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CRUISE

Trade News

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VIRGIN VOYAGES

SEA CHANGE

How Virgin Voyages cemented itself as one of the cruise industry's most exciting operators

INSIDE: CTN INVESTIGATES IS CRUISE ON THE BRINK OF A CREW CRISIS? P43
INTERVIEW VIRGIN VOYAGES' SJ WALKER, P32 • **REVIEW** CELEBRITY XCEL IN FOCUS, P61

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WELCOME...

TO THE FEBRUARY ISSUE



In 2021, ripples were sent across the cruise sphere when Virgin Voyages splashed down for the very first time. The challenger brand brought a new concept to the world of holidays-at-sea: adult-only cruising for fun-loving couples and groups of friends looking to try something new.

It now gives me great pleasure to introduce this special edition of *Cruise Trade News*, where we've partnered with the line to showcase what it has to offer in 2026 and beyond.

We dive into the company's growth plans (p. 32) and take a closer look at its fleet (p. 38), before speaking to one of the brand's on the road sales reps (p. 40). We're also giving readers the chance to win a range of exclusive Virgin Voyages prizes, including a free cruise (p. 26).

Elsewhere, you'll find your usual updates from the luxury, river and expedition sectors (p. 11), as well as an investigation into the growing pressure on cruise lines to ensure they have enough hands-on deck to keep up with rapid capacity growth (p. 43).

Happy reading!

On the cover: Virgin Voyages

Will Payne
Editor



Ahoy First Mates! I'm absolutely thrilled to partner with *Cruise Trade News* for this special Virgin Voyages edition of the magazine, rooted in the stories that make cruise worth writing home about.

As a month synonymous with love and appreciation, it feels like the perfect moment to spotlight 'With Love From' – a Virgin Voyages brand platform inspired by the act of sharing meaningful experiences with the people who matter most.

At its heart, With Love From is about taking a moment to notice. To reflect on a place, a partnership, and the small details that leave a lasting impression. That spirit runs through this takeover.

The perspectives shared throughout this edition come directly from our Virgin Voyages UK sales team. Grounded in daily connections with our fabulous trade partners across the country, these voices bring real front-line insight. Ultimately, this takeover is a thank you. A postcard-perfect pause to celebrate the partnerships, shared ambition and collective energy that keep cruise thriving – this month and beyond.

With Love From,

SJ Walker
Director of sales UK, Virgin Voyages

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QUESTION TIME

Is cruising the right fit for active travellers?

Navigator



Power of partnerships

► In January, MSC Cruises and the BWT Alpine Formula One Team joined forces to reveal the first F1 car on a cruise ship, making the racing brand the latest high-profile company to partner with the cruise industry in a landmark activation.

The event, hosted by radio and TV presenter Clara Amfo, saw MSC Cruises' executive chair Pierfrancesco Vago, the team's drivers Pierre Gasly and Franco Colapinto, and Alpine F1 executive advisor Flavio Briatore reveal the new car in *World Europa's* Panorama Lounge.

"I am very grateful to our partners at MSC Cruises not just for hosting us today here in Barcelona, on this incredible ship, but also for their support and commitment to our team,"



Continued overleaf



Briatore said. "They have proven to be genuine partners as we prepare for what will undoubtedly be a unique season in Formula One history. To be joined by so many of our partners at an event like this is fantastic. I thank them all, both new ones and existing ones, for their commitment to the team, especially after our challenges on track last year."

The event was the latest in a string of partnerships between cruise lines and well-established global brands, highlighting the industry's ability

to reach global audiences and the brand awareness it drives to the wider sector.

It's not the first time a cruise line has worked with an F1 team, either. In 2024, Regent Seven Seas Cruises partnered with the Aston Martin Aramco Formula One Team. Vice president of sales UK and Ireland for the line, Paul Beale, said bringing the luxury brands together showcased cruise "to a whole new affluent audience". The world outside of motorsport has highlighted cruise as

Effective brand partnerships have never been more important

an effective marketing tool, too. In November, Princess Cruises partnered with Handshake Speakeasy, which was named North America's best bar in 2025, while Cunard joined forces with Letters Live in December to celebrate the line's literary heritage. Nobu has partnered with Crystal, guests will find Starbucks onboard Norwegian Cruise Line ships and Elemis products are available onboard Seabourn cruises.

From speedway superstars and global sporting powerhouses to fine dining and the arts, world-renowned names are increasingly turning to cruise to share their story.

As global firms continue to seek innovative ways to cut through the noise and as cruise increases its focus on new customers, the implementation of effective – and relevant – brand partnerships have never been more important.

IN NUMBERS

10%
of global tourism spend
is in sports travel

17%
Estimated growth
of sports tourism

71%
of travellers are
considering a cruise

Stats from CLIA and UN Tourism



CARIBBEAN DREAMS

Virgin Voyages has kicked off 2026 with renewed momentum following a marked growth in Caribbean business. Bookings in the region have doubled year-on-year and now account for more than 40 per cent of total active bookings.

Longer itineraries continue to resonate strongly in the UK, highlighting ongoing demand for fly-cruise and extended Caribbean options. Top-selling sailings for 2026 include Eastern Caribbean & Bimini Beach Club, Southern Caribbean & Aruban Nights, and Western

Caribbean & Bimini Beach Club.

It comes ahead of a busy year for the line. *Brilliant Lady* will launch in two new regions for Virgin Voyages: Los Angeles on 7 April and Seattle, for the company's first-ever Alaska season, from 21 May. Closer to home, *Valiant Lady* will make three calls into Portsmouth this summer, which will be supported by a programme of trade-focused activations, designed to build awareness, spark engagement and support UK travel partners on the ground.



SCAN
to read more about Royal
Caribbean Group's new
Discovery class

Exclusive

SPOTLIGHT

Tony Roberts



Geopolitical uncertainty across the US, the Middle East and parts of Ukraine and Russia should be viewed as an opportunity rather than a hindrance for the UK travel trade, according to Imagine Cruising CEO Tony Roberts.

Roberts acknowledged that global tensions would “naturally have an impact” on consumers’ willingness to book holidays. However, when concerns arise around safety and booking security, customers often turn to experts for support.

“For the demographic which loves to cruise in particular, going to some of these bucket list destinations – regardless of the issues – is still appealing, even more so when somebody is taking care of all elements of the holiday,” Roberts added.

“People don’t want to be on their own or making their own arrangements when there’s more uncertainty, as they want an expert to take care of everything and to be responsible for ensuring their holiday is delivered in the way they expect it to be.”

Customers with safety and booking concerns often turn to experts for support

BOUNCING IN THE BAHAMAS

➤ MSC Cruises has revealed plans to upgrade Ocean Cay MSC Marine Reserve, the cruise line’s private island in The Bahamas. Due for completion in late 2027, the programme will see the addition of new dining venues and cabanas, as well as an extended pier to allow two ships to call simultaneously.

The island features dedicated areas to relax or swim, seven bars, Seakers Food Court for casual dining plus food trucks, along with a range of water activities and shore excursions.

From 2027, it will offer four new dining experiences and Seakers Cove will receive a reimagined kid’s playground, a splashpad, and ropes course with water elements. The area will also feature ping-pong and foosball.

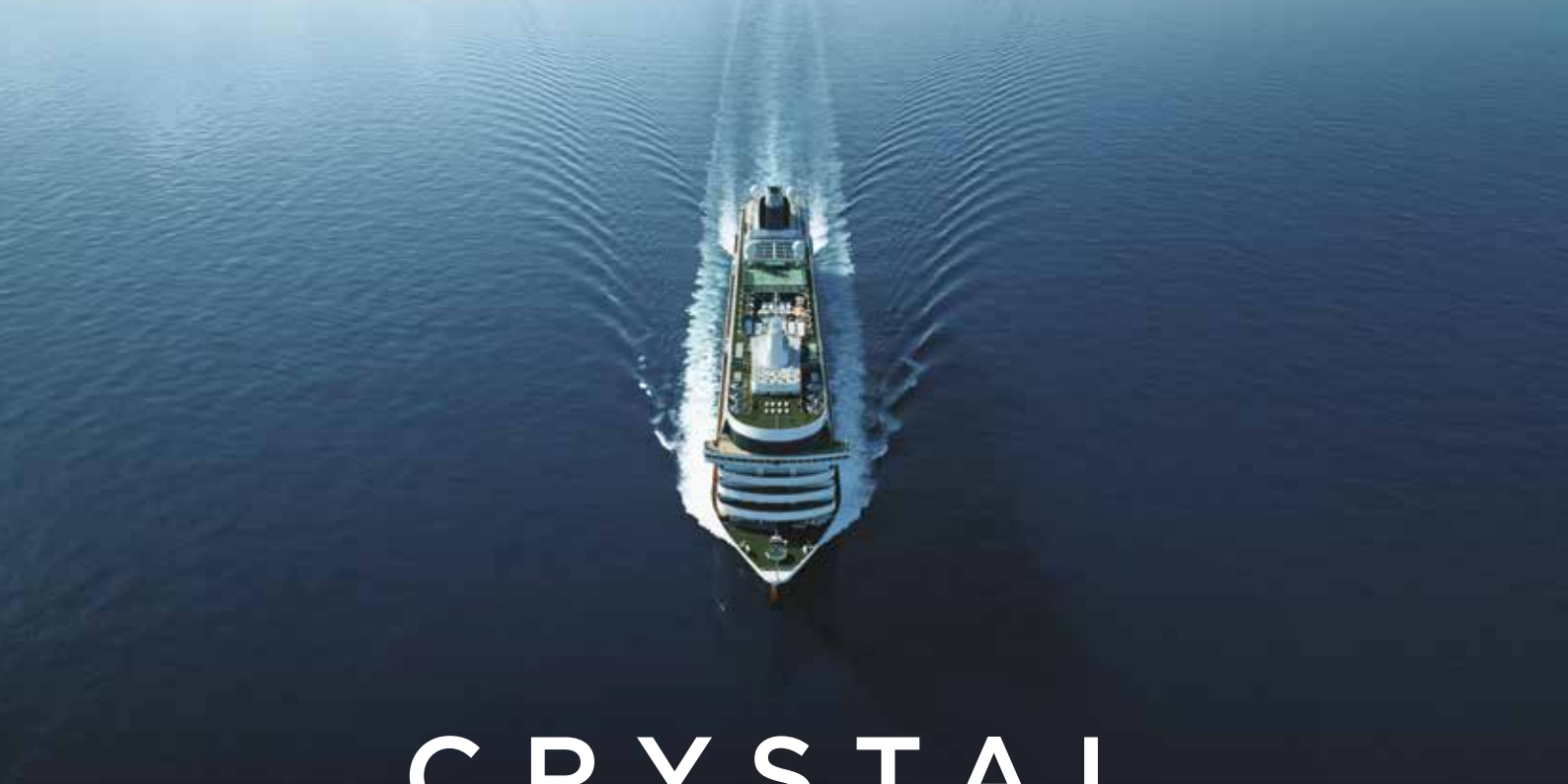
“The programme will see new dining venues and cabanas plus an extended pier



LITERARY GEMS

➤ The 2025 iterations of the Wave Awards and Cruise Stars have raised more than £6,300 for the events’ charity partner, the National Literacy Trust (NLT).

Generated from a combination of ticket sales across both events, a silent auction at the Wave Awards and matched donations from *Cruise Trade News*’ parent company Real Response Media, the donation will go towards supporting the NLT in transforming lives through the power of words by working with schools, families and communities across the UK to improve reading, writing, speaking and listening skills. The partnership saw author Anthony Horowitz speak at Cruise Stars 2025.



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EXPLORA UNVEILS THIRD SHIP

Explora Journeys has revealed more details about its forthcoming vessel *Explora III* ahead of its launch in the Mediterranean this summer. Following its debut on 24 July, the new ship will be named in Barcelona at the MSC Group Cruise Division's new terminal on 1 August 2026. The vessel – which is 19.2 metres longer than its predecessors

Explora I and *Explora II* – will offer 463 suites, three outdoor swimming pools, five indoor and outdoor heated whirlpools and new dining venues Shore Club on 11, The Chef's Table and The Cellar. The Ocean Wellness spa and the ship's fitness areas have been brought together, with the spa featuring new treatments and curated collaborations.

