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# THE GOOD LIFE



## PLEASE, SIR, I WANT SOME MOR

*'There's an island without roads but with a post office, called Tanera Mor. And one, Harris, with a desolate lunar landscape.'*  
*Caroline Phillips sees Scotland by land and by sea*

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# PLEASE, SIR, I WANT SOME MOR

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*Caroline Phillips* communes with dolphins, eagles and tweedmakers, and savours views you'd kilt for, on a sumptuous tour around Scotland by water and rail





OPPOSITE: YOU CAN LIVE LIKE A QUEEN ON THE HEBRIDEAN PRINCESS. LEFT: BAGPIPES AND EYE-CATCHING FACIAL HAIR WELCOME PASSENGERS TO THE ROYAL SCOTSMAN TRAIN (BELOW)



Two crofters turn the hay by hand, beside woods of rowan, wych and grey willow. These are ancient woods and ancient people. Nearby a sign warns of bulls and calves roaming free — but you may also meet wildcats and pine martens. We're amid bens and glens covered in bracken and purple thistles, the air heady with wild thyme. Far below us is the sea and shore. This is Shieldaig, one of the most remote areas of Scotland. Afterwards we have mugs of tea in a tin shack where they sell slabs of homemade chocolate cake and tiny, hand-knitted Aran sweaters.

Over the ensuing week we see porpoises, dolphins, otters, peregrine falcons and sea eagles. There are places where we drink in blue lochs, skies and sea. There's an island without roads but with a post office, called Tanera Mor. And one, Harris, with a desolate lunar landscape and gneiss so hard that they used to take their dead to bury them on the other side of the island. Welcome to our *Hebridean Princess* cruise.

When I say 'cruise', you may dismiss the idea. But this is the small ship that Her Majesty chartered for close friends and family in 2006 for her 80th birthday and again in 2011 for Princess Anne's 60th and Prince Andrew's 50th. Ours is a new package that includes a guided scenic road trip to the ship with the bekilted aristo Lord Gray, then a seven-day trip on the *Hebridean Princess*, a stay in the Airds Hotel (a one-time ferry inn gone smart), followed by two nights on the Royal Scotsman, a 1920s-style Pullman train with marquetry, ceiling fans and a cast from Agatha Christie.

Additionally the Baggage man, a professional service, collects our luggage from home and delivers it on board. This is lucky, as the boot of the Jaguar F-Type we're test-driving fits only a Tumi overnight case plus a bottle of Avon's Skin So Soft. (It's what the US military and SAS use against midges. Honestly.) We're under instructions to bring black tie, and gentlemen may hire a kilt for the gala dinners. When the husband demurred to bring black tie, I suggested a kilt, which had him packing the DJ pretty sharpish.

## CHOPPY CHANGE

The *Hebridean Princess* leaves from Oban and returns there. Where we go in between involves, gales, stabilisers and lying green on my bed. Who minds? Under the Trade Descriptions Act, it *should* be wet and rough in Scotland.

We're scheduled to island-hop to Stornoway then back down through the Hebridean Sea, but because of the storm-tossed waters the captain wisely misses out Skye and Muck, plus the privately owned Shiant Isles. (Delightfully, the *Hebridean Princess* is small enough to go to remote places and make beach landings.) Instead he includes Plockton — where boatman Calum Mackenzie offers seal trips for £10, 'money-back guarantee if you don't see any' — and Rùm, population 50, where there's a fantastical »



» pink sandstone pleasure palace, Kinloch Castle. It's an Edwardian time capsule now letting in water and waiting for an oligarch to snap it up.

What of the *Hebridean Princess*? She's 50 years old and used to be the MacBrayne ferry, carting cows and cars. Now she has a brick inglenook fireplace, proper bathtubs and wood panelling. There are 49 passengers and 50 excellent crew, including the swashbuckling chief purser, Charles Carroll. The guests have silver hair and golden purses — this is some of the world's most expensive cruising — and the staff are mostly Latvians with broad Scottish accents.

There are kippers for breakfast — 'Best I've ever had,' declares veteran broadcaster Hugh Scully — scones for tea and lobster bisque and salmon for dinner. James Boswell wrote of Dr Johnson: 'I insisted on Scottifying his palate, but he was very reluctant.' If only he'd tasted this.

