

Last call of 2023 brings record cruise season for Belfast to a close

Belfast enjoyed a record cruise season in 2023, with 158 calls reported by Cruise Belfast, the partnership between Belfast Harbour and Visit Belfast which markets the city as a leading cruise tourism destination.

The announcement was made as the final cruise ship of the year to call to Belfast, Fred Olsen Cruise Line's 'Borealis' arrived in the port on Saturday 21st October.

This year's cruise season saw 57 ships from 32 different cruise lines dock in the port, carrying 320,000 passengers and crew, who received a customary warm welcome. Among them were 14 ships who made their inaugural calls to Belfast.

The total of 158 calls made by cruise vessels during the 2023 season marked an 8% increase on the pre-pandemic record set in 2019. On board, passenger capacities have increased to an average of around 90% per vessel.

With increased passenger numbers, and more visitors arriving into Belfast to experience the tourism offerings across Northern Ireland, Cruise Belfast estimates that more than £20m was injected into the local economy through passenger spend alone.

This year also marked the arrival of the 2 millionth cruise visitor to Belfast Harbour since the first cruise ship called to Belfast in 1996. The milestone passenger arrived onboard the Norwegian Dawn, operated by the Norwegian Cruise Line in May this year.

A further indication of the city's growing status in the cruise industry, Belfast has also begun to facilitate a number of cruise turnarounds during the year, the largest of which saw 1,200 US passengers from the Oceania Riviera ending their holiday in Belfast and a further 1,200 starting their trip in the city.

Michael Robinson, Port Director of Belfast Harbour said: "After a couple of disrupted years due to the pandemic it's clear that cruise tourism in Belfast is now in very good health. We continue to receive a lot of positive feedback from passengers, crew and cruise line management on the quality of Northern Ireland's tourism offering and the service the industry provides.

"Bookings for the 2024 cruise season are currently strong, with similar levels to this year's record season, which is great news for the city and the industry. We look forward to another busy year welcoming visitors from around the world."

Gerry Lennon Chief Executive at Visit Belfast added: "Belfast as a gateway city to Northern Ireland, now takes its place among Europe's most vibrant and captivating destinations, for leisure, business and cruise visitors.

"With the continued investment in the city's infrastructure and iconic world class attractions such as Titanic Belfast, Hillsborough Castle and Gardens, Titanic Distillery and Belfast's cultural programming for 2024, we will ensure we have a range of new and exciting giant experiences to attract the growing cruise market. Cruise Tourism is vital element of our tourism portfolio, and its impact is significant contributing to the visitor economy and bringing a great vibrancy the city region."

Welcoming the continued growth in the sector, Naomi Waite, Tourism Northern Ireland's Director of

Marketing, added: "Cruise tourism is increasingly important to the city and wider tourism economy, providing more opportunities to showcase Belfast and Northern Ireland's wide range of visitor attractions, driving spend and economic impact.

"A highly competitive sector, our growing cruise tourism industry continues to benefit from over a decade of investment and marketing focus and I'm delighted by its continuing success."