SPOTLIGHT

Michael Young-Richards



Crystal has appointed Michael Young-Richards to the newly created role of key account manager UK and Eire. He joins from Celebrity Cruises where he most recently spent five years as a strategic account manager, and two years as a regional sales manager.

He has also held positions with Do Something Different, Kuoni and TUI UK, with a total of eight years' experience in the cruise industry and nearly 28 years' experience in travel. Within his new role, Young-Richards will drive trade sales performance and expand Crystal's market presence.



AZAMARA TO REFURBISH FLEET

Azamara Cruises has revealed plans for the largest refurbishment programme in its history, confirming an \$80m investment across its four-ship fleet under a new initiative called Azamara Forward. The multi-year project will commence with *Azamara Quest*, which is scheduled to enter dry dock in Athens this October, before returning to service in December. The line confirmed that the transformation

programme will integrate feedback received from its guests and travel partners.

Fleetwide changes will include refreshed public spaces, lighter interior palettes and new dining and bar concepts. A permanent Chef's Table venue will replace the Drawing Room on all ships, giving a dedicated home to a previous pop-up dining experience.



CELEBRITY GROWS RIVER FLEET

Celebrity River Cruises has confirmed it will add 10 new ships to its first European river cruise fleet to bring its total portfolio to 20 vessels by 2031. The announcement comes after the steel cutting ceremony for *Celebrity Compass*, the line's debut river ship. The 2028 season is now open for bookings, featuring an 80 per cent increase in European destinations compared to the brand's inaugural 2027 deployment. The line has also put its 2028 season on sale, featuring more than 160 sailings to more than 50 destinations across Europe. Celebrity River Cruises launches in 2027 with *Celebrity Compass* and *Celebrity Seeker*, followed by *Celebrity Wanderer*, *Celebrity Roamer*, and *Celebrity Boundless* in 2028.



AMADEUS REVEALS NEW SHIP

Amadeus River Cruises has announced plans to launch a new ship, *Amadeus Mira*, which will sail on the Rhine and Danube in 2027.

The vessel will accommodate 158 guests in 12 suites with balconies and 67 cabins featuring panoramic windows. *Mira* also includes a restaurant, a sun deck with an outdoor pool and bar,

a fitness room and a river terrace. The ship will operate with hybrid propulsion and a heat recovery system.

Mira will offer a range of itineraries on the Rhine and Danube including tulip cruises from Amsterdam, journeys from Trier to Passau, voyages to the Danube Delta, and a 15-day sailing from Amsterdam to Budapest.

SPOTLIGHT

Riviera Travel



Riviera Travel has praised its travel agent partners for helping it record the best January in its history. Vicky Billing, director of trade and partnerships, said: "The support we receive from the trade is nothing short of phenomenal. We wouldn't be where we are today without you, and we won't forget that." Billing also praised her team, adding: "They are a passionate, hardworking group who operate at an incredible pace. Over the past two years, they've put Riviera back on the map, and I couldn't be prouder of what they have achieved."



TAUCK WAIVES SOLO SUPPLEMENT

Ultra luxury river cruise line Tauck has waived its solo supplement on more than 250 departures in 2026. The extra charge for individual travellers has been removed on all Category 1 riverboat cabins, eliminating it entirely on every departure of each Tauck river cruise itinerary. The solo-friendly sailings will include a new itinerary, Bordeaux, Paris & The Seine, which sails on the new

MS Serene. In addition, Tauck will reduce the single supplement by \$1,000 (£745) on certain other cabin categories (typically Categories 4 and 5) on select European river cruise departures in 2026. The company has also reduced single supplements on land tours by up to \$600 on 105 departures of 37 itineraries spanning the likes of Europe, Asia and North America.

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ATLAS BOLSTERS FLEET

Atlas Ocean Voyages has announced plans to launch its first-ever luxury expedition sailing yacht, *Atlas Adventurer*, in 2028. The new Atlas class vessel will feature a hybrid propulsion system and solid sails, as well as advanced marine systems and three carbon masts. When conditions at sea and with the wind permit, the ship will be able to cruise with zero-emissions.

Speaking exclusively to *Cruise Trade News*, international sales director

Bernard Carter said: "This is an amazing new chapter in the Atlas Ocean Voyages story – taking luxury yachting expeditions to a whole new level.

"We have already experienced strong demand in the UK for our World class yachts, *Navigator*, *Traveller* and *Voyager*, and I am confident *Atlas Adventurer* will herald a new era of growth, understanding and appreciation of the Atlas Ocean Voyages brand within the UK market."

SPOTLIGHT

Brooke Dunn



National Geographic-Lindblad Expeditions is continuing to expand its UK sales team with the appointment of Brooke Dunn to the newly created position of sales support executive. The appointment comes six weeks after Karen Hollands was named expedition sales and concierge specialist for the brand. Dunn, who joined on 1 January 2026, has spent the last four years working with Fred. Holidays as relationship executive for the company's river cruise brands. Prior to that, she spent five years with Star Clippers as reservations manager.



PONANT ADDS TO FRENCH POLYNESIA DEPLOYMENT

Ponant Explorations Group has confirmed plans to position two ships in French Polynesia for its winter 2026/2027 season. *Paul Gauguin* will be joined by *Le Jacques Cartier*, with both offering itineraries to the Society, Tuamotu, Austral, Gambier and Marquesas Islands, as well as the Pitcairn Islands.

José Sarica, R&D expedition experience director, recently flew to the Austral and Tuamotu Islands to prepare for the new Discovery itineraries on *Le Jacques Cartier*. "We discovered hidden treasures, places of incredible beauty and a spirituality that is truly linked to the natural environment," he said.



LOVE IS IN THE AIR

Princess Cruises is serenading its travel agent partners this February with a raft of new incentives, prizes and training opportunities

February is the perfect month to show someone how much they mean to you. For Princess Cruises, it's all about giving back to its loyal legions of travel agent partners. This month, the cruise line is on a mission to celebrate the UK trade with four weeks full of love, exciting experiences and incredible prizes to make agents feel like VIPs.

From flight vouchers, spa days and West End show tickets to restaurant gift cards, hampers and cinema trips, there's a prize suited for everyone. Princess Cruises is also offering a mystery headline prize, which will be revealed by the line in due course. Keep an eye on the brand's trade social media channels and sign up to its newsletter to stay up to date with the latest offers and activations.

ROLL UP, ROLL UP

With five prizes per week up for grabs, there's plenty of opportunity to take home a gift to make the dark evenings a little bit brighter. To escape the gloomy weather altogether, several flight vouchers are on offer, which the lucky winners can put towards last-minute winter sun escapes.

Or, for film and theatre buffs, tickets are up for grabs for blockbuster flicks and indie gems throughout 2026. These can be redeemed for upcoming pictures

“
Tickets are up for grabs for blockbuster flicks and indie gems throughout 2026

like Christopher Nolan's *The Odyssey*, out this summer, or the on-screen adaptation of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, as well as Lin Manuel-Miranda's *Hamilton* on London's West End.

Princess Cruises is also putting the final touches on its 2026 travel agent ship visit programme, so look out for more information.

But the line isn't done there. Travel agents also have the chance to delve into a mystery destination thanks to Princess Cruises' exclusive programme of Destination Experiences, which promise a blend of iconic sightseeing, off-the-beaten-track discoveries, and the chance to experience what it is like to holiday onboard one of the line's vessels.

The trip will take place this summer, and experiences will be split between the ship and destination, which will

CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT A drink on deck is the perfect way to end a night; the Sanctuary is an exclusive onboard retreat; relax in the Enclave; gourmet dining awaits around every corner of the ship



be revealed in due course. When onboard, agents will have the chance to experience some of Princess' best loved venues, such as Crown Grill and Sabatini's Italian Trattoria, which offers home-style dishes originating from the Med's culinary powerhouse. Make sure to follow Princess Cruises' social channels and newsletter for more updates on these experiences.

HOW TO ENTER

All agents need to do to be in with a chance of winning these incredible prizes is engage with Princess Cruises on its Facebook page, join the line's webinars

“Experiencing a product first-hand is more important than ever for agents

and quizzes and register all bookings via the online registration form. The trade should also keep an eye out for dedicated agent takeover days, new training videos and the line's famous O'Malley's Pub Quiz for more ways to engage with the company. There will also be fresh content on Princess Cruises' OneSource platform and the line will mark Random Acts

of Kindness Day with an extra special surprise giveaway revealed on its social media channels.

Guests can also feel like a VIP this month with up to £800 savings per stateroom, plus, from 13 February to 2 March, up to £500 onboard spend.

As more Brits turn to cruise to satiate their desire to travel the world, experiencing a product first-hand is more important than ever. This new programme gives agents a taste of Princess, positioning them to sell not just a cruise, but a holiday of a lifetime. ●



Scan to sign up to Princess Cruises' mailing list and keep up to date with the latest news, incentives and activations



February is all about YOU!

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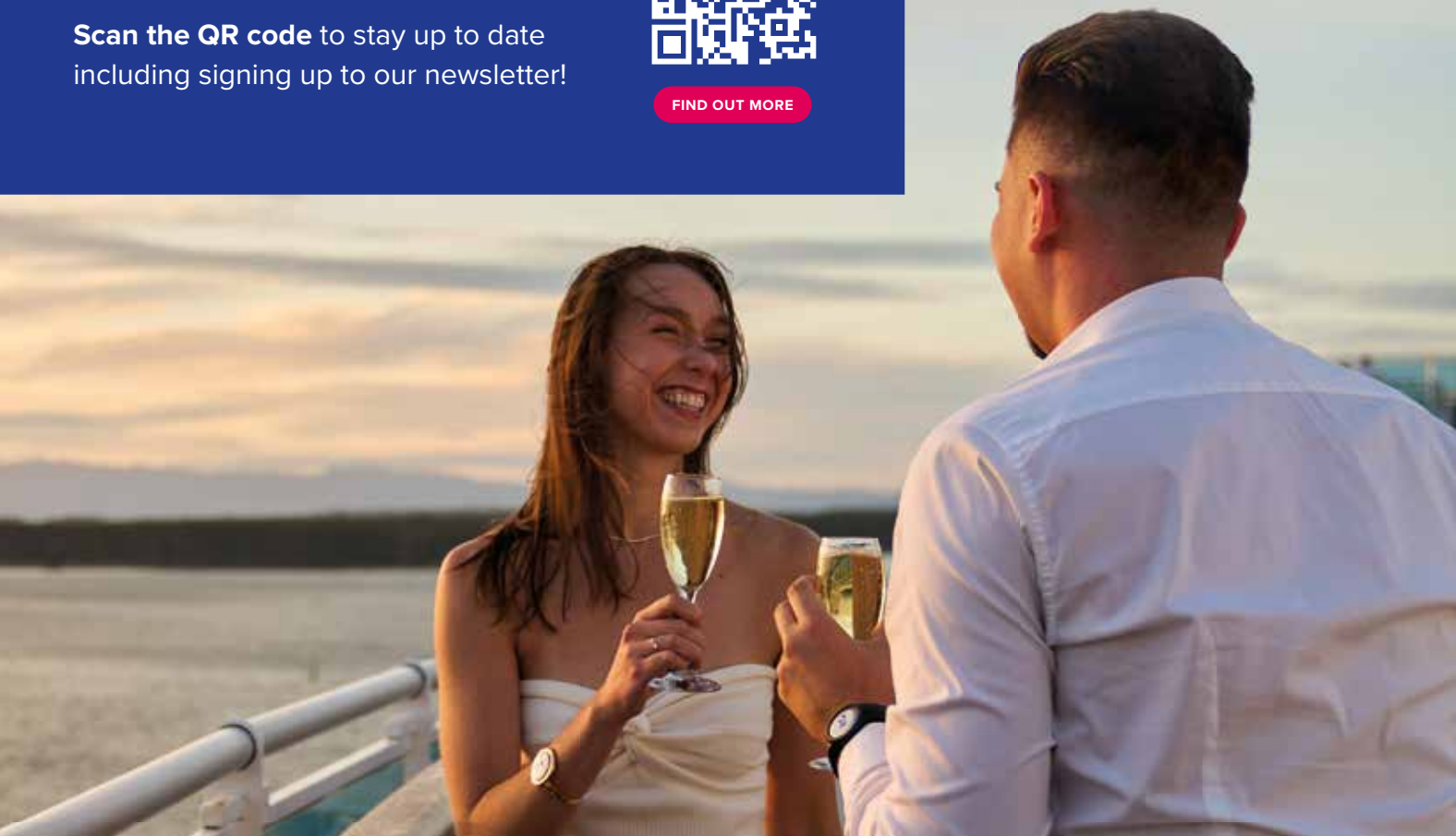
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**Subject
Matter**

Resilient demand

US action in Venezuela dominated interest on *World of Cruising* in January. But data suggests demand is holding firm, says **Raphael Giacardi**

It's fair to say that 2026 began with a bang. Just days into the new year, while many were still enjoying the tail end of the festive break, US President Donald Trump had already orchestrated and carried out the capture of Venezuelan leader Nicolás Maduro.

