golf course that doubles as a refuge for golden and white-tailed eagles.

Birds sighted, Mull well and truly explored, we finish up back at Macgochan’s pub in Tobermory, sipping Cobras in celebration of our fellow passenger John’s 60th birthday – the perfect ending to my first adventure cruise. One thing’s for sure: it won’t be my last.

*Lewis Nunn was a guest of St Hilda Sea Adventures (sthildaseaadventures.co.uk). Mull Odyssey Cruise costs from £960pp, full board, for six nights, including all drinks and activities.*

