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INSIDE: CTN INVESTIGATES WILL TAX HIKES FORCE LINES TO RE-ROUTE THEIR ITINERARIES? P39
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A12610

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HIGHLIGHTS OF DEVON AND BRITTANY

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Sailing from Belfast

A22611BL

First guest: **£649**
Second guest: **£329**



HIGHLIGHTS OF DEVON AND BRITTANY

23 May 2026
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Sailing from Liverpool

A22611LV

First guest: **£649**
Second guest: **£329**



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A22612BL

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A22612LV

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A22616DD

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A12614

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WELCOME... TO THE JANUARY ISSUE

It's almost 12 months to the day since I penned my first editor's letter for *Cruise Trade News*. While I sit at my desk and wonder where the time went, I'm grateful to look back and see several definable markers that remind me of some of the amazing things this publication achieved in 2024.

In June, for instance, we welcomed nearly 200 agents, cruise lines and industry suppliers to our third annual Cruise Summit at News UK's Central London HQ, where we unveiled the findings of our most in-depth piece of reader research to date (soon to be eclipsed by our upcoming industry report, published next month).

This was followed up with the launch of a new roundtable interview series which sparked rich debates between lines and agents over the merits of trade reward schemes, how to better amplify the small ship sector and the dos and don'ts of launching your own travel agency.

And as is tradition for *Cruise Trade News*, we ended the year with two glittering award ceremonies, with both the Wave Awards and Cruise Stars seeing a record number of entries.

Of course, 2024 was a blockbuster year for the wider cruise industry, too, and we're enthused



ABOVE The Cruise Stars awards had a record number of entries

to hear that readers are gearing up for another record-breaking 12 months, starting with wave. Turn to page 18 to read all about how lines and agents are shaping up for peaks.

So, here's to another successful 12 months and just know that whatever happens, *Cruise Trade News* will be there to capture it.

Happy reading!

Jack Carter
Editor

On the cover: Fred. Olsen Cruise Lines

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Doha • Sir Bani Yas Island • Abu Dhabi

[^]2025: Dec 12
[^]2026: Jan 2, 9, 16, 23, 30; Feb 6, 13, 20, 27;
Dec 11
[^]2027: Jan 8, 15, 22, 29; Feb 5, 12, 19, 26

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Fujairah • Muscat • Khasab • Abu Dhabi

[^]2025: Dec 15
[^]2026: Jan 5, 12, 19, 26; Feb 2, 9, 16, 23; Mar 2;
Dec 7, 14
[^]2027: Jan 4, 11, 18, 25; Feb 1, 8, 15, 22; Mar 1

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Fujairah • Muscat • Khasab • Abu Dhabi

[^]2025: Dec 12
[^]2026: Jan 2, 9, 16, 23, 30; Feb 6, 13, 20, 27; Dec 11
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Cruise Corner

PANACHE CONTINUES GROWTH TRAJECTORY

> Luxury cruise retailer Panache Cruises has hired another four apprentices and promoted a fifth as part of its ongoing expansion plans.

Henry Livesey, Tom Holding, Molly Brooks and Isabella Clark have joined the Chorley-based agency and Mollie-Jo Green has been promoted to assistant partnership manager.

It brings the number of apprentices employed by Panache to 20 as part of its target to take on 100 by 2030.

CEO James Cole said: "Apprentices are great for the business. We want people who want to succeed and grow with the business and we feel apprentices give us that."



IN NUMBERS

20

apprentices

62

UK team members

£25m

turnover in 2024



CARIBBEAN LAGS FOR ROYAL

Royal Caribbean International will aim to work closer with its Royal Group counterparts as it looks to bring its Caribbean cruises back to the forefront.

It comes after Royal's new EMEA boss Gerard Nolan admitted the line's Caribbean cruises are underperforming against other markets.

The operator's regional vice president and managing director told the CLIA Forum in Windsor that the family of

operators, which includes Silversea and Celebrity, are "part of something bigger" than their individual brands as they strive to expand the UK market.

"It's a mission we are all on to bring the brands together and find synergies," Nolan said. "There are so many opportunities to do things together. There could be partnerships with certain airlines or trade partners to work together for the collective good of all of the brands."



SCAN

What the cruise industry
learned from 2024 and how
it will shape 2025

QUEEN MARY 2 CREW CLEANS UP

> The crew on Cunard's *Queen Mary 2* took part in a coastal clean-up of Salisbury Beach on the west coast of Dominica while the ship was in the Caribbean last month.

The two-hour effort was organised by the vessel's environmental compliance officer, Robert Price, together with representatives from the Discover Dominica Authority and local Salisbury Council.

The Cunard team, along with 12 local volunteers, swept 20,000 square metres of beach front, collecting hundreds of discarded items, totalling an impressive 25kg of waste in 30 bags of rubbish.

The group removed an array of glass, plastics, fishing nets, ropes, metal bars, and bottle tops.

“The team collected an impressive 25kg of waste in 30 bags of rubbish

Exclusive



CROATIA GETS CRUISE UPDATE

> Unforgettable Croatia has outlined plans to launch a new category of cruising as it looks to capitalise on the burgeoning demand for small-ship holidays.

The line's co-founder and chief commercial officer, Graham Carter, said the new style of holiday will give passengers a “much more intimate” experience. The new category of cruise will sail with 20-25 per cent less guests than the line's usual 30-40.

“We're trying to blend a bit of what you see on shows like *Below Deck* with actual cruising, where you're not paying £150,000 for a week-long trip, but you still get a taste of an intimate yachting holiday,” he said.

APPOINTMENTS



Peter Green joins Ambassador

A mbassador Cruise Line has appointed Peter Green as its first strategic accounts manager to further strengthen its UK sales team as it continues to expand.

Green, who joined the business on 6 January from the Malta Tourism Authority, will report into the line's deputy head of trade Karen Cameron and will be responsible for growing relationships with key clients to maximise sales generation and leads.

The role will also see Green drive Ambassador's sales agenda, generating new business opportunities across the country and coordinating activity for trade events, which includes a nationwide ship visit programme, comprising 12 events in six UK ports.

Prior to the Malta Tourism Authority, Green was cruise product manager at Arena Travel and held various roles at Thomas Cook.

“Green will be in charge of growing relationships with key clients

NEED TO KNOW

AMAWATERWAYS OFFERS
BONUS COMMISSION

AmaWaterways will offer agents five per cent bonus commission on a selection of European sailings as part of its wave season campaign.

Agents who sell the line's Holiday Triple Savings itineraries, which combine savings of up to £750pp with upgrades and €50pp onboard credit, will benefit from the extra earnings. Managing director Jamie Loizou said: "We wanted

to provide our partners with a wide choice of value adds and savings, ensuring there is something to suit their client's needs.

"These sailings offer guests fantastic value for money, but the agent benefits too. It's our way of saying thank you for all the support we have received throughout this year as we look forward to an exciting 2025."

Appointments

Riviera grows
account team

Riviera Travel has appointed Alexander Davies to the role of key account manager for the north on a 12-month fixed term contract.

Davies, who previously worked as account manager for Red Bull, will focus on building relationships with the river cruise and escorted tour specialist's travel agent partners, reporting into Claire Hills.

The appointment comes after the line added a new training module to its recently launched e-learning platform, Riviera Explorer.

UNIWORLD URGES AGENTS
TO 'BE PROACTIVE'

Uniworld Boutique River Cruises has encouraged agents to proactively contact clients they believe are seeking bucket list experiences.

It comes after the luxury river line saw its India's Golden Triangle and the Sacred Ganges itinerary nearly sell out for 2025.

UK & Europe managing director Chris Townson said the sailing –

which featured in the first two episodes of Channel 5's *Susan Calman's Cruise of a Lifetime* on 3 January – is the "ultimate" in ultra-luxury travel in India. "It was such a pleasure to welcome Susan and the film crew," he added.

"This holiday is true bucket list stuff. I'm not surprised it has been branded 'a cruise of a lifetime'."

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT The Moselle comes to life in the autumn; Riviera's upper deck cabins are the perfect place to watch Europe's epic scenery go by

1 January and 28 February 2025 will receive a £30 Lifestyle voucher, while those who confirm a reservation on one of Riviera's themed river cruises will double their fortunes, receiving a £60 Lifestyle voucher in return. Riviera will also be giving away £1,000 pre-loaded credit card every week during wave, with all bookings made within the seven day period going into a special prize draw.

The trade incentive follows the recent launch of the inaugural Riviera Travel Agents Awards. The event will take place later this year and will recognise the success of the operator's retail, homeworkers and OTA trade partners. Winners will be chosen by the senior Riviera trade team, based on performances and results in 2024.

Vicky Billing, head of trade and partnerships at Riviera, says: "Agents' tireless work has been crucial to the growth of the business and now it's our time to give back." ●

SAVE & UPGRADE

An enticing selection of incentives is putting Riviera front of mind for guests and agents this wave season

There aren't many travel experiences better than imbibing Europe's bucolic landscapes in the autumn, where vibrant shades of red and orange blanket the landscape, transforming rolling hillsides and fairytale towns and villages into breathtaking vistas. Now imagine getting to enjoy this view for days on end while relaxing on the deck of a river cruise ship, a glass of wine in hand perhaps, while you look forward to the adventures that await.

Experiences like this are a regular occurrence on a Riviera sailing, but they're about to get even better. That's because the river cruise line is now offering complimentary cabin upgrades on a selection of Rhine, Rhône, Seine and Danube cruises in October 2025. Guests who book by 31 January 2025 will be able to swap their middle cabin to an upper deck cabin for even better views of the scenery outside.

Upper deck cabins also come with a host of exclusive benefits, courtesy of the line's Riviera Plus scheme. Guests can enjoy luxury toiletries in their bathroom, a complimentary bottle of Champagne on arrival and

“Guests who book by 31 January can upgrade to upper deck cabins for even better views

a 10 per cent discount on the ship's onboard laundry service. Guests can also treat themselves to 10 per cent off massages, spa treatments and hairdresser appointments.

But that's not all, because Riviera is also extending its price freeze on 2026 river cruises for those who book by 28 February 2025. That's in addition to a host of other benefits, including direct flights from 17 UK airports, return international train travel and transfer on select holidays and five-star ships with impeccable onboard service. Customers can go online to find frozen prices for their desired cruise.

AGENT APPRECIATION

To show its gratitude to UK travel partners, Riviera is offering a special wave incentive for agents as well. Agents who book a Riviera holiday between



For more information, visit
rivieratravel.co.uk

NEED TO KNOW



SETTING SAIL FOR SVALBARD

CLIA has unveiled a raft of trade-focused activities and initiatives for 2025, including a new overseas forum.

The trade body revealed during its winter forum that its first-ever Expedition Showcase will take place from 16-20 July in Longyearbyen, Svalbard.

The event, which will have limited spaces for agents, will include ship visits on AE Expeditions, Ponant,

Quark Expeditions and Swan Hellenic, as well as a range of business sessions, shore excursions, two hosted lunches and two hosted dinners.

Meanwhile, a new Art of Selling Cruise event will take place on 3 July in Leeds, with both CLIA and member cruise lines offering education and advice on their 2025 sailings to travel agent attendees.

Appointments



Bethany Brown joins AE Expeditions

AE Expeditions has appointed Bethany Brown as its new business development sales support EMEA.

Brown has more than 13 years' experience in travel. She joins the UK-based sales team, led by sales director Andrew Turner, alongside senior business development managers Katie Harber and Andy Tait.

In her new role, she will assist the team with the development of industry partnerships, agent engagement and training initiatives.



HX GIVES BACK

HX Foundation, the nonprofit arm of HX, has confirmed the recipients of its first standalone grant, which sees the brand award nearly £100,000 to 13 projects worldwide, spanning 11 countries and regions.

The funding will support an array of initiatives focused on environmental conservation, community empowerment, sustainable development and wildlife protection.

Projects receiving funding include Heriot-Watt University's Whales and Arctic Vessels initiative, the Seamen's Home in Sisimiut's Christmas Evening and The GRAB Trust's Beaches and Marine Litter Project.

"We are delighted to support these incredible projects that not only champion environmental conservation but also foster community development," said HX Foundation MD Henrik Lund.

NEED TO KNOW



PONANT BOOSTS UK TEAM

Ponant has bolstered its UK trade sales team as it looks to further strengthen its presence in the market.

Marine Huguet, who previously worked for the brand in Marseille, has taken up the new role of commercial coordinator, joining Vladislav Saveliev, the line's UK south & midlands sales manager, and Andrew Bolton, who came onboard in November to cover

the north, Scotland, and Ireland. UK GM Anthony Daniels said the addition will help Ponant "proactively support all business channels and opportunities" as it continues to grow its presence in the UK in 2025.

"The UK trade is crucial to our success, and we eagerly anticipate collaborating deeper with our established partners," he added.

Appointments



Montague to lead Regent and Oceania

Norwegian Cruise Line Holdings (NCLH) has appointed Jason Montague to the new role of chief luxury officer to oversee the expansion of its Regent Seven Seas Cruises and Oceania Cruises brands.

The restructure will see president of Oceania, Frank Del Rio Jr, report to Montague and president of Regent, Andrea DeMarco, step down on 4 March 2025 after remaining in the position to facilitate a handover.



CROATIA CALLING FOR AGENTS

Unforgettable Croatia has launched a new fam trip incentive for the trade. Every agent who makes a booking for the luxury, small ship operator from 6 January until 31 March 2025 will be entered into a draw to win a place for themselves and a guest on a Sibenik to Dubrovnik cruise. The sailing departs on 12 July 2025 on the 36-guest *My Wish*, and will call at Trogir, Split, Brac, Jelsa, Hvar, Korcula, Slano and Ston.