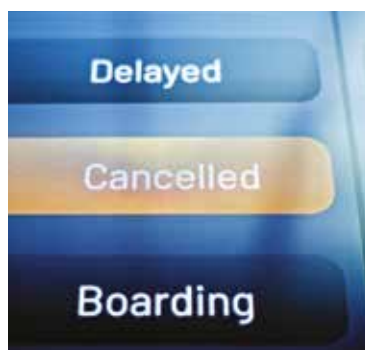
Ordinarily, this would not have featured in a Market Watch column. However, the US military operation required the temporary closure of parts of Caribbean airspace in the early hours of 3 January, bringing the story closer to home.

Almost immediately, reports began circulating of cancelled and delayed flights to and from the Caribbean. Travellers were understandably concerned, questioning whether their itineraries would be affected and what this meant for their holidays.

PUBLIC INTEREST

In response, the *World of Cruising* editorial team moved quickly to cover the situation, explaining what had happened and outlining the likely implications for Caribbean cruises. The resulting article struck a chord. It became, by some margin, our most-read piece of January, attracting thousands of views and widespread sharing.

Interestingly, from a trade perspective, despite heightened attention and clear consumer concern, our search data shows little evidence that demand for



“**Passengers are willing to assess the situation before altering plans**

the Caribbean has been dented. When comparing year-on-year figures, the share of searches for Caribbean sailings is slightly higher, standing at 21 per cent in early 2026 compared with 18 per cent during the same period last year.

Overall, the Caribbean remains the second most popular destination on the website after the Mediterranean.

STABLE DEMAND

This resilience is echoed beyond our own platform. Search behaviour points in the same direction, with Google Trends showing comparable levels of interest in the Caribbean in January 2026 and 2025.

Geopolitical uncertainty is clearly on cruisers' minds, but it is not automatically changing booking behaviour. Instead, prospective passengers appear willing to assess the situation before altering plans. This suggests that, in a fragile geopolitical landscape, keeping consumers informed and communicating clearly about developing situations is essential. ●

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT Demand for Caribbean cruises is still high; US military operations caused problems with flights

IN NUMBERS



#1

The impact of the US actions in Venezuela on Caribbean cruises was the most-read topic on worldofcruising.co.uk in January



21%

Despite geopolitical uncertainty, more than two in every ten searches were for Caribbean sailings at the start of the year



#2

Searches for the Caribbean have grown year-on-year, and the region remains the second-most in-demand destination

TOP TIP

Don't shy away from discussing tricky situations overseas. Most travellers appreciate open and honest conversations, and often turn to experts for peace of mind in times of uncertainty



‘Is cruising a good choice for a wellness break?’

As more and more travellers look to prioritise their health and wellbeing while away, **Rashmi Narayan** asks the experts whether cruising can truly be a health-conscious holiday

Cruising is often associated with indulgence, abundant dining and all-encompassing drink packages. Although some travellers let their hair down and pause their diets for a week or two while away, there’s a growing trend among Brits looking to maintain their fitness routines in-between stints on the sun lounger.

According to a survey commissioned by Hilton of 2,000 adults, 50 per cent say they use their holidays to start a new self-care routine and 37 per cent would prefer to do an activity while abroad rather than relaxing by the pool. As traveller priorities evolve, cruise lines in recent years have repositioned their offerings to appeal more to wellness-minded guests who want to stay active without sacrificing comfort or experience.

Indeed, most now feature fully equipped fitness centres, structured group classes such as yoga, Pilates and spin, and purpose-built spaces designed to inspire guests to get moving. However, for every fitness studio there’s also myriad dining options, snacks and treats around every corner that make a mid-morning pastry too good to turn down.

With these juxtaposing offerings, we ask the experts whether a cruise holiday can turn the heads of fitness fanatics and help support a healthy lifestyle at sea.

“

Most ships now feature fully equipped fitness centres, yoga, Pilates and spin group classes

ON THE MOVE

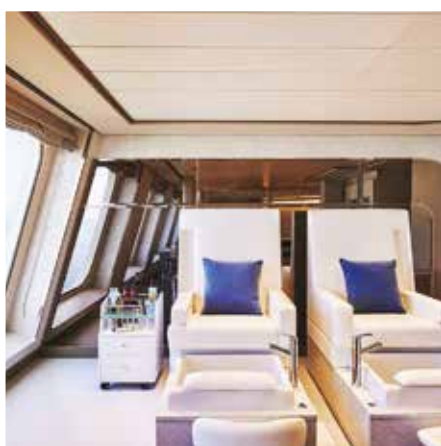
Travel Counsellor Kate Gannon says: “Cruising is a great fit for health-conscious travellers because it supports routine and consistency, which are often what people lose on holiday. Most ships now offer high-quality gyms, a full timetable of fitness classes, yoga and stretching sessions, spa and recovery facilities, plus more balanced dining options, so guests can stay active without feeling like they’re compromising on their holiday.”

Gill Potter, a cruise sales concierge from Cruise118 agrees, adding: “There are certain sailings that are particularly well suited to those who don’t want





SCAN
to read more about P&O
Cruises' largest-ever Shine at
Sea programme



their healthy habits to slip while on holiday. Guests are often off the ship every day, clocking up their steps while exploring new destinations. Guests can make the most of sea days by trying out cruise ships' fully equipped

gyms, a wide range of fitness classes, and even personal trainers. Add to that access to luxurious spas offering steam rooms, saunas, and holistic treatments and you quickly realise how seriously wellness at sea is now being taken. To this day, my at-sea massages remain unbeaten.”

FIT AND FUN

Virgin Voyages has been instrumental in reshaping this conversation. Its ships feature an extensive range of fitness facilities including bungee classes, barre workouts, a boxing ring, basketball courts and a dedicated juice bar. The line's approach resonates strongly with younger, fitness-focused travellers and those new to cruising, giving agents a clear entry point for guests with one eye on the scale.

“Active options such as hiking, kayaking, cycling and snorkelling are now widely promoted

At the premium end, Crystal has developed a more immersive fitness offering through its Wellness at Sea voyages, with the next instalment sailing aboard *Crystal Symphony* in August 2026, timed to coincide with National Wellness Month.

The programme combines structured fitness, mindfulness and nutrition within a luxury cruise framework. Guests will be guided through a series of immersive sessions including yoga and meditation, sound baths, functional training and breathwork as well as mind-reset classes. The voyage also features a two-day detox at sea, encouraging digital mindfulness and deep restoration. ►

CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT There are plenty of onboard options to attract younger, fitness-focused travellers; Virgin Voyages' range of facilities even includes a boxing ring; the spa onboard *Crystal Serenity*



LEFT Travellers can indulge in luxurious spa treatments to boost their wellbeing

“ Hydrotherapy pools, spa treatments and open deck spaces remain central to the cruise experience

Additionally, CroisiEurope offers specialised “Cruise & Hike” itineraries across Europe, combining river cruising with guided, scenic and active trekking for various fitness levels. Active options such as hiking, kayaking, cycling and snorkelling are also now widely promoted, enabling clients to engage with destinations while maintaining physical activity.

AmaWaterways, for example, offers a fleet of complimentary bikes for guided or solo rides through Europe’s scenic river towns. Guides share local insights and even little ones can join. Importantly, the wellness proposition does not come at the expense of relaxation. Spa treatments, hydrotherapy pools and open deck spaces remain central to the cruise experience, allowing guests to balance activity with recovery. For agents, this blend of structure and flexibility is attractive to clients seeking balance rather than regimented wellness programmes.

For agents, the message is clear: cruising is a great choice for health-conscious clients. With the right itinerary and ship, it can be positioned as a credible alternative to traditional wellness holidays. ●

Windstar Cruises, meanwhile, also continues to build on its wellness credentials through its Mind, Body, Spirit Collection itineraries. Led by yoga teacher and life coach Debbie Dixon, these sailings combine daily yoga, meditation and breathwork with small-ship intimacy. Fresh juices from the onboard Elixir Bar and access to a wellness coach for personalised guidance further enhance the experience.

Windstar’s chief operations officer Stijn Creupelandt, says: “Windstar Cruises recognises the growing demand for wellness travel as a re-set and escape from daily schedules and habits.”

“Is cruising a good choice for health-conscious travellers?”



Kate Gannon, Travel Counsellor

“Cruising removes a lot of the day-to-day travel stress. No constant packing, transfers or planning which helps prioritise sleep. Many itineraries also include more active shore experiences such as walking tours, hikes and cycling.”



Jack Atherton, Virgin Voyages:

“Virgin Voyages ships offer sunrise yoga, bungee and HIIT classes, a fully equipped gym, outdoor running tracks, and wellness-forward dining. It’s very easy to stay active at sea, then recover properly with our extensive range of spa experiences.”



Gill Potter, Cruise118

“Some cruise lines go even further by designing experiences specifically for wellness-focused guests. Celebrity Cruises, for example, offers AquaClass guests curated fitness kits delivered directly to their staterooms to enhance their wellness experience.”

Lights, camera, action

Cruise Trade News' sister travel show, *World of Cruising TV*, is back with a bang, with a roster of new guests and experts primed to inspire UK travellers



SCAN
to learn more about World
of Cruising TV and watch the
latest episodes

The fourth season of *World of Cruising TV* hit the screens for the first time this month. Recorded at Palma Pictures Studio in Mallorca, the show has added three new partners – Celestyal Cruises, Fred. Olsen Cruise Lines and Crystal – and welcomed Virgin Voyages, Riviera Travel and Princess Cruises back to the sofa once again.

CLIA UK and Ireland managing director Andy Harmer OBE makes his *World of Cruising TV* debut to discuss the benefits of a holiday at sea with host Dean Wilson, filmed outside the Cathedral of Santa Maria of Palma.

He says: “You see ships now of all shapes and sizes with all different inclusions, targeting certain types of holidaymaker. But you also have a choice of destinations. So, pick carefully because that’s what people remember.”



And for the first time, *World of Cruising TV* brings cruising to life with a visit onboard *Sun Princess*, giving viewers a closer look at what they could expect on a Princess Cruises sailing. To date, the show has worked with 13 pioneering cruise lines, filmed and produced 28 half-hour episodes, delivered more than 96,000 minutes of footage and achieved upwards of 150,000 views on YouTube.

Each episode sees hosts Dean Wilson chat to a cruise line representative about the brand and highlighted itineraries. Next, Michelin star chef Marc Fosh prepares dishes inspired by the line’s menus in the studio kitchen before the guests join him for a tasting.

The show, which is designed to help guests open their minds to cruise lines they may not have considered before, capped the successful launch of its

CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM LEFT

Dishes from ship menus are recreated in the studio; a visit to *Sun Princess* sheds light on life onboard for viewers; Simon Calder and Celestyal’s Lee Haslett

second season by being nominated for Video Content of the Year – New at the 2025 PPA Awards.

Simon Calder, travel editor at *The Independent*, joins the show once again for the Ask the Expert segment, which sees him answer viewers’ burning questions about cruising.

