

## Merganser in the Hebrides 2018

Not counting the voyage from Tollesbury to Ardrossan on the back of a truck we travelled 1200 miles through the inner and Outer Hebrides in May, June, July and August 2018. 'We' comprised my wife Liz and I, the true boat-dog Jester and a series of friends for a week here and there. Merganser, a Haines 340 offshore motorboat proved the perfect boat for the trip. A displacement cruiser capable of 18 knots but giving us 400+ range at 8 knots, she had spent her previous few years as a flat in St Katharine's Dock, hence the family nickname 'The Sitting Duck'! With two Yanmar diesel engines, generator, 2 double cabins, two bathrooms, 2 large holding tanks, heater, sheltered steering position in a Bimini upstairs and panoramic views from inside the saloon she could hardly have been more perfect for a meander around the Scottish NW. All this and only 1.2m draft allowing access to all the most sheltered nooks and crannies.

We chased the truck up the A1 on May 14th and finally caught up the next day just as Merganser was kissing the water in Ardrossan marina at the mouth of the Clyde. After a day of the usual preparation and making sure we had enough stores to be independent out in the islands we set off to Arran. Almost as we left Ardrossan the wind dropped away and the sun came out...it was the start of the amazing weather and, with hindsight, we could not have been luckier with the timing of our 'sabbatical'!



Before going further, it is probably worth setting the scene a little more. In addition to the boat itself and all its' mod-cons there were other essentials. We took a sturdy 3.5m aluminium RIB and 8HP



engine, capable of 15knots 2-up, a paddle board for exercise and exploration as well as convenient and quick get-ashore transport, 2 bicycles and fishing rods. We had the Clyde Cruising Club Guides, the equally excellent 'The Scottish Islands', ordnance survey maps on the iPad as well as GPS and large-scale paper charts. Later we heard of the amazing ultra-detailed Antares charts, a result of private mapping.

Arran is a magical island. We had pre-planned a week's stay in our friend Margie's house in the NW of the Island, so we headed for moorings at Lamlash, near the distillery. Howard and Angela Payne arrived in their Campervan having been in the Outer Hebrides on one of their bonkers adventures and then Steve and Debs Johnson also turned up in their Campervan, with kayaks, bicycles, tents and everything else Debs needed to be comfortable (and looking fab-u-lous of course!). This team settled into walking in the high peaks at the North End of Arran. Angela is an avid rock collector, so the geology of Arran provided her with a great variety of rocks with which to weigh poor Howard down!! His cries of 'Ange' split the air after a long day when he discovered she had been secretly loading his back-pack, SAS style! On alternate days we went cruising in the area visiting the Kyles of Bute, Tarbert and



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Sadly Margie, Howard and Angela had to return home so the three of us (dog counted as one of the crew of course) started our cruise proper. Steve and Debs headed off in their Campervan and we agreed to meet again in the Outer Hebrides, if the logistics worked. So, for us it was back up Loch Fyne and through the Crinan canal short cut. We spent the suggested 2 days in the canal, and it was pretty but not quite what we were expecting after the hyperbole in the CCC (Clyde cruising club) handbook about it being the prettiest canal in the Northern Hemisphere! After taking Merganser in 2017 most of the way to Oxford and back in 2017 and chartering in the Nivernais canal in Burgundy, maybe our standards are high!

So, out at Crinan into the Atlantic proper. Given the excellent weather forecast and high pressure settling in we decided we would head straight for Barra in the Outer Hebrides. After an overnight stop we (I) made basic error number 1 and had to battle a 7-knot spring tide in Cuan sound before being released from its grip and setting off across the Firth of Lorn in flat calm conditions along the Southern coast of Mull. That afternoon we nosed through outlying rocks and into Bagh a' Ghnoic Mhaoileanich. Wow!! We could hardly believe that we had this spectacular bay, surrounded by white-sand beaches, all to ourselves; a first and exciting flavour of the many anchorages to come. In moments the dinghy was launched the paddleboard was inflated and we were off ashore with Jester to explore the enormous beaches. The next day was more of the same and we met with a man who had grown up on the nearby Erraid island as a boy and who was a mine of local knowledge and history.



Moving on past the equally gorgeous David Balfour's bay and on to the highly secure and much praised in the CCC guide Tinker's Hole for the evening. Shock horror: another boat! The next morning, we set off early, North and West in calm conditions past Iona to the West heading for the island of Coll. In hazy high-pressure conditions, we passed Fingal's Cave well to the East and the truly extraordinary shaped island called Dutchman's Cap (pictured) which was the most symmetrical 'peak and brim' of a hat you could imagine, a product of the same volcanic geology as more islands to the North, more about which later.



WE selected the bay called Loch Breachacha in Coll as it contained because it contained not one but two Castles. The stream there is called 'Stream of the Heads' after a battle where one the Coll MacLean's drove back invaders, killed them, throwing the heads in the stream. Charming these Scotts...! We had a lovely cycle around Coll with Jester running alongside or sitting in a backpack. A very pretty Island with more stunning beaches on the wild Atlantic side and vast stretches of sand and dune pasture filled with bird life including the rare Corncrake. Having stocked up with bread and some fresh vegetables and met a few

locals and a few tourists in the village it was back to the boat...well, not immediately as i had made mistake No 2 and not appreciated that the tide was going to leave our dinghy 1/2 mile from the water! After much huffing and puffing, dragging the dinghy and the outboard in our very own relay event, we were back aboard!