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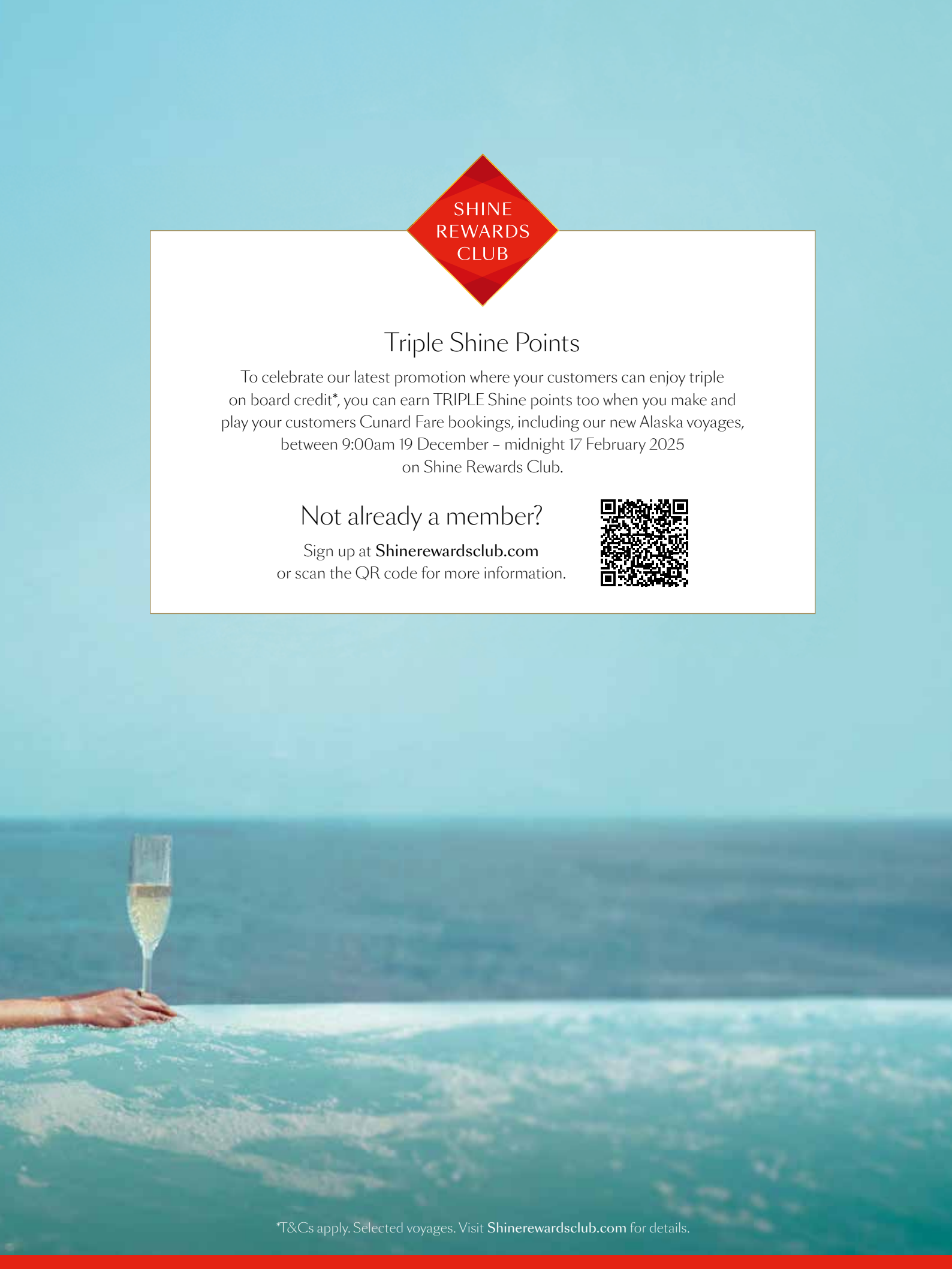
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CLUB

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To celebrate our latest promotion where your customers can enjoy triple on board credit*, you can earn TRIPLE Shine points too when you make and play your customers Cunard Fare bookings, including our new Alaska voyages, between 9:00am 19 December – midnight 17 February 2025 on Shine Rewards Club.

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*T&Cs apply. Selected voyages. Visit Shinerewardsclub.com for details.



SPOILT FOR CHOICE

From Puerto Plata to Rhodes, Norwegian Cruise Line (NCL) has a broad variety of itineraries perfectly suited to all types of customers

It's safe to say Brits are no longer looking to "just get away", and in 2025 they'll be more discerning with their travel choices than ever. Coupled with an increase in demand for intimate experiences, it's vital to pair your customers with the correct cruise to ensure repeat business and rave reviews.

Therefore, NCL should sit firmly at the top of your list of recommendations. This year the company will offer an eclectic range of itineraries, placing a specific focus on its European and Caribbean seasons.

On the continent, the line will sail to headline destinations like Cagliari in Italy, where guests can step into

the medieval mystery of 13th century Sardinia. In Rhodes, they can join one of NCL's Go Local shore excursions to soak up the rural atmosphere in several inland villages while tasting classic Greek specialties, such as sourdough bread, stuffed grape leaves and ouzo.

Towards the end of the year and into 2026, the Caribbean will take centre stage for the brand. Here, travellers will discover the palm-fringed beaches in Tortola and the Amber Museum in Puerto Plata, which houses a unique collection of Dominican semiprecious tree sap having been hardened for millions of years.

The line prides itself on offering travellers more time in port, more elevated experiences and more drink and dining options. This is all available on top of premium beverages, speciality dining, Wi-Fi and excursion credits, which customers can secure when they upgrade for just £249pp based on seven and eight-night cruises.

Wherever your customers opt to venture in 2025 and 2026, encourage them to plan their holidays now and book soon before sailings fill up. After all, they wouldn't want to miss out on an adventure of a lifetime. 🍷



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT Guests can zipline on the line's private island, Great Stirrup Cay; NCL prides itself on offering travellers more drink and dining options than most other lines

Three of the best Discover a selection of NCL's standout European and Caribbean cruises

Greek islands

Santorini, Rhodes & Mykonos cruise aboard *Norwegian Viva®*, round-trip from Athens (Piraeus) via Thessaloniki, Mykonos, Santorini, Bodrum, Rhodes and Heraklion (Crete), departs 10 August 2025, from £1,489pp.

Mediterranean

Italy, France & Spain cruise aboard *Norwegian Breakaway®*, round-trip from Barcelona via Cannes, Florence/Pisa (Livorno), Rome (Civitavecchia), Naples, Cagliari, Ibiza and Palma (Majorca), departs 19 August 2025, from £1,345pp.

**NEW
SHIP**

Caribbean

Great Stirrup Cay & Dominican Republic cruise aboard *Norwegian Aqua®* round-trip from Miami via Puerto Plata, St. Thomas, Tortola and Great Stirrup Cay, departs 11 January 2026, from £1,025pp*.

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*Lead prices are correct at time of going to print, shown in £GBP and based on cruise only, dual occupancy including government taxes, port expenses & fees. NCL reserves the right to correct any errors, inaccuracies or omissions & to change or update fares, fees & surcharges at any time without prior notice. General excise tax (GET), discretionary onboard service charges & gratuities additional. NCL (Bahamas) Ltd, UK Office, Mountbatten House, Grosvenor Square, Southampton, SO15 2JU. ©2025 NCL Corporation Ltd.



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SELLING THE DREAM

Jack Carter speaks to lines and agents to examine how the industry's approach to the wave season is evolving as demand for cruise continues to soar

And just like that, another wave season is upon us. While enthusiasm for cruise is growing, the dichotomy of there being more inventory to sell than ever and rising costs squeezing consumers' holiday budgets is forcing lines and agents to rethink their approach to peaks. *Cruise Trade News* has canvassed readers to find out how they're adjusting their wave strategy to keep up with increasingly hard-to-predict booking patterns.

GO BESPOKE

While the cost of living crisis continues to pinch household budgets, the days of cruise lines relying solely on cut-price sea fares to entice new customers onboard are long gone. Tracy Clenshaw, head of commercial for Fred Olsen Travel, says today's travellers are seeking value that goes beyond the price of a cruise, something the company has taken into account this wave period.

"If you're a savvy customer, it's not always about price," she says. "You want to see drink packages or suites for the price of balconies. Creating bespoke packages that cater to these desires gives us an edge over our competitors because it's an oversaturated market. We are all going for the same customers, so we ensure that we're looking at offering better value rather than always going for the cheapest offer."

While being on the front line makes it easier for agents to keep their fingers on the pulse,

“
Creating bespoke packages gives us an edge over our competitors in an oversaturated market

Anna Perrott, senior partnerships and marketing director at luxury cruise retailer Panache Cruises says some lines have been slow to adapt to consumers' changing priorities.

"There are some cruise lines that come out in wave with the same pricing model or the same campaign that they've run for the past four or five years. We want to shake it up."

GETTING AHEAD OF THE GAME

As the market becomes flooded with deals, one challenge for cruise lines is being able to cut through the noise. As a result, operators have been getting ahead of the game by launching their wave offers early. Hayley Moore, UK and Europe sales director for Princess Cruises, says that this was one of the learnings it took from last year's wave season. "We saw demand in December 2023 which we hadn't expected, so we've followed through with that again this year."





“Even with everything else that’s going on around the country, we know that protected spend is there for consumers to buy time with their families. Starting a bit sooner allows us to get in on that early browsing period.”

Releasing wave deals earlier also benefits agents who have more time to get their ducks in a row before the peak booking period begins. “A lot of the luxury cruise lines have brought their deals forward to the first week of December, which helps agents,” Perrott says. “We can line up our websites, ensure pricing is correct and set up marketing activities. That puts us in a stronger position going into Q1.”

AGENT EDUCATION

Another way that lines got an early march on wave this year was through their trade engagement. Karen Farndell, director, sales & marketing UK & Ireland at Holland America Line says educating agents on their wave offers well in advance ensures they go into the new year able to sell their product with confidence.

Farndell explains: “In 2024 we invested in a range of activities to help prepare agents for the

“
A lot of the luxury cruise lines have brought their deals forward to the first week in December

wave period, including eight ship visit events, a Mediterranean fam trip on *Nieuw Statendam* in September, and a conference onboard *Nieuw Statendam* as part of the CLIA Destination Showcase in Gibraltar.

“This level of engagement has meant we’ve been able to drive awareness for our wave campaign and other agent-led initiatives, ensuring agents have all they need to confidently promote Holland America Line to their clients.”

Engaging the trade community early also means lines can gather feedback from consumers to better understand what kind of offers they’re hunting for. “We’ve listened to the fact that customers want to engage in new hardware and they want some decent prices to match,” says Moore.

CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT Agents get up to speed on the latest in the world of cruising; Princess Cruises has tried to get ahead of the game with December bookings; Holland America Line’s Karen Farndell



THE CASH CONUNDRUM

Of course, consumers aren't the only ones being courted by cruise lines during wave. Operators are coming up with all manner of ways to incentivise agents to push deals to their clients, reigniting the debate over whether prize or cash rewards are the most effective way to motivate the trade.

"Some lines give away money, but we've gone for prizes this year because people really love the element of surprise," says Moore. "Some of the reactions we've seen in previous prize giveaways have driven us to come up with a huge prize haul for wave this year as it allows us to reach more agents than ever before."

The line is giving away more than 130 prizes throughout January and February, including Fortnum & Mason hampers, Nutribullets and Ninja Airfryers, with agents simply needing to book a Princess Cruises holiday on any platform to qualify for entry. "For me, it's about engaging with as many agents as possible and maximising our consumer reach during such an important period," Moore adds.

THE MARKETING MIX

The final piece of the jigsaw for any successful wave strategy is how to market your deals to consumers. With so many platforms to utilise and new audiences to target, lines and agents are increasingly turning to new channels to promote their offers.

Perrott explains: "We're working very closely with external partners, including British Airways Executive



ABOVE Suite upgrades can play a key part in enticing new customers; Panache Cruises' Anna Perrott

Club, Cathay Pacific and Harrod's, and looking at their luxury databases to find customers who are new to cruise."

That's not to say that agents aren't continuing to rely on tried-and-tested platforms to excite their consumer base. "Facebook, specifically for the luxury market, is really important," Perrott continues, "but I think there's still a lot of value in print marketing."

"It does seem slightly old school, but having a brochure drop on someone's doorstep is really powerful and it allows you to talk about your products in detail. We dropped a 100-page brochure at the start of last year's wave period and customers absolutely loved it. They phoned us up to ask us when we're doing our next one."

Whichever approach you're taking to this year's wave period, one thing's for certain: the sands have shifted for the cruise industry and those who are able to adapt to consumer trends will inevitably come out on top. ●



Free airfare

is currently available on all February and March 2025 Antarctica sailings, while agents who book the itineraries will receive a £100 Amazon giftcard!

SEAMLESS SAILING

Sailing inviting waters on a luxury yacht is the most rewarding way your customers can explore northern Europe and the Med in 2025, says Lucy McGuire

Whether you have clients dreaming of sipping wine in the Italian fishing community of Portofino or exploring Norwegian villages with a Viking past, an ocean holiday on a boutique yacht that immerses them in local culture is an experience they will cherish.

This sentiment is shared by Atlas Ocean Voyages, which prides itself on providing intimate yachting expeditions with immersive experiences on land and onboard, with exceptional value for money guaranteed.

While Atlas Ocean Voyages excels in reaching off-grid locations, it's also an excellent choice for sailing around northern Europe and the Mediterranean.

“Atlas Ocean Voyages excels in reaching off-grid locations



Book guests before 3 February 2025 and they can enjoy 30 per cent off select Mediterranean or North Europe cruises, with £236 (\$300) ship credit per room. Five sailings also offer a reduced single supplement, so solo travellers can experience the onboard camaraderie as they voyage to secluded spots.

Itineraries span eight to 21-night sailings, and guests can embark from an array of vibrant ports from Dublin and Leith near Edinburgh to Amsterdam, Barcelona, Nice or Lisbon, as well as Reykjavik in Iceland.

Customers travel on one of three luxurious vessels: *World Navigator*, which focuses on one-of-a-kind expeditions; *World Traveller*, which offers a classic ocean experience; and *World Voyager*, which is known for its epicurean delights.

Yet whether they explore neo-Gothic castles in the Scottish Highlands, savour eastern Iceland's farm-to-table dining or discover revered Sardinian restaurants in Porto Cervo, guests will find abundant opportunities for deep cultural immersion throughout the itinerary.

There are, of course, many reasons not to step off the vessels at all. That's thanks to their relaxing spas, surprisingly spacious staterooms and beautiful Art Deco interiors, as well as the ships' onboard guest speakers and World Voyager's cookery classes, which are led by epicurean experts.

Whichever adventure they choose, special memories are waiting to be made. ●



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SHINE ON

Last month lines and agents joined together for a jubilant Cruise Stars 2024 ceremony, celebrating the best and brightest talent from across the industry

The Cruise Stars awards, hosted by *Cruise Trade News*, returned on Friday 13 December, with representatives from the likes of Riviera Travel, Virgin Voyages, Iglu and Bolsover Cruise Club joining a packed-out room at the De Vere Grand Connaught Rooms hotel in Central London.

Virgin Voyages, Princess Cruises and Barrhead Travel were among the biggest winners on the night after judges poured through the highest number of entries in the awards' history.

A total of 19 gongs, including the new Editor's Choice Award, recognised the accomplishments of sales, PR and marketing staff, as well as senior management and rising stars from across the cruise line and travel agent sectors.

Among the most highly anticipated awards on the day were the Cruise Star of the Year, which was won by Virgin Voyages global training manager Luke Day, and National Travel Agent Sales Star, which was presented to Barrhead Travel's Deborah Newton.

Also in the agent categories was Homeworking Star of the Year, which went to Travel Counsellor's Sarah Bolton, while Oceania Cruises' Leah Williams won Trade Sales Star of the Year in the cruise line category.

The final award on the night was saved for the ceremony's inaugural Editor's Choice Award, sponsored by Marella Cruises, which was presented by *Cruise Trade News* deputy editor Will Payne.

"This year we received a record number of entries and it was an incredibly difficult task to



pick the winners, given each and every applicant had truly embodied what it means to be a Cruise Star," he said.

"As a result, we felt it was only right to introduce a new award to highlight one individual in particular who went above and beyond but was just pipped to the post on the judging day."

Cruise Trade News caught up with some of the winners over the course of the ceremony to find out what their wins meant to them.



