



Former Beirut hostage Terry Waite sets sail for the charms - and chocolate - of Belgium as he reveals why...

IT WAS 11 when I took command of my first passenger ship. Well, perhaps it was not a ship - it was more of a boat really - but the passengers were real enough. This little craft used to ply its way across the Manchester Ship Canal and the elderly ferryman in charge taught me how to scull by standing at the stern and propelling it through the water with a single blade.

It was quite a skilled job and I became so proficient he let me take charge while he sat in his cabin reading a newspaper.

Liverpool was not far from home, and my father would take me on the railway where we could gaze down on real ships from every corner of the globe. Thus my love of ships and the sea was fostered, and it has never left me.

Little did I realise that years later I would be sought after as a lecturer on luxury cruise ships and sail the oceans of the world.

So it was with some interest that I accepted an invitation to join the Pride of York at Hull for an overnight passage to Zeebrugge and a

day-trip to Bruges - certainly the shortest cruise I have ever taken.

In all honesty, this is a ferry crossing, but P&O has done its best to make the short journey more interesting for those wanting to take their car abroad or who are fed up with airports.

Boarding was a breeze. There is plenty of car parking space, and as the day I travelled was a quiet one, there was not one single queue to endure.

P&O Ferries is separate from P&O Cruises, but the seafaring community is very much an extended family and the Chief Officer knew many of the people with whom I had sailed in the past.

Although Pride of York is 30 years old, it is in good condition. On a quick visit to the bridge as we cast off, I marvelled at the precision with which the ship was edged into the lock before entering the Humber.

Captain Kevin Alcock was full of praise for his vessel. 'This is a very sound ship,' he answered in reply to my comment about how rough the North Sea can get at times. 'I have never had anything go seriously wrong, even when we passed through a Force 11 gale.' Force 11 is pretty rough by any reckoning. I



WINDOW ON THE WORLD: Flemish art at the Groeninge

was booked into a Club Class cabin which had two lots of bunk beds. Admittedly, this looked a little spartan compared to the cabins on a large cruise ship, but having spent five years as a hostage sleeping on the floor, it was luxury.

On a cruise liner you don't normally find tea- and coffee-making facilities in your suite, but you will find them on the York. You will also find a TV with a dozen or more channels and, lo and behold, something I have never before seen on any liner... the beloved Corby trouser press!

Who was Corby, I wonder? A place or a person? This was of interest to me. In the first week of my captivity in Beirut, I had my own clothes and each night I managed to remove my trousers (no mean feat when you are chained to the wall) and place them under my mattress on the floor to press them. The guards thought I was mad but it was my way of keeping pride in myself and not going to pieces.

The bathroom on the York was spacious, with a good shower and plenty of hot water. I also decided to try the premier dining room and wondered what to expect as I had read some grim reports on the internet by customers.

Well, I found the food to be very good - scallops followed by a steak - and the prices comparable with what you might expect to pay in a middle-of-the-road restaurant on land.

The food court had an all-you-can-eat breakfast and dinner deal for £26. Unfortunately I'm on a diet, but I was sorely tempted.

I asked two passengers at the next table why they had sailed from Hull to travel around Europe. They said Dover and Calais presented too many problems these days and they wanted to be free of that - it's also why more lorries are using this route to the Continent. Before turning in for an early



RELAXING: Pride of York and its premier dining room, right

night, I went to the shop which stocks the usual alcohol and perfume brands. If you are partial to a fine old malt whisky, then you can sample before you buy.

The bunk bed in my cabin didn't look too appealing but it turned out to be comfortable and big enough for my 6ft 7in frame.

Leaving the ship after breakfast, I took the coach for a 25-minute journey to Bruges. We were dropped at a location which seemed as though we were miles from civilisation. In fact, a walk of 15 minutes along an avenue of trees and across a small bridge brought us into this wonderful city.

One tip: the streets are cobbled, so be sure to wear stout shoes. When you enter the city, temptation strikes with



OLD-FASHIONED STYLE: A horse and carriage in Bruges's Market Square

I love the freedom of the seas



a vengeance as there are numerous shops selling the most wonderful array of chocolates. Walk on and the aroma of waffles greets you. Go a little further and the national dish of frites and mayonnaise is waiting to be sampled.

Alas, the day was wet, so the only sensible course of action was to make for the cafe Huyze Die Maene on Market Square and order lunch.

Due to the rain, I stayed in the cafe too long and did not manage to visit the chocolate museums or the collection of Flemish art at the Groeninge Museum. Nor did I venture to the city's churches, although there are enough to satisfy a College of Cardinals, let alone a simple layman such as myself.

But if you are taking your car to Europe or want a mini-cruise with chips and chocolate thrown in, this is the trip for you. I just hope you have better weather than I did.

