

» THERE is something magical about messing about on boats – especially when you get to do it in and around the mystical Loch Ness.

And what a boat the Ros Crana is – a superbly decked-out barge that offered us an excellent home for four nights of sightseeing, exploring, discovering and simply enjoying the delights of the loch and the Caledonian Canal.

All of this with amazing and welcoming staff who had a wealth of knowledge about the hidden gems of Loch Ness and a trip that was dripping with historical and cultural significance.

It's fair to say I had a once-in-a-lifetime trip that won't be forgotten. I even tried canoeing for the first time.

We started our amazing trip on the Ros Crana – operated by holiday company Caledonian Discover – from Dores on the northern side of Loch Ness. It was here we had our first glimpse of the breathtaking views of the loch across to the iconic Urquhart Castle.

Our tour guides Chris and Neil intrigued us with stories about the loch while we stopped off in a couple of picturesque places along



» IN THE SADDLE: HEATHER TAKING A RIDE ALONG THE TOW PATH ON HER WAY TO LOCH OICH

BLOWN AWAY BY AMAZING BARGE BREAK

HEATHER FOWLIE was very pleasantly surprised when a barge-based break turned out to be a trip of a lifetime

the way to Fort Augustus, where the barge was situated. One of these little gems was The Falls of Foyer, the ninth-highest waterfall in the UK with a fall of 165ft. At Fort Augustus, we received a warm welcome from Martin and Kara, the owners of Ros Crana, which would be our home for the next three nights. Originally a Belgian cargo ship that operated in Amsterdam before they bought it, Ros Crana has been running since May 2013.

I was truly excited and fascinated by the colourful barge and once aboard I went on to the top deck with a cold beer and a cider to get acquainted with the other guests, while Martin took the barge out to the "wild" side of Loch Ness, an area only accessible by water. It was so peaceful and we could see the snow-covered mountains when looking back towards Fort Augustus. Right from this moment, I could tell this was going to be a great trip.

The barge itself was very modern and cosy. It felt extremely spacious and, if I'm honest, I didn't expect there to be so much room. In the communal living room they had a range of board games and books, which added to the homely feel. One of the features I was so impressed with was the shower. It may sound trivial, but after a long day there really is nothing better than a nice hot shower to warm



» SHIPSHAPE WITH A HOMELY FEEL: THE MAIN SEATING AREA ABOARD THE WELL-APPOINTED ROS CRANA

you up, and Ros Crana did not disappoint. Another wonderful highlight was the food that was prepared for us by Tree (short for Theresa), the chef on board who has worked for the company for 13 years. We had our breakfast at the huge table in the middle of the barge where on arrival we had a range of cereals, a cooked breakfast option, fresh juice and two big baskets of toast. Before leaving Fort Augustus, we had a wander round the shops and watched the barge climb the five locks which lead to our next stop, Loch Oich.



» PADDLE'S UP: CANOEING ROOKIE HEATHER ON LOCH OICH

The trip had a range of activities for people of all ages and abilities such as cycling, canoeing, walking and sailing. You can even steer the barge. For those who don't want to take part in the activities, there's an option to stay aboard Ros Crana and take in the stunning views. Hill walking was the first activity I did, walking up the "wee hill"

between Loch Oich and Loch Lochy. The "wee hill" is a great vantage point for seeing both the lochs at once and it was worth the climb. After a delicious lunch on the barge, I tried my next activity, which was to cycle along the tow path parallel to the canal ahead of the barge for two miles, and then a further three that took us to Loch Oich. This loch captured my heart. There was something magical about it and the boat looked magnificent once anchored in the middle of this stunning 154ft deep paradise. That night we had homemade bread with our venison stew and peach and cherry meringue pudding for dessert – a hearty meal that was much needed after our eventful day.

The next morning we took to the



» AND RELAX: FORT AUGUSTUS ON THE BANKS OF LOCH NESS (TOP) AND (ABOVE) WHERE GUESTS BOARD THE ROS CRANA AT THE VILLAGE

I HAD LOVED EVERY SINGLE MINUTE OF THIS JOURNEY

water on canoes and spent a couple of hours paddling down the loch and back. I had never canoed before, so I was extremely excited if a little nervous. I was soon put to ease by our guide, Chris.

We chose to canoe again four miles down the loch to Lock Locky, where we met up with the barge that was already in the bay waiting for us. Overnight we berthed at Laggan Locks, where we visited another boat that had been made into a bar called The Eagle Barge Inn. It was the perfect place to spend the

afternoon with the other passengers having a few drinks before supper. On our last morning, we went for a cycle through the Dark Mile. This took us around 45 minutes and was a fairly easy ride with pretty waterfalls and old bridges. It was on that cycle I realised the trip was coming to an end and I felt quite sad at knowing I would have to go back to reality. I had loved every single minute of this journey and was blown away at how amazing and relaxing this trip had been.

FACT FILE

» Heather was a guest on board the Ros Crana with Caledonian Discover (www.caledonian-discovery.co.uk)

» The 2019 season starts on Saturday from Banavie (Fort William) on March 30, the final cruise leaving Inverness on Saturday on October 19.

» Prices range from £975 per person sharing a twin room and from £1075 per person for a single en-suite

» This includes accommodation in twin en-suite cabins; all meals; exclusive use of cycles and canoes; local guide to lead you to the finest paths for foot and bicycles.

» Caledonian Discover is offering, for 2019 cruises, a saving of £70 per person on a seven-day cruise, or £35 per person on a four-day cruise. This offer is available until January 31 2019.

» You can contact Caledonian Discover at info@caledonian-discovery.co.uk or on 01397 7712167.

HOLIDAY HIGHLIGHTS

WE SHOULD ALL BE ANTARCTICA AMBASSADORS, SAYS PACKHAM

» A DEFENDER of wildlife and wild places, TV presenter and photographer Chris Packham has visited the polar regions on multiple occasions.

At the end of November, he will return to Antarctica on an Exodus Travels charter with wildlife photographers Mark Carwardine and Paul Goldstein. Here's what you need to know about Antarctica, according to Packham...

IT'S A SPECIAL PLACE "There are very few places on the planet where we can see such large aggregations of wildlife. That's one of the many things we've lost. The most extraordinary light I've ever encountered



» MEN ON A MISSION: CHRIS (LEFT) AND PAUL

occurs in those regions because of the clarity of the air."

THE ICY LANDSCAPE IS ALWAYS IN FLUX

"The first time you step foot on the seventh continent is something special. I remember watching an iceberg one evening, and we were up all night. The iceberg was white and blue in every shade and then it was green, orange and lilac. The diversity of life is amazing and the sculpturing of the bergs never ceases to entrance."

WE ALL HAVE A DUTY TO PROTECT ANTARCTICA

"The first time we visited, I got on a rib boat and there was a plastic bottle on the beach. This last time we visited, there was a big chunk of plastic. It's tempting to think of Antarctica as an untouched wilderness, but if it isn't touched directly, it's touched by climate change and plastic drifting from other places. We should be ambassadors for that place and campaign to protect it."

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