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ALL ABOARD FINGAL, SCOTLAND'S FIRST SHIP TURNED HOTEL....

By Caroline Phillips



It's not often that I get to sleep in a floating hotel. Especially not one that HRH the Princess Royal has been out to sea on. Nor one that's a former Northern Lighthouse ship, once used for maintaining lighthouses and transporting their keepers and equipment through treacherous seas. And particularly not one that's based adjacent to the former Royal Yacht Britannia. Welcome to Fingal, Scotland's first ship turned hotel. Where once she was stationed at Oban, she's now in the Port of Leith, Edinburgh.

My husband, Adrian, and I cross the gangway to board Fingal. She's 237 ft long — from the golden trident on her prow to her stern and boasting smart livery of navy and red — and 40 ft in breadth. She used to travel at 15.25 knots, but in her new resting place of a working dock amid residential housing, there's just a slight movement of the water beneath. The 'ghosts' of her erstwhile crew of chief engineer, coxswain, seamen, greasers and the like may still be here, but we're greeted by a smiley receptionist with the Fingal trident on her pin badge sitting at a rippled sycamore desk.



A quick look around reveals that, whilst (to use nautical turns of phrase) Fingal may not be seaworthy, her fabric and equipment are in very good order — courtesy of Steven Flannigan, high-spec interior designer. Her lavish refit cost £5 million and took four years. (170 tons of steel was removed, including cranes; and two new decks were added). There's a lift by reception that recalls the lantern of a lighthouse: multi-faceted, circular and glass. And everywhere we walk there are beautiful, high-quality surfaces, textures and designs: from caulked reclaimed teak

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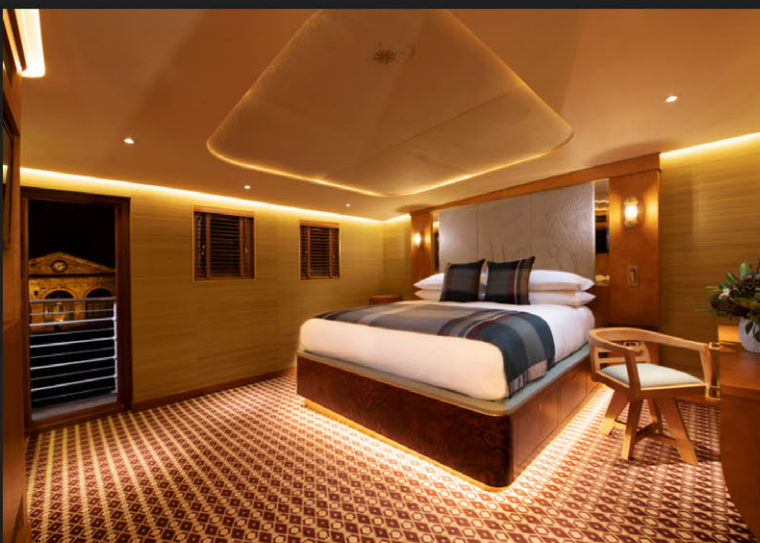
There are beautiful, high-quality surfaces, textures and designs: from lacquered reclaimed teak floors to golden-brown iroko doors and cork on the staircase. Every contour, curve, slant, angle and tilt appears carefully considered. The design is all delightfully nautical in a superyacht, top craftsmanship and artistry kind of way.

There's a grand, sweeping staircase and sycamore panelling in the former hold, now a triple-height ballroom — it even has a removable skylight — which seats 60. The erstwhile bridge room (which contains the Engineer's Log '67- '73, 'Overhauling fuel injectors...' reads one entry) is now a private dining-cum-board-room and contains the original ship's wheel. On the top deck, beyond the thick granite bar, the Art Deco-style restaurant has a glittering, beaten-copper ceiling that looks like water. And then there's the glass walkway leading to the engine room and the state-of-the-art galley where once there were fuel tanks.



Once the accommodations on Fingal consisted of 40 cramped cabins: single ones for officers and double cabins for crew. The only en-suite was the master's, who also had a separate dayroom and bedroom. Instead there are now 23 double, en-suite cabins, all named after Stevenson lighthouses (which were designed and built in the 19th century by the eponymous Scottish engineer).

Each cabin has an individual and original, bespoke leather headboard of a seascape — designed by Araminta Campbell, a Leith weaver, about whom more later — with the contours of the marinescape stitched into the leather around the relevant lighthouse: ours the sea contour around Hyskeir. One of Campbell's plaid throws — also telling the story of land and sea — lies on the bed. A compass is embroidered into the suede above the bed.



The furniture is fixed, with no sharp corners. There's a replica of a radio operator's swivel chair (the original was bagged by HRH the Princess Royal). The cabinetry (think leather-faced wardrobe and minibar) is exquisite. Even the bathroom boasts brass light-fittings and wheel-handled taps, the sort of ship's paraphernalia found in a chandlery.

Enough of the design, brilliant though it is. The real reason we're here is for a short break in Edinburgh, one of our favourite cities. This starts (for us) with the joy of eating. This is lucky because instead of Fingal being used for relieving light-keepers, servicing of lighthouses and buoys, and landing of cargo, she too has retired to a life of pleasure. Or, at least, to offering a life of pleasure. And so to afternoon tea in the officers' dining saloon — or is it the messroom? — aka the onboard restaurant. If we're expecting scones and cream, we're in for a surprise.

