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MOTION PICTURES

Caroline Phillips takes a trip by cruise ship and then luxury train to explore the unspoilt islands of the Hebrides

These are the islands on the edge of the world. You may see porpoises, basking sharks or dolphins. Or perchance a peregrine falcon or sea eagle. You'll pass rivers of moss and mushroom colours of plaid, and bens and glens cloaked in bracken and tradition. 'It's the last great wilderness,' declares our ship's chief purser, Charles Carroll. It's as if we are lost in time. Welcome to the Hebridean Islands.

We are on the first leg of a trip that's a new collaboration between the *Hebridean Princess* cruise ship and *The Royal Scotsman*, an elegant Edwardian-style train with mahogany-panelled Pullman carriages. A week at sea, a drive, then a two-night Highland rail trip - a journey of 1,000 miles.

We're scheduled to cruise from Oban to the remote island of Tanera Mòr and then down to Skye and Muck. But the weather gods stir summer winds over the Hebridean Sea and the sea dogs mutter about 'swell', so we forego Skye's Dunvegan Castle and Muck. Instead, we end our trip with Rum - population 50 - and Kinloch Castle, a fantastical Edwardian time capsule, sadly decaying.

The *Hebridean Princess*, which has occasionally been chartered by the Queen, is an erstwhile ferry, once used for carting cars and cows. Now she has swag-festooned beds, attentive crew and passengers - the kind with silver hair and OBEs - who don kilts to dine on lobster bisque and the freshest of langoustines, and listen to the harpist strumming songs of mermaids. She's also small enough to sail to remote inky waters other ships cannot reach,

allowing passengers to experience the simplicity and wildness of the Hebrides.

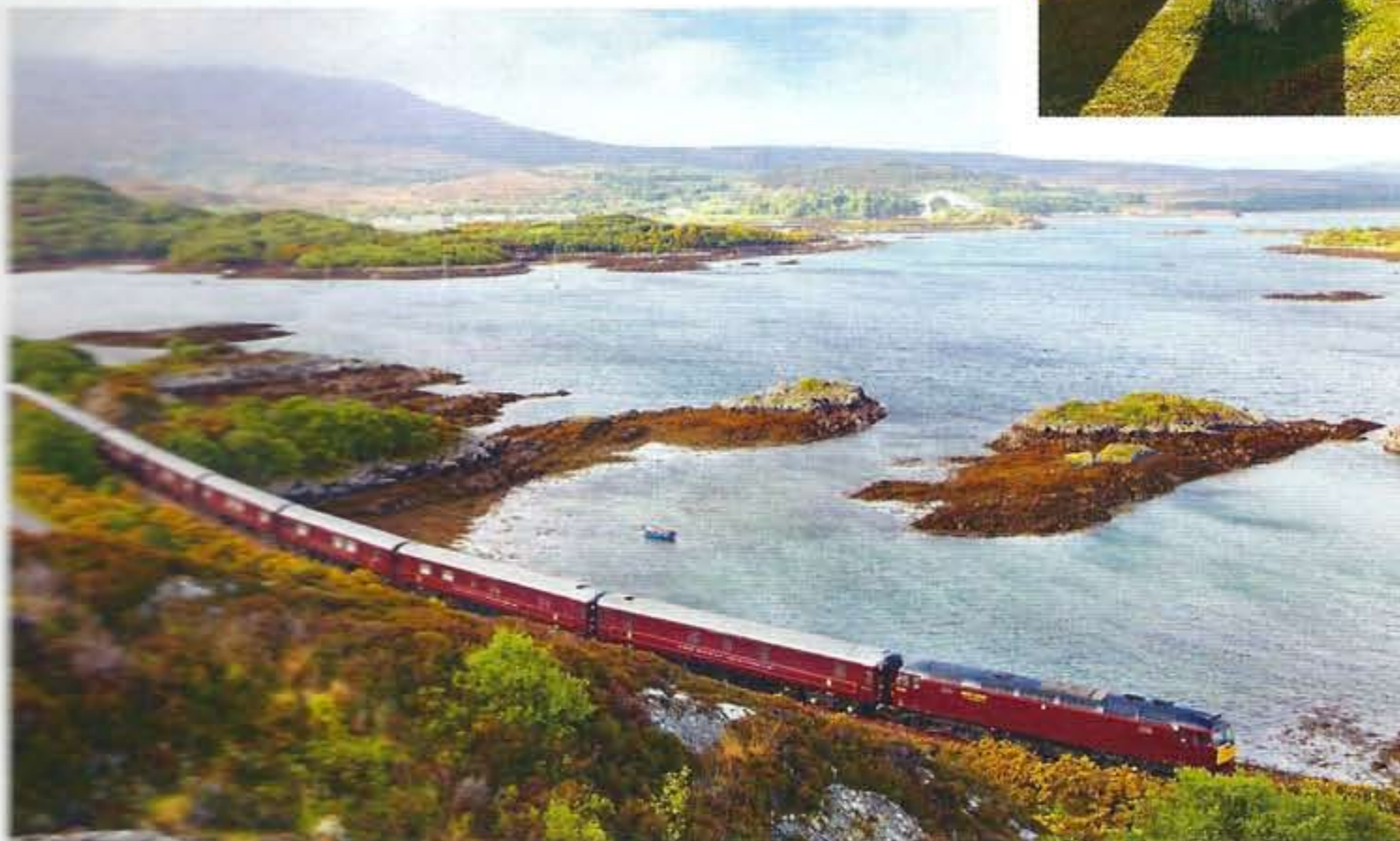
At Shieldaig, still on the mainland, we first set anchor. Some of us take bikes kept on the ship for guests to use and cycle along a mountainous coastal road flanked by historic woodlands - the air scented with ferns, fir and sheep's scour - while a crofter from centuries past turns hay by hand in the field. On Tanera Mòr, the largest of the Summer islands - population six and currently on the market for £2.5 million - there's not even a road. Instead, there are smugglers' ghosts, timeless views of spectacular mountains and a tea room/ceilidh hall/post office that issues its own stamps for collectors.

