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WELCOME... TO THE JULY/AUGUST ISSUE

What incentivises you to succeed at your job? For me, there's no motivator more powerful than the thought of someone having a positive reaction to something I've written or edited (I'll never forget the sheer excitement I felt when the person sat next to me on an early-morning flight to Lisbon began reading one of my features in easyJet's in-flight magazine).

For travel agents, however, the carrot on the end of the stick is slightly juicier, where reaching sales targets could mean winning everything from vouchers to a free holiday. And if you were one of the lucky agents to win tickets to see Taylor Swift at Wembley Stadium earlier this year, courtesy of Unforgettable Croatia, we'd love to hear from you!

Figuring out how best to incentivise the trade is something cruise lines are constantly grappling with. And so, in what was an epic feat of diary juggling, *Cruise Trade News* decided to bring together five senior industry experts from both sides of the table to debate the merits of agent reward schemes. What became clear during our discussion was that there's no one-size-fits-all solution.

On the cover: Shutterstock



ABOVE The reward of a dream holiday is an ideal travel agent incentive

Turn to *page 43* for our in-depth write-up on the roundtable interview, where you can also scan a QR code to watch the conversation in full on cruisetradenews.com.

Elsewhere, on *page 36*, we share the key findings from the 2024 Cruise Summit, hosted by *Cruise Trade News* at the News UK offices in June, while on *page 64*, we share 10 irresistible reasons to send your clients on an island-hopping cruise around the South Pacific.

Happy reading!

Jack Carter
Editor

cruisetradenews.com

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Short cruise, long memories...



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Cruise Corner



Cruise reacts to Labour landslide

Travel industry bodies share their priorities for the new government following a devastating general election for the Conservatives

Collaboration on sustainability, support for small businesses and investment in the future workforce are at the top of travel's list of priorities for the new government.

On 5 July Keir Starmer's Labour Party reached the 326-seat threshold to win the 2024 UK general election, sweeping aside the Conservative Party in a landslide victory.

Transport secretary and Conservative MP Mark Harper lost his Forest of Dean seat to Labour's Matt Bishop while Covid-era transport secretary Grant Shapps lost his Welwyn Hatfield seat to Labour's Andrew Lewin.

Conservative MP and tourism minister Julia Lopez held her Hornchurch and Upminster seat as shadow secretary for culture, media and sport and Labour MP for Bristol Central Thangam Debbonaire lost her seat to the Green Party.

At *Cruise Trade News'* Cruise Summit earlier this year, which you can read all about on *page 50*, Andy Harmer, managing director of CLIA UK, told the audience that sustainability efforts need accelerating, with Labour needing to play a central role. He said the industry had already built strong relationships with representatives of the new government.

"We look forward to working with them, as well as with opposition MPs and backbenchers, alongside officials and stakeholders on behalf of the cruise industry," said Harmer. "Cruise makes a vital contribution to the UK, generating billions for the economy and supporting many thousands of jobs across the country."

Chief executive of ABTA Mark Tanzer said the association is in a "very strong place" to engage with the new government, MPs and officials.

"We've already put in a lot of work with parliamentary candidates across the political spectrum, which means we can hit the ground running in engaging them in the issues that matter to our members and the wider industry," he said.

Meanwhile, Steve Witt, co-founder of Not Just Travel, expects the agency's strong sales performance in 2024 to continue with a post-election boost. "We are looking forward to a period of long-term clarity which provides consumers with confidence to move ahead and feel comfortable in spending on holidays," he added.



SCAN

Why cruise needs a seat at the table with the new government



HAL HOSTS LARGEST-EVER TRADE SHIP VISIT

More than 100 agents boarded *Nieuw Statendam* in June for Holland America Line's (HAL) largest-ever trade ship visit.

Agents from across the country joined the Pinnacle class ship at the event in Liverpool, which was hosted by HAL's UK trade team. The day saw guests welcomed onboard with a presentation before receiving a tour and a three-course lunch.

The 2,666-passenger vessel will depart from Dover in 2025 with a season of 10 sailings throughout the summer. The ship will sail to the Canary Islands, British Isles, Norway, Iceland, Greenland, Iberia and the Eastern Mediterranean.

Karen Farndell, director sales and marketing for Holland America Line, said: "First-hand experience is simply the best training tool we can offer our agent partners."

“The 2,666-passenger vessel will depart from Dover in 2025 with 10 summer sailings



AMSTERDAM TO MOVE CRUISE TERMINAL

Amsterdam will relocate its cruise terminal away from the city centre by 2035 in a bid to combat "nuisance".

The city council also plans to almost halve the number of ships allowed to dock at the Passenger Terminal Amsterdam (PTA) by 2026 from 190 to 100 per year.

The PTA will return to one berth and ships will be required to use shore power by 2027. The measures come as the council looks to limit over-tourism.

A CLIA spokesperson said the announcement is a "great example" of the cruise industry's partnership with the Port of Amsterdam and the outcome of discussions on the relocation of the terminal, which started in 2016.

Exclusive



NEW AGENCY PLOTS COURSE FOR UK EXPANSION

The team behind a new travel agency has set its sights on "significant growth" across the UK ahead of the launch of its first retail outlet in Swindon.

Director of Swindon Travel Hub Ashley Hunt said the new high street store will specialise in cruise holidays. Renovations on the premises began on 21 June with completion expected later this month. The store is due to open its doors to the public later this summer.

"Initially, we'll launch with a small team, but we fully intend to scale up based on demand," Hunt said. "From discussions with other agents, we anticipate needing around ten people to begin with."

The Devizes Road store will be the first in what Hunt and fellow director Shaun Jones hope will grow to become a collection of premises across the UK.

"We do not intend to be just another 'normal' travel agency," Hunt declared. "Our goal is for customers to have fun, get excited for their next adventure, and feel like their holiday begins the moment they step through our doors."

Age is not just a number

Fred. Olsen Cruise Lines' Geoff Ridgeon on why age is no barrier when it comes to travel



We are firm believers in the concept that age is just a number. Actually, we think it's the opposite. For many cruise lines, the majority of guests are in the 50+ age bracket and love nothing more than clocking up more travel miles year-on-year.

There is no upper limit when it comes to cruising. In fact, many of your customers are better positioned to travel in their golden years. Most of them will have worked all their adult life, raised children and helped look after grandchildren, so now is their opportunity to visit those corners of the world that they've always dreamed of but never had time to do.

Seeing the world isn't just good fun; it is also about experiencing new ways of life, meeting new people and enjoying the requisite luxuries of a cruise ship. It is also a way of experiencing beautiful destinations around the world in comfort with personal, attentive service on board. And that's regardless of whether your customers are travelling with a companion or cruising solo.

Here at Fred. Olsen Cruise Lines, we carefully curate our itineraries to ensure that guests have the chance to broaden their mind with captivating culture, local cuisine and enriching outdoor experiences. That could be visiting the coast of Canada during the



ABOVE Older clients can finally visit dreamed-of destinations

“There is no upper limit in cruising... many of your customers are better positioned to travel in their golden years”

TOP TIPS

- 1** Remind your customers to not limit their travel options just because of their age.
- 2** Itineraries are designed to help guests broaden their mind.
- 3** There is no upper age limit on travel. Most of your customers are better positioned to travel in their golden years.

largest migration of humpback whales on earth, witnessing the Perseid meteor shower in the Azores or experiencing the Norwegian Fjords in autumn when they're at their prettiest.

Cruises on board our smaller-sized ships range from short five-night trips to destinations including Norway and the Scottish isles through to grand voyages exploring South America or epic journeys circumnavigating the world's furthest reaches.

Throughout my travels, I've met a lot of 'old' 20-year-olds and 'young' 70-year-olds; it really is just a state of mind. So, whatever your kind of holiday your customer's are in the market for, now is your chance to remind them that their age shouldn't limit what they do – and the world really is their oyster. ●



A SEA OF POSSIBILITIES

Cruise Trade News touches base with Atlas Ocean Voyages' Bernard Carter to see how the line's UK expansion plans are taking shape

It's been a year since you joined Atlas to head up its sales operation in the UK. How has it been?

It's been busy, but great. In the early days we focused on getting things set up with our Preferred Sales Agent (PSA), The Cruise Line, who will handle bookings for the general trade in the UK. We have also worked with a small number of the trade directly to get the product information out there and increase our brand awareness, hosting various webinars, in-person training days and attending several events such as the CLIA Conference and the Cruise Summit. That's been great because it has also helped me get to grips with the product and how best to promote it to our agents.

“We'll introduce more technology to let agents use our digital assets and infrastructure



Despite only working with a small number of agents, how has trade business performed?

We have seen a great deal of enthusiasm from some top partners here in the UK. I have done a lot of ground work to get that up and running, which has been very rewarding, but as we move into the next phase of development, we will introduce more technology to allow agents to use our digital assets and infrastructure to their benefit, which should reduce the wait times and allow them to make

reservations without having to refer to different people within the Atlas camp.

You mentioned 'the next phase' for Atlas. Can you elaborate?

We are growing and developing very fast corporately. There are several major projects that we have on the books in the US, which will positively affect what we do internationally and how agents are able to work with us. This includes an enhanced website coming in the next two to three months, which will provide local currency options and a booking engine, allowing our partners to check live availability and make reservations. This will speed the booking process up a great deal.

It sounds very positive. How else will you work with agents going forward?

We recently ran an Adventure Beyond promotion which finished at the end of June, and we have a new Explore and Save initiative starting for Q3. We're expecting to bolster that with some form of booking incentive for our agent partners as well, where if they make a certain number of bookings, they'll secure a place on a sailing in 2024. Watch this space for more details. 📌

Get on board

Atlas Ocean Voyages' seven-night Drake Express itinerary on board *World Voyager* departs 2 December 2025 round-trip from King George Island via the South Shetland Islands and comes in at £10,272pp. Round-trip private charter jet service is included between Punta Arenas and King George Island, along with one night pre- and post-stay in Punta Arenas.



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atlasoceanvoyages.com

NEED TO KNOW



AMAWATERWAYS PUTS 2026 ON SALE

AmaWaterways has launched its 2026 river cruise season early after it saw strong demand for its 2024 and 2025 itineraries. Over the next three years the line will launch seven new ships in Portugal, Egypt, Colombia and Europe and sail more than 40 different itineraries. *AmaSofia* will sail the Danube from 24 May 2026 on the 14-night Magnificent Europe itinerary and *AmaMaya* will join *AmaDara* on the Mekong, sailing the seven-night Charms of the Mekong and Riches of the Mekong cruises.



A-ROSA PLACES FOCUS ON GROUPS

A-Rosa River Cruises has increased its focus on the groups market in the UK to help its agent partners reach a wider pool of clients. As part of the new marketing push, the line has launched an eight-page digital brochure dedicated to the demographic, which highlights the line's group benefits and range of themed cruises.

Michelle Daniels, sales director at A-Rosa River Cruises UK & Ireland, said the brand has identified groups as a "strong new route to market" and the brochure is an "important step on our journey".

"We know our flexible, relaxed approach works well with groups and our focus going forward is to grow this area of our business," she added.

Appointments



Riviera promotes Will Sarson

Riviera Travel has promoted Will Sarson to the newly created role of product director.

He will join the executive team and report to Robin Shaw, chief operating officer. Sarson has been with the river cruise and escorted tour specialist for nine years, most recently as head of product cruise and long haul.

He said: "Curating perfect holidays has always been at that heart of Riviera; I am thrilled to be taking the lead as we enter a very exciting period."



FLEDGLING RIVER SPECIALIST HITS £1M REVENUE

Cruise, an online booking platform specialising in river cruises, has achieved £1 million in revenue in its first year. Launched in June 2023, the brand has since expanded its operation to a team of seven with two cruise consultants, two web developers and three content writers, amassing

30 years' experience in the travel industry collectively.

The Manchester-based agency, which is part of Hays Travel, was co-founded by Daniel Travis-Brown and Dan Roche, with their MO being to "dramatically improve" customer service within the river cruise booking journey.

NEED TO KNOW

UK EXPEDITION OUTPACING
OVERSEAS MARKETS

Around a quarter of Expedition Cruise Network (ECN) members have seen the UK market grow significantly faster than other international markets, with more than two-thirds of members reporting a rise in bookings for the first half of 2024.

According to ECN's half-yearly review, one member reported an impressive 88 per cent increase in bookings

year-on-year from December to the beginning of June 2024.

Meanwhile, another expedition line said bookings to Antarctica had seen a three-digit percentage growth in February 2024 compared to the same period last year. Antarctica remained the most popular region for ECN members' guests.

Appointments

HX confirms
leadership reshuffle

HX – formerly Hurtigruten Expeditions – has appointed Gebhard Rainer as its new chief executive, with current CEO Daniel Skjeldam transitioning to a board member role for Hurtigruten Group.

The line said Rainer's appointment will be integral to delivering its long-term strategy and financial plan as its executive leadership team continues towards full autonomy following the split from sister company Hurtigruten last year.

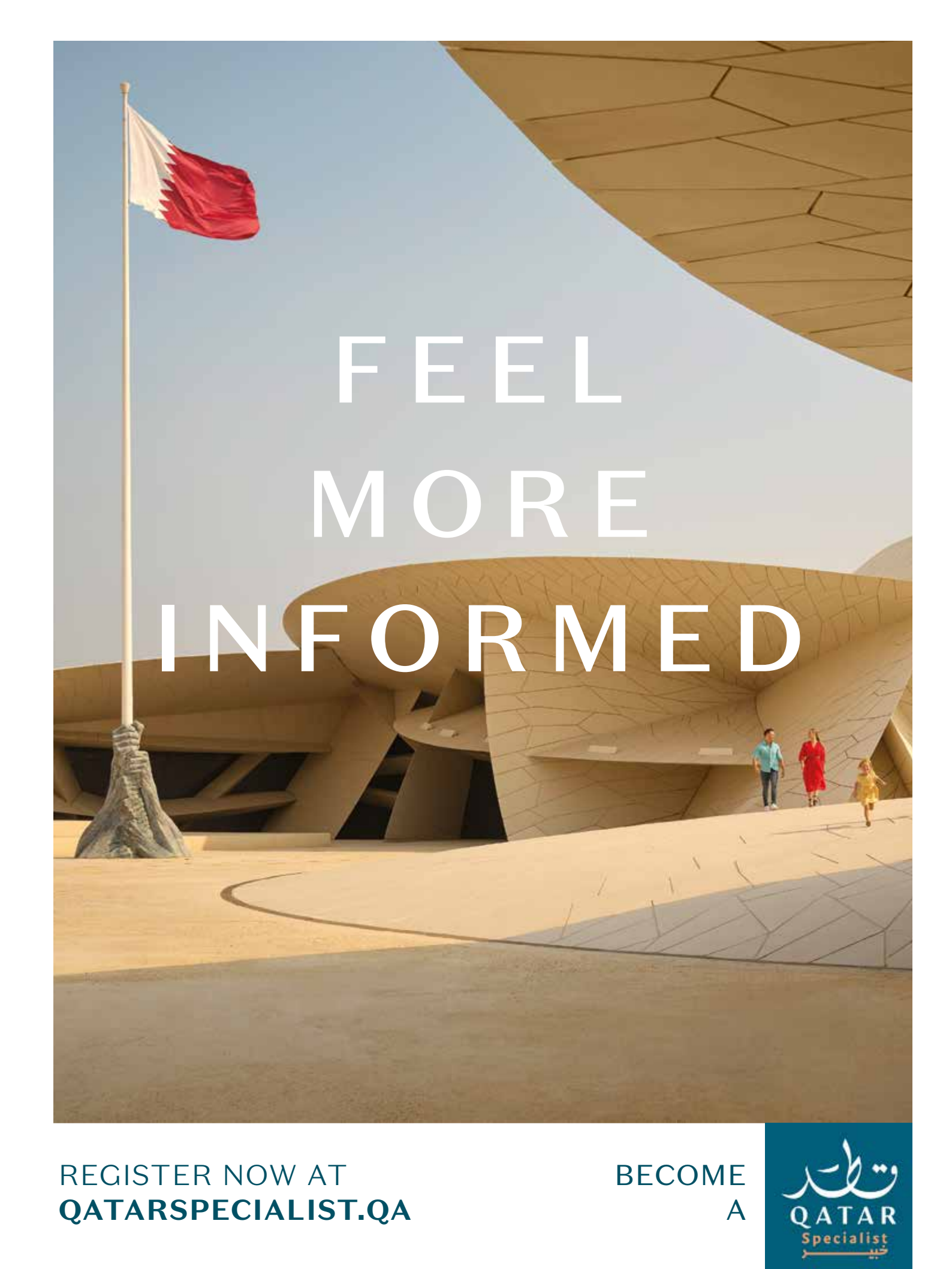
PRINI PATEL JOINS
HURTIGRUTEN

Hurtigruten has appointed Prini Patel as its new head of marketing UK & EMEA in a bid to enhance its brand awareness amongst the UK travel trade.