The 45 miles to Barra was oily calm once again. Out past Gunna, owned by the Ferranti family who are now friends from Classic yacht racing in the Med (!), and then out into the Atlantic. So calm as to be a little boring so I set about some boat polishing and Liz (Kiwi wife) set about some 'Maori PT'!! The monotony was broken by dolphins, Minke whales and a Basking shark, right out in the middle of the Minch. Gorgeous to see, together with our first Gannets and Guillemots, apparently feeding along a tide-line created by sharp contours down-under which are responsible for the notoriously choppy waters in this channel. We did not see Barra until we were quite close to Muldoanich island which loomed out of the fog. Then the cloud lifted, and we motored up to the new pontoons next to the Castle (of Castle Bay) and the ubiquitous Cal-Mac terminal. And there were Steve and Debs to take our lines and escort us to the pub! The warm and comfortable forward cabin in Merganser somehow more inviting than their Tent?



Barra was fun, a highlight being an impromptu night in the Castle Hotel and a sing along with the local fisherman and the Vattersay boys (very much their version of the Dengie Boys, but better!). It was hilarious to see these large knurled fishermen and their equally large wives singing their favorite, the Lion King, with enormous gusto! A third quick trip back to London for me for business gave me the chance to fly in and out of the famous Barra airport, famous because the airstrip is on the beach and the timetable 'flexed' according to the tide! Barra has vast expanses of sandy beaches in the North and West but is short of sheltered harbours for cruising so most boats head North to Uist after a stay in Barra.



However, before heading North, we decided to go south! There is a chain of Islands, the last of which is Berneray, stretching about 40m south of Barra. These are small and very exposed to the Atlantic. As a consequence, there are virtually no other cruising boats heading that way as settled weather is not a given. We found gorgeous bays on the eastern sides of Vattersay, Sandray and



Pabbay and had these all to ourselves (we would get used to this) and then got as far South as the atmospheric, historical and truly special Mingulay.

Once having a population of 450 (and a school for 80 children) Mingulay is now deserted. Life here must have been incredibly tough. The deserted village surrounded by 'lazy beds' (raised furrows formed by piling seaweed on thin coastal soils), stinging nettles and flag iris' provide an eerie testament to and evidence of life before the Scottish Clearances and before folk

decided they wanted more than subsistence living. We came to look for these pointers to previous civilization wherever we went and discovered for ourselves the extent of colonization of the islands, many now uninhabited, hundreds of years ago. After a long walk ashore from the boat anchored in village bay we were back aboard for a complete circumnavigation. The guide book told us that Mingulay was like St Kilda on its Atlantic side and we were not disappointed with the towering cliffs, hundreds and thousands of seabirds and a jumbled and confused 'clappety' sea state as the Atlantic swells bounced off the dark walls. Breathtaking stuff and we were grateful to have two trusty Yanmar diesels purring away, our only incident being when the TV had to be fielded at second slip by Debs after a particularly violent lurch!!

So, it was back to Barra to say goodbye to Steve and Debs ('au revoir' as it turned out) and then we were off on our own once again and heading North around Barra to the off-lying islands of Hellisay and Gighay. Naturally enough we selected the 'tricky' entrance and glided in over a sand



bar (drys) in 1.21m (!) and into a pool between the islands. Still, quiet and all alone again: perfect! But not quite alone as a pair of Golden Eagles have made this lonely spot their own and watched us constantly from one ridge or another. If we went to one island they flew gracefully to the other, and vice versa. So, tick, Golden Eagles well and truly 'Twitched'!

Continuing North we bi-passed Eriskay (of Whiskey Galore fame) and ignored the new marina at Loch Boisdale on South Uist. We were hungry for anchorages and exploration ashore. Loch Eynort looked promising in the cruising guide. It penetrates several miles into the

low-lying island and has a tricky entrance which is narrow, has unseen rocks called Bo Dearg right in the middle, strong tides etc etc. The actuality is that for the careful and confident it is straightforward and SO rewarding. Really wild scenery with the highest point of South Uist at 620m called Beinn Mhor to the North and an array of inlets to explore. More seals than you could shake a stick at and otters too.

After a quiet night in Anchorage 1 where the evening walk yielded a magnificent deer Antler, presumably a left over from the rutting season, we moved to anchorage 2 further up the lock and then took dinghy and bicycles to the West, ending up exploring the Wild West coast and pedaling some of the Hebridean Way. Next morning it was off to Anchorage 3 for a walk on the wild side and up Bhein Mhor with the ever eager



'Jester' where we came across the 'castle' cairn guarding the trig point and providing the walker a chance to shelter at the



top and not get blown away! Returning to the boat some hours later we spotted two kayaks. How dare they come into 'our' lock and shatter the peace! Then the familiar profiles of Steve and Debs revealed themselves...after a night or two in the tent with the

midges, hot water and duvet obviously had magnetic properties! It was a lovely reunion and an excuse for wine, rum and games!

In the morning Steve and Debs departed once again and this time it really was 'adieu' as they were time



expired and having to get back to Mersea.

We set off North once again as far as Loch Skipport and nosed into the famous 'Wizard Pool' for perfect shelter once again, taking a look also at Littler Kettle



Pool. Leaving the boat, we set off in the trusty dinghy to the top of the rather featureless loch, passed a salvaged and smashed fishing boat and onto a sluice and weir controlling water levels for an ancient route running right across Northern Uist and into the Atlantic, several miles away to the West.

Heading North once again we bi-passed Benbecula, a small island between North and South Uist which is extremely low-lying and rocky having been ground flat by the glaciers until 10000 years ago. Instead we continued to North Uist and nosed into the narrow channel leading up to Kalinn harbour, a tidy fishing port (EU funded of course) with a large fish and shellfish business consolidating cargoes of fresh lobster, crab and langoustines on their way to Spain. Top tip: we can all buy fresh seafood from Kalinn under the 'Namara' seafoods brand and they guarantee 24-hour delivery (on ice).

