



### Cruise Weekly today

**CRUISE Weekly** today features three pages of the latest cruise news, plus a full page from **Cruise Lines International Association**.

### Ponant backs WHOI

**PONANT** Explorations has announced a three-year partnership with the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution (WHOI) to advance ocean research and education.

Through the new alliance, WHOI scientists will join select Ponant expeditions to conduct fieldwork, test emerging technologies, and share their expertise with guests.

Additionally, the cruise line will provide grant funding to help support WHOI's polar science work and launch educational campaigns, including a symposium at sea.

## Cruise Month celebrating river week

**NEW** ships, new itineraries, and a wealth of new experiences have made river cruising one of the most innovative areas in travel, setting the tone for this week's phase of Cruise Lines International Association's (CLIA) annual Cruise Month campaign.

The river sector will take the focus in this week's expanded program of social media activity, digital advertising, educational opportunities and other initiatives celebrating the industry.

CLIA Managing Director Joel Katz said river cruising has developed into one of the hottest areas of cruising, driven by increasing popularity.

"In recent times we've had a succession of new announcements in river cruising, including spectacular new ships, new rivers and destinations to explore, and new cruise lines entering the sector," Katz said.



"It's an exciting time in river cruising, and the result is a much greater variety of experiences available to travellers."

This year's Cruise Month activities will showcase the huge diversity of cruise lines and experiences available under the banner #LoveCruise.

Last week's focus was ocean cruising, while expedition and

luxury cruising will come across the next two weeks respectively.

Initiatives will highlight the advantages of booking a sailing through a cruise specialist travel agent, and will encourage consumers to connect with a certified CLIA member.

There is also a Cruise Month competition - for more information, head to **page 4**. *MS*

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## HAL's Burke is back

**HOLLAND** America Line (HAL) is continuing its Culinary Ambassador Program next year, with the line-up including a solar eclipse cruise with chef David Burke.

Departing 24 Jul 2026, the 28-day voyage will visit Greenland and Scotland, with Burke on board to present cooking shows and host an exclusive dinner.

The cruise builds on the success of Burke's recent sailing aboard *Zuiderdam*, which saw guests treated to a week of culinary engagement during the 'Legendary: Voyage of the Vikings' trip in Aug.

Burke's signature dishes are featured on the menus in the Dining Room and Pinnacle Grill aboard every ship, as one of HAL's Culinary Ambassadors.

## Brand loyalty up for grabs



**BRAND** loyalty is up for grabs in the cruise sector, according to a new report from travel rewards platform Arrivia, which suggests nearly half of passengers are open to switching from their favourite cruise line.

Arrivia's report, *View from the Cabin*, found 46% of passengers with a preferred brand would swap if they were offered better value or discounts with another cruise line.

Other leading triggers for switching brands include better itineraries or onboard experiences (35%), access to newer or more luxurious ships (27%), and more stops at private destinations (23%).

Around 20% of pax would change brands for the ability to bundle travel, while around 15% would swap for a shorter cruise.

Although Arrivia describes a

cruise market defined by fluidity, the report also indicates clear preferences when broken down by demographics.

The budget-friendly Carnival Cruise Line was cited most often by Generation Z and lower-income travellers; Disney Cruise Line resounded most strongly with Millennials, particularly those travelling with children; and Celebrity Cruises emerged as a favourite among Baby Boomers.

Almost 20% of guests also cited more options for river cruising as a key trigger to change brands.

Premium ocean line Celebrity is currently preparing to launch a river cruise option in Europe in 2027 (**CW** 12 Sep).

Other sectors of the travel industry are also entering river cruising, with tour brand Trafalgar set to launch its first ships next year (**CW** 04 Jun). *MS*

## Cruise up in Mexico

**CRUISE** tourism is booming across Mexico, with the country recording 5.6 million cruise passengers in the first half of the year - an 8.4% increase nationally.

Ships visiting Mexico's Yucatan have spiked by 82%, with the region one of the stars of Mexico's booming cruise sector.

The destination's key port Progreso has already welcomed well over 100 ships this year, according to local Yucatan media.

Progreso received 102 cruise vessels between Jan and Aug, with more than 311,000 passengers generating an estimated US\$14.9 million in economic impact.