● Prices for two passengers with a car (including a cabin for the night) start at £430 return from Hull to Zeebrugge. For two passengers on foot (including a cabin), prices start at £290 return. For details, visit poferries.com or call 0800 130 0030. Terry's comic novel, *The Voyage Of The Golden Handshake*, is published by Silvertail at £12.99.

Now WIN your cruise to Bruges

WE ARE giving five lucky readers the chance to win a cruise for two people from Hull to Zeebrugge on one of the largest passenger ferries in Europe (the Pride of Bruges or Pride of York). Both ships have smart bars and restaurants (including a silver-service brasserie), airport-style shops stocking goods at heavily discounted prices, and even a cinema.

After an overnight crossing to Zeebrugge, the winners will enjoy a coach to Bruges for a day of sightseeing before taking the coach back to the ship and return to England. To enter, simply visit mailtravel.co.uk/fantastic-po-ferries-competition.

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Soaring above a pagoda paradise

By Alice Bianchi

WE GLIDE through the air silently. On the horizon, a shy sun is rising and the sky is tinged with streaks of pale pink. Below our hot-air balloon, the Burmese valley unfurls like a carpet, woven with scenes of rural village life: palm-thatched huts, stray chickens, and girls waving at us in excitement.

We soar higher over tamarind trees and crumbling pagodas, their silhouettes theatrical against a coral sun. In the distance is the ancient city of Bagan.

I had been urged by Amy, a British expat based in Burma: 'To best appreciate the spread of these temples, take to the skies.' Her advice is spot-on. Of the 10,000 temples built between the 11th and 13th Centuries on a 40 square mile plain on the eastern bank of the Irrawaddy river, 2,200 remain. The grandeur is on a par with the Angkor Wat complex in Cambodia. One benefit is that there are no

crowds here since Burma's repressive regime has only recently opened up the country to tourism.

Our pilot pulls a lever and more gas wheezes into the balloon. As we whoosh higher, my husband Toby puts a protective arm around my waist, lest I too should fly away.

'Where are we landing?' I ask. 'No idea yet,' says our pilot, grinning. 'That's part of the adventure.' Our landing is a little bumpy, but all is forgiven when we're served champagne in pewter flutes.

Back in the city of Rangoon, a short flight away by Air Mandalay, the golden Shwedagon pagoda is the biggest draw. Dubbed the city's Eiffel Tower, it dominates the skyline with its burnished golden stupa.

We're staying at the Belmont Governor's Residence, a colonial mansion set amid lotus ponds,



SILENT FLIGHT: Ballooning above some of Bagan's 2,200 temples

redolent of a bygone era. In the evening, on teal chairs set out on its lawn, we watch *The Lady*, the biopic of Aung San Suu Kyi, who has led the National League For Democracy party since 1988, and is now the country's first State Counsellor. Under a canopy of stars, cocktails are served in coconut shells and

popcorn comes in banana leaf cones. It's the best cinema in the world.

● *TransIndus* (transindus.co.uk) offers an 11-day tour of Burma starting from £3,950pp, including return flights, nine nights' B&B, a hot-air balloon flight over Bagan, internal travel and guides.

Take the hi road to the best of Brit

By Wendy Ho

FANCY a serious road trip? Check out the North Coast 500, a spectacular route that goes up the north-west coast of Scotland, along the top and down the east side. It's about 500 miles long, takes three days to complete, and is just about the most fantastic drive in these isles. I should know - I've been doing it, off and on, for the past 20 years.

The official advice is to start at Inverness and go up the east coast first. But I'd start in the west as that's by far the best bit. Our departure point is always the serene West Highland village of Lochcarron, near Kyle of Lochalsh, where we rent a holiday cottage each year on the gorgeous Attadale Estate.

From here, within half an hour, the NC500 reaches the top of the Applecross peninsula and the summit of what's officially the UK's highest road, the Bealach na Ba, or 'Pass of the Cattle'.

Next is Torridon, a mass of pinkish-grey bare mountains reflected in silver lochs.

Some 80 miles north, the town of Ullapool appears like a distant vision at the end of Loch Broom. It's not an especially big place, but in this landscape of huge hills and lonely lengths of loch it seems a thrilling metropolis with pubs, bookshop, leisure centre, and hotels for an overnight stay.

Day Two starts with the

amazing mountain just beyond Ullapool. Pollaidh's crazy s and disappears as twists and turns.

Celebrate reaching the British Isles w, Durness, where y beaches with san those in Antigua. the Caithness coa a town whose sev appearance believ welcome. If you h Castle of Mey - o of the Queen Mo

On Day Three, provides a photo- and it's fun to 'tur at Duncansby He

Further down th Inverness, and ju city is the battlefi

It was a bad day there in 1746, but about Scotland is much with us.

● For further info northcoast500.com on cottages on the Attadale Estate, go to attadale.com.

TWISTS AND TURNS: The UK's highest road, Bealach na Ba. Right: Wendy at John O'Groats



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