After filling up with diesel and a seafood lunch we moved around the corner to Flodday Sound and into an amazing little anchorage called Acairsaid Fhalach. While here we once again completed a marathon dinghy trip to the West up a wide drying (to sand) estuary which ends where the main road north forms a barrier. This part of the island is a maze of sheltered channels. We also had a great walk up Eaval, at 320m the highest point of North Uist and we had views of the mountainous Harris to the North as well as all the way back to Barra



in the South. On the way back to the boat we spotted a Sea Eagle soaring over cliffs. Re-introduced and apparently

thriving (this was our first one) these birds are impressive with wingspan greater than a Golden Eagle, but not so massive. That evening we walked up to the same cliffs with our sun-downer, just in case, and were treated to a 'fly-by' by the same bird, only 20m away!!

Warnings of Storm Hector caused us to head for Loch Maddy at the Northern end of North Uist as our next stop. New pontoons next to the Calmac terminal seemed a sensible place to sit out the promised southerly gale. We were lucky: our visit coincided with the St Kilda Challenge, an annual yacht race out and around St Kilda island, and the resulting 'regatta week' with music, dancing, drinking and more was great fun. The tractor show

was a bit strange!! Sadly, as the wind built and the rain started, it became clear that not many

boats would make it from Ireland and the mainland and as a result the race to St Kilda was downsized to a brief pursuit race in the bay outside Loch Maddy! The promised storm Hector arrived on June 13th and overnight it blew very hard from the SE (and i mean very - gusts of 90mph were reported). We had carefully selected a berth 'laying off' the pontoon but others on the windward side were in a world of trouble, up all night stuffing fenders back in, preventing masts clashing and saving their topsides. No one slept a wink. As things gradually calmed down, we explored North Uist on foot and walked the 'machair' (extensive grass and wild-flower meadows on the coastal sands) and beaches. The coastal cemeteries are fascinating: situated miles from the villages and right on the coast because it was easier to walk the coffins out there than try to dig holes in the rocky terrain inland!



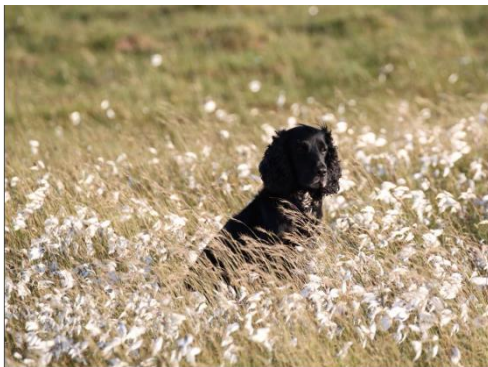
Finally, the wind backed off and we set off for Berneray Island between North Uist and Harris. After being warned off using the mooring (there were two here last week) we squeezed into the very



sheltered fishing harbour as the wind built once again. Friends Hubert and Elaine joined



us here and we took a couple of days to explore this charming island, including a circumnavigation on foot which included a walk along the most beautiful 5 miles of white shell-sand beach on the western side. Liz and i have done beaches all over the world, including New Zealand, French Polynesia and the Caribbean and this one is special. Jester enjoyed hunting through spectacular dunes and Marram grass.



Having been delayed by the weather, Hubert and Elaine now needed to be in Stornoway for the flight home in a few days so we decided to travel North quite rapidly (unusual for us) and have just a taster of what Harris and Lewis offers. After all, we had plenty of time to retrace our steps! The next stop was Scadabay, an enclosed pool with an entrance about 8m wide and perfect shelter inside. Walking ashore we found a weird rock-strewn landscape either side of 'the golden road', nicknamed because of its' exorbitant cost!

Next day it was onwards first to Loch Seaforth which is flanked by the highest mountains in the Outer Hebrides and is more like a Norwegian Fjord than the other lochs. Here we flagged down a fishing boat and Hubert, hungry and therefore ready to negotiate, managed to secure a bucketful of

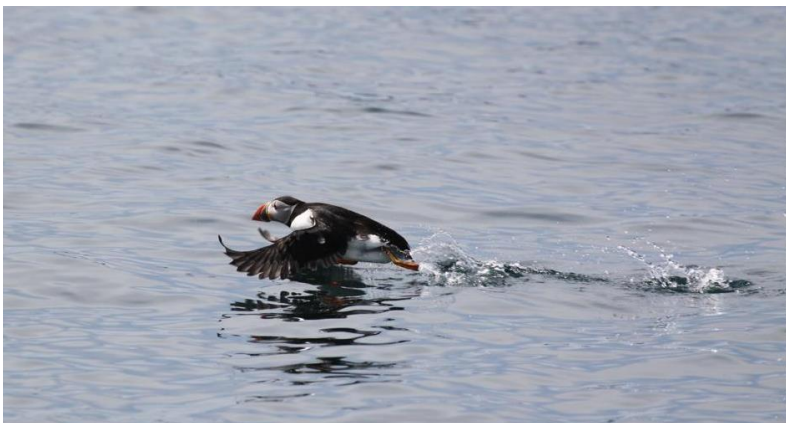


fresh-from-the-bottom langoustines which we sopped to consume after we had toured the upper reaches of the loch. Our overnight spot was Loch Bhrollum, another deep loch with high and looming walls. We found a secure spot at the head after getting entangled in lobster pot lines in the recommended anchorage (a first swim was necessary - BRRR!). Here we were joined by a whale watching boat for the evening. Ashore there were the ubiquitous signs of ancient buildings and agriculture and spectacular views from the hills behind.