Royal Caribbean has shown particular interest in Mexican destinations recently, announcing plans for a US\$600 million private beach resort in Mahahual, scheduled to open in 2027 (**CW** 11 Oct 2024).

**MEANWHILE**, Carnival Cruise Line's *Carnival Legend* recently made a surprise return to Acapulco, marking its first visit to the destination in more than 15 years.

The unexpected call was the result of a forced change to *Legend's* itinerary due to a weather diversion.

Carnival will visit Acapulco again in 2027 on a Carnival Journeys voyage (**CW** 25 Jul).

## Iona's dry dock

**P&O** Cruises' *Iona* is undergoing a dry dock refurb, which will see two voyages this month cancelled.

The original dry dock date was back in Mar, but had to be postponed as no shipyard was available at the time.

*Iona* is expected to resume service on 23 Oct.

A two-week Canary Islands sailing on 04 Oct was scrapped, as well as a week-long Northern Europe cruise departing on 18 Oct.



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**AN OBSERVANT** traveller recently made a disappointing discovery while on board a cruise ship.

The man, called Matt, posted a video on TikTok showing his surprise upon finding a bag filled with pre-folded towel animals under his bed.

He told viewers, "I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but I need to show you something".

"As we go underneath the bed, I found something shocking," Matt said as he panned the camera to the floor to reveal the bag.

"Already wrapped towel animals - it's like finding out Santa isn't real," he lamented.

One commenter likened Matt's discovery to "pulling back the curtain on Oz".

Another said, "I was heart broken for a moment, then realised that's just efficient and they still have to fold them and put them there, so it's okay".

## Virgin's new AI assistant

**VIRGIN** Voyages has partnered with Google Cloud to launch a fleet of more than 50 AI assistants via Gemini Enterprise.

The line will roll out generative AI company-wide, supporting its various business needs.

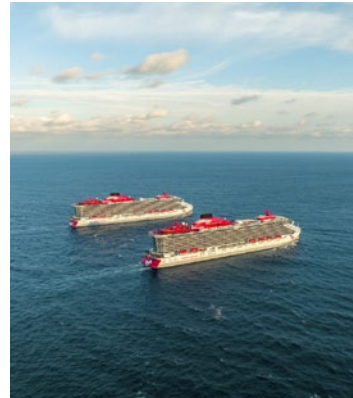
These AI agents can be created easily without technical experience, and have been trained on internal brand frameworks, which included immersing them in Virgin's tone of "cheekiness" and "cleverness".

'Email Ellie' is the first agent to emerge from this collaboration, developed by Virgin's creative team to generate hyper-personalised marketing outreach.

The first AI agent has already driven significant business impact, contributing to a 28% year-on-year increase in Jul sales.

'Email Ellie' has also allowed the marketing team to reduce time spent on campaign copy creation by an estimated 40%, freeing up marketers to focus on higher-value initiatives, like spotlighting new itineraries and destinations.

The partnership between Virgin and Google Cloud is already underway, developing the next



series of AI agents aimed at further enhancing the passenger experience, both pre-voyage and while on board.

"What excites me most about this partnership with Google Cloud is how it gives our teams back time to do what they do best - create joy, build connections, and bring our brand to life," the cruise line's Chief Executive Officer Nirmal Saverimuttu said.

"'Email Ellie' is just the beginning - it's already helped deliver record-breaking sales, and she's proof that AI agents scale our impact and amplify our human touches." *MS*

## The Murray's marvel

**THE** newly rebranded Travelmarvel has begun its exclusive charter program of *Emmylou*, one of Australia's most famous paddlesteamers, with new packages available to book.

A special four-night cruise from Echuca aboard *Emmylou* on the Murray River will depart every week from now until the end of 2027, featuring stops to visit wineries, historic farm stations, Indigenous sites, country towns, and more.

Travelmarvel's packages include return rail transfers from Melbourne; four nights aboard *Emmylou*; all meals and morning and afternoon teas; selected wine and beer with dinners; daily land tours; transfers in Echuca; and more.

Couples can currently save \$2,400 when booking by the end of the month.

*Emmylou* carries 16 guests in an en suite stateroom with air-conditioning and wi-fi, opening directly onto the paddlesteamer's timber deck.

Call Travelmarvel on 1300 208 712.

## NEXT ISSUE: Southeast Asia special report

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# IT'S RIVER WEEK!

## MORE WAYS TO GET INVOLVED



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