Mid-week wonders

Samantha Whitaker boards the Glen Massan for a dramatic tour of the Argyll countryside

Following in the footsteps of HM The Queen, who cruises the coast of Scotland aboard the luxurious Hebridean Princess with 60 guests and 40 staff, I climbed aboard the Glen Massan. A more modest vessel, able to accommodate up to 12 passengers with four crew, the boat is one of two owned by The Majestic Line, a company set up by Edinburgh-based architect Andrew Thoms and Dr Ken Grant in 2005, with the aim of showing off the beautiful coastline of Argyll.

Surrounded by rugged hills, I was soothed by the stillness around me. Our day had begun early, with a train from London Euston to Glasgow, and from there another train and connecting ferry to Dunoon. However, the seven-hour journey was quickly forgotten when we climbed aboard the Glen Massan and were shown to our en suite cabin. The wooden boat, which for 25 years was a fishing trawler, is now a wood-panelled, gold-funnelled luxury mini cruise ship. We could hear the water lapping against the porthole of our cabin, which had once been the fish hold.

We gathered in the saloon to meet the other guests and the crew: Martin the skipper, Andrew the engineer, Steve the chef and Alistair the bosun. Boat life was quickly explained: the itinerary changes with the weather and the whims of the guests. Someone expressed a desire to see Inveraray, and, since no one objected and the weather was fine, we swiftly set sail up Loch Fyne to the town.

I watched the scenery drift by from a sun lounger on deck before we gathered at the communal table in the saloon for a sumptuous dinner of salmon and beef hotchpotch. The cruise is known for its cuisine and there is plenty of it. The timetable is built around the meals, each served at a different idyllic anchorage.

Although we were on a three-night tour (most last six), we managed to sample a wide range of locally-sourced produce and Scottish favourites, including kippers, haggis, black pudding, lobster, deep-fried Mars bar and Irn-Bru jelly. The feasts that Steve created in the tiny galley were beyond belief. Wine is served with the evening meal, and there is a reasonably-priced bar, which serves generous measures.

Sights of exploration

After breakfast the next day, we motored to shore in the tender. Refreshed after a peaceful night's sleep on the calm water, my friend Jess and I pottered around the Inveraray Jail museum, learning how the wrongdoers of the 19th century were punished. Back onboard, we pestered Martin with questions about sites of interest and wildlife, as we sailed back down the loch. Through his binoculars, we watched gannets dive like torpedoes for fish, and grey seals lolling on a rocky island.

We watched gannets dive like torpedoes for fish and grey seals lolling on a rocky island











JESSICA CUNNIFFE

SAIL AWAY: (Clockwise from left) seals; the saloon; Samantha relaxes on deck; Martin fishes for mackerel; and the Glen Massan

We anchored at Tarbert for a nose around the town. From the shore, ours was by far the most handsome boat in the bay and we watched with envy as Alistair bombed the little tender back towards it. The staff of the Glen Massan could not be more accommodating. Nothing is too much trouble – or, rather, everything is 'nae bother'. On the final leg of the trip, I steered the boat into Holy Loch, feeling for myself the tug of the 500 horsepower engine, which we had been shown the night before.

That evening, when we anchored for the night in the beautiful setting of Lochranza, on the Cock of Arran, Alistair took us for a spin in the tender. He even let us drive it ourselves, skimming over the glittering water and doubling back to bounce over our own waves. When we returned, Martin was showing one of the guests how to fish for mackerel. Their bucket was already half full, and, less than two hours later, the fish was served as our starter.

In Lochranza, we visited the Arran whisky distillery and sampled the famous Arran Gold, a whisky liquor that is similar to Baileys. We sailed along the Kyles of Bute – up the West Kyle and down the East Kyle to Rothesay, where we saw the glamorous Victorian gothic mansion, Mount Stuart.

All aboard

The Glen Massan's twin vessel, the Glen Tarsan operates from Oban in more open waters further north. Between them, the boats welcome around 600 guests a year. Jess and I helped to lower the average age on our trip, which is usually around 70.

The transfer in the tender is smooth and the boat is as accessible as possible. If you don't fancy going ashore, there is a lot to do onboard: from the deck you can spot wildlife; and in the saloon there are books on local wildlife, history and attractions, board games, and a plasma screen, which usually displays GPS navigation data but can also play DVDs.

We were back on dry land by 10.30am on day three, and bid a fond farewell to the other guests and the superb crew, who had shown us genuine highland hospitality.

The Majestic Line, www.themajesticline.co.uk; info@themajesticline.co.uk; 0131 623 5012.

IN THE UK



LONDON

What's on...

Underground Journeys
V&A
Until 13 February 2011
Subheaded 'Charles Holden's designs for London Transport', this exhibition features designs by Holden and his architectural practice, Adams, Holden and Pearson.
Free admission. Contact: 020 7907 7073 or www.vam.ac.uk

The Royal Ballet: Alice's Adventures in Wonderland
Royal Opera House
2-15 March 2011
The world premiere of Christopher Wheeldon's new ballet of Lewis Carroll's famous tale of Alice and her encounters with extraordinary people, strange creatures and unusual events.
Tickets: £5-£360. Contact: 020 7304 4000 or www.roh.org.uk

Yes, Prime Minister
Gielgud Theatre
Booking until 15 January 2011
The original writers of the BBC series, Antony Jay and Jonathan Lynn, have reunited for this 30th-anniversary production, starring Henry Goodman as Sir Humphrey Appleby and David Haig as Jim Hacker.
Tickets: £17.50-£52.50. Contact: 0844 482 5138 or www.yesprimeminister.co.uk



© MANUEL HARLAN