Patel, who has more than 20 years of experience in the travel industry, will be responsible for managing the UK and EMEA marketing team to build brand awareness and increase demand.

She will also oversee the introduction of new marketing tools, delivery of new assets and event opportunities for trade partners to advertise to their consumers.

"We've set ambitious growth targets in the UK, and Prini's appointment is a strategic move to support turning our vision into reality," said Iain Powell, the line's new VP of sales and marketing UK and EMEA.

A photograph of the Qatar National Museum, featuring its iconic golden, undulating roof and a large flagpole with the Qatari flag. Three people are walking on the museum's steps.

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SEADREAM ROLLS OUT LONGER CRUISES

SeaDream Yacht Club has unveiled a new set of longer yacht sailings. The Grand Voyage Collection will offer two itineraries in 2025 and six in 2026, ranging from 21 to 35 days, visiting quiet beaches, historic wineries, UNESCO World Heritage sites and landmarks in the Greek Isles, French and Italian Rivas, Scandinavia, Northern Europe and the Caribbean. "The collection showcases the spectacular diversity of SeaDream's itineraries," said Andreas Brynstad of SeaDream Yacht Club. "We have combined some of our best itineraries into extended, care-free yachting experiences."



QUINTESSENTIAL CROATIA

Unforgettable Croatia has confirmed its fleet of six ships, which depart mainly from Split and Dubrovnik and can carry up to 38 guests, is now available for private charter, starting from £75,000 a week. Guests will be able to plan bespoke itineraries with help from the Unforgettable Croatia team. The ships

have up to 19 cabins, many with private balconies, and offer facilities such as air-conditioning, a swim deck, a jacuzzi and sun deck. Cruises are available for five to seven nights, with Unforgettable Croatia on hand to research and book private shore excursions, as well as pre- and post-hotel stays.



Regent to debut new class

Regent Seven Seas Cruises will debut a new Prestige class in 2026 with the introduction of *Seven Seas Prestige*. The 850-guest vessel will boast one of the highest passenger to space ratios in the industry.

This is Regent's first new ship class launch for a decade, following the Explorer class vessels, which were launched in 2016, 2020 and 2023.

A second Prestige class ship is slated to launch in 2029, which will introduce new accommodation categories, including a reimagining of the palatial Regent Suite, plus new dining experiences.



EXPLORA DELAYS LAUNCH OF SECOND SHIP

Explora Journeys has delayed the delivery of *Explora II* to allow more time for "final touches" to be made to the vessel. In a joint decision with shipbuilder Fincantieri, the luxury arm of the MSC Group confirmed the vessel will now be delivered on 12 September 2024.

Its maiden voyage will therefore take place on 16 September, departing from Civitavecchia with

a seven-night sailing to Sorrento, Lipari, Trapani and Siracusa in Sicily, Valletta in Malta and Tarragona, Spain.

Explora Journeys is contacting guests affected by the delays either directly or through their travel agents, where they will be arranging an alternative cruise on *Explora II* or sister ship *Explora I* which is also sailing in the Mediterranean.

The climate conundrum

As eco-friendly solutions like LNG come under closer scrutiny, what else is the cruise industry doing to improve its environmental impact? **Will Payne** reports

Whenever the travel industry's carbon footprint comes into focus, the cruise sector often finds itself in the firing line. In 2023, for example, several of the world's largest cruise lines disputed claims made by an environmental pressure group that they were trying to "gaslight" consumers into believing liquefied natural gas (LNG) – which the group claimed was a polluting fossil fuel – was an appropriate climate solution.

NGO Opportunity Green (OG) filed a series of complaints to the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) against lines such as Carnival Cruise Line, MSC Cruises, Princess Cruises and Costa Cruises to try to put an end to the alleged "LNG greenwashing". The complaint is still under review.

What can't be disputed, however, is that travellers are more engaged in the climate debate than ever before. According to booking.com's 2024 Travel Predictions, more than half (53 per cent) of holidaymakers are seeking travel options that blend comfort with sustainability. Mel Connell, head of marketing for sustainability organisation Cleaner Seas Group (CSG), believes the industry is entering a "pivotal moment" for sustainability.

"The industry is waking up to the role it can play in minimising the greatest causes of ocean and environmental pollution, as well as the consumer demand for greener travel," she says.

Connell believes everyone – whether corporate or personal – has a responsibility to minimise their impact on the planet for future generations. "It's awesome to see the cruise industry at large set a course for minimising pollution across the business and working with innovative organisations like us to make that a reality," she adds.



Here, we highlight three lines which have implemented innovative solutions to help reduce the impact their ships have on the environment.

MARELLA CRUISES

Earlier this year, Marella Cruises began trialling a new microplastic filter on board *Marella Explorer*. In partnership with CSG, the line installed two Indikon filters onto the ship's crew laundry system to help prevent marine life from being harmed by microfibres produced from plastics.

The line is working with the University of Surrey to monitor and measure the microplastics captured on board the ship, which will help Cleaner Seas Group adapt its technology based on the findings. Marella will review the results of the six-month trial before rolling out the filters across the rest of its fleet,

“
The industry is waking up to the role it can play in minimising ocean and environmental pollution



including *Marella Discovery*, *Marella Discovery 2*, *Marella Explorer 2* and *Marella Voyager*.

Olivia Wells, sustainability manager at Marella Cruises, says: “We are committed to finding ways to further look after the natural environment in which our ships sail. By working with Cleaner Seas Group during this six-month trial as an industry first initiative, we believe that it will support future studies on preserving and protecting oceans.”

Dave Miller, CEO at Cleaner Seas Group, adds: “We are thrilled to be working on this ocean conservation initiative with Marella Cruises. By collaborating with one of the largest cruise lines in the UK, we hope to set a new course in microplastic capture prevention at sea.”

HURTIGRUTEN

A specially designed reactor at one of Hurtigruten’s ports has been installed to convert edible food waste



“

A specially designed reactor at a Hurtigruten port has been installed to convert food waste into compost

into compost which can be used to grow vegetables for the line’s restaurants.

“We understand the importance of preserving our environment while offering unforgettable experiences to our guests,” says CEO Hedda Felin. “Recognising that our operations inherently impact the environment, wildlife and local cultures in the waters we sail in, we are committed to taking proactive steps to minimise our ecological footprint and promote responsible practices.”

The initiative starts with sorting food waste from Hurtigruten’s Coastal Express ships, which sail year-round along the coast of Norway, calling at 34 ports from Bergen in the south to Kirkenes in the north. The waste is then transported to Stamsund Harbor where it undergoes transformation through a compost reactor, which converts edible food waste into compost within 24 hours. This is then transported to a farm on the Lofoten Islands to enhance soil quality and produce food which will end up on the menu of Hurtigruten’s ships.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Travellers are highly engaged in the climate debate; food waste from Hurtigruten ships will be converted to compost; ingredients will then be grown in soil using the compost



ABOVE Marella Cruises is trialling a microplastic filter in the laundry facilities on board *Marella Explorer*

Following a five-year scheme to reduce waste, Hurtigruten has seen a drop in leftovers from 261 grams per customer in 2019 to 66 grams in 2023. To increase awareness on climate change amongst its crew and passengers, the line has also added presentations, workshops and interactive experiences to its onboard programming.

HOLLAND AMERICA LINE

Holland America Line (HAL) has embarked on a long-term biofuel test on its flagship, *Rotterdam*, leveraging 100 per cent low carbon intensity biofuel while sailing within the Norwegian Fjords.

The ship will operate one of its four engines using low carbon intensity oil derived from organic waste produced from fats, oils and grease left over from feedstock processing, which is hoped to yield an estimated 86 per cent reduction in life-cycle greenhouse gas emissions.

“Holland America Line is committed to reducing our greenhouse gas emissions and we are excited to demonstrate a next-generation fuel source that can help us toward our pursuit of net zero emissions,” said Gus Antorcha, president of HAL. “Converting items such as food waste into fuel is an innovative way to meet environmental challenges and we thank the Dutch government for its support.”

Holland America Line is one of the first Carnival Corporation brands to run a long-term 100 per cent biofuel shipboard operation, having completed a successful first test in August 2022.

Meanwhile, the company’s German line Aida Cruises also sampled biofuels onboard *AIDAprima* in Rotterdam in 2022. While biofuels have been tested on large diesel engines at shoreside research facilities and in other shipping segments, these are among the first live tests on working cruise ships. ●

FIVE WAYS TO BOOST YOUR SUSTAINABILITY CREDENTIALS

Not everyone has access to innovative technologies to combat emissions, so here are five ways you can help your business reduce its climate impact.

1 APPOINT A FULL-TIME SUSTAINABILITY ADVISOR

Having someone in your company dedicated to ensuring you’re operating with the environment in mind can help keep you on track to achieve your sustainability goals.

2 TAKE PART IN LOCAL CLEAN-UP EVENTS

Joining litter pick-ups is a great way to support your community while promoting your commitment to the planet. Last year, The Travel Village Group and Royal Caribbean collected 50kg of rubbish from Blackpool beach.

3 PROMOTE SUSTAINABLE TRAVEL TO CUSTOMERS

Consumer interest in sustainability is growing, but the number of travellers making responsible choices is still relatively low. Be sure to highlight sustainable options – like bus and train transfers – when selling cruises.

4 OFFER ALTERNATIVES TO PAPER BROCHURES

With the advent of technology in recent years it is now easier than ever to get a brochure in front of a client without using paper. Reach out to your supplier partners to find out how they can support you in moving brochures online.

5 LEARN MORE AT EXPERT-LED EVENTS

Attend as many industry events as possible to pick up tips on how to sell cruise in a more sustainable way. For example, this year’s Cruise Summit by *Cruise Trade News* gave attendees insight into why consumers are ready to learn more about responsible travel.

DISCOVER EPIC ADVENTURES



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Spring 2025 Special Interest Mediterranean Voyages

Including tickets to Monte Carlo Masters,
Barcelona Open Tennis Tournament and
Cultural Events.

'The Collection' is a series of five 7-10-night Spring 2025 Mediterranean voyages onboard 132 all-veranda suite Seabourn Venture which feature extraordinary curated onshore events. Depending on the itinerary they select, guests will enjoy exclusive access to private cultural events, fine dining at world renowned wineries and premium tickets to iconic tennis tournaments in a selection of marquee ports.

Book your clients by 3 September and they'll enjoy More Moments Credit of up to \$2,200USD per suite to use towards more adventures.

10-Day Andalusian Nights: Spotlight on Seville

26 Mar & 20 Apr 2025^A

Lisbon to Barcelona | Inclusive Air

Visits: Portimao (Algarve, Portugal); Seville (Spain, overnight); Tangier (Morocco); Motril (Granada); Mahon (Menorca); Sete (Montpelier, France); Palamos (Spain).

- Overnight in Seville
- Included dinner and flamenco dance performance at Villa Luisa, Seville
- Seabourn Conversations with renowned wine expert Will Lyons (26/3 cruise).

^AItinerary operates in reverse on 20 Apr 2025 featuring Seabourn Conversations with UNESCO expert Alessandra Borchini.



SEVILLE

8-Day Monte Carlo Masters

5 April 2025

Barcelona to Rome | Inclusive air

Visits: Port Vendres (France); Toulon; St Tropez; Cannes; Monte Carlo (Monaco, overnight); Porto Venere (Cinque Terre, Italy).

Sue Barker CBE



- Overnight in Monte Carlo
- Included Premium tickets to the Monte Carlo Masters
- Seabourn Conversations with TV presenter and world-class tennis player Sue Barker, CBE.

7-Day Barcelona Open

13 April 2025

Rome to Barcelona | Inclusive air

Visits: Portoferraio (Elba, Italy); Porto Venere (Cinque Terre); Cannes (France); St Tropez; Sete (Montpelier); Barcelona (Spain, overnight).

Tommy Haas



- Overnight in Barcelona
- Included Premium tickets to the Barcelona Open Tournament
- Seabourn Conversations with German tennis star Tommy Haas



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8-Day Vineyard Vistas: An Evening in Bordeaux

30 Apr 2025 | Lisbon to Dublin | Inclusive Air

Visits: Gijon (Spain); Hendaye (Biarritz, France); Bordeaux (overnight); Dunmore East (Waterford, Ireland).

- Overnight in Bordeaux
- Included Wine Tasting at Chateau Smith Haut Lafitte.



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Tech Talk

Climate check

While discussions around sustainability are nothing new, the cruise industry is lagging behind, says Traveltek chief commercial officer **Cressida Sergeant**

Despite the growing consumer interest in sustainable travel, the cruise industry often struggles to offer and promote green options. A *Time Magazine* article from 2023 claimed the cruise industry was “on a course for climate disaster” and questioned whether customers booking cruises to popular destinations care about the sustainability of their voyages.

However, despite the negative press around cruise’s environmental impact, bookings through Traveltek’s platforms continue to grow year on year. Yet an impending demographic shift will bring new challenges, such as attracting Millennial and Gen Z travellers, nicknamed the “sustainability generation”. Targeting these groups will be crucial for the industry’s anticipated growth and the need to attract an additional four million new to cruise travellers between 2023 and 2025 (CLIA).

Many cruise companies are investing heavily in innovative technologies and sustainability practices to reach net zero targets, as detailed in this issue’s Behind the Headlines feature on *page 18*. However, agents still say that they face several challenges when promoting sustainable cruises, with survey respondents rating it an above-average difficulty rating of 5.7/10.