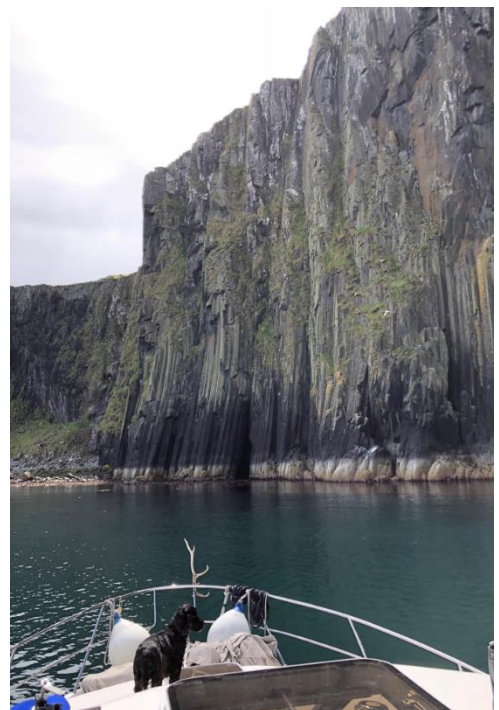
From Bhrollum we pushed tight along the coast (NW 30knots) to Stornoway with a brief lunch stop in Loch Grimshader and a walk ashore. In Stornoway we were back in the mainstream: a marina, traffic, tourists, shops and restaurants. We decided to stay for a few days for 'R&R' and to re-stock the lockers and the tanks. After saying goodbye to Hubert and Elaine we got the jobs done and booked a hire car so we could go and look at the Butt of Lewis to the North as well as the Callinish standing stones (200 years older than Stonehenge), the Blackhouse model village, Sheilings (the summer houses in the pastures) and the scenic Uigg where famous Viking artefacts were found. As a result of this trip we realised that Harris is THE spectacular island in the Outer Hebrides and that we had a lot more exploration to do!



After 5 days in Stornoway we therefore headed South on June 26th. First stop was the spectacular Shiant Islands, home to 5% of the world's Puffins and multitudes of Guillemot and Gulls. Anchored,

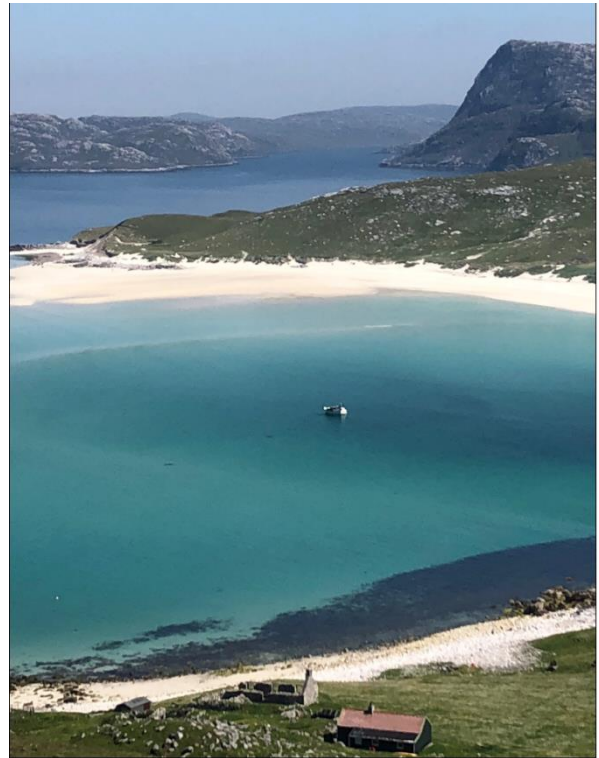


we went ashore and stumbled upon a Puffin colony. We sat on a steep slope with Puffins nesting all around us, flying in and out in their clockwork fashion with beaks full of sand eels for their young. Circling several times to make sure the Skuas were not watching as they flew into their burrows! We felt like David Attenborough! We circumnavigated all the islands close-to, watching the seabirds wheeling and listening to the cacophony of noise as they screech and squabble for the best spots along the guano covered cliffs. Awesome.



Rather than stay the night rolling at anchor here we headed for Scalpay, a small island off the mainland and close to Tarbert. This was our second Tarbert. Tarbert is the name given by the Vikings to places situated on a strip of land that links two lochs, thus preventing islands being formed. The Tarbert in Loch Fyne has an interesting story: the Vikings (they only relinquished the islands in 1263) were obviously a nuisance so the Scots had agreed that they could 'have' the Islands. Not satisfied with this a smart-Alec Viking noble sat in his longship and was carried across the strip of land at Tarbert, thus declaring the WHOLE of the Mull of Kintyre to be an Island and in Viking ownership. Smart!

With a good weekly forecast, we considered a trip to St Kilda but read that dogs were not welcome, so we headed for the famous (and wild) West coast of Harris instead. What a great decision that proved to be. Our first stop was the anchorage in the channel between the now deserted Scarp and Hushinish point on the Harris mainland. Acres of shallow water with a sandy bottom made us feel we were in French Polynesia once again with the high hills of Harris looming close by. We explored Scarp and roamed the most beautiful wild flower fields on the machair and investigated the uninhabited village. Apparently, Scarp was a refuge for many during the clearances and every bit of flat land on Scarp and anywhere easily reached by small boat was put into food production by cultivating the lazy beds. When the sun was low in the evening the landscape all around looked weirdly corrugated. We also investigated the beautiful bay of Loch Cravadale in the mouth of loch resort, there meeting some intrepid hikers who had 'yomped' across the island, following this natural fault line.