Each and every applicant had truly embodied what it means to be a Cruise Star



**Luke Day, global training manager,
Virgin Voyages**

“It feels absolutely incredible. A huge thanks to all of our First Mates [agents] and a huge thank you to Virgin Voyages for giving me the platform to win an award like this. I’ve been part of the commercial team for Virgin Voyages for three years and this is a significant milestone and achievement. I’m over the moon.”

WINNER of Cruise Star of the Year

Deborah Newton, Barrhead Travel

“It’s a wonderful surprise. I feel so overwhelmed that I as an individual in such a huge industry have been selected. It’s really important to feel recognised. We’re very excited about 2025. There are lots of new ships coming out which means lots of prospects to get more people to go cruising.

**WINNER of National Travel Agent Sales Star,
sponsored by Riviera Travel**

**Nicola Cowan, product executive,
The Cruise Specialists**

“Awards like this are absolutely massive. To be recognised despite being a member of the back office, I’m absolutely blown away. I’ve been working in cruise for 14 years and it is such a diverse industry. I couldn’t have done any of this without my girls.”

**WINNER of Editor’s Choice Award, sponsored
by Marella Cruises**

“
**These events highlight
people just getting
started in their career**

**Elizabeth Dalby, senior marketing
manager, Princess Cruises**

“It’s so wonderful to have the recognition for all the hard work over the past 12 months and for everything that’s still to come. This year we launched the first-ever Good Food Show at sea, which was such an exciting project for me. There

are many of us that work so hard at pioneering new ideas and these events get to highlight those people who are just getting started in their career.”

**WINNER of Cruise Line Rising Star, sponsored by
MBM Travel Executives**

Hayley Hogan, cruise consultant, Mundy Cruising

“I’m completely overwhelmed, I didn’t expect it at all and it’s a real privilege. It’s really important to have events like these in the industry because it takes a lot of people to work as a team and get the ultimate goal of achieving sales but also offering amazing customer service. It’s great to have something that recognises that effort.”

**WINNER of Travel Agent Star of the Year,
sponsored by Princess Cruises**



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Cruise Stars 2024

WAVE AWARDS FEATURE





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Memories in the Med

Fred. Olsen Cruise Lines' turn-of-year offer means your clients can make those awe-inspiring moments at sea last even longer

Whether it's moments that make you smile or moments that make your jaw drop, the most memorable cruise holidays are full of endorphin-spiking experiences that turn a great voyage into an epic one. Fred. Olsen Cruise Lines is in the business of creating these types of moments, whether it's feeling the spray of the Krka Waterfalls sprinkle on your face or enjoying awe-inspiring views over Athens from the Acropolis.

Thanks to the line's current cruise offer, guests who book a sailing before 28 February 2025 will receive up to £330pp worth of free onboard spend.

The offer can be redeemed on more than 100 sailings, including Fred. Olsen's expansive 2025 fly cruise Mediterranean programme, which comprises the sunny coastlines of Amalfi and the enchanting Balearic Islands. Here, we highlight five of the best sailings to show you how your clients can put their extra spend to use.

MED MARVELS

This 20-night itinerary offers a smorgasbord of the Mediterranean's most popular ports of call. Think charming cliff-edge towns in Corsica's Bonifacio, the spectacular fjord-like Bay of Kotor in Montenegro, and fascinating Balkan and Roman history in Paestum, Pompeii and Split.

Gourmands will be able to savour local delights such as scialatielli pasta, limoncello and Neapolitan pizza, and dine in authentic *konobas* – traditional stone-walled tavernas – in Croatia, before sipping authentic Dingač and Postup red wines to rhythmic folk music.

“

Fred. Olsen Cruise Lines' 20-night itinerary offers a smorgasbord of the Med's best ports of call

Get on board

The 20-night Discovering the Amalfi Coast and Dalmatian Coasts on *Balmoral*, sailing from Valencia to Dubrovnik via La Spezia, Naples, Sorrento, Civitavecchia, Kotor and Split, departs 27 September 2025, from £3,199pp including flights.

DALMATIAN WONDERS

From majestic mountains to serene bays and islands, incredible scenery awaits on this sailing to the Dalmatian Coast. After making its way from Civitavecchia and around the boot's beatific coastline, the 1,350-guest *Balmoral* will navigate through the Bay of Kotor, where medieval churches and palaces jut

skywards from the city's old town. After, guests will sail past the mountainous Makarska Riviera toward Slovenia, where shoreside excursions include trips to Lake Bled, Lokrum Island and the Krka Waterfalls. Further along in Split, guests can discover the rich tapestry of Balkan history by visiting iconic landmarks like the 4th-century Diocletian's Palace.

Get on board

The 10-night Bays, Mountains & Islands of Croatia on *Balmoral*, sailing from Civitavecchia to Dubrovnik, via Kotor, Koper (Slovenia), Sibinek (Croatia) and Split, departs 7 October 2025, from £1,699pp including flights.





Wave offer

Get up to £330pp worth of free onboard spend on more than 100 Fred. Olsen cruises when booked by 28 February 2025

GREEK GEMS

If a Greek island-hopping adventure is on your clients' travel wish lists, then this eight-night sailing could be just the ticket. Indeed, the very best of the Greek islands are covered in this all-encompassing itinerary, from the jaw-dropping coastline of Zakynthos, which boasts some of the best beaches in the Ionian Sea, to the iconic blue-domed, whitewashed houses of Santorini.

Guests will have the chance to meander through charming streets lined by little tavernas serving Greek favourites, such as souvlaki and moussaka, while history buffs will be enthralled by storied landmarks like the Palace of Knossos, the ruins of Ancient Thera and Athens' Acropolis, with its famous temple ruins.

Get on board

The eight-night Greek Island Odyssey on *Balmoral*, sailing from Dubrovnik to Rhodes via Argostoli, Kalamata, Piraeus (for Athens) and Santorini, departs 17 October 2025, from £1,619pp including flights.

TURKISH DELIGHTS

Turkey's ornate landmarks are the focus of this immersive 12-night itinerary, which starts with a day in Rhodes' UNESCO-protected Old Town. Historic sites such as the 15th-century Bodrum

Castle, now home to the Museum of Underwater Archaeology, and the Mausoleum at Halicarnassus, await upon arrival in Turkey.

In Istanbul, meanwhile, guests can marvel at the stunning mosaics of Hagia Sophia, the imperial treasures of Topkapi Palace and the Ottoman architecture of the Blue Mosque, while a final stop in Malta's Valletta is a chance to stroll the gilded halls of St John's Co-Cathedral.

Get on board

The 12-night Discovering Turkish Treasures on *Balmoral*, sailing from Rhodes to Malaga, via Bodrum, Kusadasi, Istanbul and Valletta, departs 25 October 2025, from £1,779pp including flights.

ITALIAN TREASURES

Fred. Olsen's expert Journey Planners have compiled the very best of the Amalfi Coast and packed it into one unforgettable itinerary. Guests' first taste of Italy on this 10-night cruise will be the charming city of La Spezia on the Ligurian coast, where its tranquil bay inspired many world-famous writers and poets, including Lord Byron and Mary Shelley. The city is also a gateway to Cinque Terre, with its world-famous coloured villages overlooking the Mediterranean Sea.

CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT Cinque Terre's colourful residences are a sight to behold; Navagio Beach is one of Zakynthos' most stunning; Fred.Olsen's wave offer applies to 100+ sailings

Balmoral will then sail past the vibrant Amalfi Coast, allowing guests to admire the terraced gardens and rolling hillsides from the comfort of the ship, before a stop in Naples offers the chance to go beyond the city's breathtaking frescos to discover its cache of archaeological treasures.

Get on board

The 10-night Colourful Cliffside Towns of the Amalfi Coast on *Balmoral*, sailing from Valencia to Civitavecchia via Mahon (Spain), La Spezia, Salerno, Naples and Sorrento, departs 27 September 2025, from £1,799pp including flights. ●



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Lindblad Expeditions

Bolstered by its partnership with Fred Holidays, ambitious UK expansion plans are underway for the National Geographic-affiliated brand

IN THE KNOW

Since announcing its partnership with National Geographic more than 20 years ago, National Geographic-Lindblad Expeditions has cemented itself as a leader in enriching adventure-led cruises around the globe. However, the line was leading expeditions to the world's far-flung corners long before its relationship with the renowned yellow-border brand. In fact, Lindblad was the first line to take civilian explorers to both Antarctica and Galapagos Islands in 1966 and 1967, respectively.

According to the line, pairing its expedition leaders, naturalists and historians with National Geographic's scientists, oceanographers and filmmakers allows guests to get a deeper understanding of their role as stewards of these exotic, yet vulnerable environments. Today, Antarctica, the Galápagos, Baja – California, the Arctic and Alaska make up the core of Lindblad's itinerary offering.



THE FLEET

Lindblad expanded its portfolio of ships to 21 after the dual launch of *National Geographic Endurance* and *National Geographic Resolution* in 2021, becoming the first new-build vessels in the company's history, with both purpose-built to slice through the Drake Passage's choppy waters.

Each ship in the Lindblad fleet includes all the requisite features for modern expedition cruising, from Zodiac-loading platforms and kayaks to observation lounges and luxury suites, while *Endurance* and *Resolution* boast glass igloos that allow guests to sleep under the stars. The fleet is set to grow again with two new ships launching in the Galápagos later this year.

AGENT SUPPORT

While we all get excited by the prospect of new ships, arguably the most significant recent development for Lindblad was the appointment of Fred Holidays as its general sales agent (GSA) in the UK in autumn last year.

The partnership will see Fred Holidays assist on targeted sales, marketing and public relation campaigns aimed at increasing Lindblad's brand exposure in the UK. The Fred Holidays team will also be on hand to take bookings and queries



CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT Lindblad is an expert when it comes to Antarctic itineraries; Zodiac expeditions are a key part of visiting The White Continent; an Alaska cruise offers the perfect mix of adventure and scenery; glass igloos allow guests to sleep under the stars

“Two new ships are set to launch in the Galápagos this year

from its UK call centre, while providing agents with GBP priced quotes and other marketing materials.

WHO'S WHO?

Former Star Clippers UK sales manager Danielle Bates joined Lindblad in October last year to head up the line's domestic operations. As well as having support from Lindblad's US team, Bates will harness her relationship with Fred Holidays to further establish the line in the UK market.

WHAT'S ON THE HORIZON?

The stage is set for an exciting 2025 for Lindblad, having recently unveiled its inaugural UK brochure, a 64-page 'bible' to help agents better understand the brand. To support the launch, Lindblad Expeditions has introduced an exclusive UK agent booking incentive offering a Galápagos cruise for two people for the highest value booking made between 1 and 31 January 2025.

This will be supported by a revamped UK ship visit and familiarisation trip programme. Agents are encouraged to join the line's dedicated Facebook group – 'Lindblad Expeditions – UK Travel Agents' – to keep track of the latest updates.



IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Danielle Bates, head of UK sales, Lindblad Expeditions on the benefits of intimate polar cruising

What should agents highlight when pitching Lindblad Expeditions to clients?

A key fact I like to highlight is the size of our ships. Our fleet ranges from 16 to 138 passengers, making us one of the smaller options. Only 100 passengers can 'land' at any one time while visiting the White Continent, so if you're sailing on a much larger vessel, your time ashore will be limited, whereas a smaller ship experience will give you more time to explore.

Does your partnership with National Geographic give you an edge over other lines?

Our relationship with National Geographic enhances the onboard expedition experience, as we are joined by National Geographic photographers, lecturers and guides alongside our own teams, making for a rewarding and enriching time both on our ships and during landings ashore.

SELLING TIPS

1 Expedition is very competitive, says Bates. "The key to pitching the right product for your client is by differentiating the brands and guiding customers to the one that's the right fit for them."

2 Lindblad encourages families, with the National Geographic Young Explorers programme widely available on Antarctica, Arctic and Galápagos cruises, where kids can take part in fun, educational lectures.

3 Lindblad Expeditions has more than 50 years of experience in the sector and was the first company to take civilian explorers to Antarctica and Galápagos Islands, making it a true pioneer in the field.



TRIP TO CELEBRATION KEY UP FOR GRABS

> Carnival Cruise Line is offering agents the chance to win a visit to its new private destination, Celebration Key, as well as a host of other prizes as part of its 2025 trade wave incentive.

Running until 31 March 2025, the incentive includes six places to join a fam trip to Celebration Key in Grand Bahama this year.

To be in with a chance of winning, agents need to make any Carnival

booking during the period on GoCCL.co.uk and register it on LoyaltyRocksClub.com, the line's agent rewards platform.

Other wave season prizes include a spa package; two 12-month passes for Merlin Attractions; IMAX tickets; and a limited-edition Mardi Gras version of Monopoly.

Carnival says winners will be notified via email by mid-March.



Celestyal launches new trade portal

Celestyal has unveiled a trade portal to support agents during wave.

'The Celestyal Compass' will incorporate a new learning platform called 'Celestyal Campus', offering training modules on brand identity, life onboard, itinerary information, shore excursions and advice on how agents can grow their cruise sales.

Users will also be able to access marketing assets and information on the latest offers and campaigns.

Agents can earn stars for every module they complete, resulting in exclusive benefits.



LINDBLAD PUBLISHES BROCHURE

> National Geographic-Lindblad Expeditions has launched its first-ever UK brochure, featuring sterling pricing as well as contact details for the UK reservations team, which can now provide agents with same-day availability and quotes.

The 64-page *Voyages of Discovery* brochure provides an overview of the company, the fleet and life onboard;

a brief guide to expedition cruising; and information about core destinations such as the Galápagos, Antarctica, Alaska, Baja California, Iceland, Central America and the Mediterranean.

To support the launch, the line has introduced a booking incentive offering a Galápagos cruise for two people for the highest value booking made between 1 and 31 January 2025.

On the
road with...

Sharnie Bruce

P&O Cruises' partnership development manager reveals how she is using her experience as an agent to help the trade strengthen their sales this wave season

How do you draw on your experience as a travel agent in your partnerships role with P&O Cruises?

Coming from a travel retail background has helped me adjust massively into my new role at P&O Cruises and it's great seeing the industry from 'the other side'. I already had relationships with travel agents and can really resonate with them. I know what they want and how I can help them reach their full selling potential.

You joined the line in spring 2024.

What have you enjoyed about the role so far?

It's been a whirlwind, but it's been the best decision I've ever made. I feel so lucky to work for such a brilliant and forward-thinking brand and I've learned so much in such a short time. I can't wait to see where my role takes me next.

What attracted you to the move away from the agency side of things?

I wanted to make the jump for a while, but I was looking for a role with a



company I believed in and trusted. Cruise was my biggest passion as a travel agent and I was lucky enough to visit *Arvia* on a ship visit last year and engage in some training in Carnival House, so when I saw the job advertised, I was over the moon.

What selling points are you focusing on when visiting agents?

My main focus is ensuring our agents understand and believe in our product, and what sets us apart from the competition. I'm so passionate about our ships and showing agents just how amazing P&O Cruises can be. Giving our partners all the tools they need to be confident selling us means the bookings keep rolling in.

