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19 May 2006

All aboard for cruise

SAILING around Shetland in a tall ship later this month could be the start of a long-lasting love affair with the islands, according to the Austrian businessman behind the venture.

Jurgen Scharkosi, chairman of Orkney and Shetland Touring Company, is bringing Dutch tall ship *Thalassa* to Shetland on Sunday 28th May.



Orkney & Shetland touring Company chairman Jurgen Scharkosi.

Photo: Keith Morrison

It will make two voyages, a three-and-a-half hour trip from Lerwick around Bressay and Noss, and a five-hour evening cruise from Lerwick to Scalloway.

Earlier in the week she will sail from Aberdeen to the Orkney folk festival. And after leaving Scalloway will head for Kirkwall and on to the Hebrides and Dublin.

Mr Scharkosi, 52, from Salzburg, hopes the two Shetland cruises, over lunch and dinner respectively, will be the foretaste of things to come.

He has already booked to bring the ship back to Lerwick on 19th May next year, and he also hopes to base a different tall ship here for the whole of next summer so cruises can be organised from the islands.

It is all part of Mr Scharkosi's vision which he hopes will see Shetland, along with Faroe, Iceland and Greenland, become the new Alaska in tourism terms.

He said: "Shetland is in a unique position. I can see the tourism development here.

"Looking at the whole region, including Greenland, this is going to be the new Alaska. I was there when that started.

"Shetland is in a good strategic position. It is on an axis where it is between a very good brand which is Scotland and a very good north west development stage with Faroe, Iceland and eventually Greenland which is practically virgin.

"The area has a good feeling about it. It has good neighbours in terms of Scandinavians, Russians, Europeans and there is also the Canadian east coast and the American east coast. This place is going to be booming one day."

In the short term Mr Scharkosi, whose company has an office in Market Cross, Lerwick, is going after the German-speaking market when it comes to selling Shetland.

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24 hours: BECOMING
 BRIGHTER FROM THE
 NORTH

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 OR DRIZZLE

Day 6 - 10: Milder but
 unsettled

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"Shetland has been mainly marketed to English speaking countries like the UK, USA, and Canada.

"I am trying to go to a new market of German-speaking countries first of all and Scandinavia because it's a neighbour.

"I am aiming at people who are tired of going to hot places and standing in line to do something for two minutes.

"I am looking at eco-tourism, nature, agro-tourism, those who are looking for a bit of peace and tranquility.

"We don't want to contribute to overcrowding and destroy the very thing people are coming to see.

"We can take 100 people out on the ship without them crowding the streets or the sights.

"It gives tourists and locals a chance to see Shetland from a different perspective.

"And it is the ultimate eco-tourism because we are using wind power and it is good for the environment. We have a two-coachload capacity without congesting anything."

The 20-year-old Dutch-built ship is capable of seating 70 for lunch or dinner at any one time.

Mr Scharkosi is keen for Shetland residents to take advantage of an open-ship policy between 9.30am-11.30am when she is in Lerwick on 28th May during which time anyone is welcome to go on board free of charge and take a look around.

He hopes it will whet their appetites to take a cruise, if not this year, then when he hopes to expand the operation in Lerwick next summer.

And he hopes Shetland will continue to extend its tourist season to make the most of what he sees as a flourishing new market.

"In order to grow a quality business, with quality staff, you need a longer season than exists in Shetland at the moment."

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