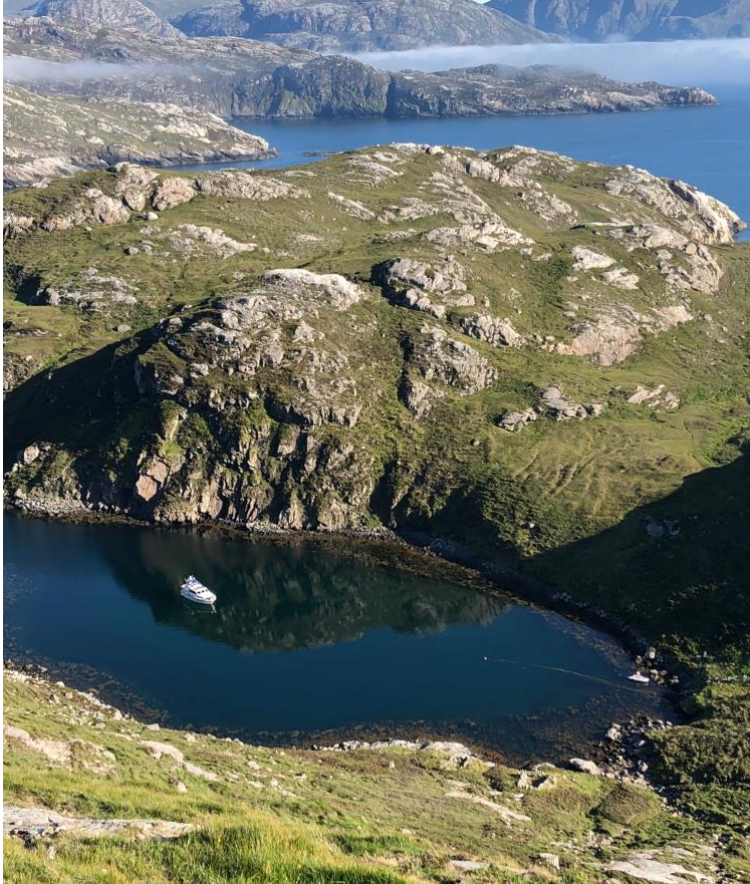


The next stop was the breathtaking bay on the North coast of Scarp inside Kearsay island. Once again on our own next to a spectacular beach with gin clear water and cliffs towering above us. Liz found Cowries while the dog and i climbed up for a better vantage point of the bay and the Flannan islands out to the West which were the location of one of the great mysteries when the lighthouse keepers went mad when bad weather prevented relief for many months. This story now the subject of the feature film. Our stay was fore-

shortened when the fog closed in the next day and we decided to head for the mainland and Lock Tamanavay. As expected, the warmth of the land frightened the fog away and we explored the bay from the most sheltered anchorage called Tamana Sear possible (including, for me, the now standard paddle-board expedition). Up in the high hills above Tamanavay there were deer aplenty to keep the dog occupied and the most spectacular panoramic views over Harris that you could imagine.



Next day we moved on to Grobadh rah Vinneag as a lunch and walk spot and then started South



through the amazing Caolas Scarp once again to Loch Leosovay for the night. Home to a magnificent Castle (built as a home for the Laird of Harris and Lewis, a salmon hatchery and a spectacular laddered salmon fishery there was lots to investigate ashore. The dog, investigating enthusiastically, came across a field of non-native 'sticky' plants the like of which we had never seen before. So entangled did he become that it required a near shave to sort him out! After an 'honesty box' shop ashore for a selection of hugely expensive salmon products we pressed on the next day via Soay to Loch an h-Uidhe on Taransay.

Here we found yet another vast horseshoe shaped sandy bay with perfect protection from the West and all to ourselves. We had a long walk ashore to discover signs of land management (deer fences) and large flocks of sheep. The island is however uninhabited unless the shooting lodge or the holiday cottage in the East is

occupied. Taransay is yet another island where there were obvious signs of a large population a few hundred years ago. On our walk we could see hundreds of acres of cultivated lazy-beds, irrigation systems and old stone buildings. One building near the anchorage has a corrugated iron roof making it kind of weatherproof and we surmised that shepherds stay there for the muster. Using old fishing nets as hammocks was practical but they presumably were not to know of the two very distressed lambs we found inextricably tangled in this rubbish. They would certainly have died if it were not for our help - Liz being able to put her Kiwi sheep mustering skills to good effect!

From Taransay we headed south to Temple bay. This is not a marked anchorage, but we anchored off a sandy bay (it was low water) that penetrated about 5 miles inland, being completely covered at high water springs. Not mentioned in the CCC guide this was a memorable lunchtime stop but as the wind freshened, we set off back around Toe Head and through the Sound of Harris past the port of Leverburgh which was named after Lord Leverburgh who, with typical Victorian arrogance, determined that this should be the site of a major port for Harris. This despite being advised that the myriad rocks in the approach and the sailing tides through the sound made it perfectly unsuitable!

We arrived (early as it happened and had to anchor off for the tide) at Loch Rodel for the night, anticipating a run ashore to the Hotel (closed) where Queen Elizabeth once disembarked. Instead we made do with a walk taking in the historic St Clement's church and the nearby village. From Rodel we headed North back to Scalpay for fuel and then into the pontoons at Tarbert where we snugged the boat down and left her for the next week in the capable hands of harbourmaster Fred Taylor. Fred deserves special mention as he was SO helpful and very modest. It took us a while to learn that he inherited Scalpay and another island in the sound where he lives in his eco-house with a very angry rescue dog! Scalpay, population several hundred, was apparently more trouble than it was worth, so he 'gave' the island to its people!