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT

Even as an agent, Sharnie Bruce was passionate about cruise; P&O Cruises has a wealth of training available as well as the Shine Rewards Club

What are the current challenges in agent training?

I know how tough it is as an agent to be commercially aware, especially during key selling periods when there are several cruise operators and land-based operators all launching within such a short space of time. When I'm creating my training material, I try to make it as clear and engaging as possible, without bombarding them with too much product information.

We are lucky enough to have an in-house training team that host regular webinars, as well as our Shine Rewards Club with our learning hub, so all the information is readily available for agents to browse at their leisure.

What's to come from P&O in 2025?

We've just announced our partnership with Pride of Britain, which we're all incredibly proud of, and we'll be celebrating *Britannia's* 10th anniversary in June. As always, we are committed to providing excellent service, unforgettable experiences and holidays that shine. 🌟

“

I know how tough it is as an agent to be commercially aware, especially during key selling periods





SAILING AHEAD

Ambassador Cruise Line has reaffirmed its commitment to its UK travel agent partners with a raft of new incentives, ship visits and engagement opportunities

It's safe to say the travel trade will play a pivotal role in Ambassador Cruise Line's growth plans this year, after the line unveiled swathes of new engagement opportunities to help agents pitch its ex-UK cruise itineraries to their clients.

Sailing from Tilbury, Newcastle, Dundee, Liverpool, Belfast, Bristol, Falmouth and Portsmouth to destinations such as Stockholm, Ponta Delgada and Arrecife, the line prides itself on its eclectic range of boarding options for the British market.

This expansive network of departures ensures that Ambassador's unique brand of affordable quality is within reach of travellers across the UK – presenting a prime opportunity for agents to bolster their sales in the coming months.

TRADE IMPORTANCE

Ambassador is acutely aware just how instrumental the UK trade will be if it is to achieve its ambitious growth plans in 2025. As a result, the line has revealed a new incentive to recognise the vital role agents will play this year.

Since December, agents have been participating in two dynamic programmes designed to reward sales and build excitement. If you haven't had the chance to discover the new

schemes yet, don't fret: the incentives run until 12 February 2025.

The first, 'Sale Beyond Limits with Ambassador Cruise Line', comprises a leaderboard competition that encourages agents to drive their sales even higher. The top performer will win a cruise for two, to take place any time before April 2026, with the line sharing regular updates on social media to drive agents' competitive spirit.

'Ambassador Moments', meanwhile, is a weekly prize draw rewarding agents for bookings across all seasons. Prizes include West End show tickets, a spa day, Merlin Annual Passes, bottomless brunch experiences and a VIP ship visit.

"These initiatives not only incentivise agents but also foster a deeper connection to the Ambassador brand by providing incentives that offer a similar

“
**These initiatives
not only incentivise
agents but foster
deeper connections**



experience at land,” says Ambassador deputy head of trade Karen Cameron.

To further strengthen ties with agents, Ambassador’s trade team will embark on engagement blitzes across the UK in January and February, focusing particularly on key regions like Tilbury, Liverpool and Belfast. These visits aim to provide agents with the tools and confidence needed to drive bookings and ensure sustained success post-wave.

Cameron adds: “Our trade partners are the cornerstone of our success. By investing in training, engagement and rewards, we are building lasting partnerships that will drive growth and deliver exceptional experiences for our cruise guests.”

SAVINGS GALORE

The line also recognises the importance of consumer-facing offers to drive footfall to agencies across the UK.

Its latest initiative, the ‘Shiploads of Savings’ campaign, offers deals across its 2025, 2026 and 2027 sailing seasons. Also running to 12 February, the campaign offers half-price Premium Drinks Packages on selected 2025/26 sailings and Buy One, Get One Half Price offers on all 2026/27 departures.

Additionally, guests can save 20 per cent on the Expedition Drinks Package when booking the Ambassador Fare. These offers apply to *Ambience*, sailing from its Tilbury homeport, and *Ambition*, sailing from the line’s eight regional ports across the UK.

ALL ABOARD

The line’s two ships – *Ambition* and *Ambience* – can carry 1,200 and 1,400 passengers respectively. Each ship boasts plenty of space, with onboard amenities, such as the Green Sea Spa and Shopping Galleria, making for relaxing days at sea.

Both vessels also feature intimate speciality restaurants such as Saffron, an Indian-inspired eatery featuring extravagant dishes like Royal Indian Maharaja Thali, a selection of delicacies served on a platter with rice, dal, aloo gobi, palak paneer and naan bread.

Afterwards, guests can head to the ships’ theatre for West End-style productions, including *The Chronicles of a Pirate King*, *Love is in the Air*, *Dance Dance Dance* and *Enchanted Garden*.

Combine all this with Ambassador’s exemplary service, and your guests have everything they could possibly need for an unforgettable cruise. ●

CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT Savour the jewels of the Caribbean with Ambassador; enjoy the spectacle of Bridgetown’s historic changing of the guard; *Ambition* boasts plenty of space and onboard amenities

Three of the best Highlights from Ambassador’s 2025/26 season

Charm of the channel

The six-night Channel Islands and the Netherlands Experience aboard *Ambition*, from Bristol to Newcastle via Falmouth, St Peter Port and Ijmuiden, departs 13 July 2025, from £519pp.

Beach break

The 40-night Jewels of the Caribbean Sea aboard *Ambience*, return from Tilbury via Praia da Vitoria, Town, Havana, Montego Bay, Ocho Rios, Santo Domingo, Bridgetown, Castries and Kingstown, departs 30 January 2026, from £2,939pp.

Exhilarating expeditions

The 10-night Iceland’s Land of Ice & Fire aboard *Ambition*, return from Belfast via Liverpool, Reykjavik, Isafjordur, and Seydisfjordur, departs 4 June 2026, from £1,399 for the first passenger and £699 for the second.

AMBASSADOR
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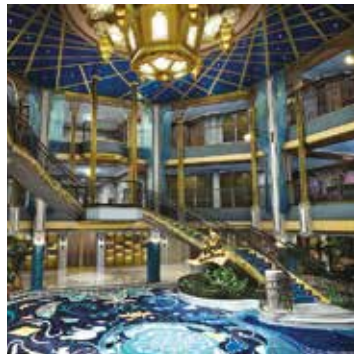
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SHIP OF THE MONTH

DISNEY TREASURE

Moana, *Peter Pan* and *Frozen*'s Princess Elsa are just some of the Disney favourites guests can interact with during a sailing aboard the brand's newest ship, *Disney Treasure*. The 4,000-passenger vessel, which launched in December last year, is kicking off with a series of seven-night eastern and western Caribbean itineraries from Port Canaveral, Florida. Onboard amenities include three immersive dining experiences – Plaza de CoCo, Worlds of Marvel and 1923 – as well as an impressive 10 pools, a spa and a theatre equipped for high-spec, Broadway-style shows. There's also an adults-only refuge, Quiet Cove, with an infinity pool, bar and opulent lounge area ideal for sipping, socialising and soaking up the Caribbean sun.



1 Grand Hall

Serving as the ship's most prominent gathering space, the Grand Hall draws inspiration from Africa and Asia, paying homage to the land of Agrabah from Walt Disney's *Aladdin*. A stage hosts performances and character encounters while two cafés offer a selection of coffees and snacks.



2 AquaMouse

For immersive thrills paired with Disney magic, AquaMouse is the place to go. The water coaster features a new Mickey and Minnie short called *Curse of the Golden Egg*, which guests can enjoy as they splash and slide through an ancient temple in search of treasure.



3 Walt Disney Theatre

It wouldn't be a Disney cruise without the Walt Disney Theatre. The blockbuster hit *Moana* will appear on stage for the first time exclusively aboard *Disney Treasure*, with other shows including *Beauty and the Beast* and *Disney Seas the Adventure*, featuring songs from *Frozen II*.

Fast facts

4,000
passengers

1,256
staterooms

10
pools

9
restaurants



4 Dining

Guests won't go hungry while aboard *Disney Treasure*. The ship offers nine restaurants in total, including three immersive dining options, such as World of Marvel, where a *Guardians of the Galaxy*-themed story plays on the walls as diners feast on an expansive menu.



5 Jumbeaux's Sweets

This is arguably one of the most unique locations onboard. Inspired by Jerry Jumbeaux Jr from Disney's *Zootopia*, the parlour is the perfect spot for sailors with a sweet tooth, with 31 flavours of ice cream to choose from, as well as speciality bakes, sweets and drinks.



6 Cabins

Spacious staterooms adorned with Disney artwork make the living areas the perfect place to unwind after a day of exploration. In the Royal Suite, guests will find a pantry and stocked bar, as well as three bathrooms and a private dining area.



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CTN
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HOT TO GO

Ongoing global conflicts and protests against overtourism have forced cruise lines to search for safer and more welcoming waters. **Will Payne** asks what opportunities this might create for lesser-known ports that are ready to add their names to travellers' wishlists





Another one?’, I mutter as the Mexican government announces a new tax on cruise passengers. In December the sunny South American destination – one of the world’s most popular ports of call and the soon-to-be-home of Royal Caribbean’s second private island destination – joined the likes of Venice, Amsterdam, Barcelona, Norway and Bordeaux in introducing restrictions on cruise passengers.

Mexican officials voted to introduce a £33 levy on each cruise passenger to dock in its international ports. In response, Florida-Caribbean Cruise Association (FCCA) CEO Michele Paige said the plans, which would make cruise tourism in Mexico 213 per cent more expensive than the average Caribbean port, would “effectively price Mexican ports out of the cruise market”.

The FCCA also warned that the proposal would shrink the contributions cruise tourism makes to Mexico’s economy, including approximately £800 million (US\$1 billion) in direct spending, more than 20,000 jobs, and more than £160 million (US\$200 million) in wages annually.

“Cruise lines will inevitably reevaluate the viability of these investments considering the potential loss of consumer demand for Mexico cruises, driven by the unprecedented tax increase on cruise tourism,” Paige added.

“ As ships are driven away by financial sanctions, that creates an opportunity for lesser-known destinations to benefit

However, there’s always a silver lining. As cruise lines consider diverting their ships away from these financial sanctions, it creates an opportunity for lesser-known destinations to benefit from tourism that might not have normally come their way. Countries such as Belize, Cuba, Nicaragua and Honduras – all of which are ripe for cruise travellers thanks to their mix of culture, cuisine and spectacular coastline.

SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE

However, South America isn’t the only place where cruise is facing an upstream battle. The conflict in the Red Sea and Russia’s invasion of Ukraine have forced numerous operators to reposition vessels to different locations. One of these cruise lines is Noble Caledonia, which recently partnered with Tourism is Life (TIL) to bring travellers to Sierra Leone after it diverted sailings away from the Red Sea to West Africa.

Alieya Kargbo, travel director for TIL, will be part of the team overseeing the shore excursions for the line in 2025. “Many cruise companies have enquired, and it’s great that Noble Caledonia has confirmed dates for Guinea, Sierra Leone and Liberia in October 2025,” he says.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT The striking contrasts of Namibia’s Skeleton Coast; Estonian capital Tallinn is steeped in history and culture; a Namibian safari offers a wealth of wildlife sightings; Namibia boasts the highest sand dune on earth



Kargbo confirms that conversations with Scenic USA and Holland American Line for shore excursion partnerships are ongoing, saying that he isn't surprised the destination is attracting swathes of cruise operators. "Sierra Leone offers warm hospitality, a range of historic sites and miles of white sandy beaches, not to mention the iconic black sand beach."

"There are also local cooking classes, adventure activities, wildlife parks, community support projects and rich culture. And don't forget the beautiful weather. There really is something for everyone."

In 2025 Kargbo expects the country to facilitate inbound tourism by lifting its visa restrictions on UK visitors, which currently requires Brits travelling to Sierra Leone to pay £64 (\$80 USD) for a 90-day single entry pass.

"We will also see more site development, like the Innovation Centre at Tacugama which can even host events for cruise lines and their passengers," he adds.

Cruise being blamed for issues such as overtourism and damage to local environments – whether rightly or wrongly – is nothing new, and this is unlikely going to change any time soon. While the sector continues to make steps in the right direction, major ports altering their policies does give rise to new destinations that are ready to welcome cruise tourists with open arms, thanks to the industry's positive impact in creating jobs and boosting local economies.

Here, we highlight five emerging destinations which could benefit from popular ports reducing their cruise visitation numbers.

NAMIBIA

Located just north of South Africa, Namibia is distinguished by the Namib Desert, which hugs the coast of the Atlantic Ocean. Here, guests will find a range of diverse wildlife, like cheetah, black rhino, oribi and zebra, making the country the ideal option for guests looking to add a safari onto their cruise holiday.

The country's flagship port of call is Walvis Bay, which features as a stop on Cunard, MSC Cruises and Norwegian Cruise Line itineraries. The port town is home to a tidal lagoon where guests can spot sea life, such as dolphins and whales.

Further inland, guests will find a host of high-octane activities at Dune 7 – the highest sand dune on earth and the starting point of the Namib Desert – including sandboarding and quad biking. With more lines opting to reposition vessels south away from the Red Sea, it's likely we'll see more ships calling into this beguiling southern African gem.





ROTTERDAM

Heads turned when the Amsterdam City Council announced plans in June 2024 to relocate its cruise terminal away from the city centre in a bid to combat “nuisance” and over-tourism. But after the dust settled, alternatives began to appear.

One of those was Rotterdam, just south of the Dutch capital and accessible by the Nieuwe Waterway. Nick Hoogeweij, executive manager of Cruise Port Rotterdam, says the city receives around 135 ships a year from 20 different lines. “Rotterdam is popular due to its architecture, where visitors can discover buildings dating back to 1100, as well as the strikingly contemporary Markthal,” he says.

Rotterdam is also in close vicinity to Kinderdijk, which has 19 UNESCO-protected windmills; and The Hague, renowned for its Gothic-style architecture and being home to the UN’s International Court of Justice.

All of these selling points, coupled with its prime location, make Rotterdam a one-to-watch cruise destination.

NICARAGUA

Due to its popularity, it’s highly unlikely Mexico will be eliminated from cruise lines’ destination rosters, even if plans to hike a tax on cruise tourists go ahead next summer. However, the act of introducing such a bill could deter Brits from visiting somewhere which views them in a negative light.

Therefore, surrounding countries like Nicaragua, set between the Pacific Ocean and

the Caribbean Sea, could see an influx of visitors. The South America destination is known for its diverse terrain of lakes, volcanoes and beaches, as well as its coffee plantations. Travellers can head to farms in Matagalpa to take guided tours and sample local brews before a bag of beans home with them as souvenirs.

Lake Managua and its iconic stratovolcano Momotombo in the north of the country offers a day trip visitors will be hard pressed to forget, thanks to its imposing 1,394 metre cliff face and lush surroundings. Thrill seekers can take a day trip to the Cerro Negro part of the volcano, where guides lead them to the top of the ashen slope before visitors board down on sleds.