We all have a role to play in addressing these issues. Cruise lines must enhance communication on green technologies and sustainable itineraries, involve passengers and collaborate with environmental organisations to improve transparency. Travel technology



“**Agents still say they face several challenges promoting sustainable cruises**

companies like Traveltek can support these efforts by developing green search filters, enhancing data transparency, supporting industry collaboration, providing educational and marketing support and leveraging technology for efficiency.

By taking these steps, the cruise industry can move closer to aligning with broader sustainability trends and consumer expectations in travel, allowing everyone to contribute to a greener future. It’s crucial that technology companies, cruise lines and travel agents all work together to help support our mutual customers with the correct information, allowing them to make greener choices. ●

ABOVE Cressida Sergeant says cruise lines are investing heavily in new technologies to reach net zero targets

In NUMBERS

A cruise sustainability survey of frontline agents launched by Traveltek in May found that:

93%

of customers say price is their main concern when booking a cruise

35%

of customers report sustainability is an important factor regarding holidays-at-sea

14%

of agents commonly have conversations about sustainability with clients

Authentic Arabia

Celestyal has set its sights on becoming the 'go-to' cruise operator in the Gulf, following the repositioning of *Celestyal Discovery* to the region for winter 2025

“Trade business in the UK has been performing really well, we are in high triple digit growth year-on-year, and we believe the UK has the capacity to perform even better,” says Janet Parton VP business development, UK, Europe and Australia, Celestyal. In a bid to continue the momentum of a recent influx in bookings from the UK, Celestyal increased its presence in the Arabian Gulf by 30 per cent with the addition of *Celestyal Discovery* in the region.

The vessel will sail a series of winter sun Arabian Gulf itineraries from 2025 alongside *Celestyal Journey*, which will depart on the seven-night Desert Days cruise later this year making maiden calls to Khasab, Dubai, Sir Bani Yas Island, Abu Dhabi and Bahrain.

During the week-long sailing, guests can get lost in the great outdoors of the Khasab public gardens before treating themselves to a fresh batch of Halwa – a local sweet delicacy made from semolina, nuts and cardamom – as the Arabian sun kisses the beatific Bassa Beach.

POSITIVE FEEDBACK

Parton said the line's Desert Days itinerary has been “positively received” by the trade. “Our intention was always for the UK to be a core part of that business, hence the growth in the Gulf.

“The response to Celestyal from the trade over the past 12 months has been overwhelming, with bookings coming in through an array of

agents, including homeworkers, consortia and independent retail outlets.”

Alongside its winter sun voyages, Celestyal's core summer Greek and Mediterranean cruises are also now on sale. These will feature eight additional Heavenly Adriatic cruises in 2025 and a further 13 in 2026, calling at Greece; Split or Dubrovnik, Croatia; Kotor, Montenegro; and Venice, Marghera, or Bari, Italy. Demand is already overwhelming, according to the line.

Here, guests will have the chance to take in the majesty of the Adriatic Sea before docking in Kotor to find out more about the Venetian fortifications which sweep the hills.

Then, they can grab a taste of the region by tucking into the catch of the day – which can include lobster and grilled squid – in local shoreside eateries.

REPEAT ON THE RISE

Lee Haslett, chief commercial officer at Celestyal, says 86 per cent of the cruise line's guests report they want to come back to Celestyal. As a result, the line will deliver on its commitment to broaden out its programmes, explains Haslett.

“

Guests can get lost in the great outdoors of the Khasab public gardens





“We’re renowned as the cruise specialists of the Greek islands and Mediterranean and, thanks to the commitment of the region and this overwhelming support from our customers and trusted partners, we are now confident in becoming the go-to cruise specialists of the Arabian Gulf.”

Across its entire network, Celestyal offers two types of cruising: destination intensive three- and four-night itineraries – which can be combined with a land stay and as a bolt-on to a beach or touring holiday – and seven-night cruises.

“We have award-winning service, two newly refurbished ships, immersive shore excursions, a diverse and high-end food and beverage offering and unrivalled customer satisfaction, as well as the ambition to continuously evolve and deliver more,” Haslett explains.

Discover it all

New *Celestyal Discovery* sailings in the Arabian Gulf

1 A three-night Iconic Arabia cruise, departing from Abu Dhabi, calling at Doha (Qatar) and Sir Bani Yas Island (UAE). Prices start from £249pp.

2 A four-night Iconic Arabia cruise, departing from Abu Dhabi, calling at Fujairah (UAE), Muscat and Khasab (both Oman). Prices start from £309pp.

3 Guests can also combine the itineraries into a seven-night Gulf Icons sailing. Prices start from £569pp.

INCREASING DEMAND

Parton says bookings are “coming in at a good pace” for 2025, with demand already being present for 2026.

“When looking at the portfolio, we can see a race for space in 2024. So, it’s a case of getting in early to guarantee the available space, hence why we’ve gone out so early with 2026/27,” she explains.

Parton also believes the line’s expansion in the Gulf gives agents the opportunity to appeal to a new strain of client. “For those that have never cruised before, the region is a really strong selling point for the UK with all of the airlift available,” she says.

“We know a lot of travellers go to the Arabian Gulf for a land-based holiday, and what that does is open up another proposition for agents to convince customers to do their land stay in the Gulf and then take a cruise to another region.” ●

CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT Lee Haslett; the bright lights of Dubai; *Celestyal Journey* now also travels to the Arabian Gulf; Janet Parton





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Both of our ships are sailing to the Arabian Gulf



Celestyal **Discovery**

Celestyal **Journey**

All prices are per-person, based on a double occupancy of the stateroom and are quoted in €/\$/E/AU\$. Celestyal Experience fares include accommodation on board in the booked category, on-board dining and complimentary select drinks and beverages during food service hours, all port and service charges and entertainment program on board. Moreover an €75 \$85 £65 AU\$120 discount for pre-booked shore excursions is included. Booking window is July 1st, 2024 to August 31st, 2024 for the selected cruises. Offer is valid for new, individual bookings. It is not valid for groups and cannot be held as group block. Reduced rate space is capacity controlled and may be withdrawn at any time with, or without notice. Celestyal Cruises reserves the right to add, change or modify reduced rate conditions at any time, without notification. Port and service charges and any other surcharges are not commissionable even if indicated as included in the cruise rate. Celestyal's Deposit and Cancellation standard policies apply based on the booking/sailing date. Celestyal reserves the right to correct any incorrect information due to a human error, typographical error or technical error. Other restrictions may apply. In the event of any discrepancies between the rates stated herein and the rates displayed in the Reservation System, the rates provided by the Reservation System shall prevail and be deemed as the correct and binding rates for all purpose. The general terms and conditions of Celestyal apply.



3 nights

Iconic Arabia

Discovery Sailings
2025 - 2026 - 2027

Itinerary
Abu Dhabi • Doha
Sir Bani Yas Island • Abu Dhabi

From
only **£249** pp

4 nights

Iconic Arabia

Discovery Sailings
2025 - 2026 - 2027

Itinerary
Abu Dhabi • Fujairah
Muscat • Khasab • Abu Dhabi

From
only **£309** pp

7 nights

Desert Days

Journey Sailings
2024 - 2025 (Q1)

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Doha • Bahrain • Dubai
Khasab • Sir Bani Yas Island
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Tauck

With nearly 100 years' experience in providing cruise and tour holidays, the US-based firm is now setting its sights on the UK market

IN THE KNOW

It would be safe to assume Arthur Tauck Sr would be proud of the meteoric rise his company has experienced in recent years. Having cemented its place as a key player over the pond, the Connecticut-based operator has recently expanded its footprint in the UK as part of plans to bolster its global remit.

The line has ambitions to grow its presence in the British market by ensuring its fleet of nine river ships – which sail on the Danube, Rhone, Rhine, Seine and Douro rivers – stand out amongst its competitors. To do this, Tauck is focusing on elevated experiences, such as after-hours visits to some of the world's most captivating museums and points of interest.

THE FLEET

Tauck's river ships specialise in exclusive sailing experiences, with each vessel accommodating a maximum of 130



guests, which is fewer than most vessels on Europe's rivers. Stars of the fleet include *Inspire* and *Savor*, which were renovated in 2020, and *Andorinha*, which launched in the same year.

Onboard, staterooms are fitted with 400-thread satin bed linen, mako cotton pillows and 100 per cent cotton blankets, as well as a variety of Tauck-exclusive Molton Brown bath products.

The larger ships in the fleet offer a mix of casual and alfresco dining, as well as expansive sun decks with putting greens and jacuzzis.

EXCLUSIVE EXCURSIONS

The highlight of the line's themed all-inclusive river cruises are undoubtedly the private excursions, which provide guests with exclusive access to some of the most sought-after experiences on Europe's rivers. For example, passengers sailing along the Rhine this autumn can enjoy reserved seating for lunch in one of the traditional brewery tents at Munich's Oktoberfest, while those exploring the Danube can sit in on a private orchestra rehearsal with the Vienna Philharmonic.

WHO'S WHO?

The main point of contact for Tauck in the UK is Tom Dumbrell, national sales manager UK and Ireland, who joined the



CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT
Tauck's fleet offers intimate experiences; the sun decks are perfect for taking in the view; guests can enjoy the scenery in *Andorinha's* bar lounge; there's a wide range of excursions with many exclusive options

“Our trips include special access to hidden gems without the presence of crowds

line in August 2022. He is responsible for overseeing the brand's passenger and revenue growth in the UK market. Arthur Tauck Jr, who heads up the company in the US as chair of the board, is supported by CEO and board director Daniel Mahar. The line also has a team on hand to support agents with training and guidance on its portfolio of cruises.

WHAT'S ON THE HORIZON?

Tauck will mark its 100th anniversary with a refreshed portfolio of holidays in destinations such as Cuba, Colombia and Japan. The line will supplement its river cruise collection with a new 14-day Romantic Capitals itinerary, connecting Paris and Prague with nine-nights along the Rhine, Moselle and Danube rivers, sailing from May to July and October this year.

It will also add a new cruise to Sicily, the Amalfi Coast and Rome, which includes after-hours visits to the Vatican Museums and the Sistine Chapel.



IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Tom Dumbrell, national sales manager for UK and Ireland, on what makes Tauck a compelling proposition for cruise-goers

What advice would you give an agent who has never sold Tauck before? UK agents are well supported by a dedicated national sales manager and an experienced reservations team who are all happy to help. Our team can provide any training, support or advice you require, and our portfolio of 150 tours and cruises hold fantastic opportunities for those looking to grow or diversify their business.

How does Tauck differentiate itself from similar competitors in the market? Our trips include a collection of experiences which provide special access to hidden gems and must-see sights without the presence of crowds. Whether it's an evening at a Viennese Palace, time at a family farm in La Camargue, or our early-opening visit to Claude Monet's house and gardens at Giverny, Tauck guests see the world differently to how they could see it on their own.

TOP TIPS

1 Get in touch with Tauck if you've never sold the brand before. Experts are on hand to offer training on the company's portfolio of 150 tours and cruises, as well as advice on what kind of customer to target.

2 Highlight Tauck's unique selling points when trying to convert a customer. The line's fleet of nine riverboats can each carry 130 passengers, making them the perfect choice for those who prefer a small-ship, intimate experience.

3 Point clients towards Tauck's refreshed itineraries coming in 2025 as part of its centurion celebrations. Refreshed sailings in Japan and Cuba will be available, as well as a European cruise which connects Paris and Prague.



SCAN
Carnival Cruise Line
hosts 21 agents on
Florida fam trip

INCENTIVES
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**What's in
it for you?**



CARNIVAL BOOSTS LOYALTY ROCKS CLUB INCENTIVE



Carnival Cruise Line has expanded its Loyalty Rocks Club incentive, which will now run throughout July and will allow agents to receive 20 points for every family cabin booking made and 10 points for any other type of booking.

The 20 points, which have the equivalent value of £20, can be exchanged for a variety of vouchers and gift cards which can be used for brands such as M&S, Argos and Greggs.

Agents who make a booking will also be entered into a leaderboard to win a cruise to Celebration Key, the line's new private Grand Bahama

destination, opening in July 2025. Iain Baillie, vice-president international sales at Carnival, said: "We've been blown away by the support of the trade and their enthusiasm for all things Carnival, in particular Celebration Key.

"By adding family cabins to our July incentive, we're once again demonstrating that a cruise with Carnival is the perfect getaway for everyone across the generations."

To be in with a chance of winning, agents need to make a Celebration Key booking on GoCCL.co.uk and register it on LoyaltyRocksClub.com.

Visit

cruisetradenews.com for the latest incentives, itineraries and training news from across the cruise industry



AMBASSADOR ANNOUNCES FAM TRIP WINNERS

Ambassador Cruise Line has confirmed the agents who have won a place on its Autumn Fjordland sailing. Co-op Travel's Bridget Wilkinson; Fallon McGilloway from Lincolnshire Co-Op; One Travel Club's Remi Creed; Suze Newton-Staines, a homemaker from Inteletravel; Sam Wolanski from No Fuss Holidays; Harley Travel's Joshua Newbert; Pauline Dougherty from Travel Counsellors; and Claire Body from ITE will join the seven-night sailing on 26 September.

Through 2024, Ambassador will offer 60 agents the opportunity to join three fam trips taking place from July to October 2024. Two itineraries onboard *Ambience* will depart from Tilbury with a third sailing welcoming agents in the Port of Tyne.



CLIA CONFIRMS CRUISE WEEK 2024 DATES

CLIA has confirmed this year's UK & Ireland Cruise Week will take place from 16-22 September. The annual series will see a host of trade-focused activities and initiatives take place over the course of the seven-day event.

It will focus on the #DiscoverMore destination theme, which was also a feature across CLIA's main conference in May.

The trade body will share information and insights on destinations through interviews, webinars and live broadcasts. It will also work with its member cruise lines to offer trade incentives.



RIVIERA TO HOST TRADE DINNERS

Riviera Travel will hold a series of regional travel agent dinners across the UK and Ireland as it continues its 40th anniversary celebrations. Nine agents will be invited each evening.

The dinners will take place over the course of the summer, beginning in Birmingham on 16 July with others to follow in London, the south west, south east, north west and north east, as well as Scotland and Ireland.

During the dinners, agents will learn more about the latest Riviera updates and how the brand is working with the trade, connect with the Riviera team and network with their peers.

Vicky Billing (pictured), head of trade and partnerships at Riviera, said: "These events are just one of the ways we are showing our gratitude to our agent partners, whose support has been nothing short of phenomenal."

Gold standard

Cruise Stars is back and bigger than ever. With entries open for this year's ceremony, past winners reveal how the award has propelled their careers

After returning for the first time in 2023 following a four-year hiatus, Cruise Stars is back again to celebrate the industry's rising talent. This year's ceremony, hosted by *Cruise Trade News* and sponsored by Riviera Travel, Virgin Voyages and Fred. Olsen Cruise Lines, will take place at the Grand Connaught Rooms in Central London on 13 December, and with a host of new categories now open for entry, now's the perfect time to recognise the leaders of tomorrow within your business.

Categories this year include Cruise Line Sales Star, Mentoring Star and the coveted Star of the Year award, while roving travel agents will also be celebrated with two regional gongs.

Each award is free to enter online at cruisestars.uk, with categories open to travel agents who sell cruise holidays, as well as those working for lines and brands themselves.