Discussing the series, he says: “There were plenty of highlights, but I particularly enjoyed getting the chance to hear from the top figures from each of the cruise lines. Frankly, I am still drooling at the wonderful memory of getting to taste some of the best food in the Mediterranean, all cooked up in the studio by a Michelin-starred chef.”



IN NUMBERS

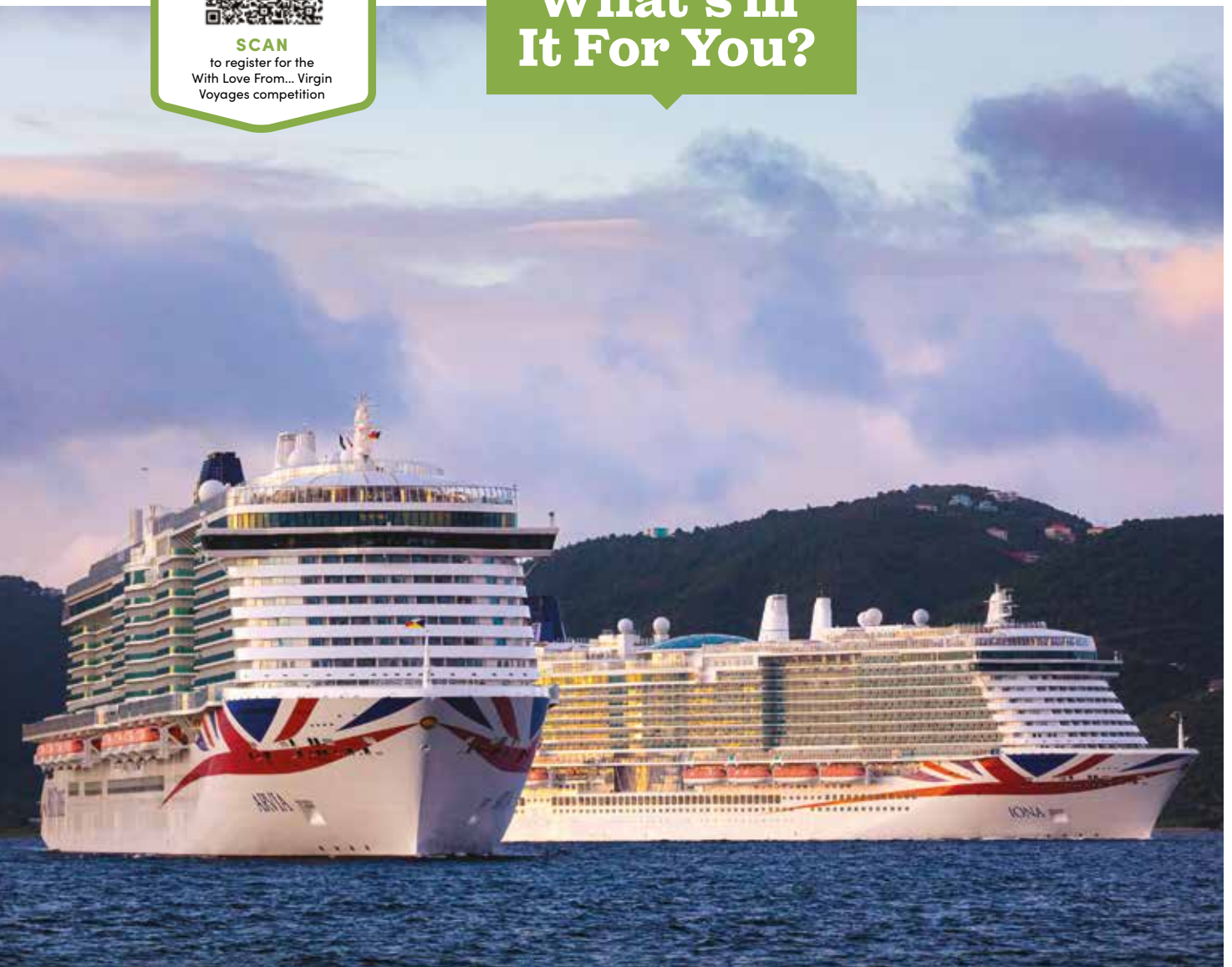
13 ▶ **28** ▶ **96K** ▶ **150K**
cruise line guests episodes aired minutes views on YouTube



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Voyages competition

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What's in It For You?



SEA OF OPPORTUNITY

> P&O Cruises has unveiled its biggest Shine at Sea programme to date, giving more travel agents than ever before the chance to experience a sailing through the lens of a consumer. In 2026, P&O Cruises will offer training experiences for 120 agents across three sailings, each with 40 spaces available. Travel agents will have the

opportunity to win a place on a five-night cruise to Belgium and Germany on *Aurora* on 9 September; a seven-night Northern Europe sailing on *Iona* on 31 October; and a four-night cruise to Belgium and France on *Ventura* on 29 November.

All three cruises are roundtrip from Southampton and winners will get to try out P&O Cruises' shore experience

programme, explore the range of dining and speciality restaurants onboard and participate in exclusive face-to-face training sessions with the P&O Cruises training team. P&O Cruises associate vice president of sales & distribution, Ruth Venn, said: "Shine at Sea has become one of our most valued trade initiatives, and for 2026 we're making it bigger than ever."



Bring on Bimini

As Wave season hits its stride, Virgin Voyages is giving its travel agent partners even more reason to lean into the Caribbean with its Bring on Bimini incentive programme, now in its final stretch. The headline prize? A chance to win a seven-night Caribbean voyage aboard *Resilient Lady*, complete with return flights, a pre-cruise hotel stay and time at Bimini Beach Club. Alongside the grand prize, agents can earn £30 in First Mate Loot on every confirmed booking through 26 February, turning strong sales momentum into meaningful rewards, just as the incentive window begins to close.

CRYSTAL CLEAR

> Crystal has launched a new incentive offering its travel agent partners £20 per booking, with the top six bookers winning an overnight stay in London with dinner and train travel.

The incentive, which runs from 16 January to 31 March 2026, is valid on all new bookings for any destination and sailing year. For each new reservation, advisors will earn a £20 retail voucher

from Tremendous which can be used at more than 2,500 retailers worldwide, including Amazon, Costa, Nike, Sephora and Just Eat.

There is no limit to the number of bookings, so the more cruises that agents book, the more vouchers they will earn. In addition, the top six booking advisors during the period will receive an all-expenses-paid trip to London where they will enjoy a hosted dinner.

GOLDEN AGE

> Uniworld Boutique River Cruises will host a minimum of 500 UK travel agents on board its Super Ships in 2026 to mark its 50th anniversary year.

It comes ahead of the launch of the *SS Emilie*, which will set sail for the first time in March 2026 on the Rhine before transferring to the Danube later in the Spring

to sail on two new itineraries: Capital Cities of the Danube and Vineyards and Palaces of the Danube.

Uniworld will host a further 150 agents at its Ultra Luxury Showcase taking place from 17-19 March 2026 onboard *SS Emilie*, making them among the first to experience the new vessel.

“When, if not now?”



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THE VOICE OF THE CRUISE INDUSTRY

CRUISE

Trade News



Welcome to the **VIRGIN VOYAGES TAKEOVER**

Following a whirlwind start to life, Virgin Voyages is now looking to cement its position in the UK market and beyond as one of the industry's most exciting operators. Central to this goal are its travel agent partners, or 'First Mates', who provide the foundation for the line's future ambitions. Discover everything you need to know about the brand in this special takeover section and on the line's dedicated trade portal, firstmates.com.

SJ Walker

Virgin Voyages' UK sales director highlights the cruise industry's growth opportunities in 2026, and outlines how the line will support its trade partners as it continues to expand

Having sent shockwaves through the industry when it launched its fresh take on cruising in 2021, Virgin Voyages has proven that it's more than just a flash in the pan. Critical to its transformation from disruptor to industry powerhouse are the people working tirelessly behind the scenes both onboard and shoreside.

One of those people is SJ Walker, who has been a part of the line's sales operation since the very beginning. She brings with her 26 years' experience across roles with Thomas Cook, cruise.co.uk, Island Cruises, P&O Cruises and Princess Cruises.

As Virgin Voyages' UK sales director, Walker has helped the brand grow to a slick four-ship operation, with the launch of *Brilliant Lady* last summer the latest in a long line of achievements.

"Last year was an incredibly rewarding year, both professionally and personally," Walker says. "One of the standout moments for me was welcoming *Brilliant Lady* to the fleet, particularly seeing the vessel celebrated at its unveiling and launch event in Portsmouth. It was a proud moment for our entire team and a fantastic opportunity to showcase new destinations and itineraries that continue to elevate the Virgin Voyages experience."



TRADE IMPORTANCE

Walker further explains how she has been "really encouraged" by the strength and depth of the line's travel agent partnerships. "Our First Mates [agents] have truly been at the heart of our success, and strengthening those relationships has been a major highlight," she continues. "Expanding the UK sales team has also been hugely important, allowing us to deliver more personalised, high-touch support and service to our First Mates across the country."

These activations include this very takeover of *Cruise Trade News*' February edition. "The aim is to reach and engage more First Mates, our travel advisors, and, through them, amplify Virgin Voyages' position within the wider travel market," she continues.

"We continue to see huge opportunities to drive greater recognition of our casually luxurious, kid-free cruise experience and the incredible value built into every sailing. The takeover also allows us to build stronger awareness of the breadth and diversity of our itineraries and destinations, ensuring more customers see Virgin Voyages as a compelling and differentiated choice."



What my career has taught me

Build trust

"Most importantly, this industry runs on people, so building trusting relationships with people is everything. Being curious, kind, authentic and reliable will take you very far in this sector, and others."

Work with integrity

"Some of my biggest career breakthroughs came from learning new areas of the business and working with integrity, being open to new challenges and trying my hand at different things. This is much more important than chasing titles – with the right attitude, those will come."

Be adaptable

"Cruising evolves quickly, so adaptability is essential. Saying yes to new opportunities, even outside of your comfort zone, can be hugely powerful for personal and professional growth."

CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT

The Caribbean is a key focus for Virgin Voyages moving forward; SJ Walker joined Virgin Voyages in 2019; The Beach Club at Bimini is the line's exclusive port of call; an array of international cuisines are served on board

“The aim is to reach and engage more agents and, through them, amplify Virgin Voyages

Trade support, Walker adds, is “absolutely central” to the line’s strategy. “Ensuring First Mates feel confident and fully equipped to sell Virgin Voyages is a top priority. Our three business development executives – Gemma, Alan and Kerry – are very much on the frontline, working closely with partners across the UK.

“Through tailored incentives for our UK trade partners, such as First Mate Loot and Bring on Bimini, alongside marketing tools and training, we’re focused on making it as easy and rewarding as possible for agents to succeed with us.”

FUTURE-PROOFING

Despite the industry reporting a later start to Wave bookings compared to previous years, Walker reports a strong start to 2026 for Virgin Voyages. “Our Free Drinks promotion has proven incredibly popular.

It’s simple and delivers real value, which both Sailors [guests] and First Mates appreciate.”

Looking ahead, the line has seen particularly strong demand for Caribbean sailings in Q4 this year and early 2027. Longer voyages of up to 10 nights are resonating well with UK travellers, too. This year will also see the launch of Virgin’s inaugural sailings from Los Angeles and its very first Alaska season.

“Alongside this, we’ll continue to expand our speciality voyages, which give First Mates even more exciting stories and experiences to share with their clients,” Walker adds. “There’s a real sense of innovation and growth, and I’m looking forward to seeing how our trade partners leverage these exciting new opportunities.”