PAUILLAC

When Bordeaux mayor Pierre Hurmic called for a complete ban on “eyesore” cruise ships, alarm bells rang. “More and more people in Bordeaux

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE Rotterdam’s stunning architecture spans centuries; Pauillac is famous for its showstopping wines; Sierra Leone offers miles of beautiful beaches





are being disturbed by the arrival of cruise ships in the city centre, and it's becoming increasingly unpleasant," he claimed.

Again, when one door closes, another opens. Ships en route to Bordeaux sail past Pauillac, a popular port of call for the likes of Cunard, Ponant and Viking. Sitting on the Gironde, the town is famous for its showstopping wines, with fruity cabernet sauvignons and spiced merlots among some of its most prized varieties.

Visitors can book tastings in historic countryside chateaux or soak up the town's café culture, where local specialties like Arcachon oysters and lamb are served up on a daily basis.

TALLINN

St Petersburg was once one of Northern Europe's most popular ports of call, thanks to its opera house and rich imperial history. However, since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, cruise lines have repositioned vessels away from the port to nearby destinations, such as Tallinn in Estonia.

Sitting on the Gulf of Finland in the north, the Estonian capital is unsurprisingly the country's cultural hub, with its beautifully kept cobblestone old town housing a selection of quaint cafés and shops, which orbit Kiek in de Kōk, a 15th-century defensive tower that resides above a network of once-secret tunnels.

Its Gothic Town Hall and St Nicholas Church, meanwhile, were both constructed in the 13th century, with the latter exhibiting stunning collections of religious art. ●



Three unmissable sailings to lesser-known ports

1 Noble Caledonian's 15-night South Africa and Namibia By Sea cruise aboard *MS Hebridean Sky*, from Richard's Bay (South Africa) to Johannesburg via Durban, Mossel Bay, Cape Town, Luderitz and Walvis Bay, departs 23 March 2025, from £8,995pp.

2 Princess Cruises' 16-day Panama Canal – Ocean to Ocean cruise aboard *Coral Princess*, from Los Angeles to Fort Lauderdale via Puerto Vallarta, Huatulco, San Juan del Sur, Puntarenas, Fuerte Amador and Aruba, departs 28 October 2025, from £1,084pp.

3 Norwegian Cruise Line's 12-day South Africa: South Africa & Madagascar cruise aboard *Norwegian Sun*, from Cape Town to Port Louis via Mossel Bay, Port Elizabeth, Richards Bay, Nosy Be, Antsiranana and Pointe Des Galets, departs 29 April 2026, from £1,408pp.

Booking
insights



Trend WATCH

From vegan voyages and mystery itineraries to expeditions in steamy destinations, **Mark Frary** identifies nine booking behaviours set to define the cruise industry this year



1 COOL-CATIONS

Some like it hot but others prefer to stay cool and now it's influencing our holiday habits.

"The record-breaking temperatures we've seen across the globe in recent years mean that many people are seeking cooler climes," says Dave Mills, chief commercial director at Iglu.

The Arctic Council, which promotes cooperation between the US, Canada, Russia and Scandinavia, says the number of cruise ships in the Arctic has grown by 37 per cent since 2013, while 122,000 international tourists now visit Antarctica per year, according to the International Association of Antarctica Tour Operators – more than three times the number in the 2013-2014 season.

There's no sign of decline, either. CLIA UK & Ireland managing director Andy Harmer says: "As more travellers look to tick off bucket-list destinations, the demand for immersive experiences in remote locations such as Antarctica and Alaska will grow further."

Get on board

Swan Hellenic's nine-night Antarctic Peninsula Discovery cruise aboard *SH Vega*, return from Ushuaia via the Drake Passage, departs on 4 February 2025, from £10,380pp. swanhellenic.com

2 CRUISE-AND-STAY

According to Harmer, the number of cruise-and-stay packages – where cruisers spend time on land before or after a voyage – is "growing significantly". He explains: "Cruise-and-stay packages provide passengers with the best of both worlds – the benefits of everything available via a cruise ship, combined with the opportunity to explore on land before or after sailing."

Get on board

MSC Cruises' 10-night Dubai Nights and Arabian Delights cruise aboard *MSC Euribia*, return from Dubai via Doha, Bahrain, Abu Dhabi and Sir Bani Yas Island, departs 18 February 2025, from £1,759pp including flights and three nights in Dubai.

msccruises.co.uk

3 FLOATING BOUTIQUE HOTELS

Cruise ships have long been called floating luxury hotels, and now land-based five-star hotel groups are launching cruise ships of their own.

Belmond launched *Coquelicot*, a *Belmond Boat*, in 2023; The Ritz-Carlton Yacht Collection launched *Ilma* in 2024, and Grupo Vidanta, which operates high-end hotels in Mexico, will launch the 298-capacity superyacht *Elegant* in early 2025.

CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT Wildlife is a major draw for visitors to the Arctic; ocean lines such as Windstar Cruises now offer mystery cruises from Mediterranean destinations; Cornwall's stunning coastline will be the focal point when Ambassador's *Ambience* visits Fowey in June

Four Seasons Yachts and Orient Express will dip their toes in the water the following year, while Aman, in partnership with Cruise Saudi, will launch a 50-suite motor yacht, provisionally called *Aman At Sea*, in 2027.

Get on board

The Ritz-Carlton Yacht Collection's six-night Bridgetown/Bridgetown cruise aboard *Ilma*, return from Barbados via Guadeloupe, St Lucia, St Vincent and Grenada, departs on 8 March 2025, from £4,700pp.

ritzcarltonyachtcollection.com

“The demand for immersive experiences in remote locations like Antarctica and Alaska will grow further





“
CLIA has found that the average age of a cruise traveller is now 46, while 36 per cent of guests are under 40

4 MYSTERY CRUISES
Cruises to the unknown take the hassle out of decision-making and appeal to travellers with no fixed plans. By their nature, all expedition cruises have an element of surprise, because expedition ships visit remote locations in unpredictable weather conditions.

However, ocean lines are increasingly offering mystery cruises to undisclosed ports, targeting the 52 per cent of respondents who said they want surprise destinations in booking.com's Travel Predictions 2024 survey.

Windstar Cruises president Christopher Prelog says the line has added mystery cruises to “awaken a sense of adventure”. Fred Olsen Cruise Lines' first mystery cruise was in 2019, and it is bringing them back in 2025 for the first time since the pandemic.

Get on board

Windstar Cruises' eight-night President's Mystery Cruise aboard *Star Legend*, return from Athens, departs on 19 April 2025, from £3,455pp.

windstarcruises.com

5 MORE UK DEPARTURES
Did you know a record 1.5 million cruisers embarked on their first ex-UK voyage in 2023? UK-based travellers' inclination for domestic departures continued into 2024, according to a September 2024 survey from Iglu, which revealed that 47 per cent of cruisers said they preferred to depart from a UK port. No wonder cruise ships departing from Aberdeen jumped by 18 per cent.

While Southampton retains its crown as the UK's most popular port, there are a number of interesting newcomers. Among them is Fowey in Cornwall, which will host its largest ship yet when Ambassador's *Ambience* visits the historic harbour in June 2025.

Get on board

Ambassador's seven-night Gems of the English Channel cruise on *Ambience*, return from London Tilbury via Fowey, St Mary's, St Peter Port and Honfleur, departs on 28 June 2025, from £779pp.

ambassadorcruiseline.com

6 YOUNGER CRUISERS

The Association of British Travel Agents (ABTA) says that family cruises have almost doubled in popularity since 2019, with 17 per cent of families planning one in 2025. Mills says there has been a rise in family and multi-generational bookings on large ships.

“Families are fascinated by megaships, given all that they offer,” he says, citing the entertainment on Royal Caribbean International's *Icon of the Seas*, which includes Category 6, the largest waterpark at sea; Absolute Zero, the industry's biggest ice arena; and its rope course, Crown's Edge. Giant cruise ships offer “extraordinary value for money”, says Mills – adding that kids' places often get booked up 12 months in advance.

Cruises are becoming increasingly popular with younger adults, too. CLIA has found that the average age of a cruise traveller is now 46, compared to 50 in 2011, while 36 per cent are under 40.

Get on board

Royal Caribbean's 10-night Western Caribbean & Perfect Day cruise onboard *Icon of the Seas*, roundtrip from Miami via Roatan Island and Perfect Day at Cococay, departs 27 November 2025, from £2,379pp

royalcaribbean.com



CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT

Destinations like Qatar are growing more popular; guests in search of an immersive experience should head for Alaska; river cruising is expanding with more themed itineraries; cruise lines are responding to demand for better plant-based dining options

To capitalise on this demand, A-ROSA launched a charity-run themed cruise in 2023; Viva debuted an LGBTQ+ river cruise in 2024, while Uniworld Boutique River Cruises will run its first women-only waterways voyage from Arles to Lyon in August 2025. Other themes popping up include Jewish history, gardening and bicycle excursions.

Get on board

Riviera Travel's seven-night Music, Arts & Craft of Switzerland and the Rhine cruise aboard *MS Geoffrey Chaucer*, from Basel to Bonn via Stanserhorn, Lucerne, Breisach, Strasbourg, Speyer, Rudesheim and Koblenz, departs on 28 August 2025, from £2,399pp.

rivieratravel.co.uk

9 HOT EXPEDITIONS

Heat seekers looking to escape grey UK winters and – let's face it – washed out summers are choosing warmer destinations such as Australia's Kimberley region, which is popular with expedition ships. Coral Expeditions has reported record bookings, with sales in June, July and August 2025 double those for 2024.

The Arabian Gulf also remains in demand. Celestyal's chief commercial officer, Lee Haslett, says cruisers are attracted by "out-of-this world, high-quality experiences at competitive prices" such as Doha's Souk Waqif market and Abu Dhabi's Grand Mosque. Saudi Arabia, in particular, is investing enormous sums in its burgeoning cruise industry, with plans to open 10 ports and attract 1.3 million cruise visitors by 2035. ●

Get on board

Celestyal's seven-night Desert Days cruise aboard *Celestyal Journey*, return from Doha via Dubai, Sir Bani Yas Island, Abu Dhabi and Bahrain, departs 1 March 2025, from £539pp.

celestyal.com

7 VEGAN VOYAGES

There are now 2.5 million vegans in the UK – up from 1.1 million as recently as 2023 – and cruise lines are responding to growing demand for plant-based dining options.

SeaDream Yacht Club pioneered vegan cuisine in 2013 and offers what it claims to be the only raw food menu at sea. In 2023 Carnival launched dedicated vegan menus featuring Hawaiian plant-based poke bowls, which is now fleetwide, while in summer 2024 Silversea's *Silver*

Ray launched a vegan seven-course tasting menu designed by Michelin-starred chef Jean-Luc Rabanel.

Get on board

Viva Cruises' nine-night Serene Summer Sails Along Germany's Enchanting Waterways cruise aboard *Viva Moments*, from Passau to Cologne via Regensburg, Nuremberg, Bamberg, Würzburg, Wertheim, Aschaffenburg, Frankfurt, Rudesheim and Koblenz, departs on 12 August 2025, from £1,565pp.

viva-cruises.com

8 THEMED RIVER CRUISES

The river cruise sector is breaking out of its traditional vineyards-and-villages mould with an array of themed cruises that aim to attract a more diverse audience. Researchers Mintel forecasts that river cruising will grow faster than all other types of travel over the next three years.



In
conversation
with...



SCAN

SJ Walker on how agents can benefit from Virgin Voyages' 'most immersive season yet'

Graham Carter

Unforgettable Croatia co-founder and CCO chats to **Will Payne** about the importance of agents to the line's ambitious growth targets

When Graham Carter launched Unforgettable Travel Company in 2015, little did he know 10 years later he would be celebrating a hat trick of Wave Awards wins for subsidiary brand Unforgettable Croatia. "We weren't expecting to win the second time," he admits as we sit down to catch up on a hugely successful 2024.

A few weeks prior, we spoke at The Dorchester Hotel in London after Carter and his team took to the stage to collect the Best Specialist Cruise Line Award – something he did the previous year, too. "It's a really nice accolade to have as it underpins the amount of work that the team has put into keeping the product fresh and innovative, and making sure we don't just think, 'we've won it once, that'll do'."

Last year the line boosted capacity by 20 per cent while maintaining a 99.2 per cent occupancy rate and a 98.7 per cent guest satisfactory level, something that didn't go unnoticed by Wave Awards judges. "One of the things we've focused on is maintaining our level of detail," Carter explains. "We have top-line merchandise for our guests, which they can keep, sommelier-led wine tastings and lectures on board – all these things contribute to our success."

Clients are also infatuated with the Unforgettable Croatia story, Carter says, adding he's seen more and more travellers opt for an intimate small-ship experience as opposed to a traditional ocean cruise holiday. "We only have up to 11 crew onboard so it feels very much like a family atmosphere and on excursions, we take clients to meet local families – you don't get much more immersed than that."

“

The brand is investigating the possibility of a new style of holiday with 20-25% fewer guests



BUILDING BLOCKS

To capitalise on this growing demand for boutique cruising, the line will introduce a new itinerary in 2025 to the northern part of Croatia. Carter believes the new itinerary – which has already attracted a lot of attention – will help UK agents boost their sales. "We have a lot of British clients who've cruised with us, so this new sailing gives an alternative in the north for returning customers," he says.

As well as a new ship for sister brand Cruise Croatia, *MV Aretis*, Unforgettable is also working on a new style of cruising, looking into possibility of a new category of holiday which will sail with 20-25 per cent less guests, offering passengers an even more intimacy.

"We're trying to blend a bit of what you see on shows like *Below Deck* with actual cruising, where you're not paying £150,000 for a week-long trip, but you still get a taste of an intimate yachting holiday," Carter says.

The new concept is set to launch in 2026 and Carter isn't ruling out implementing it across the rest of the fleet.

What my career has taught me

Be consistent

"I built my business on the Japanese philosophy of Kaizen, which emphasises small but consistent improvements over time. Instead of aiming for instant success, focus on making incremental changes that add up to significant progress."

Embrace change

"Change is a constant in both life and business, and resisting it often leads to stagnation. View change as an opportunity to learn, innovate and grow."

Lead by example

"Hard work is the core to success. When you consistently show dedication and persistence, you inspire those around you to do the same."

TRADE IMPORTANCE

The vital role of the travel trade is not lost on Carter. In 2024 the brand held its first fam trip, which saw 13 travel agents from the UK and US, along with friends and family, join a four-night Dalmatian Coast itinerary onboard the 38-guest *Memories*.

Carter, who joined the trip, believes the event offered agents more learnings and insight into the product than a "traditional" fam. "We treated it like a normal cruise, so our agents could experience the sailing like our consumers would," he says.

The company will host its second fam in July 2025 as it attempts to better the 24 per cent increase in year-on-year UK trade bookings it experienced in 2024. Carter believes that investing more energy into promoting the brand across the industry is starting

CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT Unforgettable Croatia's Graham Carter; Dubrovnik is one of the country's many delights; as a signature ship, *MS My Wish* offers a luxurious, intimate sailing experience

to pay off. He explains: "We're speaking to a lot of new partners who are eager to learn more about our brand."