We left Tarbert by Cal-Mac at 7am the next day and our hire car was ready for us on Skye. We



arrived in Oban by 2pm where we swapped into our car and were home in Mersea by the wee hours! We unwound this trip a week later and arrived back in Tarbert raring to go once again. We had my nephew and his fiancée arriving from New York to stay with us for a few days, so we got the boat ship shape for visitors and then it started raining! They had a car, so we made the best of it and circumnavigated Harris one day, taking in the sights including the famous Luskentyre beach, reckoned to be the jewel in the crown. Next day we went to Caolas Scarp in a gale and driving rain and braved a long, wet walk to Caolas Scarp and Hushinish once

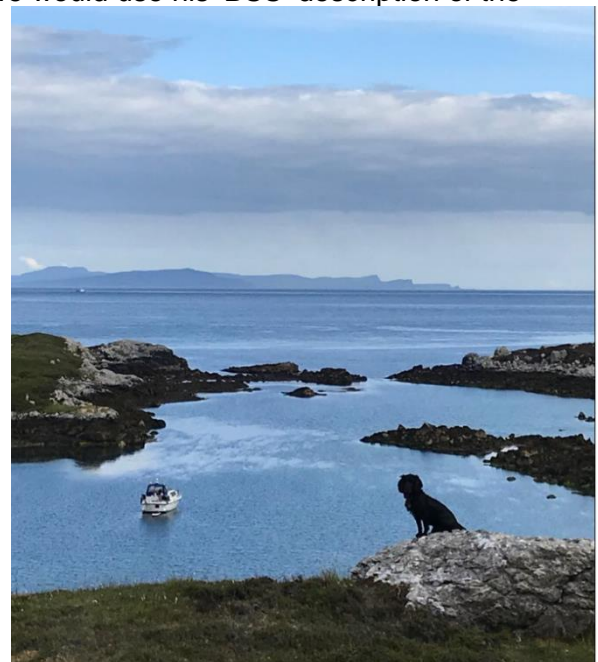
again before returning sodden to a meal and a warm-up in Tarbert, coincidentally on the same night as England got knocked out of the World Cup football. Ignoring the slow service, we were amazed to see all the Scots supporting England with gusto!

On their last day the weather improved so we set off for the amazing Shiant islands once again. Spectacular cliffs and puffins galore. This time we landed on the main island for a good walk and discovered a posse of volunteer bird-counters amongst the rocks, marshalled by a young couple who were permanent summer residents.



We said goodbye to our guests in Scarp and decided to circumnavigate the island to acquire an appetite for the highly recommended 'Blob Stack and Smear' restaurant next to the Harbour. Recommended by Fred Taylor this was a culinary highlight of our trip. Fred knew the chef well and had a sleepless night, we discovered, worrying that we would use his 'BSS' description of the nouveau cuisine!! We did not of course because staying friendly with the Harbour Master is a key to happy cruising as we all know! On the trip around Scarp we made ourselves feel virtuous by helping haul bags of litter from the cove by the lighthouse up to the access road. It had become a gnawing concern for us that there was such a huge amount of litter on the beaches of this paradise, probably 90% of which was waste from fishing boats, fish farms, nets and fishing gear. We had already started bagging rubbish wherever we went and when the volunteers on Scarp explained that even the fishing communities have joined in with the clear-up we became determined to carry on, Mersea style!

With a mixed forecast we decided to spend a little more time exploring South Harris before heading to the Mainland in time for our next guest rendezvous.



We headed South to Lingara Bay, snug between Lingarabay Island and the mainland but not snug enough, so after the standard paddle-board recce we nosed in to the inner anchorage at half tide to find perfect shelter in about 1.5m minimum at low water. Snug in here we explored the deserted houses ashore and also the jetty/dock and workings of what was planned to have been a gigantic quarry to excavate a seam of very rare 'luminous' hard stone that is reputed to be as gold dust for road building!



The next day the dog and i yomped up and around Roienebahl (460m) to witness spectacular 360-degree views of the Sound of Harris and all the way to Barra to the South and the spectacular ridge line of the high mountains of North Harris and Lewis to the North. Out to the East was the coast of the Scottish mainland from Gaerloch in the North and then Skye and down to the North Coast of Mull. Returning to the boat we traversed the scarp face of a north facing Corrie, which once was the site of the crash of an aircraft lost in the clouds and were rewarded for our effort by the sight of a pair of Golden Eagles we disturbed soaring on the updraft for a while.

Early in the morning we set off to loch Stockinish bright and early and had a fabulous walk ashore (another 10 miles or so!) right across the Island by way of the 'Coffin Road' to Luskenytre. It is called the Coffin Road (made famous by the whodunnit written by Peter May of the same name) because the Crofters who settled on the poor and rocky land on the east side of the island had to walk the coffins right across the island in order to bury their folk! The path was dotted with Cairns, not the usual type created by walkers, but much more

substantial and apparently witnessing the final resting place of those who were too heavy or who chose their funeral on days when the weather was too bad to complete the trip into a 100mph head wind!



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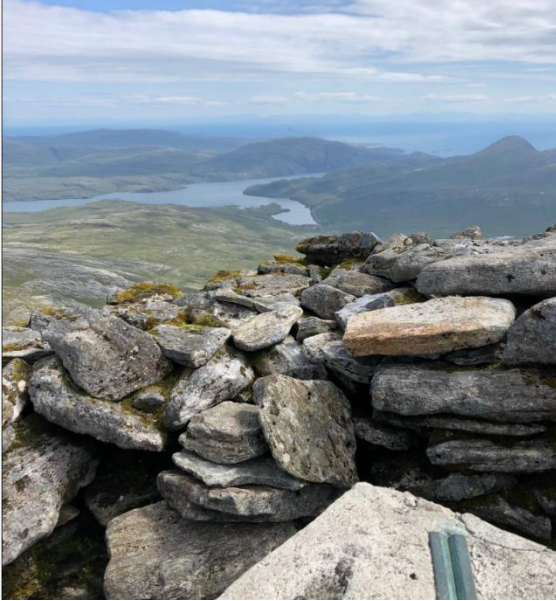
From Stockinish we headed back to Scalpay for the night and fresh lobster dinner and then North the next day to Loch Maaruig, half way up Loch Seaforth. Since our previous foray in Loch Seaforth we wanted to return to do some serious walking and this Loch is nestled in the middle of the highest mountains of the Outer Hebrides. Waiting for a weather window to get across the Minch we stayed here for several days and had time to meet the 'locals' who included a retired submariner and erstwhile Harbour Master of the London Port Authority and a group of shepherds who had some together for their summer round-up and sheering session. Liz was able once again to muck in and demonstrate her Kiwi heritage! The submariner, who of course knew Mersea's David Jarvis, was in the throes of fitting out a