With a maturing product, a growing fleet and robust sales strategy, Virgin Voyages is firmly focused on long-term growth. For Walker, that success is inseparable from the trade partnerships which have been a pivotal part of Virgin Voyages’ entry to the market. As new ships, destinations and initiatives come online, the brand’s commitment to the trade remains unwavering, ensuring its disruptive spirit is matched by a future-proof foundation. ●

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Virgin VOYAGES

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Virgin Voyages

This industry disruptor has staked its claim as one of cruise's most exciting entrants in recent history. It's now primed to grow even further. Here, we take a closer look at what's on offer

IN THE KNOW

Headquartered in Plantation, Florida, Virgin Voyages is owned by Sir Richard Branson's Virgin Group and was the brainchild of now president and CEO Nirmal Saverimuttu. The line's official debut had originally been scheduled for April 2020 with the maiden voyage of *Scarlet Lady*, but the Covid-19 pandemic forced the company to postpone its UK debut till August 2021. Today, Virgin Voyages offers cruises to the Caribbean islands, Europe, the east and west coast of the US including Alaska, and transatlantic and Panama Canal crossings.

THE FLEET

Virgin Voyages' fleet is made up of four ships, spearheaded by its debut vessel *Scarlet Lady*. The ship was subsequently joined by *Valiant Lady* in 2022, before *Resilient Lady* took to the water for the



first time in May 2023. In September 2025, *Brilliant Lady* made its debut, completing the line's first class of Lady ships. Each vessel can carry up to 2,700 passengers, with 1,150 crew members. Onboard, guests will find a range of dining options, like vegetarian-forward Razzle Dazzle and Mexican specialist Pink Agave, as well as a range of cabin

options, spa treatments and wellness experiences to rival the very best shoreside offerings.

WHAT'S ON THE HORIZON

Moving into 2026, Virgin Voyages will continue to mature its global distribution strategy by strengthening its presence in the the UK. This refocus comes after revenue from the UK, which is now the line's second largest global market, jumped 17 per cent in 2025 compared to 2024, with average selling values rising by 34 per cent over the same period.

This year the line will also offer a robust programme of ship visits, designed to give its agent partners more opportunities to experience what Virgin Voyages has to offer onboard through the lens of a customer. The company will share further information on dates and locations in the coming months.



IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Senior manager of global trade engagement, Luke Day

Where should an agent who has never sold Virgin Voyages start?

Start by recognising how much the cruise audience has evolved. CLIA data shows the average cruise traveller is now in their mid-40s, with Gen-X and Millennials driving much of the growth. That presents a huge opportunity for agents to shift the conversation towards lifestyle, experience and value, which is where Virgin Voyages fits perfectly.

What are your most popular itineraries at the moment?

Caribbean sailings remain our most popular itineraries, particularly from Miami, and continue to resonate strongly with UK guests. Alongside this, our new Alaska season is generating real excitement and early demand. Agents should lead with the Caribbean, then introduce Alaska as a standout, bucket-list option for clients looking for something new.

“In 2026 the line will offer a robust scheme of ship visits

WHO'S WHO

Virgin Voyages' UK trade-facing team is led by director of sales, UK, SJ Walker, who oversees the UK sales and Brilliant Support teams, driving strategic partnerships and commercial growth across the UK travel trade. The UK team includes sales managers Jenny Lyons, Jack Atherton and Kelly Green, who work closely with agency partners to grow sales, strengthen long-term relationships and champion the Virgin Voyages brand. Supporting this activity are business development executives Gemma Wilks, Alan Fincham and

CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM LEFT

Onboard wellness is a key selling point for the brand; *Valiant Lady* joined the fleet in 2022; Pink Agave is a popular dining spot; guests can enjoy beach club vibes onboard; Luke Day joined the line in 2019; Alaska is drawing the gaze of Brits

Kerry Buchanan, who are focused on expanding Virgin Voyages' footprint within the UK trade. Luke Day is senior manager of global trade engagement.

The Brilliant Support team, meanwhile, is made up of Sarah Gilligan, Maisie Smith and Niamh Phillips, who provide support to trade partners at every stage of the booking journey.



LUKE DAY'S SELLING TIPS

1 “Those looking for a kid-free break should consider Virgin Voyages. The line is primed to ensure couples seeking a romantic escape, as well as solos and groups of friends, enjoy a holiday of a lifetime.”

2 “Agents should focus less on the headline price and more on overall value, highlighting what's already included. Taking a consultative approach and matching the product to the client's lifestyle is key to driving bookings.”

3 “We sail to a range of destinations, with itineraries suited to different travellers. Sailings include ex-UK cruises to cities like Amsterdam, as well as Caribbean sailings out of Miami and Mediterranean departures.”

FLEET IN FOCUS

Virgin Voyages has carved out a distinctive offering in the cruise market since it hit the high seas in 2021. The adults-only line's ships is well known for their striking grey and red hull, contemporary wellbeing and fitness offering and, of course, the iconic Scarlet Night, where passengers don their brightest red garbs and dance the night away on the top deck. The line's fleet of four Lady ships – *Scarlet Lady*, *Valiant Lady*, *Resilient Lady* and *Brilliant Lady* – offers itineraries to the Caribbean and Mediterranean, as well as Northern Europe cruises from Portsmouth. Each ship accommodates 2,700 guests and features more than 20 dining venues, as well as a gym, nightclub and pool areas. A Virgin Voyages sailing is the ideal choice for couples young at heart, parents looking for a child-free break, groups of friends, and first timers looking to test the waters.



VALIANT LADY

Having debuted in 2022, *Valiant Lady* sails between the Caribbean and Europe, with itineraries from Barcelona and Miami. This summer it will sail out of Portsmouth. The ship is known for hosting more entertainment and music-led sailings, with guests dancing the night away to bachata, reggaeton and Latin pop. Dining options include Pink Agave, which serves upscale Mexican food.

SCARLET LADY

Virgin Voyages' first ship sails primarily in the Caribbean and closer to home in the Mediterranean. The vessel set the blueprint for the brand's bold aesthetic and playful onboard design. Highlights include the open-air athletic club, the spa's thermal suite, and signature venues such as The Red Room theatre and The Manor nightclub. The eight Rock Star Suites, which were designed by Tom Dixon's Design Research Studio, feature stunning marble bathrooms and stargazing terraces.



RESILIENT LADY

Virgin Voyages' third ship joined the fleet in 2023 and is the line's most globally deployed vessel, sailing the Mediterranean and Northern Europe. Offering a range of longer itineraries, including transatlantic crossing and 11-night western Mediterranean cruises, the vessel is the perfect pick for shoreside explorers. Onboard, clients can expect interactive productions in The Red Room like *Persephone*, a modern interpretation of Greek theatre to disco-circus spectacles, while Klub Rubiks transforms the ship into an 80s-themed celebration. Wellness is equally central, with an expansive spa, cold plunge pools and sunrise yoga.



BRILLIANT LADY

Designed for longer sailings, including Alaska, the Caribbean and the Panama Canal, the newest addition to the fleet expands Virgin Voyages' reach into more exotic corners of the world. While maintaining the brand's signature style, *Brilliant Lady* introduces Rojo by Razzle Dazzle, an ode to Spain's convivial culture with an excellent wine menu and tapas-style sharing plates. New productions include *Murder in the Manor*, a true-crime mystery with a musical kick and *Up With a Twist*, a 1920s-inspired supper club. The 2,700-guest ship is ideal for clients who love the Virgin Voyages concept but want deeper, more adventurous routes.



Gemma Wilks

Virgin Voyages' business development executive on how the line is perfectly poised to attract new-to-cruise customers and sailors ready to try something different

What are the key messages for 2026?

I am excited to be shouting about our not-to-be-missed incentives this Wave season, which include 80 per cent off the second Sailor, plus up to \$350 in free drinks. We are also giving our First Mates more reason to book than ever before. Every booking they make will earn them £30 in First Mate Loot, plus every logged booking will get them an entry for the chance to win a place on our Bring on Bimini trip, which includes a pre night in Miami, seven-night sailing on *Resilient Lady* in the Caribbean and return flights with Virgin Atlantic.

Why is it important to increase your face time with agents?

Cruising can feel complex for anyone new to travel and Virgin Voyages is intentionally different to other cruise lines, so personal interaction helps educate them about our product. When First Mates meet us and ask questions, their confidence and understanding of our brand grows quickly. As a field-



CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM LEFT

The onboard experience is paramount to the success of Virgin Voyages; Gemma Wilks joined the line in 2023

relaxed. We remove many traditional cruise objections: no kids, no buffets, no main dining hall, no formal nights and no surprise onboard spend. That makes the product easier to sell and often leads to higher satisfaction and repeat bookings.

How important are agents to the success of Virgin Voyages?

First Mates are absolutely critical to our growth in 2026; they play a vital role in converting curiosity into bookings. They help position Virgin Voyages correctly and identify the right Sailor. Virgin Voyages is very much partnership-led; we succeed when First Mates succeed. Education and engagement within the trade will continue to be a key driver of our momentum.

What key USPs should agents focus on?

First Mates should lead with what truly sets us apart: kid-free cruising, always included dining across 20+ eateries, Wi-Fi, essential drinks and group fitness classes included, plus longer, later port stays. Add to that our transparent and flexible VoyageFair Choices, state-of-the-art ships and relaxed, modern onboard vibe and you have a product that feels genuinely different. ●

based BDE, I can tailor conversations to what's actually happening in that agency, whether it's shifting demographics, confidence gaps with cruise, or opportunities to switch sell from a land-based holiday to a cruise with Virgin Voyages. Those conversations don't happen in the same way over email.

Why should agents consider selling Virgin Voyages?

We unlock a completely new cruise customer for many agents: people who may have dismissed cruising altogether. Our kid-free voyages appeal to couples, groups of friends, honeymooners, empty nesters, multigenerational families and first-time cruisers who want something premium and

“

We unlock a completely new customer for many agents: people who may have dismissed cruising altogether



BREAKING BARRIERS

Do you have customers unsure about trying a Virgin Voyages cruise? Here, the team behind the trailblazing brand dispel two commonly held myths about the line to help you sell more effectively



‘Virgin Voyages is all about parties, isn’t it?’

Dispelled by Jenny Lyons,
UK sales manager

“This is a misconception I often hear when agents are looking to book a wellness-focused or spa holiday for their clients. While we certainly offer great nightlife for those who want it, what often surprises people is how well the brand caters to adults looking for balance, wellbeing and relaxation.

When I explain Virgin Voyages to wellness-minded customers, I start with the fitness offering. The facilities onboard are some of the best at sea, with a wide range of classes included in the voyage. Guests can enjoy Pilates, yoga, spinning and high-energy HIIT sessions without paying extra, making it easy to stay active or try something completely new while away. For early risers, there



“There are plenty of opportunities for guests to start the day feeling energised

are plenty of opportunities to start the day feeling energised, whether that’s a workout overlooking the ocean or a quieter morning routine.

Food is another key part of the conversation. All dishes are cooked from scratch, with an impressive choice of healthy, fresh options across the ship. To complete the wellness experience, the spa facilities are excellent, offering a calm retreat at sea. When you combine this with beautiful destinations, no set dining times, and the freedom to enjoy a party night only if you want to, Virgin Voyages becomes a surprisingly perfect choice for a modern wellness holiday.”

CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM LEFT

Wellness is a key USP for Virgin Voyages; Jenny Lyons; the cruise line offers a range of food and drink options; Kelly Green



‘Virgin Voyages is too expensive compared to other cruise lines’

Dispelled by Kelly Green,
UK sales manager

“This is a common objection I hear, especially when clients first compare headline prices. On the surface, Virgin Voyages can appear more expensive upfront, but the conversation quickly changes when you compare costs on a like-for-like basis.

Many cruise lines advertise a low base fare, then add extra charges for things guests now expect as standard.

Things like Wi-Fi, speciality dining, and fitness classes often come at an additional cost, which can significantly increase the final holiday price. By the time these essentials are added, the overall spend can be far higher than initially anticipated.

With Virgin Voyages, all of these are included from the start. Wi-Fi, all speciality dining across more than 20 eateries, group fitness classes, essential drinks like soda, coffee and tea are all part of the fare. There are no surprise charges and no constant decisions about whether something is ‘worth the extra’.

On top of this, Virgin Voyages delivers award-winning entertainment designed to suit every mood. Guests can enjoy modern, immersive shows, relaxed evenings under the night sky, or spontaneous pop-up moments that bring the ship to life. From sunrise to late night, the ship is filled with thoughtful, high-quality experiences that are all included.” ●



A man and a woman are smiling and looking at each other on a ship's deck. The man has curly hair, a beard, and glasses, wearing a light-colored button-down shirt. The woman has long dark hair and is wearing a green top and large hoop earrings. They are both holding drinks. The background is a clear blue sky.