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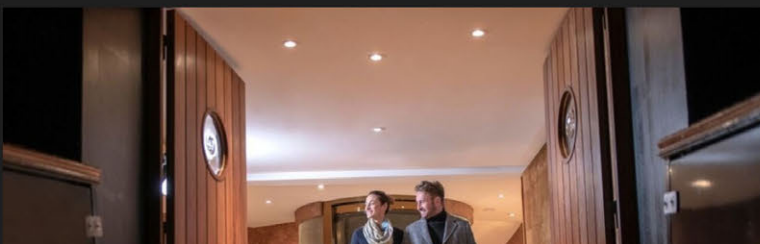
Yes, there are mixed fruit buttermilk scones with fresh clotted cream. But there's also curried haddock arancini (think Sicily meets Delhi meets North Atlantic Ocean), Stornaway black pudding cartwheels and cream of white bean soup, alongside Earl Grey with Scottish Heather tea. Plus gluten-free millionaire's shortbread, poppy seed and vanilla macarons, and sandwiches, including smoked salmon ones. (Tea is £40 per head).

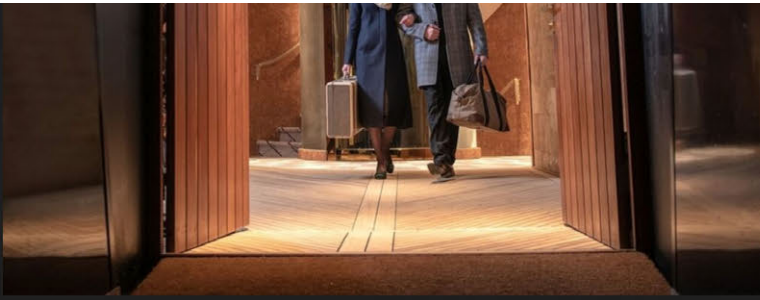
They smoke their own salmon aboard and use local suppliers, including a forager. Later at dinner, the 'small' plates are pleasingly big and simple ones, of hot oak salmon (och, aye, more) and a chocolate mousse with gold leaf. Instead of an engineer taking time off from effecting repairs to the deck crane's hydraulics to have a cuppa, we're served by a waitress. How times have changed.



Leisure time on board can be spent reading, lolling in whisky and soda scented bath gel-suffused waters (bag a cabin with a tub, some have only a shower) or wandering around the outdoor deck space. When we decide to jump ship, we find ourselves on the unattractive Ocean Drive near the Ocean Terminal Shopping Mall or it's 10 minutes by taxi to the centre of town.

We visit some of the city's obvious must-sees: Holyroodhouse, Arthur's Seat (with its panoramic view), Old Town, the Castle, the National Gallery and (the small but perfectly formed) National Portrait Gallery. Then we hop aboard Britannia (home to Her Maj's single bed) which is managed as a tourist attraction by Royal Yacht Enterprises, the company that owns Fingal. But there are also lesser-known delights. The Writers' Museum — which presents the lives of the three foremost Scottish writers, Robert Burns, Walter Scott and Robert Louis Stevenson — to Water of Leith, a 12-mile riverside walk through the heart of the city.





Soon it's time for shopping. Araminta Campbell's waterfront studio (by appointment only) is nanoseconds away from Fingal. Campbell draws her inspiration from the Scottish landscape, and her signature collection comprises one-off artworks, any weaving done on hand looms. She uses undyed British alpaca fleeces from animals whose names she knows. Her pieces are covetable but they're not bargains — a blanket is £6000 and shawl, £1500. And who can resist a visit to W. E. Scott & Son for sporrans and Highland belts?

So back to the ship. Fingal used to negotiate the tricky tidal narrows beneath the Skye Bridge. At other times, the Chief Officer would con her through the Summer Isles on the approaches to Loch Broom and Ullapool. Or guide her through the waters to examine a beacon off Elie harbour. She also accompanied the Royal Yacht Britannia in Scottish waters during official royal visits. This is all no more. But with entry level cabins at £300 and the Skerryvore Suite at £1500 a night, Fingal provides a boutique (or should that be boatique?) hotel with a difference: one that offers ocean luxury in a dock.



FURTHER INFORMATION

For further information and to make a booking, visit www.fingal.co.uk. To arrange car hire, visit www.holidayautos.com.

Caroline Phillips is an award-winning freelance journalist who contributes to publications from Sunday and daily newspapers to glossy magazines and various luxury websites. To see more of her work, go to www.carolinephillips.net.

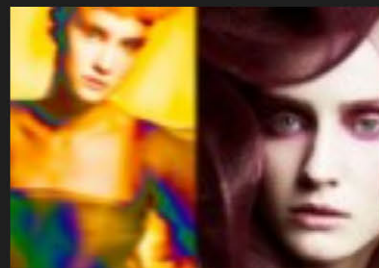
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A VINTAGE YEAR



WINSTON AND WATERLOO



ATTRACTA COURTNEY – THE