From Stockinish we headed back to Scalpay for the night and fresh lobster dinner and then North the next day to Loch Maaruig, half way up Loch Seaforth. Since our previous foray in Loch Seaforth we wanted to return to do some serious walking and this Loch is nestled in the middle of the highest mountains of the Outer Hebrides. Waiting for a weather window to get across the Minch we stayed here for several days and had time to meet the 'locals' who included a retired submariner and erstwhile Harbour Master of the London Port Authority and a group of shepherds who had some together for their summer round-up and sheering session. Liz was able once again to muck in and demonstrate her Kiwi heritage! The submariner, who of course knew Mersea's David Jarvis, was in the throes of fitting out a



splendid 'winkle-brig' type vessel which had been built in Woodbridge for the owners of the Shiant Islands to an original Island design so that they could retrace their ancestors' steps between the mainland and the islands. Naturally enough I was able to show him a thing or two about wooden boat preparation, masking up a clinker boat and then joined in with the painting between rain showers.

The walking was the best yet and included a long round trip of 14m circumnavigating the towering Toddun and including steep ascents and descents from and to the coastline, through deserted villages, past waterfalls. The next day I gave the dog a rest and climbed An Cliseam, at



899m the highest in the Hebrides but not even a Munro, while Liz set off on a gentler route up Glen Sgaladall. It turned



out that she and the dog covered more distance than I! Slightly weary the next day I decided it 'had to be done' and had a quick hike up the 526m Toddun.



Standing out all alone at the entrance to the Loch this mountain has spectacular views and is one of those that looks so steep from the water as to be unclimbable. Very rewarding.

So, it was with a heavy heart that we took the weather window (did i mention we had gale force for three days?) and headed away from the Outer Hebrides after almost exactly 2 months. We aimed for Gaerloch, only 40m away. Arriving around midday we shopped Gaerloch and had a look around, disappointed to be back in 'civilisation' with tourists a plenty! With the wind due to pick up again we headed across Gaerloch to Shildaig where we picked up a mooring (crikey) off the Hotel. The sun came out and we went ashore to walk the dog and get a feel for the place and ended up following a path with signs to the 'Fairy lakes memorial'. We pushed on, a little further than we wished, and came to the crash site of an American Liberator bomber that was returning to the US at the end of the war after hostilities had ceased. tragically the plane was full of people not bombs and all perished. The site is still strewn with engines, propellers, fuselage and the rest, some poking out of the lochs. Very sad and very atmospheric and we learned later at the hotel that many many Americans pilgrimage to this spot to leave flowers and messages for their ancestors.



We 'woke' up to a full gale and white water everywhere. But it was sunny, so we took the trusty tender around the coast to the nearby village of Badachro and had a lengthy pub lunch, yarning with locals and tourists. It turned out that we had missed by 24 hours the presence of Princess Anne, for whom the Badachro harbour and hostelry is a favourite! Her boat, a perfect-for-the-conditions Rustler 42 Pilot House was moored off still.

From the shelter of Shildaig we headed out and around to Loch Torridon. Surrounded by spectacular Mountains this Loch gets more and more dramatic the further you go up it. However, the vicious katabatic downdrafts make it less and less comfortable, so we started at Arinached bay in the outer part of the bay for the first night.



Memorable because i hooked a large Pollack on my first cast with the spinner! Next morning, with the wind building we headed inland and found an anchorage inside the Inverbain islands in Loch



Shildaig. Once again, we penetrated well beyond the guide book advice and had a perfect spot all to ourselves! Here we had a bit of rain and weather so explored ashore up a gorgeous river valley past a spectacular waterfall and as far as it opened out into a wide plain which, now deserted, was full of 'shielings' and the signs of crofting activities long past.

Remaining in Torridon we went across the loch to Shildaig village and had a meal ashore as well as a good wander under Sron an Frithich mountain where we were 'guaranteed' to see Sea Eagles, but they avoided us. Liz found a Doctor which was quite a challenge as well as a Taxi ride. The next day we completed a 'Torridon-Tour' of the upper reaches of the lock to look closer at the high mountains all around. From Inverbain we set off across the inner sound the next morning in



quite thick fog and across the submarine exercise area. Having tried and failed with fishing off the Southern tip of the Island of Rona (not as easy here as in the Outer Hebrides) we went into a well-protected anchorage called Acarsaid Mhor. The island is privately owned with an estate house called Rona Lodge and holiday lets. We had a good walk to the famous Church Cave, stone pews and prayer-book in-a-box all present and correct. We also explored the deserted village of 50 houses or so, yet another sign of thriving island life once upon a time.

Leaving Rona next day in a fresh breeze we hugged the coast of Ramsay as we headed south along the cliffs. Past the amazing Brochel Castle ruins, somehow attached to a volcanic rock pinnacle which was once a stronghold of the Macleod of Lewis, on to a lunchtime anchorage at the foot of spectacular high cliffs of ancient Torridonian Sandstone which looked like organ pipes, shaped by a billion- or two-years' worth of rainfall and gales! From this spot we took some weather gauge and then 'bore away' across the inner sound towards across to Poll Domain on the mainland.

Anchored safe and sound we explored the area on foot and found two villages, mostly deserted but for



holiday lets, a beautiful small beach that obviously makes it into the guide books as we found a French Family here, somewhat confused on a cold, rainy and grey day, questioning whether they really had found the right spot! Good job they were from Paris and not Brittany or they really would have been disappointed!! The old Ferry dock in Loch Toscaig was yet another reminder of the infrastructure required to support these remote crofting communities once upon a time.