"It's an honour to once again be celebrating the industry's amazing rising talent at this year's Cruise Stars awards," says Lina Slater, chief operating officer for Real Response Media. "Our industry is one of the most exciting and dynamic sectors within the wider travel landscape and that's in large part thanks to the individuals who champion cruise and drive holiday bookings year in, year out."

'THIS WIN FEELS AMAZING'

Walking on stage and accepting an award in front of a room full of industry peers is a moment that stays with our winners forever. However, accolades such as these are especially important because they have the power to propel someone's career for years to come.

"Since winning the Cruise Line PR & Marketing Star award, I am fortunate to have progressed to trade marketing and support manager at Scenic & Emerald Cruises, and now manage a team of three in our Manchester head office," says Helena Gale-Hasleham, trade marketing and support manager for Scenic. "I still love working in travel marketing and have been very lucky to work with a fantastic product, which has now grown to include four incredible ocean yachts."

Gale-Hasleham, who won in 2019, says it can be hard to remember all your day-to-day accomplishments or successes, so

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE The worthy winners of the 2023 Cruise Stars awards; Real Response Media's Lina Slater; a Cruise Stars award has the power to propel your career to new heights

getting help from others when writing your application can ensure you give yourself the best chance of winning on the night. "If you're unsure what to include in your application and it feels a bit overwhelming, I'd recommend asking one of your colleagues to give you some ideas for areas of your job they think you have done well - there will probably be several achievements you may not have thought of."





Rebecca Jones, head of marketing, Ambassador Cruise Line, and a 2019 award winner, says hearing why the judges had selected her submission was incredibly insightful as it was a different approach to traditional cruise marketing. “At the time, I was quite shocked to hear parts of my submission being read out before my name was announced. There was a high calibre of finalists that year and I did not think I would stand a chance.”

Meanwhile, one of last year’s winners Daniel Hammond, cruise and travel specialist at GoCruise & Travel, believes awards like this are massive for the industry. “Agents are often unsung –

“**Agents are often unsung... events like this make us more known in the industry**

they don’t get a lot of recognition; the cruise lines get more at times, which they should, but agents are the little people, so events like this make us more known in the industry.”

Head to cruisestars.uk today to enter either yourself or a colleague into one of our 20 categories and to browse past winners from 2016 onwards. ●



RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

Become an email marketing wizard with these essential 'dos' and 'don'ts' from marketing experts Force24

Email remains the cornerstone of digital marketing strategies, but with an average of 120 emails flooding inboxes daily, standing out is more challenging than ever. Here are a few crucial 'dos' and 'don'ts' to keep your email marketing on track and ensure your messages cut through.

DON'T rely solely on opens and clicks to measure success

Since Apple introduced Mail Privacy Protection (MPP), Apple's privacy proxy now generates 70 per cent of opens (Validity). This means that senders can no longer rely on opens to accurately measure email engagement. Instead,

dive deeper into your audience's interactions by tracking actions like purchases, time spent on your website, and engagement with specific content. This will provide you with a comprehensive understanding of your audience's preferences and behaviours, allowing you to tailor your strategies more effectively and foster stronger, more meaningful connections.

DO consider your preheader as the subject line's best friend

An email preheader, which sits below the subject line in a person's inbox, is often one of the first things readers see. Start your preheader with connectors like 'and', 'with', or 'but' to draw your audience in after they've read your subject line. Your preheader should be less than 85 characters and should serve as a continuation of your subject line.

DON'T just segment demographically

The frequency with which you send emails should change depending on engagement levels and behavioural

data. Use lead scoring to assign points to engagement actions and use these scores to determine what and when you send. The more you understand the customer journey, the better. Remember, if you were segmenting solely on demographics, Ozzy Osbourne and King Charles would be in the same category. Who would you rather have performing at a rock festival?

DO add SMS into the mix

Sending a follow-up SMS after an email can increase your email open rates by 20-30 per cent, according to Adobe. You can incorporate SMS into a variety of campaigns, including event reminders, exclusive promotions, survey collections and welcome messages. Nearly two-thirds of marketers still don't use SMS, which presents an opportunity to stand out and benefit from a vastly superior open rate.

DON'T neglect important email authentication protocols

With the recent updates from Google and Yahoo, incorporating Brand Indicators for Message Identification (BIMI) has become crucial. BIMI allows your brand's logo to appear next to an email in a recipient's inbox, enhancing brand visibility. To enable BIMI, you need to set up Domain-based Message Authentication, Reporting and Conformance (DMARC), which protects your domain from being used in email spoofing and phishing attacks. Proper implementation of these protocols can improve your email deliverability and ensure your messages reach your audience safely.



Sending a follow-up SMS after an email can increase email open rates by 20-30 per cent

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On the
road with...

Charlotte Ireland

Seabourn's assistant manager, business development outlines the brand's key selling points and how she intends to work more closely with agents in 2024

How important are UK agents to the success of Seabourn in 2024?

We are 100 per cent committed to working with travel partners. Whether established cruise sellers, small boutique agencies or businesses seeking to expand into adventure travel, we are on a mutual journey with our agents to grow their ultra-luxury business with Seabourn.

What selling points are you focusing on when meeting agents?

Product knowledge is vital in order to confidently sell luxury, so we offer immersive training and webinars on our brand. We talk about our pillars, our campaigns and the products we feel are most attractive to an agents client base.

How important is it for you to get out in front of trade?

We try to meet with partners, but if the distance is too great, we have Teams meetings and sponsor and attend agent conferences when possible. One of our main strategies has been to give agents



the confidence and knowledge to sell expeditions. Seabourn already has a high profile in the luxury cruise industry, but the move into selling ultra-luxury expeditions has meant prioritising training on expedition product and destinations.

What key points should agents focus on when selling Seabourn?

We compare our ocean ships to boutique hotels that just happen to be at sea with

the advantage of being able to visit a variety of destinations in just one holiday. Seabourn is all-suite, all-inclusive, ultra-luxury, with nearly one member of staff to every guest. We offer very high standards, while creating unforgettable moments.

Expedition, meanwhile, is slightly different. Our two purpose-built expedition ships

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT

Charlotte Ireland wants partners to experience the brand for themselves; *Seabourn Odyssey* offers the ultimate way to experience Alaska

Seabourn Venture and *Seabourn Pursuit* visit some of the world's most remote destinations, many of them impossible to visit in any other way than by ship.

Where should agents who have never sold Seabourn before start?

Training is key; new partners who wish to specialise in luxury and expedition should visit our online academy, which offers a range of training modules. Topics range from product and destinations to marketing and client lead generation ideas.

There's also the Seabourn YouTube channel, with many inspiring videos, ranging from worldwide destinations to virtual ship tours. We have also developed our exclusive GoSeabourn portal as a one-stop trade resource, as well as our POLAR online reservation system.

What are the current challenges in agent training?

Training is very important, but personal experience is the best way to gain the confidence to sell our brand. We offer ship visits and fam trips. Last May we took nearly 200 partners on a cruise from Tilbury to Greenwich on board *Seabourn Venture*. We've seen great results from such a project, with partners confidently sharing their experiences with potential clients. ●

“
Seabourn is all-suite, all-inclusive, ultra-luxury, with nearly one member of staff to every guest



Sailing to success

Travel agents, marketing experts and tech leaders descended on News UK's London office on 17 June to plot the future of cruise. **Will Payne** and **Jack Carter** report

Automation. Augmented reality. Artificial intelligence. Phrases which 20 years ago were nothing more than space-age lexicon in a sci-fi blockbuster. Now, however, they're engrained in our day-to-day conversations and reshaping industries around the globe. But what impact could these new technologies have on the cruise industry?

This was one of questions that this year's Cruise Summit, hosted by *Cruise Trade News (CTN)*, set out to answer at its third annual conference in London last month. A jam-packed agenda, which was themed around the future of cruise saw the likes of Google and Meta, alongside cruise industry leaders, debate how technology, booking priorities and the overall travel landscape will evolve during the next 12-18 months.

GOVERNMENT INTERVENTION

After an opening address from Real Response Media editorial director Lee Hayhurst, CLIA UK & Ireland managing director Andy Harmer took to the stage to share the association's latest membership research. He also detailed the trade body's key priorities for the next UK government. He told delegates that sustainability efforts must be sped up, with the new Labour government needing to play a central role.

Speaking before the election results were announced, Harmer said: "Whatever colour the next UK government will be, we are asking them to accelerate the availability of alternative fuels. We are asking for support for port infrastructure because we need the right fuels in the right places. We need to be able to plug in. It's happening in Europe, but not in the UK."



Cruise leaders joined Google and Meta to discuss how travel will evolve over the next 12-18 months

The data focus continued with Traveltek chief commercial officer Cressida Sergeant diving into 2024 booking trends before Jack Carter, editor of *Cruise Trade News*, revealed the findings of an extensive reader survey, published alongside sister consumer title *World of Cruising*.

The research, which was gathered from a sample of nearly 1,200 cruise experts and consumers, found that price (23 per cent), itinerary (24 per cent) and destination (22 per cent) were the primary factors influencing travellers' choice of cruise line. Discounting, meanwhile, continues to be the biggest barrier to agents looking to sell more cruise holidays, with 47 per cent of the trade feeling the impact of slashed fares.

Other highlights of the day included keynotes from Google's Amelie Matuschka and Meta's Russell Pert who shared an exclusive look at the tech giants' latest travel

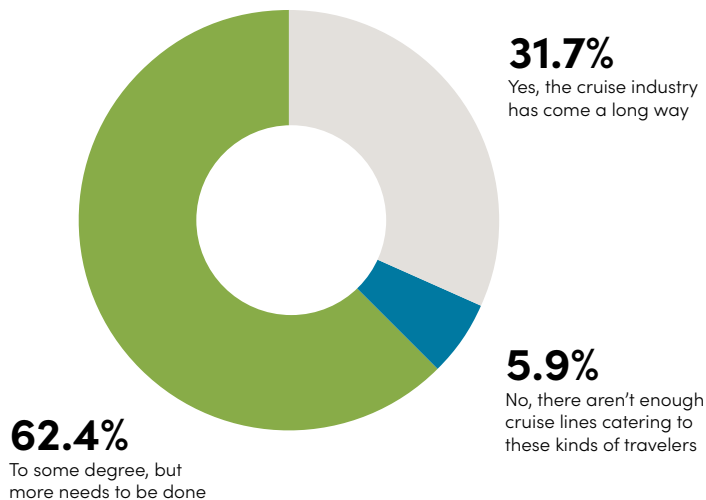


CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Editor of CTN Jack Carter; CLIA's Andy Harmer; Georgie Lamden, partnerships manager at News UK; the summit attracted a wide range of cruise industry professionals; Lee Hayhurst moderates a lively discussion; Cressida Sergeant from Traveltek

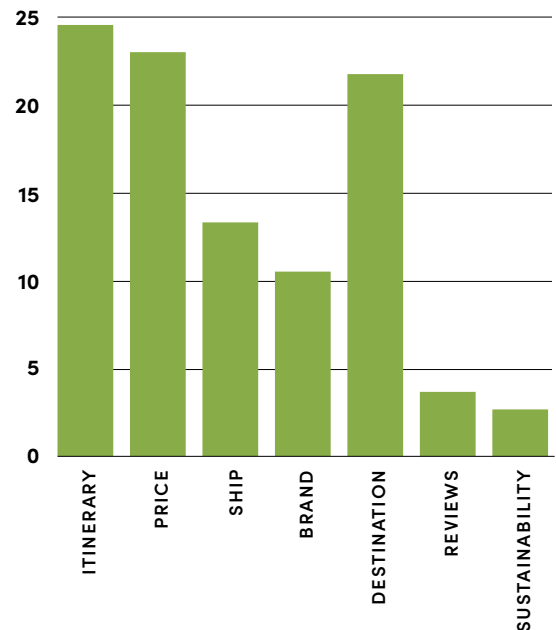


Photos: Josie Espinosa

Are cruise lines doing enough to cater for guests with accessibility needs?



What factors most influence your clients' choice of cruise line?



insights, before five media brands – including ITV, Times Radio and Force24 – went head-to-head to argue why their platform is the best for the audiences' marketing strategies.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

During the event, *Cruise Trade News* caught up with several attendees to get their take on what the future may hold for the industry.

Adam Oldfield, CEO and founder of travel marketing platform Force24, would like to see the industry “strike better conversations” and improve

relationships with consumers in the next five to 10 years.

“I feel like the industry is extremely creative and passionate and we need to make sure that translates into our marketing,” he said. “We know more about the individuals, we hold more data about them and we can produce better content which aligns to their needs.

“For me, listening to Google and Meta talk about their AI strategies and how AI is forming is a key takeaway. I’ll be doing a bit of research into how that is going to help my brand and how it is going to help us moving forward.”

“**The diversity in the mainstream market will bring more guests into the small-ship sector**

This was echoed by Hayley Moore, sales director UK and Europe for Princess Cruises, who hopes the cruise sector can continue to grow on recent record-breaking booking periods.

“There are so many advocates within the industry, whether you’re a tour operator or from another brand, there is such a community feel,” she added. “We need those advocates to continue being a positive voice. As we have a lot more ships, we’re going to need a lot more people [on board].”

Meanwhile, Bernard Carter, who joined Atlas Ocean Voyages to lead the brand’s expansion into the UK last year, predicts small ship cruising will “reach new heights” in the next decade.

“The diversity you’ve got in the mainstream market will help bring more people into the small-ship sector,” he said. “Atlas is just one of the brands in the burgeoning expedition sector which is growing at an amazing pace. The customers are king, we all want to hear



what they want – once they tell us, we'll be the ones to go and find it for them.

"It's not so much about the general stats that we all have access to, but more about hearing from companies which provide the tech and innovation to bring the industry forward which is really useful," he continued.

Destinations are also tipped to play a crucial role in bringing more customers to the sector. Michael Rodriguez, area director for the Singapore Tourism Board, believes the Southeast Asia country is the ideal place to send clients looking to take their first long-haul fly-cruise adventure.

"A lot of first-time cruisers will sail in Europe out of the UK, that's understandable," he admitted. "I think Singapore offers a unique proposition in that we are an accessible long-haul fly-cruise product."

In June, Singapore Airways will launch a new direct flight from Gatwick to the destination, signalling an increase in popularity for long-haul holiday options.

Head of sales EMEA for Hurtigruten Carla Hines, meanwhile, believes events like the Cruise Summit will enable the Norwegian coastal operator to "grow even further".

5 KEY TAKEAWAYS FROM THE 2024 CRUISE SUMMIT

1 YOUNG PEOPLE KEEN ON CRUISING

Meta group director Russell Pert revealed that travellers aged between 16–44 are just as likely to take a cruise in the next five years as those aged 45 and over. Pert was quoting a Mintel survey of 2,000 travellers aged 16+, conducted in November 2023, in which he shared that 30 per cent of respondents aged 16–24 were interested in taking a cruise in the next five years, compared to 21 per cent of interviewees aged between 55 and 64.



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT Force24's Adam Oldfield said learning about AI strategy was a key takeaway; guests admire the view from News UK's London office

“Destinations are also tipped to play a crucial role in bringing more customers to the sector

2 STILL WORK TO BE DONE ON ACCESSIBILITY

While cruising opportunities for travellers with accessibility needs are growing, 62 per cent of travel agents believe more work needs to be done to ensure the sector fully meets their needs, according to CTN's research.