The historical highlight of the trip is the Callanish Stones in Lewis - a sombre stone circle that marks the site of a burial cairn. It's older, but less impressive, than Stonehenge and is encircled by hills. The Isle of Harris is connected to Lewis and has a similarly ancient atmosphere, with its peat bogs and desolate lunar landscape of prehistoric gneiss rock outcrops punctuated with tiny, glass-like lochs. There, the deserted Luskentyre beach is breathtaking,

especially during the summer months, with its powdery golden sand and luminous turquoise sea.

Afterwards, our train journey on *The Royal Scotsman* resembles a Twenties house party on wheels. We board the train at Edinburgh to the accompaniment of bagpipes, an apt conclusion to our drive through the savage grandeur of Glencoe. We judder gently past constantly changing scenery. The on-board service is impeccable and includes a choice of 57 malt whiskies, fine Scottish venison and Aberdeen Angus; all meals are prepared on the train. We stable in Boat of Garten - yesteryear's (now private) railway siding beside the River Spey - with its softest of air and light. The atmosphere is heightened by traditional music from two on-board entertainers, who play soul-stirring, knee-tapping Scots songs and ballads.

The different people we meet on the journey - musicians, boatmen, fishermen, lairds and storytellers - all lead us into the pages of a compelling history book; stops on the tour range from Culloden's battle fields to the Rothiemurchus Estate, in the shadow of the Cairngorms. We spend a morning learning to fly-fish. The past is another country. It's just north of the border □



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT *The Royal Scotsman* travels through stunning scenery. The Callanish Stones cast their shadows on the Isle of Lewis. With space for 50 guests, the *Hebridean Princess* is small enough to sail to more remote waters

WAYS AND MEANS

Caroline Phillips travelled as a guest of the *Hebridean Princess* (www.hebridean.co.uk) and *The Royal Scotsman* (www.royalscotsman.com).

In 2014, there are three scheduled 11-night departures (April, June and July), and one 10-night departure (September). The latter costs from £8,030 per person (based on two sharing) on a full-board basis, including all drinks, excursions and transfers between the train and the ship. For reservations, call 01756-704700. For more information on Scotland, go to www.visitscotland.com.