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Why mentoring the next generation of female travel leaders matters

By Ruth Venn, P&O Cruises associate vice president of sales & distribution

International Women's Day is an important moment to celebrate progress. But for me, it's also a prompt to ask a harder question: what are we each doing, consistently, to move the dial?

Travel is full of talented, ambitious women. What we sometimes lack isn't capability, but visibility and advocacy. As I've progressed in my career, I've become increasingly conscious that visibility matters disproportionately for women.

I make a deliberate effort to use platforms such as LinkedIn and industry forums to recognise the achievements across my teams and the wider sector – particularly where brilliant work might otherwise go unseen.

Representation and recognition build confidence. They also build credibility. That's one of the reasons I value initiatives such as Travel Weekly's Inspiring Women programme. I recently attended the Inspiring Leaders retreat and it was a genuine catalyst because of the network it created. There were also incredible female keynote speakers, Karen Blackett CBE and Mia Mottley, Prime Minister of Barbados, who were both really inspiring.

The WhatsApp group that emerged is still active: sharing news, celebrating promotions, offering advice on tricky conversations. It's practical, generous and real. That sense of community is powerful. Mentorship is important, but sponsorship makes the real difference.

One of the most impactful things a senior leader can do is advocate for someone when they're not in the room – putting them forward for influential roles, recommending them for panels, backing them publicly.

Women don't always self-promote in the same way, and having someone actively opening doors can accelerate a career in ways a workshop never will.

Through my involvement in cross-industry mentoring schemes, including the UK & Ireland Women Leaders Programme, I'm able to support women across hospitality, travel, leisure and retail as they prepare for the step into executive leadership.

What drew me to this programme is its focus on bringing together women who are already operating at Head of or Director level and giving them practical tools, exposure to real-world leadership experiences, and access to mentors who can offer independent, honest guidance.

The most useful conversations in my own career weren't necessarily about technical capability; they were about judgement, confidence and navigating complexity. When to hold your nerve. When to challenge. When to listen. And how to deliver commercial results without compromising who you are.

I'm also acutely aware that many women still feel pressure to have every answer before they speak. In my role, I work hard to create environments where people can contribute without feeling they need to be perfect.

The best ideas rarely arrive fully formed. Inclusive leadership is about creating space for challenge and curiosity, not just polished certainty. Cruise – like the wider travel sector – is ultimately a people business. We serve a diverse customer base and operate in complex, fast-



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moving environments.

Leadership teams that reflect a breadth of perspectives make better decisions. That isn't a slogan; it's commercial reality. For me, being direct, authentic and human has been central to navigating senior leadership.

I don't believe in a single mould for what a leader should look or sound like. The more we normalise different styles of leadership, the more space we create for others to step forward.

If International Women's Day is about anything meaningful, it's about sustained action. Celebrate success, absolutely. But also sponsor someone. Recommend someone. Share someone's work. Create space for someone to speak. Progress doesn't happen in one day. It happens in the everyday choices we make as leaders.

For more information, call P&O Cruises on 0344 338 8003, visit www.pocruises.com or visit a travel agent.

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About P&O Cruises

P&O Cruises is Britain's favourite cruise line, welcoming guests onboard its seven ships to experience holidays with a blend of discovery, choice, relaxation and exceptional service catered towards British tastes. With a proud history spanning more than 187 years, each ship has its own appeal from family friendly or exclusively for adults with every sailing delivering each guest a *holiday like never before*.

With over 180 destinations worldwide, P&O Cruises itineraries are carefully curated to inspire discovery and are varied to suit newcomers and experienced guests alike. P&O Cruises prides itself on working with top culinary talent; Food Heroes include chefs Marco Pierre White and José Pizarro as well as award-winning drinks expert Olly Smith.

Recent awards for P&O Cruises include:

1. Wave Awards 2025 – Best Advertising & Marketing Campaign
2. British Travel Awards 2025 – Best Cruise Line for Family Holidays
3. The Travel Industry Awards 2025 by TTG – Industry Marketing Campaign of the Year
4. Sailwaze Excellence Awards 2025 – Best in Entertainment
5. Best in Cruise Awards by Cruise Critic Awards 2025 – No-Fly Cruise Line (Ocean Category)

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