Areas for improvement include the river cruise sector, where sleeker ships with narrow corridors and tight turning spaces can be challenging for guests in wheelchairs and mobility scooters. Additionally, some port destinations are not adequately prepared for meeting accessibility needs while some tenders, needed for disembarking, cannot offer a ramp.

3 SUSTAINABILITY YET TO INFLUENCE BEHAVIOUR

It was also revealed that more than half of *World of Cruising* readers say sustainability either greatly impacts their decision or they actively want to learn more about how to travel responsibly, implying that it will impact their decision in the near future. However, roughly 75 per cent of

travel agents who responded to *Cruise Trade News'* industry-wide survey say sustainability rarely, if at all, impacts their clients' decision making. This is echoed by Traveltek's own research, which reports that travellers have only a moderate interest in sustainable cruising.

4 WEEK-LONG ITINERARIES REMAIN MOST POPULAR

Traveltek's Cressida Sergeant highlighted that the average age of consumers booking with the firm's platform is 48 and so far in 2024, it has seen an increase in shorter and longer sailings. Seven-night itineraries remain the most popular, accounting for 57 per cent of total bookings, followed by 14-night itineraries at 17 per cent. Meanwhile, average booking value in 2024 is down £200 on 2019.

5 EXPEDITION AND LUXURY ARE ON THE RISE

When travel agents were asked which cruise type their clients are most excited to experience in the next 12–18 months, *Cruise Trade News'* reader survey found that river, expedition and luxury are on an equal footing with ocean cruising.

"The fact that so many of our travel agent readers say their clients want to experience luxury, river and expedition shows that the messaging around these sectors is cutting through," said Carter. "This should give a huge amount of encouragement to cruise lines operating in these sectors." ●

SHIP OF THE MONTH

CELESTYAL JOURNEY

When Celestyal announced that its latest ship – *Celestyal Journey* – will begin a new seven-night Desert Days itinerary in Doha this November, it was another milestone in Qatar’s journey to establishing itself as a leading cruise destination. The line will also sail three- and four-night variations of its Arabian Gulf deployment, with the shorter alternatives offering a midweek beach cruise or a weekend city-hopping sailing. Launched in September last year, *Celestyal Journey* is a statement addition to the challenger brand’s fleet. The ship has 149 balcony suites, six dining venues, two swimming pools and a floor dedicated to wellness.

Fast facts

1,260
guests

630
cabins

8
bars

7
restaurants



1 Desert Days

Starting from £469pp, Celestyal’s Desert Days itinerary incorporates the greatest hits of the Arabian Peninsula. As well as taking in the forts and fjords of Khasab, Oman and Dubai’s luxury shopping malls, guests will have two full days to experience Doha’s remarkable Souq Waqif.



2 Stargazer Suite

This is Celestyal’s first-ever penthouse suite with its own private terrace. The Stargazer Suite can sleep four people and features a jacuzzi bath and private dining area, as well as exclusive access to Rays, a secluded sunbathing and relaxation area, and the Compass Lounge.



3 Bars & lounges

Guests looking for a pre- or post-dinner tipple will be well served on board, with a total of eight bars offering everything from laid-back lounges with live pianists to top-deck hangouts primed for sunset. Fizz Club is the pick of the bunch thanks to its award-winning cocktails.



4 Sozo spa

The ship's wellness offering calls on influences from around the world, from the Sozo treatment rooms taking inspiration from Greece to Balinese hot stone and shiatsu massages. A dedicated relaxation room – the Drift Den – is the spot for quiet solitude.



5 Customer service

A team of 581 highly trained crew members are on hand to give guests a holiday to remember. Canapes are delivered to staterooms before dinner, with petit fours waiting when they return, while stewards ensure the mini bar is well stocked.



6 Qatar Grand Prix

To celebrate its partnership with Qatar Tourism, Celestyal has included three days at the F1 Qatar Airways Qatar Grand Prix 2024 into its Desert Days itineraries this November. Guests will be able to purchase a three-day grandstand race ticket from £193pp.



Up to
US **\$620**
on board credit
per balcony stateroom*

Plus,
complimentary
stateroom upgrades
on selected 2025
voyages*

*T&Cs apply

Guests can enjoy up to US\$620 on board credit on selected voyages when they book by 2 September 2024.

Plus, if your customers join us in 2025 to explore the wonders of Alaska on Queen Elizabeth, or for a sun-kissed holiday in the Mediterranean on Queen Victoria, they can enjoy the chance to experience a different type of stateroom (or maybe a suite?) that they've always wanted to try, on us.



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or scan the QR code.



*Visit cunard.com for more details.

QUEEN MARY 2

QUEEN VICTORIA

QUEEN ELIZABETH

QUEEN ANNE



WATCH

Scan the code to watch
the full roundtable discussion
on cruisetradenews.com

EYES ON THE PRIZE

From Taylor Swift tickets to all-expense paid cruises, today's agent reward schemes have seen cruise lines go to incredible lengths to motivate the trade. **Jack Carter** invites five senior industry experts to a roundtable discussion to find out how to devise the ultimate incentive strategy



Turn to **page 48** where our agent panel rates the reward schemes of four randomly chosen cruise lines

Picture the scene: you're relaxing in your private cabana, scanning the cocktail menu as the sight of your next cruise call drifts slowly into view. After ordering a frozen strawberry daiquiri, you contemplate whether to spend the rest of the afternoon sunbathing by the pool with Alexandra Potter's latest novel for company or spending your spa credit on a reviving Swedish massage. Of course, this is the only thing you need to worry about during your week-long cruise. And the best part? You haven't paid a single penny to be there.

Agent reward schemes are an integral part of cruise lines' trade strategy, where prizes range from vouchers and all-expense paid cruises to front-row Taylor Swift tickets – which were up for grabs earlier this year courtesy of Unforgettable Croatia. However, implementing an effective trade incentive isn't as simple as choosing great prizes. Focus too much on monetary rewards and the relationship with an agent can feel too transactional. Offer something like a once-in-a-lifetime holiday, however, and lines risk agents selling their cruises because the sale is more beneficial to them than the client.

To learn more about what makes a successful agent reward scheme, *Cruise Trade News* invited senior industry figures from Celebrity Cruises, Travel Village Group, Uniworld, World Travel Holdings and Carnival Cruise Line to a roundtable

“ Agent reward schemes are an integral part of cruise lines' trade strategy

discussion to ascertain what rewards agents value most and whether there are any alternative strategies available.

You can watch the discussion in full by scanning the QR code on *page 39* and tell us about the agent reward schemes you value most by tweeting us on X at *@cruisetradenews*.

KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

The first step to conceptualising an agent reward scheme is to know exactly who you're trying to incentivise. According to Luke Smith, director, UK & international sales, Carnival Cruise Line, engaging with travel agents at the beginning of the process means you get a clearer idea of how to motivate your trade partners.

“If you're putting together a scheme to reward travel agents, don't get sucked into a bubble of what you think travel agents want,” Smith says. “Speak to the people you're incentivising and gather as much feedback as possible.”

“I completely agree,” adds Nicola McNeish, head of sales, Celebrity Cruises. “Every year we get a panel of agents together and ask what motivates them so we can find out how we can encourage them to sell more cruises.”

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Agents can share their prizes with loved ones; agents from Panache, Travel Counsellors and more attend a fam trip to India with Uniworld; a well-earned holiday can be a major incentive for agents

“

Offering a mix of experiences and vouchers is a sure-fire way to keep agents engaged in a reward scheme

Indeed, what inspires and incentivises a high street agent doesn't necessarily have the same impact on a homeworking agent, so trying to come up with a one-size-fits-all solution is unlikely to give lines the return on investment they're hoping for.

“Not everyone wants a monetary reward,” Smith adds. “Some of the top sellers within their call centres or homeworking agencies earn good livings, so it's about experiences or things they can use in their everyday life.”

CHOOSE THE RIGHT INCENTIVE

This leads us nicely onto our next point: how to choose the right reward. For Alison Earnshaw, managing director, World Travel Holdings, the prizes that get the most engagement are either monetary rewards or experiences.

Earnshaw explains: “Our staff absolutely go for those two over and above any option. Having the choice is key. What one person wants in one point of a year might be different to what they want in another point of the year.

“We have a number of employees who add up all their points or rewards from whichever cruise line and many of them will save up for something in particular such as their weekly shop.”

However, while monetary rewards give immediate value to agents, many argue that getting on board and experiencing the product is more beneficial to all parties. “Experiences are vital I think,” argues Diane Ware, personal travel consultant, Travel Village Group. “To actually



experience [a ship] means you're going to explain it to a customer better than a product you've no knowledge of.”

It would appear, then, that offering a mix of experiences and vouchers is a sure-fire way to keep agents engaged in a line's rewards scheme, which is what Smith and his team have attempted to do at Carnival Cruise Line.

“It's about balance and flexibility,” he says. “People can spend our Loyalty Rocks points on fuel or shopping; we've even had people buy dishwashers and front doors over the years. We also layer it with experiential things where agents can come out to the Caribbean.

“We recently hosted a trip that includes four nights sailing and a few nights in Florida. We've got loads of people in their early 20s on that trip; when I was in my 20s there's no way I would have been going on holidays like that.”

LAND THE MESSAGE

Once a cruise line has decided what type of reward they want to use to incentivise their travel partners, the next step is to devise a marketing plan to promote the offer to the trade. However, with so many reward schemes running simultaneously, ensuring the message cuts through is easier said than done.

“From a communication point of view,” says McNeish, “the channel that always works best for us is our ‘Celebrity Loves Agents’ Facebook group. In 2016 we launched Celebrity Moments and one thing that helps it stand out is we focus it on key selling periods, be it wave or mini-wave in September and October. It's a time when agents are under a lot of pressure to hit targets, so we try to do something around this period to really motivate people to keep selling Celebrity Cruises.”





Celebrity Moments is unique in that in a single campaign there can be as many as 200 prizes up for grabs, which agents like Ware appreciate, as it makes them feel they have a genuine chance to win something.

“Celebrity Moments really does create excitement and agents are very anxious to win something,” Ware explains. “It’s all there for everyone to aim towards. I do quite well, as do lots of my colleagues.”

TAKING A DIFFERENT APPROACH

What do lines do, though, if they don’t want to adopt a rewards-based initiative at all? This is the dilemma river cruise line Uniworld was faced with when conceiving its own agent incentive strategy. Chris Townson, managing director UK & Ireland, Uniworld, explains that he’d rather agents book with the line because they’re the right fit for their clients, rather than because they may get a reward at the end of a sale. The best way to do that, he says, is to invite them to “see, touch and feel the product” during a fam trip.

Townson says: “It’s all about getting the right people on our ships and working with people at Allison [Earnshaw’s] level to understand who from their team are the right people to send, so it’s a partnership.

“When you go on a fam with us, you’ll experience exactly what our customers do – from food to service, excursions to entertainment – so it’s all about experiences for us. We have a different approach, but it’s massively paid off.”

“What’s nice about that is that it’s an evolving strategy,” Smith adds. “Agents want to experience the product; this is something all cruise lines and partners are really starting to take note of.”



It’s up to the agencies to ensure customers remain central to a selling decision

Carnival Cruise Line has had success in the past by inviting its top-selling agents to a complimentary trip to the Balearics during the Ibiza Rocks festival. This year, however, the line has decided to use its incentive to reward and educate its partners.

“Our big incentive this year is to experience [Carnival Cruise Line’s] private island, Celebration Key. We’ve decided that we’d be better off investing in trade by putting together a big fam trip of 25-30 people.”

REASON FOR CAUTION

Townson isn’t the only one concerned about agents being more motivated by the rewards on offer than selling a cruise to the right client. Earnshaw says it’s up to the agencies to ensure customers remain central to a selling decision, because if a guest gets placed on the wrong cruise, everyone loses.

“At the end of the day if the customer isn’t happy, we get the complaint, the cruise line gets the complaint, and we don’t get the repeat sale. Having worked in cruise for a long time I believe there is a cruise for everybody. The job of a travel agent is to put the customer on the right cruise.”

Ware agrees, saying she would never sell to a cruise to someone if it didn’t suit them. “Our company is totally repeat customers. That’s pretty much all we get and it’s phenomenal.

FROM LEFT It’s essential that agents match the right destination to the right client; fam trips are a clear investment for cruise lines



CRUISE CHALLENGE

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Sheffield	Sept 19th	London	Nov 28th
Chelmsford ..	Nov 07th		

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ABOVE Giving agents the opportunity to try out itineraries is a winning formula for everyone involved

We sell the right product to the right person and anything on top of that is a bonus. It's horses for courses and we very much recognise that."

As the cost of living continues to rise, is there a possibility that monetary rewards become too enticing for agents who may be struggling to make ends meet? "While wages might be at the lower end for entry level roles," says Earnshaw, "some of our mid- to top-level sellers earn a really good wage.

"I think there is a lot of opportunity to do well with the right training and personality. I think the travel industry gives an awful lot of opportunity and there's a balance between what you're able to learn and what you're able to experience."

Townson agrees, and believes that young agents are as motivated to sell to the right consumer as anyone else. "I've seen a lot of young agents come on our ships with lots of enthusiasm and I'm thinking, 'Are they going to back to the UK and sell us?' and boy do they," he adds.

"It's self-fulfilling. As you get people on the ships, they experience the product and then once they're back they're going to sell it to the right customer. We as the operator are winning, the travel agencies are winning and the agent who's been on the trip is winning because they're going to earn more commission the more they sell it." ●

“

It's self-fulfilling. Once agents experience the cruise, they're going to sell it to the right customer

TRADE VERDICT

We asked an anonymous panel of 20 agents to rate the reward schemes of four cruise lines. Here's how they scored...

How frequently does the line update its reward schemes?

Hurtigruten: 🍷🍷🍷🍷🍷

P&O Cruises: 🍷🍷🍷🍷🍷

A-Rosa: 🍷🍷🍷🍷🍷

Windstar Cruises: 🍷🍷🍷🍷🍷

How incentivising are the line's reward schemes?

Hurtigruten: 🍷🍷🍷🍷🍷

P&O Cruises: 🍷🍷🍷🍷🍷

A-Rosa: 🍷🍷🍷🍷🍷

Windstar Cruises: 🍷🍷🍷🍷🍷

How impressed are you with the variety of rewards on offer?

Hurtigruten: 🍷🍷🍷🍷🍷

P&O Cruises: 🍷🍷🍷🍷🍷

A-Rosa: 🍷🍷🍷🍷🍷

Windstar Cruises: 🍷🍷🍷🍷🍷

How effective is the line at promoting its reward schemes?

Hurtigruten: 🍷🍷🍷🍷🍷

P&O Cruises: 🍷🍷🍷🍷🍷

A-Rosa: 🍷🍷🍷🍷🍷

Windstar Cruises: 🍷🍷🍷🍷🍷

Do you feel you have enough of a chance to win the prizes on offer?

Hurtigruten: 🍷🍷🍷🍷🍷

P&O Cruises: 🍷🍷🍷🍷🍷

A-Rosa: 🍷🍷🍷🍷🍷

Windstar Cruises: 🍷🍷🍷🍷🍷

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SCAN

Celestyal's Janet Parton looking to build on "triple-digit" growth in 2024

In
conversation
with...

