

Different ball game

One Ocean Expeditions launched its first golf cruise this summer in Canada but, as *Peter Ellegard* discovers, the itinerary provides much more than simply teeing off in a new destination

I'm onboard the Akademik Ioffe, a Russian icebreaker that has dropped anchor more than 100 miles off Canada's Nova Scotia. And, like everyone else on this One Ocean Expeditions cruise, I'm peering at the fog that shrouds this notorious area of the North Atlantic for 125 days a year.

Suddenly, a low stretch of coastline looms out of the murk several hundred metres away - Sable Island. A mysterious, crescent-shaped sliver of sand on the edge of the Grand Banks, mariners have long feared its name.

Sable Island is known as the Graveyard of the Atlantic, claiming more than 350 ships over the centuries. Three major ocean currents meet there, creating treacherous, storm-tossed seas and thick fog.

A national park since 2013, Sable measures just 25 miles by one mile and is home to 200,000 grey seals, 550 wild horses descended from

Acadian horses brought by ships, and a handful of Parks Canada staff and scientists. Typically, only 50 to 200 people a year visit the island, as it is so remote and conditions are often too dangerous to land.

We are lucky. Today, there is a gentle swell and we board the ship's Zodiac inflatables via the exterior gangway for the short transfer once our clothes, shoes and bags have undergone strict biosecurity cleaning. Inquisitive seals pop their heads above the water to check us out before the helmsman picks a wave to surf the craft onto the beach, where One Ocean staff help us clamber out and wade ashore.

Leaving our lifejackets, wellies and waterproof jackets and trousers in piles on the beach, we split into groups to explore the island. I join official photographer Jeff Topham and ornithologist Chris Di Corrado. A lazing seal eyes us warily as we



Golfing guests enjoy stunning views from the Cabot Links course on Cape Breton Island



Hiking the sand dunes is an option on Sable Island



Passengers are transferred on and off the Akademik Ioffe by a Zodiac inflatable boat



Wild horses roam Sable Island national park

trudge by on pristine sands flecked by occasional flotsam and jetsam. Park staff monitor the debris; we mustn't touch it.

We spy one of Sable's fabled horses on a nearby sand ridge, munching on the tall grasses covering much of the island. Taking a path over the ridge reveals a vista of grassland edged by huge sand dunes that fade into the still-present fog. We walk towards one of Sable's freshwater lakes, near where more horses have gathered, keeping the required 20-metre distance from the lone horse when it trots past us to join the others, its long, shaggy mane flying out behind it.

On our two-hour nature ramble we come across exquisite flowers, tiny mushrooms and one of the rare Ipswich Sparrows that only breed on Sable Island. We hike through a desolate dunescape reminiscent of *Star Wars* planet Tatooine, clambering to the top of Sable's highest dune to enjoy a panoramic view of the narrow island and surrounding ocean, before turn to 55

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heading back to the beach to don our waterproofs for the return Zodiac ride.

Adventure golf

The eight-day Fiddles & Sticks voyage I'm on is actually the first-ever golf cruise for One Ocean Expeditions, which is better known for its Arctic and Antarctic itineraries. It's also the first expedition based specifically around golf for any cruise line. Exploring Canada's East Coast, we set off from Louisbourg on Nova Scotia's Cape Breton Island to play some of the region's best golf courses.

We anchor off Cape Breton's Inverness for two nights to play sibling newcomers Cabot Links and Cabot Cliffs, and again off picturesque Cabot Trail hamlet Ingonish for a round on its 1930s-era Highland Links. In each instance, the Zodiacs skim across benign seas to a jetty for us to disembark, returning in darkness one evening after a tour, whisky tastings and dinner at Glenora Distillery that finishes unexpectedly late.

There's no jetty by Prince Edward Island's Links at Crowbush Cove course, so we make beach landings wearing golf clothes under our waterproofs, golf buggies taking us straight from the beach to the clubhouse.

Each day, non-golfers have alternative activities, including



Peter Ellgaard

The cruise's two resident musicians are always on hand to strike up a tune



Bonnie Jennitt

There are plenty of other activities for non-golfers

biking, hiking and stand-up paddle-boarding. On Quebec's isolated Magdalen Islands, nobody takes up the option of dawn golf on its nine-hole course. Several of us kayak around spectacular red sea cliffs while others take nature trips on the Zodiacs or go biking.

Lunch on a beach serenaded by traditional fiddle songs from the ship's two musicians is followed by an enjoyable guided bus tour. Once we are back onboard, the Zodiacs transport the sports equipment – as they do with our golf bags.

On this inaugural golf cruise, there are just more than half of the 96 passengers the ship can accommodate. Most are Canadians, as One Ocean

is based in British Columbia.

Cabins are comfortable, although facilities are limited onboard. There's a library, sauna and a small, unused outdoor pool, plus a dining room where all meals are taken. But with so many shoreside activities, there are no complaints. The combined bar and lounge comes alive at night with more fiddle music, along with a quiz and other entertainment.

In 2019, One Ocean is repeating the Fiddles & Sticks cruise in July and is adding a Scotland & Ireland Golf Expedition cruise, starting June 5 and sailing from Dublin to Edinburgh with golf on six courses. For those, and other cruises, the line will use its new 146-passenger acquisition, former Hapag-Lloyd cruise ship Resolute, which joins the Akademik Ioffe and sister ship Akademik Sergey Vavilov.

I enjoyed the golf, but it was Sable Island that stole my heart – and wild horses almost couldn't drag me away...

Book it: Frontier Canada offers One Ocean Expedition's Fiddles & Sticks golf cruise in 2019 from £4,575pp, departing July 2, excluding flights but including transfers from Cape Breton's Sydney airport and a night either end at Sydney's Cambridge Suites.

■ frontier-canada.co.uk

60 SECONDS WITH...



Andrew Prossin
managing director,
One Ocean Expeditions

HOW DID YOU COME UP WITH THE IDEA OF GOLF CRUISES?

We are a polar cruise company. We introduced kayaking commercially in Antarctica. We came up with the concept of the Maritimes golf cruise while we were brainstorming ideas. We happened to be anchored off a golf course at the time, so we thought, why not try that? We made golf the primary activity but then added things for non-golfers to do, starting with cycling. We now have the best non-golfers programme you can imagine.

WASN'T AN OCEAN EXPEDITIONS SHIP INVOLVED IN HELPING IN THE SUCCESSFUL 2014 SEARCH

FOR SIR JOHN FRANKLIN'S LOST SHIP, HMS EREBUS?

Yes, we volunteered the ship and a month of our time for that. I knew it was potentially the biggest thing in the polar world since the British explorer's ship disappeared in the 1840s. That really changed the nature of Arctic tourism. All of a sudden, there is now tremendous interest in the Northwest Passage.

WHY IS SABLE ISLAND INCLUDED IN THE GOLF CRUISE?

Sable Island is a mythical place. I grew up on Cape Breton Island, and the island was mentioned in every weather forecast as well as all the shipwrecks and, of course, there's

the wildlife. Being in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean on a sand dune affects you. We can't do the kayaking and paddle-boarding there because of the great white shark and 18 other species of shark swimming around.

HOW WILL NEW SHIP RESOLUTE COMPARE TO AKADEMIK IOFFE AND SERGEY VAVILOV?

It's the same size ship but it can carry more passengers and has all the facilities you would expect of a passenger ship. It has all the same capabilities and then some. Also, it's faster, so that will make it easier to extend our times.