However, with new trade partners come fresh challenges. "It's now about education," Carter says, explaining how after a visit to his local travel agent, it dawned on him many sellers in the industry are not up-to-scratch on the nuances of what it means to cruise "small-ship" style.

Carter believes that industry-wide collaboration holds the key to changing the narrative around small-ship holidays. "We and the other small-ship cruise lines need to work together to build up the profile of the industry, whether that be through webinars, joint fam trips or ship visits," he says. Unforgettable Travel Company is currently building a small-ship cruising programme which sees the company work closely with similar lines like Star Clippers and SeaDream Yacht Club.

"There are parts of the world where we are not launching ships, and have no plans to do so, so we're looking at partnering with different companies who are the best at what they do in those areas, so our clients can see new places; it benefits everybody." ●



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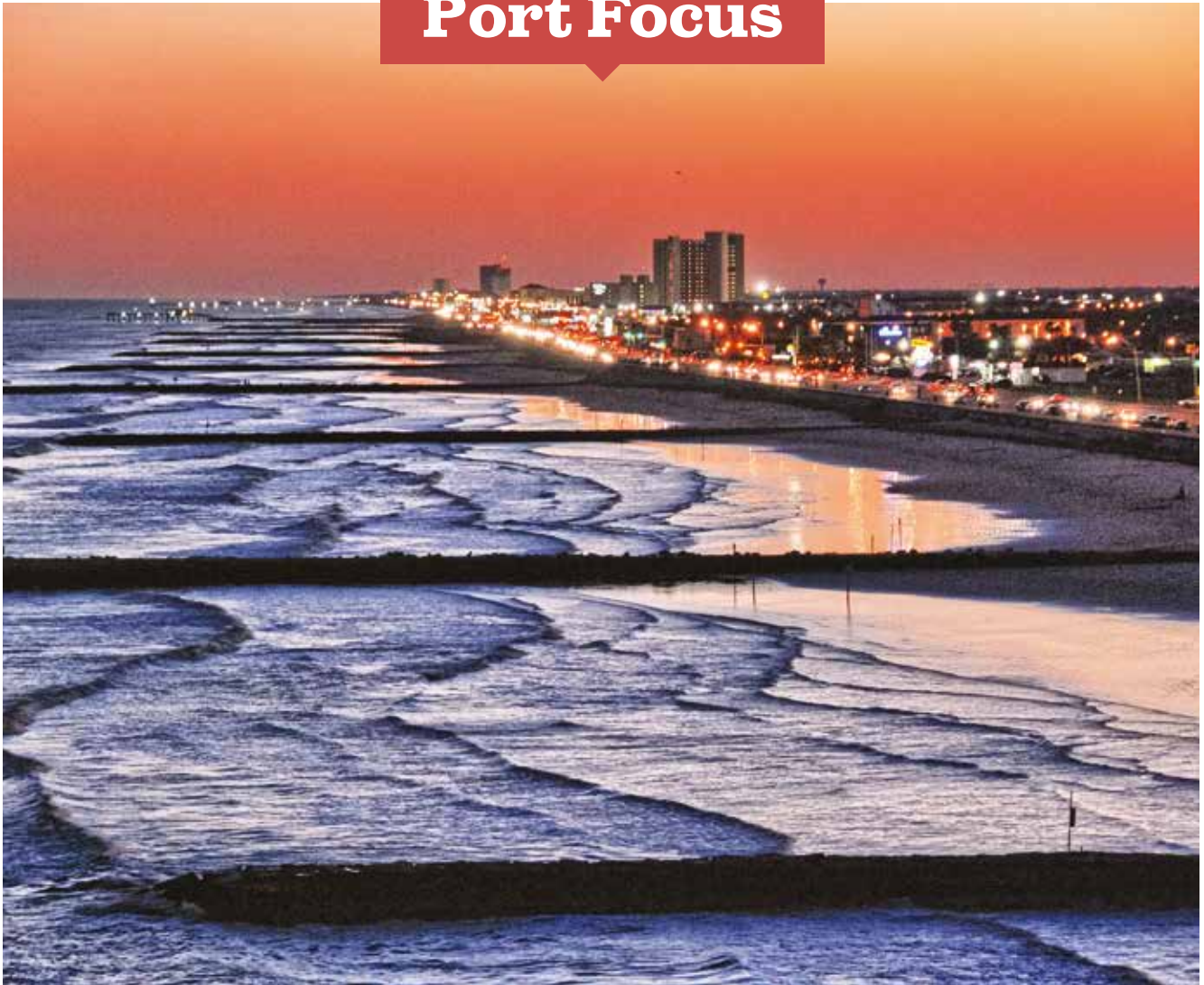


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HIGHLIGHTS • FOOD & DRINKS
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Port Focus



Galveston

From giant shark-filled pyramids to dolphin tours and an opera house, you'll need to book a spa day after visiting this Texas port city, writes **Will Payne**

Nestled on the Gulf of Mexico close to Houston, the Texan city of Galveston – formerly Galvez's town – was named after the 18th-century Spanish military leader Bernardo de Gálvez.

The coastal city saw its first European settlers in 1816 after the French pirate Louis-Michel Aury identified the location

as a critical outpost to help the fledgling empire of Mexico fight for independence from Spain.

Today, this old trading centre is home to one of the largest cruise ports in the USA. As well as its rich heritage, visitors are attracted to its balmy climate, wildlife and food scene where locally sourced red snapper, crab and shrimp star on the

menus of a growing number of nationally recognised cafés and restaurants. The city is laid out on the familiar US grid system and connected to mainland Texas by the 2.5km Galveston Causeway.

Whether your clients are visiting for 24 hours or longer, here's our pick of the city's must-see attractions, activities and foodie hotspots.



Three must-see sites

THE STRAND

Visitors can't leave Galveston without taking a trip to the Strand, also known as the Historic Strand District. Less than 10 minutes' walk from the cruise terminal, the street is the ideal place to shop, eat and be entertained, thanks to its role as a hub for events such as Galveston Mardi Gras and Dickens on the Strand. After meandering round antiques, art and clothing shops – some of which are more than a century old – guests can pop into La King's Confectionery for a sweet treat.

1892 BISHOP'S PALACE

Also known as Gresham's Castle, the 1892 Bishop's Palace on Broadway was designed by prominent Victorian-era architect Nicholas J Clayton for

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT

The ornate 1892 Bishop's Palace is well worth exploring; the Trolley is an ideal way to get your bearings around the Strand District; Moody Gardens boasts Rainforest, Discovery and Aquarium Pyramids alongside outdoor attractions that will entertain all the family



Visitors can marvel at the building's ornate, church-like design, plush interiors and sprawling grounds

Walter Gresham, a notable Texas politician who lived in the property with his wife until the Archdiocese of Galveston bought it in 1923. After the diocesan officers moved to Houston, the mansion opened to the public. Today, visitors can step into history on a self-guided tour, marvelling at the building's ornate church-like design, plush interiors and sprawling grounds.

MOODY GARDENS

Tropical plants and wildlife such as two-toed sloths and monkeys roam around the Rainforest and Discovery Pyramids at Moody Gardens, a non-profit attraction to the south of the city's grid system. The Aquarium Pyramid has a 1.5-million-gallon tank that houses sharks, seals, penguins, stingrays and more than 200 species of fish. An expert seminar in the neighbouring Discovery Museum shares insight into how sharks sense their prey and survive without a swim bladder.

3 places to eat

BUDGET

MOD Coffeehouse is located in a Victorian-style building with modern furnishings, making it a great spot to meet some locals and enjoy a drink. The café's coconut, lavender and raspberry-infused hummingbird latte and a lemon lavender cookie cost under £5, which can be enjoyed while meandering around the galleries and antiques in Galveston's Postoffice District.





TOP TO BOTTOM The seafood dishes on offer in Galveston's eateries are fresh and flavourful; MOD Coffeehouse is a great spot to meet locals and enjoy a brew

MID-RANGE

For a touch of the tropical, visitors can head to Rainforest Cafe on Seawall Boulevard in the south of Galveston. The restaurant has a large aquarium in the centre of the room, while branches and vines make it feel as though guests have been transported to the Amazon Basin. Pair this with a plate of bourbon-glazed barbecued salmon, Caribbean coconut shrimp, jasmine rice and seasonal vegetables and you'll never want to leave.

“**Branches and vines in the Rainforest Cafe make it feel as though guests have been transported to the Amazon Basin**



PREMIUM

No trip to Texas is complete without a steak dinner – which makes Landry's Prime Seafood & Steaks something of a must-visit. Situated next door to Rainforest Cafe on the seafront, the upmarket restaurant serves dishes ranging from a 32oz porterhouse steak and 8oz filet mignon to Mediterranean chicken pasta in a cheesy, buttery sauce. Dim lighting, soft melodies and crisp white cloths adorning the tables create a relaxing yet high-end ambience.

Local tips



“The Strand is where most of the nightlife is – bars, restaurants, touristy shops and things like that. I like going downtown for the Artwalk events which happen every six weeks; you can shop, browse the art and they give out wine.”

HANNAH SWANK
Physician assistant



“Galveston has attractions for all ages. You can spend the day visiting the Pleasure Pier or Schlitterbahn Waterpark & Resort; for visitors who aren't beachgoers, places like Texas Seaport Museum are perfect.”

KIMBERLY GAIDO
Estate agent

Get on board

Royal Caribbean

Seven-night Western Caribbean cruise aboard *Harmony of the Seas*, return from Galveston via Cozumel, Roatan and Puerto Costa Maya, departs 19 October 2025, from £567pp.
royalcaribbean.com

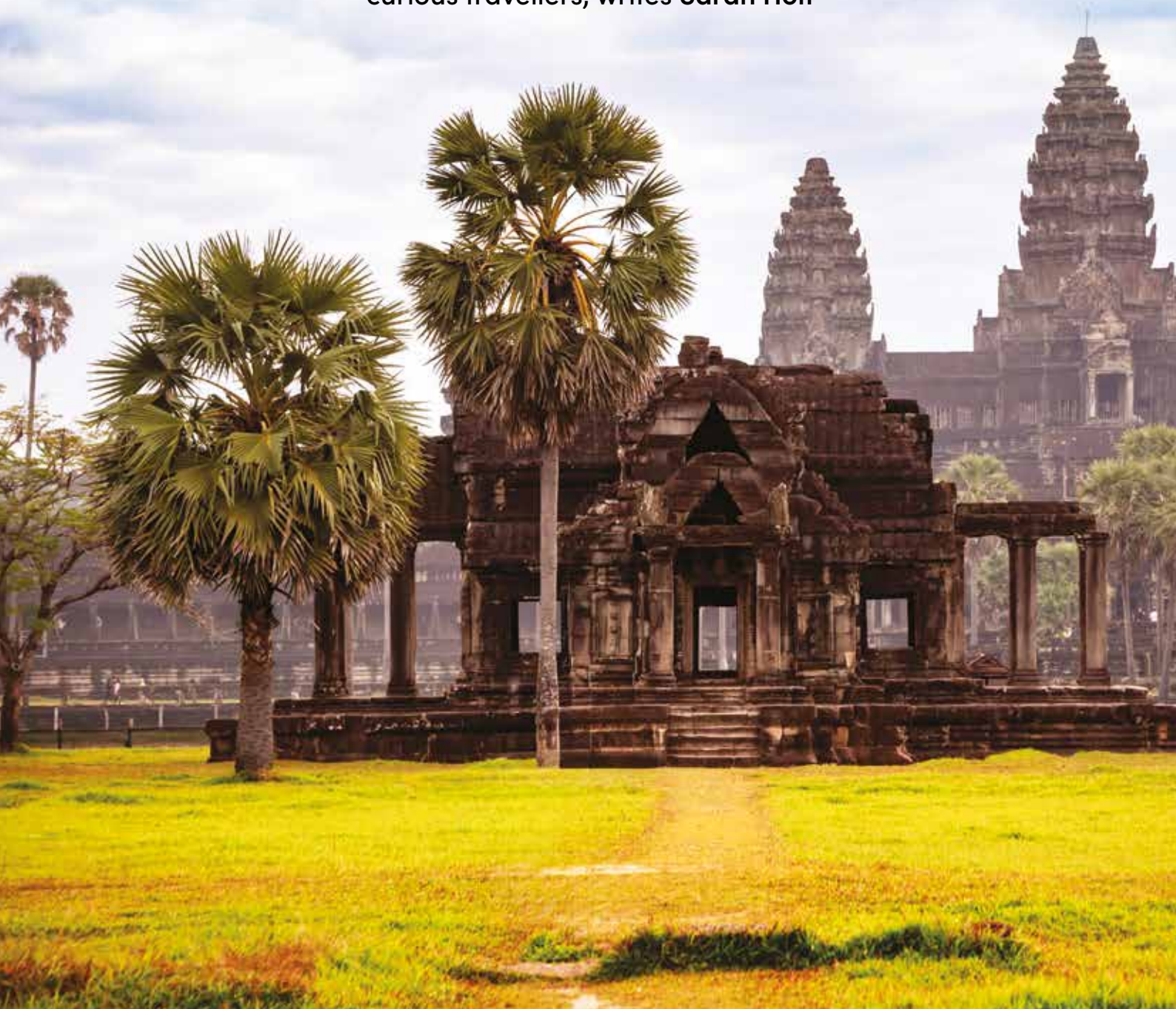
Princess Cruises

The 21-night Tropical Passage cruise aboard *Regal Princess*, from Southampton to Galveston via Le Havre, Bilbao, Vigo, Madeira, Antigua and St Thomas, departs 8 October 2025, from £1,272pp.
princess.com

**The
Mekong**

10 reasons to sail the Mekong in 2025

From effervescent cities to eye-opening culture, a cruise along Asia's inimitable river provides a horizon-broadening getaway for curious travellers, writes Sarah Holt





Known as The Mother of Rivers, the Mekong ebbs for 2,700 miles from the Tibetan Plateau to the South China Sea. The most navigable part of the waterway flows between Kampong Cham in southeast Cambodia and My Tho in southern Vietnam and it's this section that cruise itineraries tend to focus on.

Pre- and post-cruise stays in Hanoi or Hoh Chi Minh City are also often included in sailings or offered as an add-on to make getting to this jasmine-scented, temple-topped part of the world a little easier. Here are 10 reasons why a trip to the Mekong needs to be on your clients' travel wish list this year.

1 YOU CAN DIVE DEEPER INTO SOUTHEAST ASIAN CULTURE

Mekong cruises plunge passengers into a world of palaces and pagodas, stupas and gilded statues, holy mountains and hilltop temples. It's a place where go-slow paddy fields give way to all-go cities and where Buddhist and intricately carved Khmer buildings stand side by side with the Western-style structures that were left behind by the French and Dutch.

In the countryside, traditional farming and fishing communities abound, where excursions allow visitors to observe silk artisans spinning and weaving at their looms, watch rice paper makers at work and see how Vietnam's conical 'non la' hats are made from scratch. Guests also have the chance to witness sedge grass being woven into baskets and mats and listen to the soundtrack of silversmiths hammering and tapping in the backwaters of Cambodia.