Michelle Daniels

The new UK sales director for A-Rosa River Cruises shares her ambitions for bolstering the line's trade commitment by reaching more agents in 2024 and beyond through a variety of refreshed initiatives

According to a recent survey of readers of *Cruise Trade News*' sister magazine *World of Cruising*, 28 per cent of respondents said river is the sector they're most excited to try in the next 12-18 months.

It's therefore no surprise that Michelle Daniels is beaming with excitement as we sit down to discuss how her first few months have been at the helm of A-Rosa's sales operation in the UK and Ireland.

"It's been amazing," she says. "I've had a very warm welcome and I'm delighted to be a part of the team. It's important when working as part of a smaller operation that everyone supports each other. Everyone is very passionate about the brand, very committed and very driven, which is great. And it's lovely to come into a team like that."

Daniels says the passion and dedication to A-Rosa demonstrated by the line's UK managing director Lucia Rowe was key to her accepting the role. "Lucia is a huge advocate for river and she's a leading voice in the industry," Daniels says. "Her passion for the sector was a massive draw for me, but also the way A-Rosa continues to innovate is really exciting."

TRADE COMMITMENT

Daniels' main task will be to work with the organisation's network of agents to identify new ways to reach more of the trade, such as affiliate programmes and partnered community events.



We are solely reliant on our travel trade partners, they really are the future of our business



"I want to build on the education piece, as educating our trade partners on who we are and what we do is so important," she continues. "We are solely reliant on our travel trade partners, so they really are critical to the line's success. They are our future."

The first step, she says, is to recruit a business development manager for the south of England to support regional manager for the north Emma Rodgers, who joined last December, with the line welcoming applicants with a view to bringing someone on board later this month.

"Emma has been amazing, and considering she should only be based in the north, she's been covering the whole of UK, which is incredible. Her passion and enthusiasm come across and we're seeing that in bookings, which shows how important face-to-face engagement is."

Daniels says once she has found the final piece of her sales team puzzle, it will allow the firm to get out in front of even more agents. "Together we'll be able to cover a lot more of the UK and see more agents."



There are other things we're working on as well that will enable us to get in front of the trade," she adds.

While increasing face-to-face contact with agents is top of Daniels' list of priorities, getting as many of them on board as possible will be key to helping trade get a better understanding of what sets the line apart from its competitors.

Daniels explains: "[River cruising] is an all-encompassing experience and I don't think you can necessarily get that into words – you have to see it."

ALL ABOARD

So far in 2024 A-Rosa has seen year-on-year revenues double, driven by an uptick in demand for Rhine sailings which led the line to add two new ships – *A-Rosa Alea* and *A-Rosa Clea* – to the river.

"The market is incredibly positive. We launched 2025 with our group operators some time ago, and response to that has been fantastic," Daniels continues. "There's definitely interest for 2025 and our strategy moving forward is to focus on bringing in early business for next year and moving away from the lates market as much as we can in 2024."

To strengthen early bookings, A-Rosa rolled out its biggest ever trade incentive programme, giving agents the chance to win one of 25 free cruises for two when they make 2025 bookings between 10 May and 30 June 2024. "We had lots of entries and great engagement from agents," Daniels says. Turn to *page 43* to read more about agent reward schemes.

A SUSTAINABLE FUTURE

Although customers are becoming more aware of sustainability, Daniels is yet to see it influence holidaymakers' buying decisions. "It's important for the river cruise sector to be leading the wider industry's commitment to sustainability."

CLOCKWISE FROM

FAR LEFT A-Rosa River Cruises UK sales director Michelle Daniels; *A-Rosa Alea* has been added to the fleet to meet demand for Rhine sailings; *A-Rosa Sena* can dock in ports without producing emissions

What my career has taught me

Value relationships

We work in a people industry; people buy from people. Building strong relationships, having integrity and building trust is incredibly valuable if you want to be successful during your career.

Embrace change

Life changes, businesses evolve. You need to embrace it. Change offers opportunity, development and growth both personally and professionally. It can be exciting and inspire new ideas and reignite your passion and drive.

Believe in yourself

Be confident in your abilities and don't be afraid to challenge yourself. Grab every opportunity and know that not everything may work out, but it's the learnings that are important.

In recent years the brand has introduced a handful of schemes to combat its impact on the environment. These include the elimination of single-use plastics, water containers for guests with refillable stations around ships and the removal of printed daily programmes.

Meanwhile, *A-Rosa Sena*, which became the line's newest ship when it launched in June 2022, operates a propulsion system which combines diesel and electric engines with a large battery to enable it to dock in ports without producing emissions. ●



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ULTIMATE WAYS TO STAY

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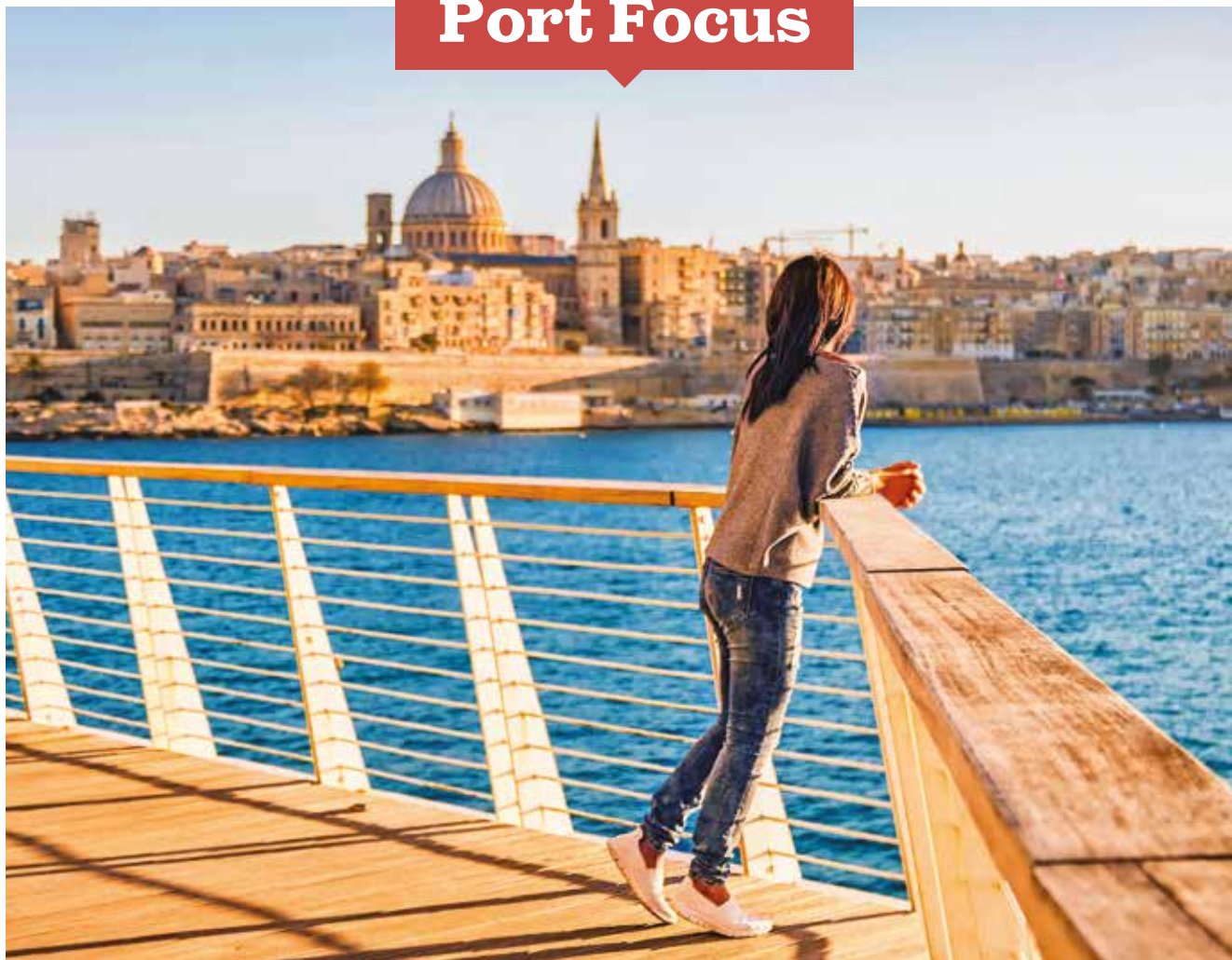
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HIGHLIGHTS • FOOD & DRINKS
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Port Focus



Valletta

Walking among the ghosts of the mysterious Knights Hospitaller and admiring one of Europe's great harbours are just some of the reasons to explore this UNESCO World Heritage city, says **Robin McKelvie**

Malta may be one of Europe's smallest nations, but its capital Valletta packs a mighty punch.

Hewn in stone half a millennium ago by the Knights Hospitaller, a religious military society also known as the Order of St John, everyone from the Phoenicians and Romans to the Greeks and the British have

breezed through this strategic bolthole, all leaving indelible traces. No wonder Valletta is eulogised on UNESCO's World Heritage list.

This fortress city's formidable walls are arguably the Mediterranean's most dramatic, and undoubtedly the star of Malta's Grand Harbour. From here, a warren of narrow streets snakes inland, lined with graceful stone buildings sporting charming balconies.

Nothing keeps Valletta down. In the Second World War, Malta made a brave stand against the might of the German air force, and today locals celebrate their freedom in pavement cafes, church-lined squares and restaurants bursting with Maltese delicacies.

Myriad possibilities tempt the visitor, whether it's kayaking across the harbour, delving into a local museum or savouring flaky pastizzi in the sunshine.



3 unmissable things to do VALLETTA'S CITY WALLS

Hiking up and around Valletta's hulking fortifications is essential. Visitors are advised to start at the main gate, where the views are breathtaking. Chunky bastions, ornate churches and surprisingly sleepy parks accompany the dramatic vistas of the harbour and bustling suburbs, some of which are like miniature cities in their own right. The Knights Hospitaller wrought these walls from the local limestone in the 16th century so they are inexorably bound into Valletta's history. As such they are cherished, preserved and in remarkable condition.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT
The dramatic vistas of Valletta; the view from Grand Harbour; a pavement cafe is the perfect place to soak up the atmosphere and enjoy the local cuisine; the opulent interiors of St John's Cathedral

“
**Maltese cooking
is unique... we get
influences from
Europe, Africa and
the Middle East**

SAIL ON A DGHAJSA BOAT

Traditional gondola-style *dghajsa* boats are the ideal way to explore the Grand Harbour and drift back through time to the days of the mysterious Knights Hospitaller. From the water it's easy to see how formidable Valletta would have been to potential attackers, and how popular it is with the owners of luxury yachts today. *Dghajsas* are easy to hire, and there is a flotilla of more modern vessels for longer sightseeing trips.

ST JOHN'S CATHEDRAL

Its facade may be relatively austere but enter Valletta's most striking building and visitors will soon discover just how rich the Knights Hospitaller were. Inside, St John's Cathedral is a riot of Baroque extravagance, with ornate sculptures and figures adorning its chapels and yet more art treasures in its museum. The great 19th-century Scottish writer and historian Sir Walter Scott proclaimed it "a magnificent church, the most striking interior I've ever seen".

3 places to eat BUDGET

It would be a crime to sail out of Valletta without trying the famous street food pastizzi. These moreish pastries are traditionally filled with lightly curried mushy peas or ricotta cheese,





enclosed by a croissant-style crust of filo pastry. But there are plenty more exotic fillings, too, such as truffle and Maltese sausage, and you'll find them all in bars and cafes across the city. Manuela Malta Pastizzi, a hole in the wall on Merchants Street near St John's Cathedral, bakes them fresh every day.

MID-RANGE

With the sun beaming down, there is no better place for wining and dining than St George's Square. Diners can recline outdoors at Fifty Nine Republic by the Grandmaster's Palace and eat like a king, sipping Maltese wine and feasting on oysters with an umami kick. Also on the menu are perfectly seared scallops and immaculate beef Wellington, all prepared by Maria Sammut, who was voted Best Maltese chef 2023 by the guide Wines and Restaurants of Malta. The outdoor terrace is a winner even after sundown, when patio heaters come out.

PREMIUM

Soaring almost within touching distance of the table, Valletta's massive fortifications aren't the only

“ With the sun beaming down, there is no better place than St George's Square

talking point at The Chophouse. Beef steaks are superbly succulent and the locally caught sea bass is perfectly complemented by a smoked fish emulsion and bonito flakes. “Maltese cooking is unique,” says chef David Micallef Sant. “We get influences from Europe, Africa and the Middle East. We are a meeting place for cuisines and you taste that on the plate.” With time to linger, guests can try some of the restaurant's 300-plus wines, all stored in a humidity and temperature-controlled cave.

3 activities for repeat visitors OFF-BEAT

Guests can experience Valletta's nefarious side with ex-BBC journalist and tour guide Mario Cacciottolo,

who runs Dark Malta Tours. “Valletta is a city of ghosts and skeletons, halfway between Europe and Africa but not truly part of either, and our tours dig into the dark underbelly,” he explains. Mario offers private tours with timings to suit cruise guests, and you can expect to be regaled with gloriously told tall tales of love, murder and even witchcraft.





LEFT Maltese wine, cultivated from fewer than 15 vineyards, is steadily gaining global acclaim

OUTDOOR

Tackling Malta's Grand Harbour in a kayak is a thrilling way to see the sights and burn off all that pastizzi. From low down on the water, Valletta's grandeur soars all around – no wonder it's a favourite location for Hollywood films. Paddling beneath these vaulting fortifications, you'll also understand why Napoleon expressed relief that he didn't have to attack the city after he was allowed to take it with barely a scuffle in 1798.

UNIQUE

With just 13 vineyards and very little of their produce escaping to the outside world, Maltese wine often flies under the radar. But 4,000 years of practice must

count for something, and just lately Maltese wines have been gaining serious international respect. Most wineries are tiny and difficult to find but you can't go wrong with a tasting at Ta' Betta Wine Estates, which cultivates four hectares of terrace some 200m above sea level. Their blood red, peppery shiraz blend is a joy to taste, as is their smoothly oaked chardonnay.

How to travel responsibly

Malta's characterful but smoke-belching vintage buses are gone – to the regret of some but the benefit of the environment – and a fleet of 400 modern replacements now offer sustainable, efficient and affordable travel. Those heading north can visit the Three Cities or check out the tourist hotspots of Sliema – admiring the painted dome of Stella Maris Church – and St Julian's, where Balluta Bay Beach beckons. Alternatively, visitors can leave the coast to explore the ancient city of Mdina.

“**Tackling Malta's Grand Harbour in a kayak is a thrilling way to see the sights**

Local tips



“Start your day at Lot 61, a coffee shop with fantastic blends, then visit Mysterium Fidei Museum at St Catherine's monastery, which was closed to the public for 400 years. For photos, appreciate our Grand Harbour from Upper Barrakka Gardens.”

MARIO CACCIOTTOLO

Owner and guide
Dark Malta Tours



“For quiet drinks, go to Ġugar, a tiny, hip and laidback bar. Gourmet Café has the best coffee. For lunch, try Elia Greek Cuisine, which serves filling salads, or go to ImPasta for a good plate of tagliatelle.”