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THE CREW CRISIS

With more record-breaking capacity ships on the horizon, could there soon be a critical shortage of staff? Following concerns raised by leading industry authority Larry Pimentel, **Dave Monk** investigates



Cruising could soon be facing a crew crisis as the growing numbers of ships outstrip the supply of new staff, according to a highly experienced leader in the industry.

In a career spanning more than 30 years in luxury travel, Larry Pimentel has been president of Seabourn, Cunard, SeaDream, Azamara and Four Seasons Yachts. He was also chief experience officer at Royal Caribbean Group, on the board of Virtuoso Travel and a cruise industry consultant before taking up his present role of cruise executive in residence at the FIU Chaplin School of Hospitality & Tourism Management in Miami.

Posting on LinkedIn, Pimentel said that projections showed an alarming potential shortage of up to 125,000 seafarers by 2030. Meanwhile, cruise passengers are expected to grow to 42 million a year by 2028, according to CLIA's State of the Industry Report 2025, and the global fleet could easily hit 500 ships within the next decade.

Pimentel tells *Cruise Trade News* that the staffing issue is "a real and growing challenge", and that some lines are more at risk than others.

He explains: "The big guys are jumping into the recruitment business to protect themselves. The Royal Caribbeans, Carnival Corps, MSCs and NCLs of the world are going to make sure their brands are protected. It is a central concern for a very specific reason, the brand is delivered by the crew. We need certified officers and engineers and just think of the more technical roles. We have new green fuels, navigation aids and advanced vessel systems, all of which require retraining.

"It's not just about getting new people in; it's taking the people we have and bringing them up to date with technologies."

MIND THE LUXURY GAP

Part of the solution could be to bring more women into the industry and seek out new sources of labour. "We're getting more African employees, in particular from Kenya and Zimbabwe," Pimentel says. "You can have 70-plus nationalities and thousands of crew on a big vessel, so you need to have really skilled HR people. Culture is a very important element."

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Luxury lines like Cunard have extremely experienced staff; passengers paying a premium expect the very best service; with multinational crew members, culture is a very important element



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Corner Podcast

While Filipinos make up nearly 30 per cent of the global maritime workforce, other countries help provide officers and technical staff; hospitality, housekeeping and food services crew; deck crew and entertainment staff. Although the large lines need to hire more people, the expanding number of small luxury ships require specialist, highly trained and experienced staff to deliver the level of one-to-one service expected says Pimentel

“Look at classic products like Cunard. When you go to the Queens Grill, you have the most experienced staff. They know what they are doing. They know guest engagement. They know their product. They know their delivery standards. They are trained in luxury service. That doesn’t happen in a moment, that happens over time.

“In the luxury sector, the expectation of the guest is associated with the price point. The rates for Four Seasons Yachts look to be roughly \$3,000pp a night. So, if you as a couple are paying \$6,000 a night, goodness gracious you are going to expect an awful lot.”

CLIA says cruise lines employ nearly 300,000 seafarers, with tens of thousands more workers

“
The expanding number of small luxury ships require specialist, highly trained and experienced staff



on land. Retention rates are above 80 per cent, compared to a turnover of 70 per cent ashore, with working conditions governed by international bodies. A CLIA spokesperson says: “Our industry wants to attract the best talent for our future growth, and to inspire the next generation to consider a career in cruise.”

When approached by *Cruise Trade News*, Royal Caribbean, MSC Cruises, NCL and Viking declined to discuss their recruitment and training policies. However, at Carnival Corporation, global chief human resources officer Bettina Deynes has shared some insights in how the company finds and develops its employees.

She says: “We have longstanding partnerships with leading maritime universities which provide students with at-sea experience, training placements and recruitment opportunities that help prepare the next generation of officers, engineers and hospitality professionals. These programmes supply highly skilled, industry-ready graduates who continue to contribute to our ships and the wider cruise industry.”

She cites collaborations with the Caribbean Maritime University, the Philippine Merchant Marine Academy and Systems Technology Institute and the Maritime and Port University of Mexico.

Deynes adds: “In the UK, we help grow future maritime talent through a mix of practical training and early career development – from cadet programmes in deck, engineering and electro-technical roles that guide students from ▶





the classroom to full officer qualification, to engineering graduate schemes that give qualified engineers a faster path on board. We also team up with maritime colleges, so students get the right blend of academic learning and real hands-on experience.”

Once on board, crew can further their career through leadership programmes. Deynes continues: “Our goal is to strengthen the maritime talent pipeline while creating meaningful, long-term careers for our 160,000 team members worldwide.”

WAVING GOODBYE TO CRUISE

So, is Pimentel right to be worried? An insight on some of the issues facing the cruise sector comes from Paul Rutterford, operations director for Viking Crew, established in 1988, which provides workers for several UK and international lines.

He says: “We are simply not training enough cadets to become the captains of tomorrow. At the same time, in an ever-expanding world of luxury hospitality, it is worth asking whether working in the cruise industry still holds the same career appeal it did 10 or 20 years ago.”

It’s not simply about finding enough people, he says. “Retention and promotion are equally critical. The cruise industry is competing fiercely for qualified engineers, many of whom are attracted by well-paid shoreside roles.

“**Our goal is to strengthen the maritime talent pipeline while creating meaningful, long-term careers for our team members**

“There is also a shortage of European-trained chefs who are willing to ‘go to sea’, working seven days a week for contracts that can last six months or more.

Rutterford believes the traditional attraction of going to sea – travel, adventure and global experience – does not resonate as strongly as it once did.

“For many, the work-life balance associated with shipboard employment no longer aligns with modern expectations. As a result, while the industry continues to move forward operationally and technologically, the employment benefits and conditions on offer do not always match what the next generation of workers are seeking. Unsurprisingly, many choose to pursue careers elsewhere.”

And yet, those who work in the cruise industry believe it still offers exceptional opportunities for career growth, professional development and progression, with the experience gained on board difficult to replicate ashore.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT The cruise industry still offers exceptional career opportunities; the experience gained on board is difficult to replicate ashore; bringing more women into the industry is a potential solution; top-notch training in is a key benefit

“ For many, the work-life balance associated with shipboard employment no longer aligns with modern expectations

“The challenge now is for the industry to continue evolving its approach to recruitment, retention and employment conditions so that we can successfully attract and develop talent.”

The International Transport Workers’ Federation (ITF) represents around 90 per cent of the cruise sector. Its seafarers’ section coordinator, Fabrizio Barcellona, says: “It’s very clear that the cruise industry

is on the up at the moment, including with the building of bigger ships. Such an expansion clearly has an impact on crewing, which also reflects a wider problem with recruitment and retention – albeit for different reasons – across shipping.

“The ITF, which holds collective bargaining agreements across a large proportion of the cruise industry, will do its utmost to ensure that existing crew and any new seafarers receive the pay and conditions they deserve.”

Crew shortages may cause inconveniences like a longer wait at the bar, but in one area it could be a matter of life and death. Valéria Santos, a senior registered nurse with more than 15 years of experience, tells us: “Hiring nurses and doctors with limited maritime or critical care experience can compromise guest and crew safety, put extra



pressure on the medical team and impact service quality. Onboard medicine requires autonomy, quick decision-making and maritime-specific training, all of which are crucial to maintaining safety and guest confidence.

“I have seen situations in which proper medical preparation and early clinical recognition could have been vital to patient outcomes, underscoring the importance of recruiting and retaining well-trained, experienced medical professionals.”

Summing up the global situation, Pimentel says: “There are no longer 18 people who want the same job. The crew can choose where they want to go and they’re going to pick places where the ship is their home. The smart companies are providing better conditions and better wages and better benefits.”

Asked if new technologies and artificial intelligence will help fill the staffing gap, Pimentel adds: “Automation is fine when it works, but when it doesn’t, it frustrates the living heck out of people. And service is not defined by automation, it’s defined by human connection. Also, we’re in the very early days of AI but I think it is going to make a difference.”

Despite his warnings, he remains optimistic. “The cruise sector is innovative and creative. I’m confident that the industry will sort through it – but there will be some rough seas along the way. Which lines will be successful? Those who figure out the magic behind good training. Those who figure out how to appreciate people. Those who understand how to say ‘thank you’” ●





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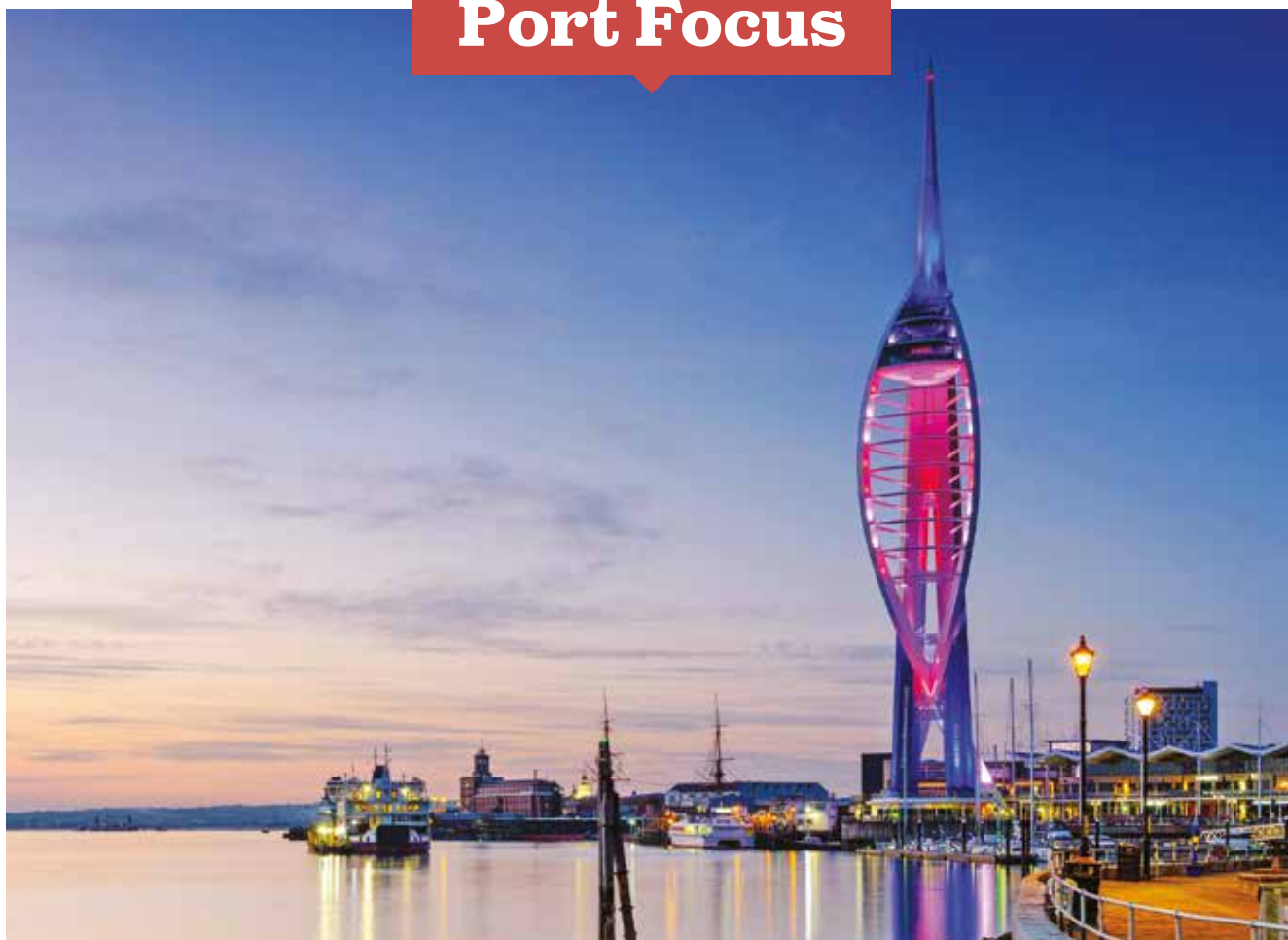


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Port Focus



Portsmouth

A storied history, sprawling beaches and a distinctly British culture collide in England's only island city, writes **Josie Klein**

Dubbed “the great waterfront city”, Portsmouth blends a rich maritime tradition with a modern and lively coastal culture to give visitors a sense of a proud history and a vibrant present.