An Apsara show is also not to be missed. In this balletic style of dance, performers dressed in silk robes and headdresses use hand gestures and delicate footwork to narrate myths and religious stories.



“
At Angkor Wat, passengers can watch long-tail macaque monkeys scrabbling over the ruins

2 IT'S ABUNDANT WITH WILDLIFE

More than 2,400 species of bird, reptile and mammal wing, scuttle and paw their way around the Mekong region. At Angkor Wat, passengers can watch long-tail macaque monkeys scrabbling over the 12th-century ruins. In the port of Kratié (also known as Kracheh) in Cambodia, clients can take an excursion to Kampi to go in search of Irrawaddy dolphins.

Then from the Vietnamese town of Tan Chau, just across the border from Cambodia, cruisers can visit Tra Su Forest and Sanctuary where the cajuput trees provide shelter for more than 70 bird species, from painted storks to kingfishers.

3 GUESTS CAN 'TUCK-TUCK' IN...

Southeast Asian food needs few introductions. Steamy bowls full of shoelace-long noodles, soups heady with chilli, coriander and lime, and dome after dome of sticky and fried rice await travellers to this part of the world.

Signature dishes along the Mekong include Cambodian amok, in which steamed fish is cooked in coconut milk and spices and served in a banana leaf, and nom banh chok, a Khmer breakfast recipe that sees slightly fermented rice noodles served in a slick of lemongrass-scented green curry sauce.

4 ...AND CHASE THE SUN

The Mekong region promises shorts and t-shirt weather year-round, with temperatures rarely dropping below 26 degrees Celsius. In the prime cruising months of November to April, the mercury hovers between 27 and 31 degrees, and skies remain rain-free so clients can make the most of both the sights and onboard facilities like sun decks and pools.

5 THERE'S A CRUISE FOR ALL TASTES

A holiday on the Mekong can be a significant investment for UK cruise-goers, so it's important that the sailing they book is the right fit for their needs and desires. Fortunately, there's a plethora of itineraries on offer for all budgets and tastes. Here are three standout options:

For luxury: An al fresco pool, sky bar, panoramic restaurant, spa and library accompany Viking passengers on its Magnificent Mekong itinerary. *Viking Saigon's* staterooms come with wide river views, bathrooms with heated floors and complimentary robes and slippers, while suites feature two full-size rooms, a veranda and a spacious bathroom with separate bathtub.

For affordability: The cost of Mekong river cruises ranges from around £3,000 to £9,000. Clients on a budget might want to look at travelling for a shorter duration. Pandaw, for example, offers three- or four-night cruises that start from less than £1,500. Costs also go down outside of the peak season of November to April.

For solo travellers: Not only are 10 per cent of passengers on Avalon Waterways' cruises solo travellers, the company also waives single supplements on selected Mekong itineraries. Avalon doesn't limit room options for solos, either. Everything from standard Deluxe Staterooms to the line's trademark Panorama Suites, with their wall-to-wall, floor-to-ceiling windows, are an option for singles.



CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT Tuk tuks are the ideal way to get from A to B; enjoy the mouthwatering local street food; marvel at wildlife including striking storks; take time to study the ancient architecture of Angkor Thom

6 **GUESTS WILL ‘REAP’ THE BENEFITS**
Siem Reap is most famously known as the gateway to the Angkor UNESCO World Heritage Site. Featuring ‘The Great City’ Angkor Thom, which was the final capital of the Khmer Empire, and Angkor Wat, with its beehive-shaped temples, the site sprawls out for more than 400 square kilometres.

“
Oudong’s monks chant and scatter jasmine petals to wish health and safe travels to onlookers

Typical cruise excursions take in highlights like the Bayon Temple, where 216 hulking faces of the Hindu god Brahma are carved into the rock; and the Terrace of the Elephants, with its spectacular carvings paying homage to the beloved jungle giant.

7 **GETTING FROM A TO B IS ALL PART OF THE FUN**
There’s some debate about whether tuk tuks were invented in Khorat, Thailand or Japan. Whichever argument you believe, there’s no denying that the honking horns of these auto rickshaws have become part of the soundtrack to Southeast Asia.

Most cruise lines offer a tuk tuk tour at some point in their itineraries, whether that’s around the hushed temples and purring street markets of the ‘Paris of the East’, Phnom Penh or the tucked away pottery village of Peam Chi Korng. Other traditional methods of getting around include flat-bottomed wooden sail boats, trishaws and ox carts.

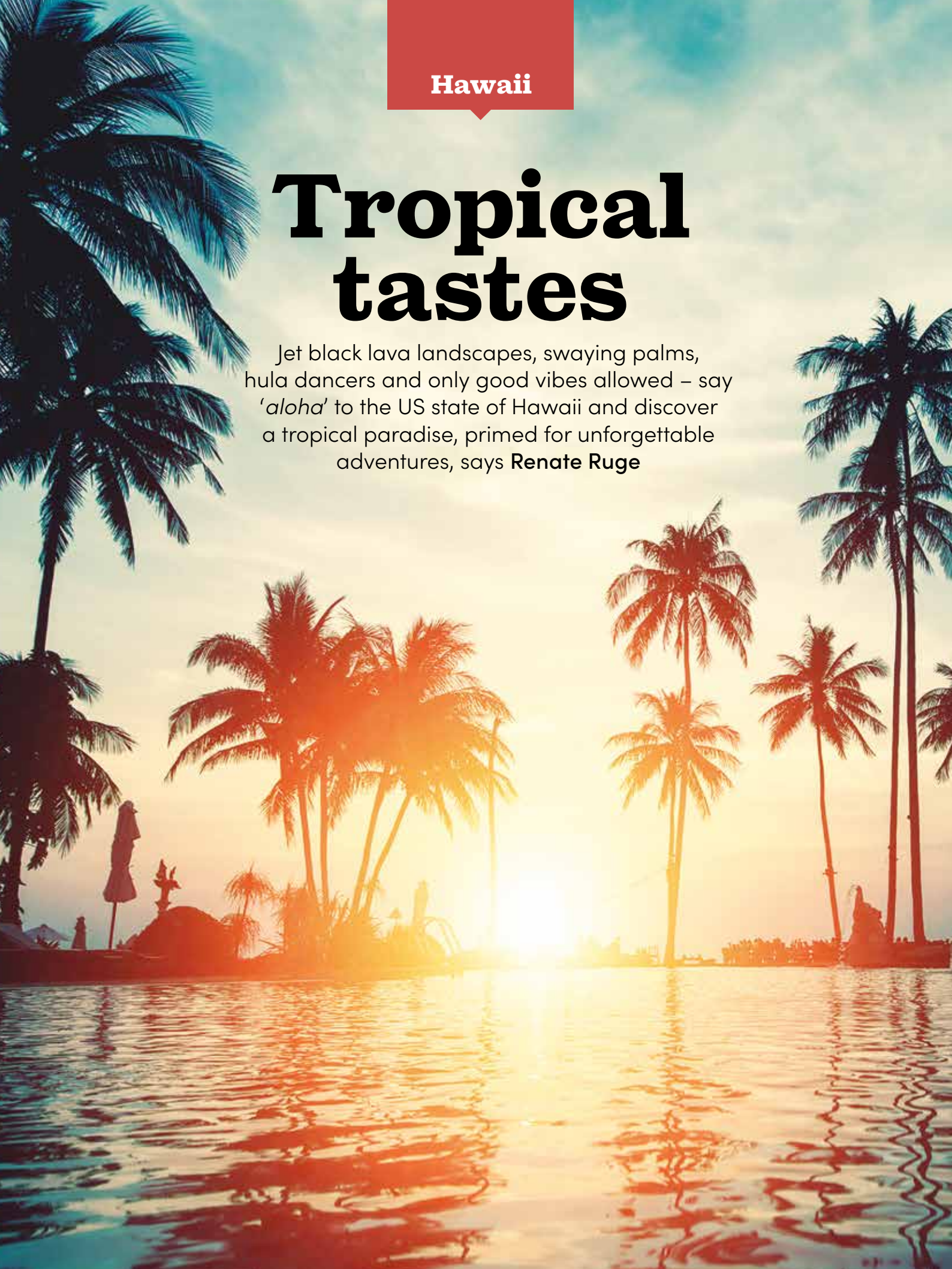
8 **A TRIP TO THE MEKONG IS A BLESSING**
Crouched in the foothills of Phnom Oudong mountain, Oudong was the capital of Cambodia for almost 250 years. Today, it’s a place of pilgrimage and peace. Many cruise lines, including AmaWaterways and AP Touring, offer passengers the opportunity to participate in a blessing with the area’s Buddhist monks. Enrobed in amber-coloured kayasa clothing, the monks chant and scatter jasmine petals to wish health and safe travels to onlookers.

9 **THE WAR HISTORY ISN’T TO BE MISSED**
Many Mekong itineraries start or end in Ho Chi Minh City, also known as Saigon or – to locals – HCMC. Vietnam’s most populous place is a whirr of street food stands, multicolour market stalls, neon-lit nightlife spots and cloud-spearing skyscrapers.

Clients interested in history should visit the Cu Chi tunnels, just outside the city. This labyrinth of once-secret subterranean passageways and rooms was used for supply routes, hospitals, dining rooms, campaign planning rooms and living quarters by the Viet Cong during the Vietnam War.

10 **IT’S EASIER TO GET THERE THAN YOU THINK**
The cities of Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh are the gateways to the Mekong and there are multiple direct flights to both locations from London Heathrow every week. Some cruise lines take the logistics off your hands by including hotel stays in the cities at the start and end of itineraries. Other lines offer pre- and post-cruise stays as extras. ●



A tropical sunset scene with palm trees and a body of water. The sun is low on the horizon, casting a warm orange glow across the sky and reflecting on the water. Several palm trees are silhouetted against the bright sky, with their fronds clearly visible. The water in the foreground shows gentle ripples and reflects the colors of the sunset. The overall mood is peaceful and idyllic.

Hawaii

Tropical tastes

Jet black lava landscapes, swaying palms, hula dancers and only good vibes allowed – say ‘*aloha*’ to the US state of Hawaii and discover a tropical paradise, primed for unforgettable adventures, says **Renate Ruge**



CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT Hawaii is a truly unforgettable destination; Waikiki Beach is the ideal spot for surfing; volcanic craters form a key part of the stunning surrounding landscape



Far away in the North Pacific lies the island chain of Hawaii – the USA’s 50th state.

Pioneering Polynesian voyagers sailed for months in dugout canoes to reach these volcanic outcrops 3,220km west of California. Today, their remote location has resulted in a close-knit community, with the local greeting ‘*aloha*’ the people’s code for love and respect.

Once visited, this enchanting prehistoric paradise stays with you, from Big Island’s dramatic volcanoes and Maui’s rainforest waterfalls to Kauai’s Edenic rainbows and Oahu’s vibrant surf scene. Here’s a snapshot of this enchanting Pacific Island getaway.

HAWAII: THE BIG ISLAND

Wisps of smoke swirl above mountains as raging lava clashes with white waves around the largest, youngest and most southerly of Hawaii’s main islands. Big Island’s peaks may be capped with snow, but its heart blazes, with the Hawaiian goddess of fire, Pele, said to reside in Kilauea volcano’s crater.

Hawaii Volcanoes National Park’s bubbling lava fields smoulder with

“**Once visited, this enchanting prehistoric paradise stays with you**

molten lava hissing through steam vents, while Mauna Loa, the world’s largest active volcano, soars above.

Stargazing here is like nowhere else on Earth, according to Pat Wright from Mauna Kea Summit Tours. “Explore the serenity of the night sky through a special cosmic window from this astonishing mountain that stands in the calm,” he says.

Inland, Hawaii Tropical Botanical Garden bioreserve is home to 2,000 plant species and waterfalls trickling through the foliage. Chasing waterfalls is encouraged in Hawaii, and Akaka Falls State Park is reached by a short hike leading to a 135m cascade. Rainbow Falls, near Hilo, reveals its namesake in the drifting mist.

For a taste of local flavours, Waimea town’s Saturday farmers’ market has good coffee and edible souvenirs such

as honey and spicy ‘ninja’ sauce which can be enjoyed alongside live music.

Hawaiian cuisine shows influences from Japan, the Philippines and Portugal. Comforting soul food such as loco moco – rice topped with a burger, onions, fried eggs and gravy – is the local go-to. Dishes like this keep Hawaiian-born Ricki Castanieto coming back for more. “A typical ‘plate lunch’ of kalua pork with Hawaiian mac salad will fill you up all day,” she explains. Her tip? “For true Hawaiian fusion food, visit Zippy’s in Honolulu.”

Heading south to Mahana Beach, a pitstop at Papakolea Beach or Green Sand Bay means swerving into Punaluu Bake Shop for sugary malasadas – fried pastries filled with cream or preserves.

Visitors can learn about the art of vanilla cultivation at boutique farm The Vanillerie and sip homegrown coffee at Heavenly Hawaiian Kona Coffee Farm – the place for a premium java hit.

Ricki also recommends the three-hectare Paleaku Gardens Peace Sanctuary near Kona, which overlooks Kealahou Bay. “Here you can view ancient Hawaiian petroglyphs and meander through macadamia orchards under the shade of palm trees among spiritual monuments,” she adds.



MAUI: THE VALLEY ISLE

As ships glide north of Hawaii and into Maui's azure waters, guests might just be able to spot whales breaching from the water near Wailea Beach. While sightings from the ship's deck are perfectly possible, those wanting a closer look can go exploring in a small boat with Maui Adventure Cruises.

The whole island is a playground for sun-seekers and surfers, with upscale resorts galore on Kaanapali Beach, while those who linger after golden hour will find memorable sunsets around the island's mountainous northwest.

For snorkelling and diving, the underwater sights off lava promontory Puu Keka are hard to beat, while Kapalua's calm, clear waters make it possible to watch turtles swimming off the coast of Makena Bay. Those who prefer to relax can stretch out under Napili Beach's swaying palms for sheltered sunbathing before sampling the fine dining restaurants that line Wailea Beach.

Makena's Big Beach with its wide expanse of sand and powerful waves sums up Maui's untamed beauty, and visitors can join a snorkelling excursion to crescent-shaped atoll Molokini Crater, which teems with fish.

Kula and Makawao are gateways to a historic whaling village, a volcano with

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE Rise above the clouds on the approach to Haleakala Crater in Maui; Hawaii's beaches are a surfer's playground; a traditional luau feast often features fire dancing; a striking wood carving at Pu'uhonua O Honaunau National Historical Park on Big Island

Selling tips

1 Guests can soak up the very best of Hawaii's islands during a one- or two-week-long cruise or combine it with a stop along the Californian coast.

2 The best time to visit Hawaii is between March and September, when warm temperatures and rain-free days make it ideal for beach activities.

3 Film fanatics will be tantalised by the number of unmistakable movie and TV locations on Oahu, with *Jurassic Park*, *Lost* and *Pirates of the Caribbean* all filmed there.

a summit more than 3,050m above sea level and a bird-watcher's paradise.