We then headed to Plockton for a brief overnight stay. A delightful and friendly holiday town with an airport and it felt like a City with pubs (plural) and a restaurant or two. Best of all was the local fish and chip van...voted by both of us as the best fish and chips ever, and that includes New Zealand!! We had planned a pit stop for new domestic batteries, water,

fuel and victuals so it was off to Kyle of Localsh for an admin day. We still had time to explore the Kyle and its nearby walks, had a haircut and dinner in the excellent restaurant on Platform 1 at the terminus of the train service.

Then back to Plockton to pick up Kiwi friend Debbie (yes, another Debbie) and her partner Philip a Welshman prepared to travel! Collecting them at Plockton station was an experience in itself as we



managed this by dinghy, having moored Merganser within a stone's throw of Platform 2! After a memorable meal ashore, we headed West the next day. It was agreed over dinner and wine the night before that we needed to find a Ceilidh, attend a Highland Games and visit a Whiskey distillery. First stop was the Highland Games in Portree on the Isle of Skye. We found a mooring no problem and avoided the queues and notorious traffic jams of Skye which made our experience of the games so much better. The pipes, the dancing, the races and the 'crack' were first rate. And then there were the 'heavies', the group of giant men, paid to appear and throw heavy objects like sledge hammers, cannon balls as well as the breathtaking caber-tossing which, until you have seen it live and hefted for yourself one end of the caber, was an Olympian physical feat.

South down the sound of Raasay the next morning we stopped at Clachan, home of the magnificent Raasay House as well as the new distillery. We completed the usual tour and learned that, of course we knew this, whisky (without an E) can only be called whisky when it

is 3 years old. The distillery had not reached this birthday yet so had to test us on an amber liquid labeled 'while you wait'. Apparently, a master whisky man had produced this to simulate what their particular whisky might taste like when it is ready: as far as we were concerned no wait would be long enough!! Onward then past Kyle of Localsh once again to a brief anchorage off the magnificent Eileen Donna castle at the juncture of Loch Long and Lochalsh. Here we took in the view and had a cuppa while waiting for the tide to swoosh us through Kyle Rhea and then a hard left into Loch Hourn on the Northern side of the Knoydart peninsula. We settled into a beautiful anchorage behind the island En Rasaidh, surrounded by hills of 500m plus.

The trouble with this part of the world is that there are amazing anchorages everywhere and you constantly have a feeling of FOMO (fear of missing out) and guilt as you motor by. But we boaties are familiar with this and they are there for next time! I reckon you could cruise Scotland for 10 years and still be having new experiences. Anyway, today we threw the dart at the chart and it stuck in Loch Moidart. Entering the South Channel was 'interesting' with sharp turns and twists to avoid the rocks at the entrance followed by more gradual turns and twist to stay in the deep channel between the sand and mud-banks as we headed inland.





Once again, our shallow draft was a trump card and we were able to creep around Riska island, churning up mud over the bar, before dropping the hook in the channel off Castle Tioram, one of the prettiest and romantic castles you could ever see. By this time, it was bright sun shine and warm. Here we had a spectacular circular walk ashore amongst pasture, woods, lochs and the inevitable deserted village. From the high points we had views all-around of a very distinctive rounded landscape; ancient geology flattened by glaciers. In the far distance we could see Rhum, Muck and Egg. Returning to the boat we spotted fellow mariners in distress and initiated a rescue: it turned out that 2 of an 8-person charter on a large Bavaria anchored in deep water a mile upwind had decided on a run ashore but their engine had failed them and both of their mickey-mouse oars had broken. After this, and an extensive paddle-board excursion, we waited for the tide to come in to drive the tourists from 'our' castle and went ashore for sundowners and snacks on the grass in front of the Keep.

It was sad to have to leave this memorable place so quickly, but flights were booked so it was off along the North coast of the Ardnamurchan peninsula to Sandy Bay for a lunchtime spot and a seriously competitive game of Boules on the immaculate beach. Spotting a nearby fishing boat I stormed off in the RIB and acquired two large lobsters and a handful of crab claws for £20. Dinner was sorted. Next stop Tobermory around a relatively benign but foreboding Ardnamurchan point and on to Mull's most famous watering hole. By a stroke of luck, we had a call-back from Cafe Fish, so I created a creel with needle and thread out of a saints bury shopping bag into which went Larry and George to keep them fresh for the next day. Cafe Fish, the recommendation of the well-travelled Kiwi Debbie, was excellent.



With a heavy heart we set off along the sound of Mull, joining Loch Linnie to our final resting place of Creran where we had had the wisdom to leave the car. But before we slipped our lines, I remembered to rescue Larry and George...but Larry had escaped!! Shock horror, my sewing was not good enough. As penance I spent quite some time on the journey cooking up crab legs and lobster, 'picking' them and producing fresh lobster and crab meat for the best seafood tagliatelle that it is possible to have! Thank you, Debbie and Philip. Washed down with NZ Greywacke Sauvignon blanc produced by the very same genius responsible for Cloudy Bay.



A few days earlier Liz had had the call from New Zealand that she had been waiting on (please come home and help) because her aging father had been slipping downhill. So, another flight was booked (Glasgow-Stansted-New Zealand) and the next day I dropped the three of them off at Oban railway station. This was after one last hiccup when I discovered the automatic parking brake had seized on the car after a few weeks in the damp! It took almost all the horses to break free! So, back to the boat for me and I decided to put her away for the winter on August 14th after 2 days pack-down and preparation. Creran Marine is an excellent boatyard with moorings and acres of hard standing in an old quarry. I soon found an engineer who has adopted the boat as both 'watchman' and man in charge of winter jobs. So there she lies until 2019.....

