

O'er the watter

Hovercraft trial on the Clyde promises new era of coastal breaks for Glasgow families

By Lyndsey Clark

IT was a treasured tradition for Glaswegians. Clutching cardboard suitcases and sandwiches for the trip, they loved leaving their home to go 'Doon the Watter' for the summer holidays.

But the march of modernisation and cheap foreign package deals spelled the end of the age-old custom of taking paddle-steamer trips to the coast.

Now, however, the Clyde could play host to a whole new era of travel after a hovercraft service was launched on the river yesterday.

Transport firm Clydefast is behind a 12-passenger hovercraft that will make trips from Glasgow to Dunoon on the Cowal peninsula for a three-day trial.

Alistair Macleod, chief executive of Clydefast, expressed his hope that the experiment would lead to the introduction of a permanent hovercraft operation.

He said: 'The service will be fast – for example, a service from Dunoon to Glasgow will reach the city centre in 52 minutes, more than 20 minutes quicker than the current journey time of an hour and a quarter by train and ferry.'

Rothsay will be included in a permanent operation, which would add a further 15 minutes to the journey. Another bonus in using



Return trip: The new hovercraft, left, is put through its paces yesterday. Right: Scots sailing 'doon the watter' in the 1930s



the hovercraft would be its ability to navigate beneath bridges which don't open.

'Some of the current Clyde bridges restrict catamaran ferries getting directly to the city centre, particularly at the Broomielaw.'

The hovercraft – a Griffon 2000TD – travels at 40 knots, the equivalent of 46mph.

Prices would be about £14.80 return from Glasgow to Dunoon, or £11.80 off-peak, and £16.20 to Rothsay, falling to £13.20 off-peak.

During the trial, the hovercraft will make two round-trips a day, giving the Clydeport Harbour-

master a chance to assess the impact on existing river-users.

The route to be tested runs between the SECC in Glasgow, Braehead, East India Harbour in Greenock and Dunoon.

A permanent service would operate to and from Glasgow Broomielaw, Braehead, Greenock, Dunoon and Rothsay.

It may surprise younger Scots to learn that hovercraft were once a common sight on Clyde.

The river became home to the world's first all-year-round scheduled service in 1965. The hovercrafts, which boasted on-board

hostess service, ran between Largs and Millport, before being withdrawn in 1971.

Changeable conditions in the Firth of Clyde had become too much for the hovercraft of the day to cope with.

But now, in a bid to ensure the service can cope with the river's variable weather, Clydefast has drafted in the same models as those used by Royal Marines in Iraq.

If the trial is successful, the service will use hovercrafts that can carry up to 130 passengers.

The project was inspired by other similar schemes in the Firth of

Forth and in Torquay Bay. It is being run in a partnership between Glasgow City Council, Riverside Inverclyde and Strathclyde Partnership for Transport (SPT).

Ron Culley, chief executive of SPT, said: 'We're delighted to be supporting this trial.'

'Development of the Clyde as an additional transport channel helps the ongoing regeneration of the area.'

'By encouraging such varied and fun ways to travel along the river, we can continue to make Glasgow a vibrant location for people to visit.'