Visiting cruise-goers can hire a driver and explore further inland, snaking along the legendary Hana Highway past plummeting cliffs and winding through rainforests to waterfalls plunging into cobalt pools and pristine rivers.

Guests wanting to support the local community should stop by the village of Lahaina, which is being rebuilt following a catastrophic wildfire. Symbolically, the town square's sprawling 151-year-old banyan tree is also growing back.

OAHU: THE GATHERING PLACE

North of The Big Island and Maui, Oahu is named after the islands' original settlers and is now home to most of the state's population. Near the cruise terminal in its buzzing capital, Honolulu, there are key sights such as the Pearl Harbor National Memorial, commemorating more than 2,400 lives lost in the Japanese surprise attack of 1941, and Iolani Palace, which was built under King David Kalakaua in 1882. Both evoke a poignant sense of Hawaii's history.

While the intrepid hike their way round Diamond Head State Monument, the island's golden beaches are a magnet for surfers. Oahu has been a beach holiday oasis ever since Elvis Presley



promised dreams would come true when the film *Blue Hawaii* hit the silver screen in 1961. Hollywood was smitten and a wave of Hawaii-based filming followed.

Wannabe surfers traditionally make Waikiki Beach the place to catch their first wave and watch hula dancers at a traditional luau feast silhouetted by the sun as it melts into the sea.

Oahu's wow-factor film settings are found inland too. Frank at Kualoa Ranch delivers a Raptor Tour, cruising around locations of the sci-fi epic *Jurassic World* in an open-sided truck. Others may recognise Oahu's forests from the TV drama *Lost*, which was filmed in Kaaawa Valley, a home to curious and fascinating chameleons.

The windswept North Shore, meanwhile, is the place to go for turtle sightings at Laniakea Beach or watching the surf roll in at Waimanalo Beach. Pretty Lanikai has powder-white sands and views across shimmering turquoise water out to the Mokulua Islands.

Snorkelling gear, kayaks and paddleboards can be hired from the

folks at Kailua Beach Adventures for those who want to venture into the blue and float past gentle giant green turtles and lazy monk seals. In the words of Disney's *Moana*, "See the line where the sky meets the sea, it calls me."

KAUAI: THE GARDEN ISLE

Sailing a little further north still, the blooming garden isle of Kauai is the northernmost and fourth largest island in the Hawaiian chain. Kilauea Lighthouse has guided mariners safely around the rocks since 1913.

Open to visitors, this historic red-roofed beacon perches on a promontory overlooking the Pacific Ocean. History buffs, meanwhile, can visit Grove Farm Homestead Museum in Lihue to hear the bittersweet story of how sugar plantations transformed the island's landscape.

Wild at heart and unlike its more built-up neighbours, Kauai contains not a single building taller than a coconut tree – and that's the law.

Desert-like Waimea Canyon is also worthy of exploration. This is where Captain James Cook dropped anchor in 1778, off the mouth of the Waimea River, to become the first in a line of European visitors.

Rotors whirr as pilot Curt Lofsted gets ready for take-off on one of his adventure helicopter tours, swooping above the towering cliffs, lava tubes, untouched beaches and crashing surf off the Napali coast. Island Helicopters Kauai also lands at Manawaiopuna Falls

so visitors can, in Curt's words, "feel the awesome power of the waterfall".

Located deep in the Hanapepe Valley, the spectacular 123m waterfall was made famous by the original *Jurassic Park*. Curt loves telling visitors how the film's location director exclaimed: "That's it; it's perfect!" the moment he saw it. Other filmmakers followed, and Curt's company has since worked on *Tropic Thunder*, *King Kong* and *Six Days, Seven Nights*. Film buffs might also recognise Black Pot Beach's pier in Hanalei Bay from the classic musical *South Pacific*.

Kauai, like the rest of Hawaii, has at least 50 shades of green in its palette, with hues ranging from the teal in the fields to verdant jade in its mountains. When the sun pierces the clouds it brushes everything a pale lime thanks to shafts of light. Could this be magic in motion? It most certainly is. 🍍

Get on board

Norwegian Cruise Lines' seven-night Hawaii: Inter-Island cruise aboard *Pride of America*, return from Honolulu via Kahului, Hilo, Kona and Kauai, departs on 5 April 2025, from £1,831pp. [ncl.com](https://www.ncl.com)

Princess Cruises' 16-night Hawaiian Islands cruise aboard *Coral Princess*, return from Vancouver via Hilo, Honolulu, Kauai and Kahului, departs on 5 October 2025, from £1,697pp. [princess.com](https://www.princess.com)



Viking Mississippi



Southern COMFORT

On a voyage to the USA's southern Heartland, **Sarah Freeman** discovers music as soulful as the food – and historic mansions as haunted as the Mississippi's gator-filled swamps

The sound of toe-tapping jazz cuts through the clang-clang of red trams as I breakfast barefooted on chicory coffee and deep-fried, sugary

beignets. This sublime pairing has been served for 150 years at Cafe du Monde, an institution that owes its prized pastry to French-Creole colonists in New Orleans' French Quarter. Judging by the telltale trail of icing sugar, I'm not the first or the last to get my beignet fix on Jackson Square's lawn.

Nicknamed NOLA, the great Louisiana port of New Orleans bookends Viking's seven-night sailing along the Lower Mississippi – fondly known as 'The Big Muddy' – to the charismatic city of Vicksburg.

MADE FOR 'THE BIG MUDDY'

A hybrid of Viking's ocean and river ships, the five-deck *Viking Mississippi* was purpose-built to ply North America's second longest river.

We may be docked 8,050km from Norway's fjord-fringed shores but that doesn't stop Viking's Scandinavian DNA imprinting the ship's décor. Its blonde wood and blue-cream palette extends to my Deluxe Veranda Stateroom with its sun-kissed balcony – perfect for drinking in those ever-changing river views. Yet 70-metre

barges carrying everything from coal to corn are a daily reminder that the Mississippi remains very much a working waterway.

Captain Cory Burke navigates 697km of the 3,770km 'Father of Waters', which rises in Minnesota's Lake Itasca and empties into the Gulf of Mexico, flowing through 10 US states, including Louisiana, along the way.

The Southern flavours of the USA's 'Pelican State' infuse everything from the ship's à la carte dinners to the entertainment. One evening I dine on Cajun oyster gratin, spicy jambalaya – a one-pot Creole rice dish with smoky andouille sausage – and gumbo, an aromatic Louisiana stew, at the ship's more formal eatery, The Restaurant, followed by blues music played in the living room on deck one.

As for Louisiana's famously friendly Southern hospitality, local guides deliver it in spades on daily excursions, which include visiting the state's poignant Civil War battlefields and bayous: a sort of marshy lake.

SPOOKY SWAMPS & HAUNTED HOMES

Day two's standout excursion is the gator-flooded Manchac Swamp. Our guide, Dustin, warns: "Don't lean over the edge of the boat, otherwise you might have a little something extra you weren't expecting – which we call 'a lagniappe'"

Cypress trees appear to rise from the water's chicory-coloured depths as our Cajun captain steers us steadily past motionless alligators and scurrying bankside raccoons. "Old boats and buildings in NOLA's French Quarter were made from rot-resistant cypress wood," Dustin adds in his Southern drawl.

“

**Local guides deliver
Louisiana's famously
friendly Southern
hospitality in spades**



The trees are draped in feathery streamers of grey-green Spanish moss – a marker of good air quality – that stuffed the seats of Henry Ford’s earliest motors and only add to Manchac’s eeriness. The shaded swamp is also said to be haunted by a guitar-playing voodoo priestess named Julia Brown, who lived here in the mid-1800s.

More ghost stories surround Houmas Estate, a 250-year-old plantation home in Darrow, set in 15 hectares of gardens, which produced 20 million pounds of sugar a year in its heyday. Dressed in a bell hoop skirt, our guide Susanna descends its three-storey spiral staircase, explaining: “The home’s original owners thought the spirits came through the keyholes at night, so they kept voodoo death dolls in the bedrooms.”

Fast facts

386
guests

193
cabins

147
crew

2
restaurants



As our group shuffles into the mansion’s billiard room, Susanna tells us that an Irishman named John Burnside purchased the property in the mid-1800s. Nicknamed the “Sugar Prince of Louisiana”, he established a horse-racing stable here.

Houmas was just one of Louisiana’s plantations. Around 500 more are marked on the entrance hall’s original 1847 map, which was recovered from the property’s attic in the 1980s.

Another restored Greek Revival mansion called Rosedown – where the cash crop was cotton rather than sugar – is 89km upstream from Darrow in Saint Francisville, day three’s port of call. A magnificent avenue of ancient oaks makes for a head-turning entrance, while the interior is a love letter to craftsmanship, with silk-screen printed wallpaper and an original mahogany staircase.

SOUL FOOD MEETS CIVIL WAR SITES

Day four has us dropping anchor at one of the Lower Mississippi’s oldest settlements: Natchez. Actress-cum-tour guide Judith brings the city’s colourful history to life as we stroll past elegant suburban villas of the Antebellum (pre-US Civil War) era. Wandering the hushed and hallowed halls of Dunleith – a national historic landmark where Oscar-nominated period drama *The Help* was filmed – is a highlight.

“Shakespeare came up with the term ‘soul food’!”, Judith says, over a Southern



“ Rosedown’s avenue of ancient oaks makes for a head-turning entrance while the interior is a love letter to craftsmanship

spread of fried chicken, deep-fried okra, black-eyed peas and buttermilk scones, washed down with native Muscadine wine in Dunleith’s restaurant – a former carriage house.

After lunch we make a sobering stop at Forks of the Road, the USA’s largest slave market from 1833 to 1863. “The hymns the enslaved sang in the fields came on over into the church,” pastor Joe from Zion Hill Baptist Church tells his congregation of Viking passengers, before we’re treated to a stirring *a cappella* gospel performance.

In Vicksburg – our northernmost port of call – I head to church again, this time

to marvel at six stained glass windows by Louis Comfort Tiffany, of light and jewellery family fame. A visit to the Church of the Holy Trinity is part one of a walking tour led by local lady Karen.

“Coca-Cola was bottled for the first time in Vicksburg in 1894,” she says, as we pound the streets paved with bricks made from the city’s own soil; the same ground into which locals dug 500 ‘clay caves’ for refuge during the 47-day siege of Vicksburg in 1863. I’m led into a replica cave by Bertram Hayes-Davis, the great, great grandson of war hero Jefferson Davis, the cotton farmer who became President of the short-lived Confederate States of America. The icing on the beignet is stepping inside my guide’s Vicksburg home, filled with museum-worthy heirlooms such as Jefferson’s sword, which was used during the 1846-1848 Mexican-American War.

FRENCH CONNECTION

I spend my penultimate cruising day being guided on foot around French-flavoured Baton Rouge – the state capital – by tour guide Craig. “Do y’all know the unofficial motto for this city?” he asks. “It’s *laissez les bons temps rouler*’, which translates as ‘let the good times roll’ in English.”

CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT Bourbon Street is a magnet for musicians; go for a ride on a New Orleans streetcar; amble around enjoying the architecture in the French Quarter; Louisiana’s swamps have a host of wonderful wildlife

In just two and a half hours we tick off landmarks such as the rocketship-like Water Tower and neoclassical former Louisiana Old State Capitol, which the river’s greatest son, Mark Twain, called ‘The Monstrosity on the Mississippi’.

Another talking point is downtown’s Governor’s Mansion, set just four blocks from the mighty river. Modelled on the White House and now a functioning museum, it was originally built as a home for Louisiana’s country-singing governor Jimmie Davis, who recorded one of the US’s best-loved tunes, *You Are My Sunshine*, in 1940.

Fittingly, my voyage ends on a musical high note along New Orleans’ neon-lit Bourbon Street. Stretching 13 blocks in the city’s French Quarter, this historic thoroughfare can be a little bewildering for first timers. Thankfully, Kevin – a Grammy-award-winning trumpet player – leads the way.

The highlight of his four-hour tour – which includes a Cajun-Creole buffet – is a private concert by his four-piece band in NOLA’s oldest operating jazz club, Fritzel’s. “Ragtime music was written down, so you purchased the sheet music,” says pianist Richard, playing as he speaks. “But with jazz you could mess around with it.”

The big crowd-pleaser at Fritzel’s is Scott Joplin’s *The Entertainer*, best known for being the ‘ice-cream van song’. As I sit back and savour a signature Berlin Mule absinthe cocktail on the house, I reflect that ‘lagniappes’ come in many wonderful shapes and forms in lyrical Louisiana. ●

Get on board

Viking’s seven-night New Orleans & Southern Charms voyage aboard *Viking Mississippi*, return from New Orleans via Darrow, St Francisville, Natchez, Vicksburg and Baton Rouge, departs on 22 November 2025, from £4,795pp including flights.

viking.com



The CLIA View

Andy Harmer OBE on how to make the most of the wave season as demand for cruise continues to soar

I hope you're having a suitably successful and productive wave season so far. It goes without saying that, quite simply, there has never been a better time to capitalise on the opportunities this peak booking period presents. With the cruise sector continuing to flourish, customers are booking in higher volumes than ever before, and a record number of ships will be at sea this year.

There's a fantastic buzz across the industry – and long may that continue. The enthusiasm and positivity from the trade is clear to see, while cruise lines are going above and beyond to provide brand insights and offer enticing incentives to promote their product.

At CLIA, we are similarly committed to empowering agents with the tools and expertise they need to succeed, with our enhanced online resources specifically designed to make selling cruise holidays easier and more rewarding than ever before.

Our weekly 'CLIA Presents' webinar sessions will run to the end of wave and are a must-attend for agents looking



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT Andy Harmer says there's a buzz across the industry; CLIA has a wide range of tools to help agents; enabling customers to envision their dream holiday is essential

to improve their knowledge on a host of leading cruise lines. These sessions contain key sales advice and information on ocean, river, expedition and luxury sectors to give agents that vital edge.

Meanwhile, our online trade platform, cruising.org, has been enhanced to support even more agents during wave. It features a wealth of resources, including factsheets on destinations and itineraries, detailed cruise line brand profiles, and new-to-selling guides.

We've also bolstered our library of virtual ship tours. With 25 videos showcasing life onboard, agents can bring the cruise experience directly to their clients' screens, enabling customers to envision their dream holiday. And look no further than our 'CLIA Recommends' page for all the latest agent offers and prizes.

I must also mention our CLIA Conference, taking place in May in Southampton. It's the largest annual travel agent event of its kind in Europe and is not to be missed, with a few spaces still up for grabs. There'll be a host of activities, including ship visits, content sessions, a trade fair and a celebratory 'sail-away' evening event. The optional 'Expedition Summit' and 'New to Selling Cruise Day' will also be on offer prior to the conference, with indispensable sales training and brand introductions.

But back to the here and now. By leveraging CLIA's support, agents can capitalise on the rest of the wave period and beyond with confidence, meeting and driving demand as new and seasoned cruisers alike seek their next adventure. The opportunity is yours – best wishes and happy sales. *Andy Harmer OBE is managing director of CLIA UK & Ireland* 📍



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Cruise lines are going above and beyond to provide brand insights and offer enticing incentives

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