JAMES VELLA CLARK

Artist

Trip Planner

Swan Hellenic

The eight-night Secrets of Sicily cruise aboard *SH Diana*, return from Palermo via Trapani, Mazara del Vallo, Porto Empedocle, Valletta, Siracusa, Taormina and Lipari departs on 20 August, from £4,680pp. swanhellenic.com

Viking

The 15-night Malta, Morocco & the Mediterranean cruise aboard *Viking Saturn*, return from Barcelona via Marseille, Rome, Valletta, Tunis, Casablanca, Seville and Malaga, departs 20 January, from £6,790pp including flights. viking.com

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Capital gains

Spanning 1,770 miles and home to four historic major cities, the Danube is second to none when it comes to culturally rich experiences. **Kayleigh Rattle** takes a tour, from Vienna to Belgrade, revealing the river's most enchanting gems



SCAN

Get the lowdown on the hottest ships and itineraries to sail the Danube in 2024



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT The ornate Hofburg Palace of Vienna; Bratislava's stunning 9th-century castle; snails are a popular choice for daring diners in the Austrian capital

“ Vienna's compact size means it is easy to experience its best bits over the course of a shore day

Vienna, Austria

Austria's capital has it all – from mind-bending museums and awe-inspiring architecture to coffee houses serving irresistible cakes and desserts. It's no wonder it came out as the best place to live in the Economist's Global Liveability index in 2023. Its compact size means it's easy to experience the city's best bits over the course of a shore day, with the impressive Hofburg Palace and the sprawling MuseumsQuartier only a 20-minute ride away on Vienna's efficient U-Bahn.

Don't miss the chance to... sample Vienna's coffee shops

Vienna's coffee culture is so intrinsic to the city that UNESCO has listed it as an intangible part of the city's identity. Typically accented with wood and marble and housed in centuries-old buildings, Vienna's coffee houses are a great place to people watch while filling up on one of the region's many famous cakes such as the sachertorte, a richly decadent chocolate cake filled with apricot jam.

Spend an afternoon... exploring Vienna's rich artistic heritage

The city's historic centre, the Innere Stadt, is where guests will find many of its most important cultural institutions such as the 13th-century Hofburg Palace with its ornate domed roof and intricately carved stone facade. After admiring the palace's lavish silver collection, guests can drop by the Natural History Museum, where a permanent exhibition tracks the evolution of life on earth, before perusing some 8,000 pieces of Austrian art from the likes of Egon Schiele and Gustav Klimt at The Leopold Museum.

Are Vienna's snails worth shelling out for?

Eating snails is a beloved pastime in the Austrian capital, with the gastropods (also known as the 'Viennese oyster') often served fried or with herby butter in a baguette. Those eager to try it for themselves can walk ten minutes from Hofburg Palace to Vestibül, which serves its snails up with delicious salads in the elegant marble halls of Burgtheater.

Get on board

Saga Travel's Vienna and Blue Danube seven-night cruise, from the UK to Vienna via Dürnstein, Linz, Passau, Melk and Tulln, aboard *Spirit of the Danube*, departs 8 August 2024, from £1,682pp travel.saga.co.uk

Bratislava, Slovakia

Bratislava is fast emerging from the shadows of the Danube's other more-established capitals to become a traveller's choice in its own right. The old town is pleasantly strollable, with cobbled streets that come alive with live music, helped by a gregarious bar and café culture. Here, elegant townhouses and historic castles mix with brutalist architecture, making for a memorable shore excursion.





ABOVE Bratislava's unmissable UFO Observation Deck on the SNP Bridge

“

Budapest's thermal spring baths are world-renowned for good reason, prized for their medicinal properties

Don't miss the chance to... taste Cold War-era cola

Although it looks more like a stout beer than the carbonated, brown liquid of Coca-Cola and Pepsi, Kofola was introduced as an alternative to these big brands at a time when Western items were deemed prohibitively expensive. Now, it's considered a national treasure in Slovakia and typically outsells all of the major brands.

Spend an afternoon... exploring the city's imposing castle

Guests won't want to miss a visit to Bratislava Castle, a 9th-century complex with stunning views over the city and the Danube. Its sugar-white facade and cylindrical towers are a sight to behold, but the real attraction is the baroque garden that lies inside, where guests can stroll among the silver linden trees and take a photo beside the central fountain.

Where should guests go for out-of-this-world views?

Guests looking for a showstopping panorama of the city can ride up to the

95-metre-high UFO Observation Deck on the SNP Bridge for views that stretch up to 100km in either direction. The Bubble Martini from the deck's cocktail bar is quite the spectacle, too, with the bartender using a smoke gun to give the beverage an otherworldly appearance.

Get on board

Viking's 10-day Treasures of the Danube cruise, from Budapest to Passau, via Győr, Bratislava, Vienna, Grein and Linz, aboard *Viking Var*, departs on 5 January 2025, from £1,695pp vikingrivercruises.co.uk

Budapest, Hungary

Straddling both sides of the Danube, Hungary's capital combines a rich and fascinating history with thermal baths, grand boulevards and a buzzing food scene, making it the perfect place to hop ashore and explore. Both Buda and Pest are well worth visiting, with the former home to the iconic Buda Castle, while the latter boasts the Opera House and the Széchenyi Baths for the ultimate in relaxation.

Don't miss the chance to... go hog wild on Hungarian treats

The Central Market Hall is a vast indoor space perfect for any food-loving cruise-goer limited to a whistle-stop tour. In this beautiful neo-Gothic building, guests will find sought-after items such as paprika, Hungarian wines and cured meats, while on the upper floors fresh, authentic Hungarian cuisine – like goulash with dumplings – is served in generous portions.

Spend an afternoon... soaking up some culture

Budapest's thermal spring baths are world-renowned and for good reason. Not only do many of them reside inside sumptuous palatial residences, but their thermal waters are prized for their medicinal properties. Széchenyi Baths, which is more than 100 years old, is the biggest and most popular in Budapest and one of the largest hot spring baths

Selling tips

1 When pitching the Danube to your clients, tell them about the medieval sites, fairytale castles and inspiring museums they can see along the way.

2 Cities like Vienna and Budapest, with their burgeoning dining scenes, are a huge draw for foodies. Be sure to give examples of some of the authentic cuisine they can sample in each destination, from richly decadent sachertorte to goulash and dumplings.

3 Danube River cruises are popular with first-time cruisers, as their itineraries suit all tastes. Take Vienna, for example, which is home to some of the world's most famous composers.



ABOVE LEFT Unwind in Budapest's Széchenyi Baths; **ABOVE RIGHT AND BELOW** Discover the many sights of the Belgrade Fortress, including the Victor Monument and its impressive ancient military fortifications

in Europe. The Gellért, with its stained-glass windows and fluorescent porcelain tiles, is another firm favourite.

Where can guests awaken their inner child?

The Budapest Pinball Museum is a fun way to spend a couple of hours. As Europe's largest continuously operating interactive pinball exhibition, guests can enjoy the colourful design and eye-catching artwork of more than 130 pinball machines or play retro games like PacMan and Space Invaders.

Get on board

Riviera Travel's eight-day The Blue Danube River Cruise aboard *MS Tom Hardy*, to and from Budapest via Esztergom, Bratislava, Dürnstein & Melk, Salzburg or Linz and Vienna, departs on 22 August 2024, from £2,099pp rivieratravel.co.uk

Belgrade, Serbia

The capital of Serbia sits at the point where the Danube and the Sava rivers meet and it makes the most of its pretty riverside location. Bars and restaurants line the riverbanks on either side, while further inland a city steeped in history stands proud as one of the oldest continually inhabited cities in Europe.

Don't miss the chance to... explore the Belgrade Fortress

The Belgrade Fortress, known locally as Kalemegdan, was built around 2,000 years ago and boasts an impressive history. Originally a military fortification constructed by the Celts, it has seen the comings and goings of the Romans, the Byzantines and the Ottomans. It now houses a variety of places of interest, including Belgrade Zoo, Victor Monument and the Roman Well, which confusingly was built by the Austrians in the 1700s.

Spend an afternoon... learning about Serbia's famous scientist

Visitors can find out about the life and inventions of the celebrated Serbian scientist, Nikola Tesla, at his eponymous museum. As well as being the final resting place for Tesla, the building holds more than 160,000 original documents, 2,000 books and journals, 1,200 technical exhibits and 1,000 plans and drawings, each giving an insight into the scientist's inimitable genius.

Where's the best place to uncover tasty Serbian treats?

The Bajloni market – named after Ignjat Bajloni, who owned the brewery next door – was created in 1926 and is

a beloved local spot. Known as 'green market', Bajloni is a vibrant and bustling place where visitors can enjoy delicacies like kaymak (clotted cream) and Čvarci (pork rinds), and is a must-visit for those who want a true flavour of the city and its friendly population.

Get on board

Emerald Cruises' 16-day Discover the Treasures of the Danube on the line's Star Ships, from Bucharest to Munich via Belgrade, Budapest and Bratislava departs on 16 May 2025, from £6,445pp emeraldcruises.co.uk



10 Reasons to go island-hopping around the South Pacific

From breathtaking beaches to lip-smacking cuisine, **Judy Cogan** reveals why now is the time to send your clients to the Southern Hemisphere's emerald archipelagos



CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT

Make the most of the region's idyllic beaches; the area is still a dream destination for many; Papeete in French Polynesia is full of fascinating sights

“
Guests will see clown and parrot fish, barracudas, sea turtles and even seahorses

2 YOUR CLIENTS WILL HAVE A WHALE OF A TIME

The diversity of marine life in the South Pacific's turquoise waters is unbeatable. Guests sailing with Captain Cook and Fred Olsen Cruise Lines, for example, can watch majestic humpback whales flick their gigantic tails high out of the crystal-clear waters around Tonga – a country in Polynesia comprising over 170 stunning islands. It's one of the best places to whale-watch in the world and the season takes place here between July and October.

Guests will also relish a coral safari around the world's second largest barrier reef near New Caledonia. Royal Caribbean cruises offers snorkelling excursions to the uninhabited Mystery Island in Vanuatu where the reef is secluded, the coral vibrant and in calm waters guests will see clown and parrot fish, barracudas, sea turtles and even seahorses.

The South Pacific, a tropical paradise made up of up to 30,000 pinprick islands scattered across the world's largest ocean, was first made famous by Hollywood and Broadway and has since become a popular go-to for honeymooners and intrepid explorers. As a cruise destination, however, it's relatively novel and often overlooked by cheaper alternatives that deliver on sun, sea and sand a little closer to home.

That said, interest in the region is on the rise as travellers become increasingly eager to tick their dream destinations off their bucket lists. Indeed, the number of cruise goers visiting Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific Islands nearly tripled between 2019 to 2022 – from 471,000 to 1.2 million – according to CLIA's 2023 State of the Industry report. And in the past year that number grew by another 8.4 per cent, so says the report's 2024 edition.

Here are 10 reasons why this once-in-a-lifetime island-hopping heaven needs to be on your clients' radars.

1 THE BEACHES ARE TO DIE FOR

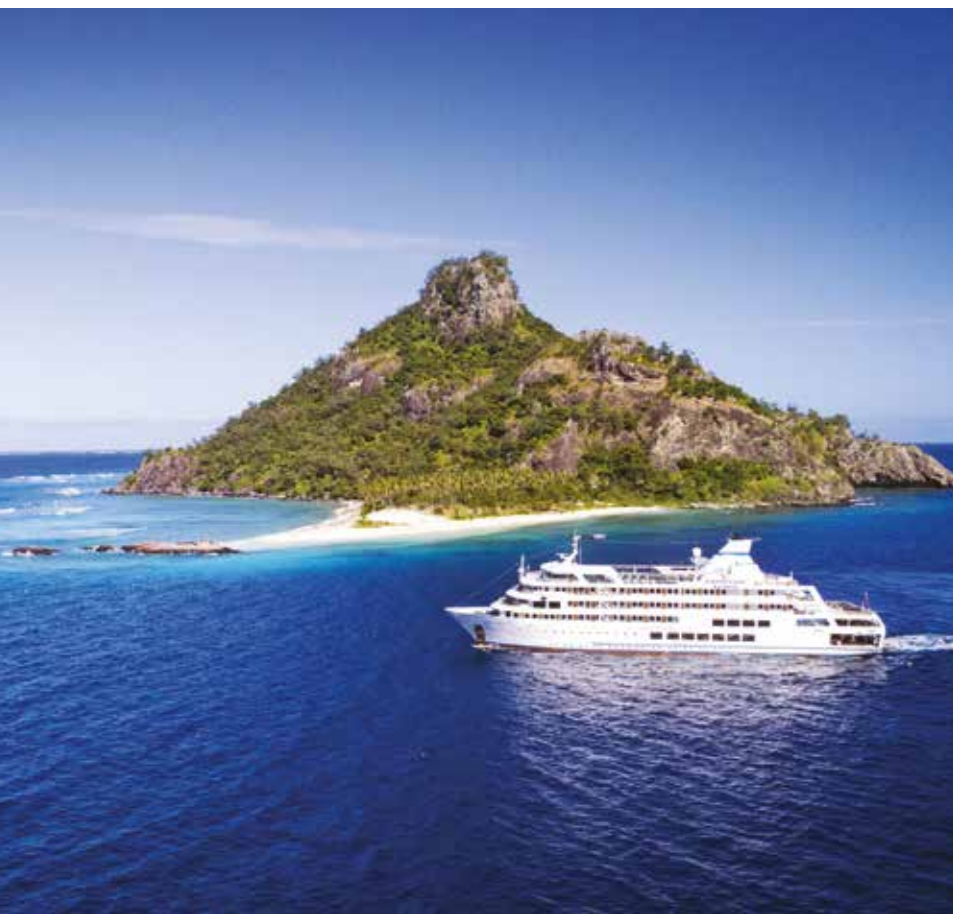
With 330 islands and 1,100km of coastline, Fiji has a deserted beach for every day of the year. A wide variety of ships travel to this pocket of paradise, including Celebrity, Royal Caribbean and P&O Cruises.

With no airport or hotels, the remote archipelago of Lau is one of the least-visited parts of the country, making the island of Fulaga feel like a deserted haven, with pristine white sands and cobalt blue waters teeming with wildlife.

Natadola Beach on Fiji's largest island, Viti Levu, is a stunning stretch of sand, while Monuriki Beach was the unforgivingly (yet achingly beautiful) tropical backdrop for Tom Hanks in the 2001 hit film *Castaway*.

Meanwhile, Bora Bora, in French Polynesia just northwest of Tahiti, is a popular stop for cruise ships, with the mile-long Matira beach arguably the most impressive thanks to its soft pearly white sand hugged by overhanging coconut trees.





“

Thrill seekers can enjoy daring firewalks, snorkelling, dense rainforest treks and the world's only underwater post office

3 A CULINARY ADVENTURE AWAITS

The South Pacific region has an abundance of fresh ingredients, all served with inventive Polynesian twists. Root vegetable like taro, sweet potatoes and yams appear in many dishes (including desserts) as do a wide variety of tropical fruits, from coconuts and lychees to tangy limes and passion fruit.

In Tahiti, the largest island in French Polynesia, cruise-goers can sample dishes heavily influenced by French cuisine, as well as local specialities, like taro leaf, lagoon fish and star apple and poisson cru (raw fish salad), which is the national dish. In Fiji, 'Kokoda' is the island's fresh take on ceviche, where raw fish is marinated in citrus and coconut milk.