Most of Portsmouth is on Portsea Island, off the south coast of England, making it the only city in the country not located primarily on the mainland. As a result, much of it offers breathtaking views across the harbour, the Solent and as far as the Isle of Wight. It also makes the port easily accessible for cruise lines such as Virgin Voyages, Saga, Fred. Olsen Cruise Lines and Ambassador Cruise Line.

Once passengers disembark, they will find a compact yet sprawling city with flat terrain. Many of Portsmouth's main attractions are within walking distance of the port, too, so it's an ideal stop for visitors keen to immerse themselves in the local culture without needing to hop on public transport.

The city's history can be traced back to Roman times when it was once considered to have the world's greatest naval port. It was bombed extensively during the Second World War, and was a pivotal embarkation point for the D-Day landings. This makes it a superb stopover for any history buff, and guests

keen to learn about the city's past will find plenty to keep them occupied at the dockyard, which is home to three naval museums and four ships, including *HMS Victory* and the restored *Mary Rose*. Harbour tours are available as well for those keen to get out on the water.

Meanwhile, shoppers will delight in Gunwharf Quays mall which has plenty of designer outlet stores, as well as spots to enjoy a bite to eat while the sun sets over the harbour. Fans of a local ale – or two – will have plenty of options to choose from as the city is known as one of the UK's leading pub hotspots with roughly 12 boozers per square mile. ►



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Portsmouth's ease of access means UK travellers can easily enjoy Virgin Voyages' UK departure itineraries; Lord Nelson's flagship, *HMS Victory*; the historic Still and West pub; South Parade pier has entertainment for the whole family; stroll around Old Portsmouth's cobbled streets



Three unmissable things to do

PORTSMOUTH DOCKYARD

Detailing more than 500 years of history, Portsmouth Dockyard is a must-visit for any naval enthusiast. Visitors can board Lord Nelson's flagship *HMS Victory* or gaze upon the remains of Henry VIII's carrack *The Mary Rose*, which was recovered after more than 400 years at the bottom of the Solent. The National Museum of the Royal Navy boasts ships, planes and submarines to give visitors the chance to see through the eyes of the men and women who served, while the Explosion Museum of Naval Firepower is home to a collection of torpedoes and modern missiles.

“The Spinnaker Tower offers 23-mile panoramic views of the city and beyond

An Ultimate Explorer pass gives visitors access to every attraction on the site, so they spend an entire day soaking up Portsmouth's fascinating local history.

SPINNAKER TOWER AND GUNWHARF QUAYS

Standing at 170 metres, the Spinnaker Tower is Portsmouth's main attraction,

offering 23-mile panoramic views over the city, the Solent and the Isle of Wight. In just 30 seconds, a lift raises visitors from street level up to the three viewing decks where they can breathe in the sea air, read about the city's history on interactive touch screens or even abseil 100 metres down the outside of the tower. Once grounded, guests can mooch around Gunwharf Quays, Portsmouth's premium outlet shopping mall, which boasts a range of designer stores and more than 30 bars and restaurants, perfect for grabbing a bite while watching ferries and pleasure boats glide in and out of the harbour.

OLD PORTSMOUTH AND SOUTHSEA

After guests have had their fill of shopping, they can stroll along the cobbled streets towards Old Portsmouth where they can soak in the architecture while passing lively bars and restaurants, quaint tea rooms and modern art galleries. They can then meander the land's head to Southsea and stop at the traditional seaside pier which was reopened in 2017 after refurbishment. The 180-metre pier offers all the staples of a classic English seaside holiday, with fish and chips, gift shops, ice creams and an amusement arcade to keep customers well-fed and entertained.





Three places to eat BUDGET

Old Portsmouth is a pub-lovers' paradise, with plenty of options to choose from. Nestled in a Grade II listed building, The Still and West combines traditional nautical charm with modern style, while The Spice Island Inn dates back to the 1700s and offers unbeatable views of the harbour. A short walk from Gunwharf Quays is Fish Portsmouth, a fishmonger teeming with locally caught produce. Although primarily a spot to buy produce to cook at home, the site recently opened a hatch where customers can choose from a selection of freshly prepared seafood, including crayfish and lobster brioche rolls, deep fried calamari or a seafood platter stacked with prawns, crab and salmon.

“ Old Portsmouth is a pub-lovers' paradise with plenty of options to choose from

MID-RANGE

Tucked away on the streets of Southsea, The Rocka Restaurant is a favourite among locals, offering unpretentious, delicious meals in a stylish yet laid-back environment. Chef Alecio has curated a Mediterranean menu with bold and flavoursome dishes, such as red Thai salmon curry, lamb shank and pasta pomodoro, with plenty of vegetarian, vegan and gluten free options available. The slow cooked pork belly is not to be missed.

PREMIUM

Found in the historic Queens Hotel on Southsea's Clarence Parade, Restaurant 1865 offers relaxed fine dining to its guests. The Edwardian decor, high ceilings and large south-facing windows provide a sunlit space in which to enjoy its rotating seasonal menu. Of course, there's a wide selection of fish and seafood staples, but don't look past the classic British dishes, which range from steaks and ox cheek to Sunday roasts and an indulgent afternoon tea. ●



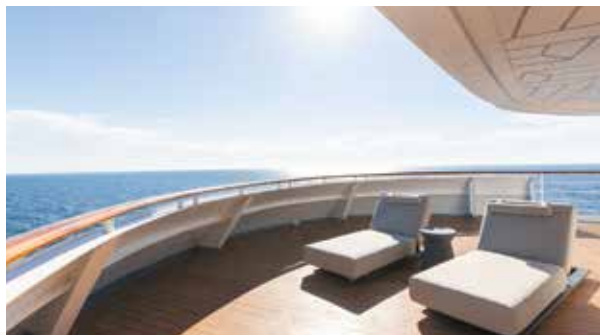
EXPERT TAKE

Jack Atherton, sales manager
UK, Virgin Voyages

“Portsmouth is a powerful sell for UK travellers who want the ease of sailing from home without compromising on experience. Position *Valiant Lady* as the ideal choice for first-time cruisers and Virgin Voyages fans alike – no flights, no baggage limits, just effortless embarkation. The ship's Portsmouth sailings unlock some of Virgin's most compelling European itineraries, from Northern Europe city-hopping to once-in-a-lifetime Icelandic adventures. Top tip: lead with the ship. *Valiant Lady's* adults-only vibe, included dining and immersive entertainment resonate strongly with couples, friends and milestone celebrations. Pair that with a familiar UK departure point and you've got a standout, easy-to-close proposition.”

Get on board

Virgin Voyages' 10-night English Elegance to Idyllic Iceland cruise aboard *Valiant Lady* from Portsmouth to Reykjavik via Amsterdam, Edinburgh, Invergordon, Akureyri and Isafjorour, departs 26 August 2026. Prices start from £1,560pp. virginvoyages.com



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NORTHERN STARS

From misty rainforests and red sand beaches to
lost Viking history and charming cobbled streets,
Canada has intrigue for every season,
writes **James March**





FROM LEFT Kejimikujik National Park offers stunning seaside walks; Vancouver Island reveals British Columbia at its most visceral

Canada's official formation documents were thrashed out at Highclere Castle in the 1860s, now better known as the quaint English countryside setting for TV hit *Downton Abbey*. Thankfully, visiting Canada is a far grander affair. From Newfoundland's wind-blasted valleys to the serrated snow-capped peaks of British Columbia, Canada's sublime natural beauty morphs throughout the year, each season promising a majestic new canvas. Add to this stops at iconic port cities such as Toronto, Halifax and Vancouver, and guests will soon discover that a cruise to the world's second-largest country promises far more than some of the finest scenery on Earth.

Winter BRITISH COLUMBIA

Canada's frigid winters are not for the faint-hearted (there's a reason they call it "The Great White North"), though there is one exception. With its climate moderated by the breezy Pacific Ocean, British Columbia's mild temperatures make it by some distance the most bearable corner of Canada during those long winter months.

Seaplanes buzz around the glassy skyline of Vancouver with the North Shore Mountains rising behind, hinting at scenes to come. The intricately carved totem poles in leafy Stanley Park recognise Canada's many indigenous cultures, while a cruise over to Vancouver Island reveals BC at its most visceral.

The hushed winter season makes Elk Falls Provincial Park ever more evocative, with its giant cedar trees and gushing waterfalls like a scene from a fantasy movie. The escapism doesn't end there either, especially when heading further north to the pristine archipelago of Haida Gwaii (previously known as the Queen Charlotte Islands) and its untouched rainforests. And for those lucky enough to visit Prince Rupert, the wilderness raises up a notch, especially so at Khutzeymateen Provincial Park, home to the world's largest population of grizzly bears.

Spring THE MARITIMES

Winter often bludgeons Canada's Atlantic Maritimes, but these are hardy folk who can't wait for spring's thaw.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Frontenac Castle in Quebec City; Nova Scotia cruisers may spot passing whales; the breathtaking Montmorency Falls on the St Lawrence River; The picturesque fishing village of Tilting in Newfoundland



“Canada’s Ocean Playground” is the slogan on the car registration plates in sea-sprayed Nova Scotia and the historic port city of Halifax is a vibrant place to start when its restaurants, wineries museums reopen for spring.

Visitors can soak up splendid harbour views from the Citadel Hill fortress by day and, when night falls, drop by Halifax’s gregarious pubs, often soundtracked by live acoustic shows and quirky sea shanties. Nova Scotia’s forest-blanketed interior is as handsome as its coast, and Kejimikujik National Park hosts the canoe routes and serene trails of the indigenous Mi’kmaq people, who have called this land home since time immemorial.

Spring’s bloom is equally kind to Prince Edward Island, Canada’s smallest province. Home to red sandstone cliffs, crystalline shores and rolling farmland, PEI is a quaint delight that’s famous for the unusual rust-red sands of Chelton Beach and Argyle Shore. Back on Nova Scotia’s wind-whipped Cape Breton,

WHO SAILS THERE?

Some of the world’s major cruise lines dock at Halifax and Vancouver, including Holland America, Princess Cruises, Royal Caribbean, Silversea, Cunard and Viking. Newfoundland and the St Lawrence River host smaller boutique lines like Pearl Sea Cruises, Adventure Canada and St Lawrence Cruise Line. Summers are warm and humid in much of Canada, and this is when the majority of cruise itineraries run. Toronto, Vancouver and Montreal are Canada’s major airports, and where most inbound flights arrive.

there are cinematic coastal vistas from rugged headlands high above the crashing waves. And if your cruise is well-timed, you might spot whales breaching the water’s surface.

Summer NEWFOUNDLAND

The Vikings landed in Newfoundland in 1021, pre-dating the boats of Christopher Columbus by some 400 years, and the place still holds much mystique today. In fact, this wind-blasted island in the north Atlantic didn’t even become a part of Canada until 1949. Summers here are short, and that’s when this harsh landscape is at its most picturesque – and accessible. With its bright pastel houses, flourishing arts scene and rowdy pubs, St John’s is one of Canada’s most distinct provincial capitals and a merry place to begin a summer cruise.

The widescreen valleys and fjords of Torngat Mountains National Park and Gros Morne National Park are



EXPERT VERDICT

Sarah Rumley,
executive director of
Cruise, Atlantic Canada

"Atlantic Canada is one of the highlights of every Canadian/New England itinerary. Travellers are welcomed like neighbours, with Atlantic Canada feeling both familiar and refreshing, the scenery shaped by seasonal wonder, rich heritage and endless miles of coastlines.

"A day ashore might include discovering natural wonders and historic sites, enjoying sea-to-table dining, and exploring waterfronts alive with culture.