There's also unlimited wine, a good library with books like *The Man Who Gave Away His Island*, and a harpist. On Sunday, there's worship aboard, which seventeen of us attend. 'We pray for the port pilots, harbour masters, tug crews...' reads the purser in a service that lasts ten minutes. It's like 1950s Britain.

## FRESH ISLES

Certainly among the highlights is the remote island of Tanera Mor. 'Its year-round population is six,' says our excellent Blue Badge guide, Marilyn Hunter. 'It's on sale for £2.5 million, which includes the post office-cum-ceilidh hall-cum-tearoom that issues its own collectors' stamps.'

We climb 270ft to gain spectacular 360° views of the Assynt mountains, then clamber down a precipitous slope of brownest peat to an isolated rocky shore cloaked with seaweed. 'The water's heating and the mackerel have swum away north,' says a fisherman, stroking a 'worthless' velvet-backed crab.

The island tour of Harris is striking too: it's a place where the sea hangs grimly to the land and the houses hug the coastline disconsolately. Yet there's also its Luskentyre beach — a turquoise sea with white breakers and golden sand. Noteworthy, too, is Lewis and its hand-weavers of Harris Tweed — no longer dyed lichen and grass, but Prada colours, and left in bales by the roadside for collection. Then there are the Callanish Stones in Lewis, silent sentinels older than Stonehenge.

All too soon the cruise comes to an end. Afterwards in Airds Hotel, Port Appin, we luxuriate on Vi-Spring beds, lazily looking at the loch, before stirring to go on the water again: this time on the ferry to Lismore, with its limeburners' cottages mostly owned by the Duke of Argyll, and no mains water supply, just wells. On board there are adverts for Lismore's annual Scarecrow Competition. We play spot-the-man-who's-selling-private-islands-for-Savills. He's the one in green wellies and Barbour. 'I just sold that island for £1.5 million...' He points



past the lighthouse to an island with a seven-bed Georgian house.

## HIGHLAND FLING

The drive to Edinburgh is in the open-topped Jag, sun on our faces, burning off in the prehistoric foothills of Glencoe with its majestically savage peaks, cascades of rock and scree. But our final transport is the Royal Scotsman from Edinburgh to Inverness and back via Dundee: a country-house party on wheels, with linen, tartan carpets, brass fittings and teeny single beds in the snuggest of cabins. But the best of service.

We have visits to Culloden battlefield and a whisky distillery, and there is clay-pigeon shooting or fishing on the Rothermurchus Estate. Meanwhile we feast at 4.30pm on homemade Victoria sponge, salmon rillette rolls and honey biscuits, everything superb and all made on board — and we only have to wait until 7pm for canapés and a four-course dinner. 'The air is temperately cold, and the natives endeavour to qualify it by taking a dose of aquavita,' wrote ethnographer Martin Martin in 1695. Perhaps this is why there are 57 different malt whiskies to try.

We judder and gently move through the Highlands: Pitlochry, which Queen Victoria visited; a glimpse of Blair Castle by Blair Atholl; then we stop for the night in Boat of Garten, a private railway station on the private Strathspey Railway. It's by the River Spey, whose salmon fishing is the best in the world — but its soft light and air are even better. I could drink in its peace for ever. After dusk, we enjoy Colin Ramage and Iain Anderson, a fine Scottish fiddle/folk singing and guitar duo who do Scots songs and ballads. It's a different world, a different time, a different place.

If I tell you that the following day I caught a 5lb trout, would you believe me? Perhaps not. But in eleven days we did see scenery better than that in heaven. And we heard that Her Majesty is rumoured to be booking her favourite ship again for her 90th. Britannia once again rules the waves. *J*

## A ROYAL ITINERARY

The Royal Scotsman, the UK's only luxury sleeper train, offers a variety of fully inclusive itineraries around Scotland

In 2014 guests can combine their journey with a stay on the *Hebridean Princess*. The seven-night Highland and Island Escape cruise, combined with the Highland Journey on the Royal Scotsman, costs from £8,030pp (based on two sharing a cabin). The trip lasts nine nights in all

For the night before you get on your *Hebridean Princess* cruise or if the *Hebridean* and Royal Scotsman components of your journey don't dovetail, then the *Hebridean Princess* suggest you stay at the Airds Hotel

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royalscotsman.com

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hebridean.co.uk

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