4 VISITORS CAN GIVE BACK TO THE OCEAN

With awareness around sustainability on the rise among travellers, cruises that run conservation initiatives in the South Pacific will be a major draw. Captain Cook Fiji Cruises, for example, looks after the country's oceans by inviting passengers to take part in marine education and sustainability activities during their time on board.

Guests will have exposure to 90 reefs and islands where they can learn about marine ecology, climate change and coral health. Onboard, marine biologists and scientists offer lectures and guided snorkelling safaris, plus the opportunity for guests to be a 'Citizen Scientist' by recording fish and coral sightings.

5 THERE'S A CRUISE FOR EVERYONE

For guests travelling a long way from the UK, it's important that the cruise they book is the right fit for their needs and desires. Here are three standout sailings for varying tastes:

FOR FAMILIES

Royal Caribbean's *Quantum of the Seas* offers a variety of memorable activities for families who want to dive, snorkel or swim in sparkling warm waters and colourful coral gardens. Excursions include shipwreck dives off Vanuatu's remote Espiritu Santo Island and spotting humpback whales. Onboard there's a waterpark, a 12-metre surf simulator and a range of child-friendly dining options, including a Jamie's Italian by Jamie Oliver.

FOR LUXURY

Guests seeking the finest in food, staterooms and facilities far from children and splash pools will enjoy sailing on Silversea's all-inclusive *Silver Shadow*. The luxury small ship includes excursions led by a team of expert guides, while on board there's a gorgeous spa and gym, designer boutiques and stylish restaurants to rival that of any major city.

FOR AFFORDABILITY

Guests who are looking to experience the natural beauty of the South Pacific on a budget should look to Norwegian Cruise Line, which is offering 14-day cruises for under £2,000pp. Sailing on *Norwegian Sun*, the itinerary includes 11 ports of call across Fiji, Vanuatu and New Caledonia, offering stylish inside and balcony staterooms, excursions and delicious dining.

6 THERE'S PLENTY TO DISCOVER INLAND, TOO

Fiji is the perfect location for adventure seekers. Guests travelling to Vanuatu with Royal Caribbean can head to Suva for daring firewalks and snorkelling tours. Guests can also

CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT

Monuriki Beach was the backdrop for the Tom Hanks film *Castaway*; Bora Bora's impressive mile-long Matira beach; snorkellers will relish the vibrant coral reefs; quad bikes are a fun way to get out and explore



trek through dense rainforest in the Colo-I-Suva Forest Park, a nature reserve that's home to the thundering 30-metre high Mele Cascades waterfall. Guests can also write home from the world's only underwater post office in Port Vila, where snorkellers can post special waterproof postcards.

7 THE SUN SHINES EVEN ON A RAINY DAY

The South Pacific has sunshine, warm seas and clear skies all year round. Between April and November is when the weather is driest and temperatures are a pleasant 28-30°C with the exception of French Polynesia: the peak season is shorter and runs from June through to August.

If guests travel between November to April, there's a greater chance of heavy (but short-lived) rain showers and the occasional storm, but never severe enough to disrupt plans.

8 THE ITINERARY OFFERING IS GROWING

The fact that new cruise itineraries are being launched in the South Pacific can only be a good sign. In April this year, Captain Cook Cruises Fiji debuted its Southern Lau expedition with never-before visited locations onboard *MS Caledonian Sky*.

The voyage offers everything from local Polynesian encounters and one-off cultural ceremonies to thrilling activities, such as diving and firewalking. Locations en route include Buliya village, Matuku Island, Fulaga, dubbed "heaven on earth", and Yagasa where guests can relax and swim or kayak.

9 THERE'S AN ABUNDANCE OF BIRD LIFE

Have a budding ornithologist in your travel party? The South Pacific is filled with birdlife and guests can see their appreciation soar while spotting some truly remarkable and rare species.

New Caledonia is arguably the best spot with unique species living in

tall fern trees. Guests can expect to tick off the silver-eared honeyeater, green-backed white-eye and horned parakeet of Grande Terre (the main island). The unique and charismatic Kagu, a long-legged bluish grey bird, is a major draw and only 700 live in the Blue River provincial park.

10 GETTING THERE IS EASIER THAN YOU THINK

This pocket of paradise is worth going the distance for with most South Pacific cruises setting sail from New Zealand, Australia or Hawaii. Cunard offers a 20-day South Pacific voyage on *Queen Elizabeth* from Sydney, accessible thanks to daily flights from the UK.

Guests can also book the all-inclusive South Pacific exploration 42-night voyage via ROL Cruises, departing March 2026, with flights to Sydney and a three-night stay in a 4-star hotel included in the price. Cruisegoers fly home to the UK from Seattle, USA so there's only one flight Down Under. ●



A new frontier

On Canada's St Lawrence River, **Jack Carter** discovers
how colonial history and inventive gastronomy combine
to create an expedition like no other



As *Viking Polaris* makes its way along the St Lawrence River on an unseasonably cold mid-April morning, little do I know that not one but two spooky coincidences are about to occur. Nearly 500 years ago, a swashbuckling French navigator called Jacques Cartier (that's coincidence number one) also arrived here on an expedition ship. Despite not having *Polaris's* next-generation stabilisers or a Nordic spa to while away the hours, Cartier successfully led 60 men across the Atlantic, where he colonised the glorious expanse of eastern Canada we now call Quebec.

"It's easy to see why Cartier fell in love with this place," says one of Viking's expedition leaders, just as a flight of white-feathered herons glide along the river, their feet setting off ripples on its mirror-calm surface. Mustard-coloured fields bordered by enormous windswept trees are being blanketed by a Siberian weather front that has dragged temperatures down to well below freezing. It's a melancholic yet utterly breathtaking scene, and I'm spellbound.

Like my French namesake, I too am on a mission. When the Expedition Cruise Network released its 2023/24 Insights Report, it revealed a growing appetite among travellers for adventure-led cruises that go beyond the polar regions. So when I was invited to sail the St Lawrence River



on Viking's newly launched Canadian Discovery itinerary, it was the perfect opportunity to see if this corner of North America has what it takes to compete with the allure of the poles.

LOCKED IN

I wake early the next morning and hurry to my window, eager to see what bucolic view awaits me. I imagine undulating pine forests complemented by a menagerie of razorbills, guillemots and gulls sailing through the air. As my blind disappears, a concrete wall with slime-green splotches emerges, 15cm from my windowsill. Then we start to sink.

I'd read about the St Lawrence Seaway when we boarded in Toronto, where I learned it had taken 22,000 workers five years to build. Stretching 304km along the border of the United States and Canada, the seaway – or to give it its colloquial name, Highway H2O – is made up of a series of locks, each designed to carry ships between the Great Lakes and the Atlantic.

I lower my window and place my hand against the seaway wall, letting it gently graze my fingers as the lock empties. With barely a Mars Bar's width either side of us, we stop descending and accelerate toward open water. Locals gathered on the riverbank beep their truck horns excitedly

CLOCKWISE FROM

FAR LEFT From stunning red-sand beaches to fertile farmland, Prince Edward Island is truly breathtaking; there's always the chance of a whale sighting; Point Prim Lighthouse offers amazing views; the colourful Victorian houses of Charlottetown







CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT

The mesmerising Montreal skyline; Viking's Canadian Discovery itinerary showcases the breathtaking St Lawrence River

Fast facts

378
guests

256
crew

4
restaurants

1
Nordic spa



Viking Polaris really is a library, museum, science lab and luxury hotel all rolled into one

while children dressed like baby lumberjacks scamper alongside us, trying to keep pace. Never before has a vessel as large as this sailed along the seaway and its appearance is causing quite a stir. Captain Xavier Mongin's voice transmits through the ship's PA system, confirming that we've made it through our third lock unscathed. "Only four more to go," he adds.

A FEAST FOR THE SENSES

The next day we arrive in the city of Trois-Rivières, where a culinary tour awaits. One by one my group squeezes through the narrow doorway of Epi – the first of three restaurants on the itinerary – where a sweet, herbaceous scent wafts from the kitchen. Two heavily tattooed men lead us to our tables and begin filling our glasses with sparkling red wine from the nearby hills of Mont Yamaska, east of Montreal. Soon, another waiter emerges from the kitchen, carrying a plate of shredded rabbit which has been pressed with fresh herbs into a neat rectangle. Resting delicately on top is a green fiddlehead,

an edible fern shaped like a coiled chameleon's tail that's grown in the next province, New Brunswick. "They're incredibly rare due to their short harvesting season," says our waiter, "so you're in for a treat." My tastebuds erupt into somersaults as I bite into the rich, umami-fied rabbit, while the crunch of the earthy fiddlehead provides a satisfying bittersweet landing.

With a population of just 60,000 people, Trois-Rivières has more restaurants per capita than anywhere else in Canada, and as much as I'd like to try them all, Viking's activity specialists do a wonderful job of selecting three for us to sample. Next, we try Japanese fusion at Sushizo, where I watch remarkably young chefs roll, slice and squeeze sushi into imaginative shapes. Our final stop is Mezcal Taqueria – and after just one bite of my corn and chorizo empanada I decide this is some of the best Mexican food I've ever eaten.

As on most expedition cruises there are long sailing days between ports, so I use the time to get acquainted with *Viking Polaris's* nooks and crannies.

What amazes me is just how many opportunities there are to learn about the world I'm sailing through. I enjoy daily lectures on everything from algae to astronomy, I join fellow guests in helping the onboard scientists to launch a weather balloon, and with my binoculars I attempt to spot pods of beluga whales from my well-appointed Deluxe Nordic Balcony room. This ship, I conclude, is a library, museum, science lab and luxury hotel all rolled into one.

ENRICHING ESCAPADES

We arrive in Quebec City as storm clouds begin to brew, making Fairmont Le Château Frontenac look more like Dracula's Castle than a luxury hotel as it watches over us from its towering bluff.

After a potter around the old town's souvenir shops to find some sensibly priced maple syrup (I settle for apple syrup instead), we board a coach to visit a preserved Amerindian village. The museum is closed for renovation, so our young guide takes us on a private tour of a reconstructed longhouse, which is protected by an imposing 15m-high

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ABOVE The majestic Fairmont Le Château Frontenac in Quebec City

“ On a walking tour of Charlottetown, I’m struck by the city’s brightly coloured colonial houses and Gothic churches

palisade. He says his ancestors were part of the Wendat tribe and I detect pride in his voice when he tells us that their innovative farming techniques once helped them forge a trading empire with the French.

As we journey north, I discover that the Wendats aren’t the only ones famed for their ingenuity around here. For example, in 1870 a great fire burned swathes of land around the Saguenay River, souring the forests with acidic, peaty soil. This, however, provided the perfect conditions to grow plump blueberries, and before long tens of thousands of bushes flourished in the scorched ground.

A trip to Domaine Le Cageot vineyard outside Saguenay city is a chance to sample blueberry-infused products, including liqueurs, vinaigrettes and wine. I expect the red to be syrupy but am pleasantly surprised by its crisp, zesty notes, so I purchase a bottle from the gift shop.

Then there are the residents of Prince Edward Island, many of whom are still rebuilding homes and rejuvenating

farmland after Hurricane Fiona crashed ashore in 2022. On a walking tour through Charlottetown, I’m struck by the splintered tree trunks and patched up rooftops, but also how beautiful the city has remained, with its brightly coloured colonial houses and Gothic churches.

Up to this point, my journey through Canada has been jam-packed with wonderful culinary discoveries and intriguing insights into the country’s indigenous First Nations people, but I am yet to have the adrenaline-pumping experience that every great expedition promises. I’m excited, then, to board *Viking Polaris*’s special operations boat in our penultimate call – Halifax, Nova Scotia.

As we whizz around the harbour, stopping momentarily to spot birdlife and have a nose at the grand waterfront mansions, it dawns on me that great expeditions are about more than full-throttle Zodiac tours and citizen science excursions. They’re about having those horizon-broadening experiences in whatever form they come – and over the past two weeks I can say without doubt that I’ve had my fair share of those. ●



GUEST VERDICT

Paula Hamilton from Oakland, California, says: “The crew on *Viking Polaris* were so welcoming. When we couldn’t sail into Cap-aux-Meules because of the weather, they immediately came up with interesting activities for us to do.

“Another thing I appreciate is Viking’s commitment to ecology, like they pull black shades down at night so birds aren’t attracted to the light and fly into the ship.

“The ship’s art is fantastic, too. It displays 300 felt birds which are switched around depending on where the ship is sailing to. Who else does that? Here’s a charcoal drawing I made of us sailing into New York.”



Get on board

Viking’s 13-night Canadian Discovery cruise aboard *Viking Polaris*, from Toronto to New York, via Trois-Rivières, Quebec City, Saguenay, Sept-Îles, Cap-Aux-Meules, Charlottetown and Halifax, departs on 3 August 2024, from £9,595pp including flights **vikingscruises.co.uk**

The CLIA View

Andy Harmer OBE on why expedition cruises could hold the key to securing more new-to-cruise clients

If the past few months have taught us anything, it's that the cruise industry continues to go from strength to strength. With record passenger numbers, more ships than ever before setting sail from destinations across the globe, and the highest ever number of attendees joining our annual CLIA Conference, it's wonderful to see such positive momentum.

That momentum is being experienced by all sectors across the cruise industry, particularly expedition. Exploration destinations have seen a 53 per cent increase in 2023 passenger numbers compared to 2022, making it one of the fastest growing segments of travel – and a fantastic opportunity for the trade.

Even if you're not familiar with expedition cruising, you'll already know it has obvious differences compared to traditional ocean voyages. You won't find zip lines and waterslides on the top deck of these ships, and instead of casinos and West End-style productions, there are interactive learning centres, citizen science projects and fascinating talks from local experts.



And these small ships don't scrimp on fine dining, comfortable cabins or onboard extras, either. In fact, a number of lines operate high-end vessels that allow guests to explore distant destinations in style. And it's these destinations that really set expedition cruising apart. From the tips of Antarctica's icebergs to the dramatic falls of the Kimberley, the sector's purpose-built ships are often the only way to get to the heart of their locations, which really are best seen by sea.

It's also the wealth of destinations that make expedition cruising such an attractive option. While this type of travel often conjures up images of snow-capped mountains and remote islands, the wild beauty of the Scottish lochs and Irish coastline are right on our doorstep and just waiting to be discovered.

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT Andy Harmer, managing director of CLIA UK&I; Andy in action at the CLIA conference; the stunning Kimberley falls in Australia

Further afield, the remarkable ecosystems of South America, paradisaical islands of the Caribbean and lush valleys of Greenland, which aren't immediately associated with expedition cruising, offer a range of exhilarating experiences for itinerant travellers.

As we heard at CLIA's recent Expedition Cruise Summit, there are now a wealth of related opportunities for the trade. Lynn Narraway from Seabourn emphasised expedition cruising as being ideal for non-cruise travellers who have taken high-end safaris, for example, and are now looking for their next escape.

That's why we've added virtual and in-person events, ship visits, resources and learning modules dedicated to expedition cruise on the CLIA website. If your customers want a truly unique getaway, an expedition cruise could be just the ticket. 📍



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It's the wealth of destinations that makes expedition cruising such an attractive option





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