"The cruise season typically runs from April through November, offering travellers a wide range of itinerary options."

is incredible for its multiculturalism," says chef Seb Yacoubian of Armenian restaurant Taline. "A visit here means you can experience different cultures to their fullest extent without ever really leaving the city." If there's time for a final cruise coda, guests should hop over to Niagara Falls, where their misty power will leave an everlasting Canadian mark. ●

Get on Board

Adventure Canada's 12-day Newfoundland Circumnavigation aboard *Ocean Nova* roundtrip from St John's via St Pierre, Gros Morne National Park and L'Anse aux Meadows, departs 11 September 2026, from £7,153pp.
adventurecanada.com

“ The foliage explodes into a kaleidoscope of red, gold and yellow come autumn

wonderful for hiking in the summer sun and look more like Scandinavia or the Scottish Highlands, while Newfoundland's northernmost tip at L'Anse aux Meadows is home to the only confirmed Viking archaeological site in North America. Over on the southern side sit the small French-speaking islands of St Pierre and Miquelon. And speaking of language, listen closely to

the locals back on the mainland. Their accent still contains strong hints of Newfoundland's distant Irish heritage.

Autumn **ST LAWRENCE RIVER** **(ONTARIO/QUEBEC)**

The St Lawrence River winds from Lake Ontario into the Atlantic Ocean, and the shoreside foliage explodes into a kaleidoscope of red, gold and yellow come autumn. Founded in 1608, Quebec City is North America's oldest city and the soaring Château Frontenac hotel, looming large atop Cape Diamond promontory, is one of Canada's most alluring sights. Amid the cobbled streets and homely boutiques of Rue du Petit-Champlain, it's as if stumbling into a European fever dream, while further south in Montreal, meandering through the fallen rust-orange maple leaves on the way to the summit of Mont Royal hill feels like the very essence of Canada.

Charming Kingston was Canada's original capital, though these days Toronto feels like the true capital of this proudly cosmopolitan country. And after a sweltering summer, the autumnal chill is a perfect time to dive into its wildly diverse food scene. "Toronto





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WOULD ABSOLUTELY RECOMMEND YOU GET TO ONE OF THEIR FABULOUS
EVENINGS, FROM START TO FINISH THE EVENT WAS WELL ORGANISED, THE
SPEAKERS WERE INFORMATIVE ON THE PRODUCTS AND ALSO FUN, THE
CRUISE CHALLENGE QUIZ WAS ONE OF THE BEST GAMES I HAVE PLAYED
HAVING TO USE THE KNOWLEDGE WE WERE GIVEN TO GET US AROUND THE
BOARD GAME, THE HOST -PETER- WAS JUST BRILLIANT.
THANK YOU FOR A FANTASTIC EVENING OF LEARNING AND FUN"

Juli Hodson
Travel Counsellor



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Celebrity
Xcel

Sea of CELEBRATIONS

Ahead of *Celebrity Xcel*'s arrival in Europe later this year, **Rashmi Narayan** joins the ship's inaugural sailing to discover what's on offer

As I ascend the ramp to board Celebrity Cruises' fifth Edge series ship in Fort Lauderdale, the first notes of "Celebration" by Kool & the Gang kicks in through my headphones. It feels like the perfect overture for what was to come on *Celebrity Xcel*'s maiden voyage. This ship is all about celebration, and the party is about to start.

As we ease out of Fort Lauderdale at dusk, *Xcel*'s navy-blue hull catches the last of the sun. From the open deck, the city slips slowly away, gulls calling overhead, Floridians waving from the





FROM LEFT Mosaic's menu is inspired by the regions the ship visits; the Hydra Room offers an immersive water-focused wellness experience

wide sandy promenade. The familiar thrill of departure settles in.

With space for 3,276 guests across 17 decks, *Xcel* is the largest ship in the line's fleet and the newest evolution of the Edge series. It builds on the design-led philosophy Celebrity is known for, while debuting new venues and entertainment concepts, as well as a playful, festival-led approach to life onboard.

The ship introduces The Bazaar, a multi-sensory marketplace inspired by Caribbean and Mediterranean cultures; the adults-only Attic at The Club, with retro games; an upgraded Celebrity Pool Club; and a baby-pink Vitamin D Deck at the spa. The entertainment offering is expanded with three new shows. New venues, including Mosaic and Bora, plus a 1920s-style speakeasy, complete the experience.

“

The multi-sensory Bazaar is inspired by Mediterranean and Caribbean cultures

SWEET DREAMS

What sets *Xcel* apart is how much of the ship has been shaped by feedback from “Dream Makers” – members of the public invited to influence everything from menus and music to theatre costumes.

My Infinite Veranda cabin sets the tone. Spacious and elegant, it pairs soft greys with warm ochre accents, with design input from British designer Kelly Hoppen. At the touch of a button, the floor-to-ceiling window lowers to transform the room into a private

terrace. I know instantly that my mornings onboard will begin here, coffee in hand, watching the sea slide past.

Like its sister ships, *Xcel* features the Magic Carpet – a cantilevered platform that moves up and down along the ship's starboard side. One moment it's a bar serving tropical cocktails (like the excellent vanilla mojito), the next it's functioning as a tender platform.

A FESTIVAL AT SEA

The Bazaar is at the heart of *Celebrity Xcel*'s celebratory spirit. At first glance, it's a beautiful boutique, filled with destination-inspired scarves, bags, spice mixes and candles. Then I notice a darkened corridor lined with infinite arches, illuminated by LED lights.



Drawn in, I walk through. I feel as if I have stepped into an alternate universe, where the sounds of a tropical forest mingle with the vibrant colours of birds of paradise and the chirps of parakeets.

Beyond the corridor, the space opens into a two-storey wonder of Carnival paraphernalia: dancers, bustling art stalls, fragrant food, and a soundtrack

“ Dining on *Xcel* is as much about atmosphere as it is about flavour

that sweeps you straight into the heart of the celebration.

Unsure where to begin, I drift to the first stall that catches my eye where I'm handed paints to create my own beach sign to take back home. A Bahamian artist and crew member, Joe, then patiently guides me as I fold an origami hummingbird. Later, I'm beckoned onto the dance floor for a quick limbo, laughing as I bend backward under the bar, taking in every little bit of the festival spirit.

These Caribbean-themed concepts – Carnival, Aqua, Viva and Flora – will shift as *Celebrity Xcel* heads to Europe this summer, replaced by Mediterranean celebrations, including a Greek Opa festival, La Dolce Vita in Italy, a Salud fiesta in Spain and a Silk and Spice theme inspired by Turkey and Morocco.

TASTES OF THE MED

Food on *Xcel* is as much about atmosphere as it is about flavour. At Bora, a new and exclusive venue, I settle in for a boozy brunch surrounded by indigo-and-white interiors and faux bougainvillea that instantly transport me from the Caribbean to the Med.

A dedicated Bloody Mary menu encourages experimentation, with accompaniments such as rosemary, cheese, bacon and even prawn skewers. It arrives looking like a meal and tasting just as indulgent. As my shakshuka lands on the table, I am swept up in a traditional Italian napkin-waving ritual that somehow feels entirely appropriate in the moment.

“We have an olive oil sommelier, a sake sommelier and a chocolatier,” executive chef Sidney Semeyo tells me later, adding, “If there's something we don't have, we plan ahead and make it happen.” He even describes growing speciality lettuce onboard when it couldn't be sourced locally, leaving me in awe of the dedication behind every detail.





MY VERDICT

Great for: Families and couples seeking a lively, unforgettable celebration where dance and dining share equal spotlight.

Recommend: The shows at the Bazaar. Each day is different, so guests can catch more than one.

Best spot on the ship: The Magic Carpet is where time can slip by with uninterrupted views of the sea; or buy a spa pass and enjoy the Vitamin D Deck all to yourself.

Value for money: While most entertainment and seven restaurants are included, the cost of drinks, spa access and Wi-Fi can add up unless guests choose the "All Included" package.

Eco credentials: Passengers can opt for a reduced housekeeping service to conserve energy and resources, earning rewards in return. *Xcel* is also the first ship in the Edge series to use green methanol.

Star rating: 5/5

WHISPERS OF JAZZ

On Deck 4, I step into what appears to be an ordinary photo booth inside The Club. After posing for my pictures, a door opens as if by magic, revealing IYKYK – "If You Know, You Know" – a hidden speakeasy straight out of the 1920s.

Inside, scarlet velvet furnishings, paisley wallpaper and an ornate Art Deco ceiling glow under soft lighting. Live jazz fills the room as dancers move through the space, tasselled flamingo-pink dresses catching the light.

As someone with a long-standing fascination with the Roaring Twenties –

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Live acts in the Bazaar reflect the local culture; the Pool Club is the perfect spot for lounging; brunch at Bora includes a dedicated Bloody Mary menu; soak up some sunlight on the Vitamin D Deck

from Gatsby to bootleggers and speakeasy passwords – this hidden venue is utterly irresistible. Sipping my sazerac, I realise IYKYK is the perfect final act of this celebratory voyage. This is a fitting crescendo to a journey defined by style and plenty of spectacle.

FINAL IMPRESSIONS

Xcel feels like a ship designed to mark moments. It's confident, expressive and playful, yet it never loses the polish and thoughtfulness Celebrity is known for. There are quieter corners for those who want them, livelier spaces for those who don't and a strong sense of celebration.

This was a maiden voyage, but *Xcel* already sails with assurance. As we dock in Fort Lauderdale, it feels less like the end of a trip and more like the closing act of a well-paced performance. ●

Get on Board

Celebrity Cruises' seven-night Bahamas, Mexico and Cayman voyage aboard *Celebrity Xcel*, return from Miami via Nassau (The Bahamas), Georgetown (Grand Cayman), Cozumel and Costa Maya (Mexico), has departures in December 2026 from £801pp. celebritycruises.com

Why loyalty still matters

CLIA managing director UK and Ireland **Andy Harmer OBE**
on why keeping loyal customers happy is just as – if not
more – important as attracting new business

Much has rightly been made of the industry's success in attracting new-to-cruise guests. They are, of course, vital to our long-term growth, and travel agents play a central role in that achievement. As we look ahead, there is another opportunity that deserves just as much attention: retaining the loyal customers who already know, love and trust cruising.

Repeat cruisers are one of the industry's greatest assets. They book more frequently, are open to trying different ships, brands and destinations and, crucially, they are powerful advocates. Many will have introduced friends and family to a holiday at sea already. And our own research tells us a striking 92 per cent of people who have cruised before are open to doing so again in the future.

For agents, ensuring repeat business starts with understanding how cruisers evolve. Someone who began with a



CLOCKWISE FROM BOTTOM LEFT For agents, ensuring repeat business starts with a personal understanding of how cruisers evolve; Andy Harmer says loyalty can be a strong growth driver

Mediterranean ex-UK departure may now be looking for something that provides a very different experience. That could mean expedition cruising, river voyages, longer itineraries, or destinations that feel genuinely distinct – whether that's the polar regions, the Arabian Gulf, Japan or lesser-visited parts in Africa and South America.

This is where agents can add real value. Cruisers who feel they've "done it all" often haven't – they simply need to see all the options that are open to them. Reframing familiar destinations through a new lens, or introducing ultra-luxury, expedition or culturally led itineraries, can reignite excitement. Increasingly, we're

also seeing strong interest in cruises with a sense of purpose, whether that's deeper destination engagement, enrichment programmes or scientific and conservation-led activities.

CLIA continues to support agents through training, insight and destination education. From market intelligence on emerging itineraries and guest trends, to advanced modules in areas such as expedition and river, our aim is to help agents have more confident, informed conversations with their most experienced clients – not just their new ones.

The industry doesn't face a choice between attracting new cruisers and valuing loyal ones. The most successful agents will do both. By nurturing existing relationships, anticipating what's next for repeat guests and using the incredible array of cruise products to inspire them again, agents can turn loyalty into one of their strongest growth drivers. In a market full of opportunity, sometimes the best place to look is closer to home, with clients who are already on board.

Andy Harmer OBE is managing director of CLIA UK & Ireland ●

“
In a market full of opportunity, sometimes the best place to look is closer to home, with clients who are already on board





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