



See porpoises, deserted beaches and Monet's garden while calling at remote corners of the UK and charming French towns, says *Jo Kessel*

The English Channel may not sound the sexiest holiday destination, but I'm nonetheless surprised by my friends' reactions when I say I'll be cruising there. Foreheads scrunch; eyebrows are raised. Someone even asks: "Why?"

However, as I board the 1,400-passenger *Ambience* it's clear that I'm not alone in my choice of destination – it's a sell-out. I'm sailing with Ambassador Cruise Line, which has week-long voyages from £500pp. Chatting at the poolside bar, it becomes clear that many of my fellow passengers have picked this cruise for its ports of call,

including Fowey, Guernsey and the Isles of Scilly.

We set sail from Tilbury, on the Thames, and I spend a relaxing day at sea, flitting from Pilates to Zumba classes and lounging on a sunbed. Then I hear a commotion and venture on to the promenade deck to investigate – there are porpoises leaping out of the water around our ship.

As though that wasn't enough excitement, I'm invited to dine at the top table, where I tuck into chicken liver parfait, seafood chowder and lamb shank while chatting to Captain Hugh Maynard, who goes by his first name.

Ambassador's soon-to-be three vessels previously

sailed under different flags. *Ambience* was launched by Princess Cruises in 1991 and is a little dated, but that's part of its charm, and testament to how well it was built. There is no climbing wall or water slide but there is an abundance of gleaming wooden furnishings and cosy bars. At £4.50 for a glass of prosecco and £7 for a cocktail, drinks are good value; packages that include drinks and crew tips start at £42.95pp a night.

My cabin has a small balcony, while the cheaper inside staterooms are a decent size, sleeping four, and have good storage space. The beds are superb, with soft linen and firm mattresses, and I sleep

better than I have in weeks.

Our first stop is Fowey, where I hike along the South West Coast Path for half an hour or so before stumbling upon Polridmouth beach, a secluded sandy cove that I have practically to myself. Later I treat myself to a scoop of Cornish clotted-cream ice cream from Ruby's in Fowey (£4; rubysicecream.co.uk).

Next it's the Isles of Scilly, and there's a sense of jeopardy before we arrive. This remote archipelago off Cornwall consists of 140 islands, of which only five are inhabited. Notoriously choppy seas often make it hard to anchor and tender passengers to shore here; there are no docking facilities. Dion Quadros from the shore-excursion team tells me that last year Ambience was scheduled to visit the islands six times but was able to do so only once. Will we make it? "Yes," he says. "The weather's looking good."

And he's right. At 8am the next day the first tender makes a beeline for St Mary's, the main island, with a seal swimming along its side. At first glance everything about this 2.5-square-mile island (population 1,800) feels distinctly like home, right down to the Royal Mail van parked outside the stone post office in the capital, Hugh Town. But this part of Britain is influenced by the Gulf Stream, which brings warm air, so there are white-sand beaches, crystalline turquoise



waters and succulents growing on gates, walls and roofs.

A glorious hour-long walk circles a former garrison and offers spectacular views of the archipelago. No surprise that the former prime minister Harold Wilson wanted to be buried on the island, at Old Town churchyard, which has an extraordinary sea view.

Later I join an excursion to Treco Abbey Garden, a subtropical wonderland on the second-largest island in the archipelago (£52). As well as being home to 20,000 plant species from 80 countries, it has red squirrels and golden pheasants.

In between port visits I laze by the ship's pool and chat to fellow guests – a savvy, down-to-earth bunch who have found a cruise line they like and sail with it multiple times a year. A couple from Liverpool say that they've travelled with Ambassador 14 times in two years.

Guernsey is next on the itinerary. The Channel Island is closer to France than to Britain and street names in its capital, St Peter Port, are intriguingly Franglais. The colourful old town sprawls up a hill; Le Marchant Street leads to The Pollet; then at the top of the hill is Hauteville House, where the French author Victor Hugo was exiled for 15 years after being banished from France for his republican views (£12; maisonsvictorhugo.paris.fr).

Hugo designed the interiors of the property – a decadent mishmash of chinoiserie, lacquered oak walls, tapestry ceilings and wild colours, especially his opulent “red room”, designed to evoke a sense of his great romantic dramas. The bed in which he slept is still in situ, as is the stand-up desk where he wrote *Les Misérables*. From his study you can see all the Channel Islands, as well as France.

There's even time to take a 20-minute ferry to the neighbouring island of Herm, a mile and a half long and crisscrossed by hiking trails that lead to unspoilt white-sand beaches. Can I lay down my towel and have one all to myself? You bet.

Most of the guests on my cruise are less interested in partying or karaoke – although each is on offer – than making the most of each destination. When Captain Hugh announces that he has secured an unexpected overnight stay at our last port, Honfleur in Normandy, an almighty cheer erupts on the top deck.

The extra hours we are there mean that there is time to explore the gorgeous town, at the mouth of the River Seine, as well as enjoy an excursion to Giverny, 90 minutes' drive away (£99). This is where the impressionist painter Claude Monet lived and painted until his death in 1926. You can explore his house, including his bedroom and very yellow dining room, as well as the exceptional garden immortalised in his paintings. Standing on the Japanese footbridge crossing the famed lily pond that featured in so many of his works is a goosebump-inducing moment.

Honfleur is equally

alluring, with a tangle of cobbled medieval backstreets. They're lined by half-timbered Normandy-style houses and shops selling calvados (apple brandy) and salted caramel bonbons. There is also a plethora of artists' ateliers and crêperies.

You won't find fancy toiletries or mod cons on Ambience, but there is a consensus on the journey back to London that we've all had an enjoyable trip without needing to pay a fortune for the privilege.

The best show is the vocal

extravaganza *Masquerade*, in which female cast members wear froufrou hoop gowns made from recycled plastic fished from the sea.

My best experience is a 90-minute Balinese massage in which I am kneaded to perfection (£139).

My favourite meal is at Saffron, an Indian restaurant where the prawn green masala and butter chicken main is worth the £20 splurge. I just wish it wasn't hidden in the corner of the buffet; it deserves a better setting.

As for those who mocked

the English Channel for being a bit of a lame place for a cruise, think again. I was utterly captivated by each destination – and that they're so close to home makes it all the sweeter.

Jo Kessel was a guest of Ambassador Cruise Line, which has 14 nights' full board from £1,199pp, departing on April 10 (ambassadorcruiseline.com)



Clockwise from main: Fowey in Cornwall; Monet's house in Giverny; the Ambassador Cruise Line ship Ambience

