

AROUND ICELAND 2017

Chris Jones, Regional Rear Commodore GB

After 14 years travelling the world on a slow circumnavigation aboard our *Gitana 43 Three Ships*, Fiona and I found that liveaboard cruising is a seductive and somewhat all-consuming lifestyle which is difficult to give up. So when we finally returned to the UK in July 2016 we were at a bit of a loss to decide what to do next. Sell the boat and move on was one option, but that seemed a bit final, so it had to be just one more trip. We had loved the remote anchorages and dramatic landscapes of New Zealand's South Island, and having spent plenty of time in warm climes we looked for the nearest equivalent in the North Atlantic. The answer soon became obvious – Iceland, with the added opportunity of a quick trip to Greenland if conditions permitted. I had visited Heimaey and Reykjavik on the way to the east coast of Greenland back in 1993, and was keen to visit more of the island, particularly northwest fjords, so the trip was on.

As the pilot guide for the Arctic* points out, Iceland is a remote cruising ground where self-sufficiency is the order of the day, so the first job was to prepare the boat. Over the years we had found *Three Ships* to be a tough, quick boat, which would be more than up to the task. However, as many of our cruising friends will testify, boat maintenance and fixing things is a major preoccupation, so preparation was going to be crucial. Basically it all boiled down to a full engine overhaul, fitting a new AIS transponder and installing a blown air heating system. We chose an MV Airo 5 heater, which at 5kw may have been a bit over the top output-wise, but you can't turn up what you haven't got and it proved to be ideal. The Icelandic Coast Guard have embraced the use of AIS by pleasure craft, and those who don't have a unit fitted are required to check in by VHF at regular intervals. In the event we found the ability to see and be seen by other craft was, without question, a huge advantage over just a receiver, especially when sailing in poor conditions. And so, with Pas and Tim Hewett, OCC, and nephews Joe Jollands, OCC, and Flynn Simpson joining us as crew, we set off from the Menai Strait on 4 July 2017 in search of another adventure.

The passage up through Scotland to the Faroes defined the trip in two main ways – weather windows and tidal gates. So we passed through the Swellies, up to Port St Mary on the Isle of Man, and through Calf Sound. Next came the Mull of Kintyre, Fladda Narrows in the Sound of Luing, Kyle Rhea, Ardnamurchan Point and so to Stornoway, where we met David Thompson, OCC, on *Peat Smoke*. After an easy 30 hour crossing we reached the Faroes, where we realised that UK tidal streams are but nothing compared to their tidal races, such as that between Tórshavn and Fuglafjørður which, with a range of only about a metre, runs at up to 9 knots. However, a free download app called Rák provided graphic real-time tidal flow information throughout the island group at any specified date and time – excellent.

Landfall at Vágur on Suðuroy was straightforward, with plenty of room against a tyre

* ARCTIC AND NORTHERN WATERS, including Faroe, Iceland and Greenland by Andrew Wilkes. Published by the RCC Pilotage Foundation / Imray Laurie Norie & Wilson Ltd.

wall in the fishing harbour. Next morning we awoke to the sight of 25 pilot whale and six dolphin carcasses lined up neatly on the dock – clearly a successful *grindadráp** had taken place that morning. The village was in celebration and by the afternoon the spoils had been divided between the villagers, and whale meat and blubber was being carted away in wheelbarrows. Next day only a bloodstain remained. Our respect for local cultural practice has become second nature over the years, especially since visiting Vanuatu, but clearly some might have found the sight of so many dead whales a little less acceptable.

We were keen to keep moving so, after a brief stop in the capital, Tórshavn, where we met up with Jim McIlraith, OCC, on *Saboo*, we battled on with a headwind and rough seas around to Fuglafjørður where one of the brace of nephews had arranged to visit the uncle of one of his school friends – a tenuous but very fruitful connection. Janus, Aneka and Steingrim were incredibly hospitable to six complete strangers, and after a meal at their home they took us on a memorable late-evening car tour of the island culminating in a stunning sunset.

Iceland beckoned, and so on 22 July we headed northwest on the 250 mile passage to Seydisfjörður. The weather was fair, so some of the crew took the opportunity to navigate using astro as well as GPS. On the previous occasion I had made landfall

* Community-led, non-commercial hunts for pilot whales, which are surrounded by boats and driven towards a bay or beach for slaughter. Many Faroese consider whale meat an important part of their food culture and history.



The Rák AP



A successful gryndadráp

*Astro nav en route
to Iceland*

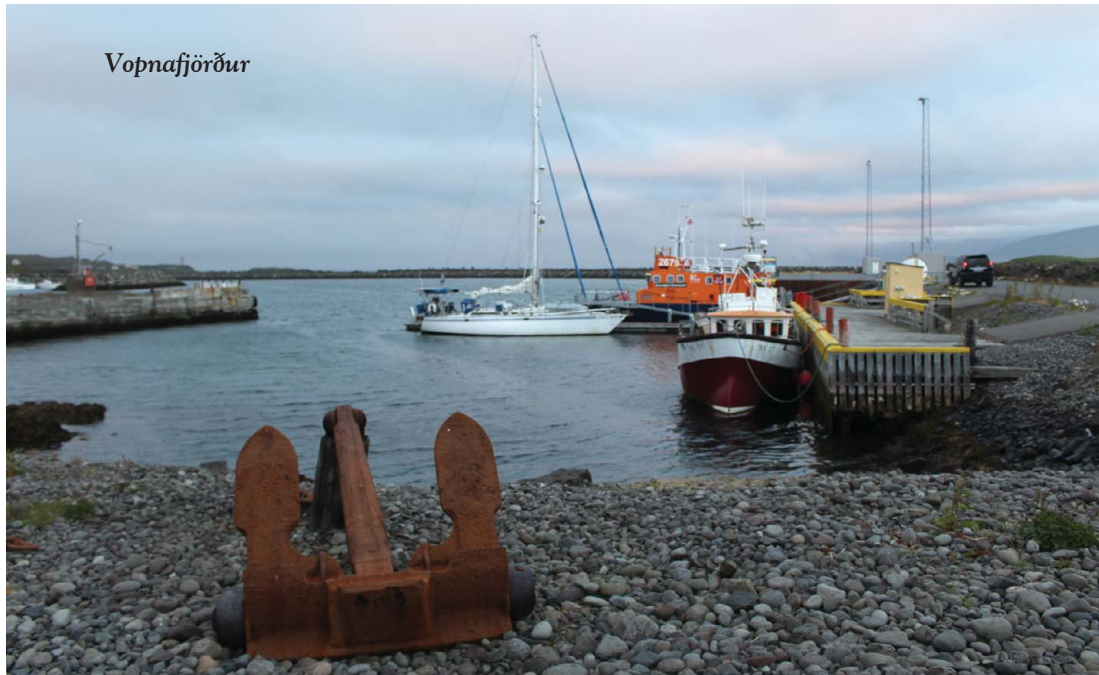
on Heimaey, off the southwest coast of Iceland, as we were heading to Greenland. This time, however, we wanted to explore the north coast so we chose landfall at Seydisfjoerdur from where we would head northeast on an anti-clockwise circumnavigation. The only problem was that

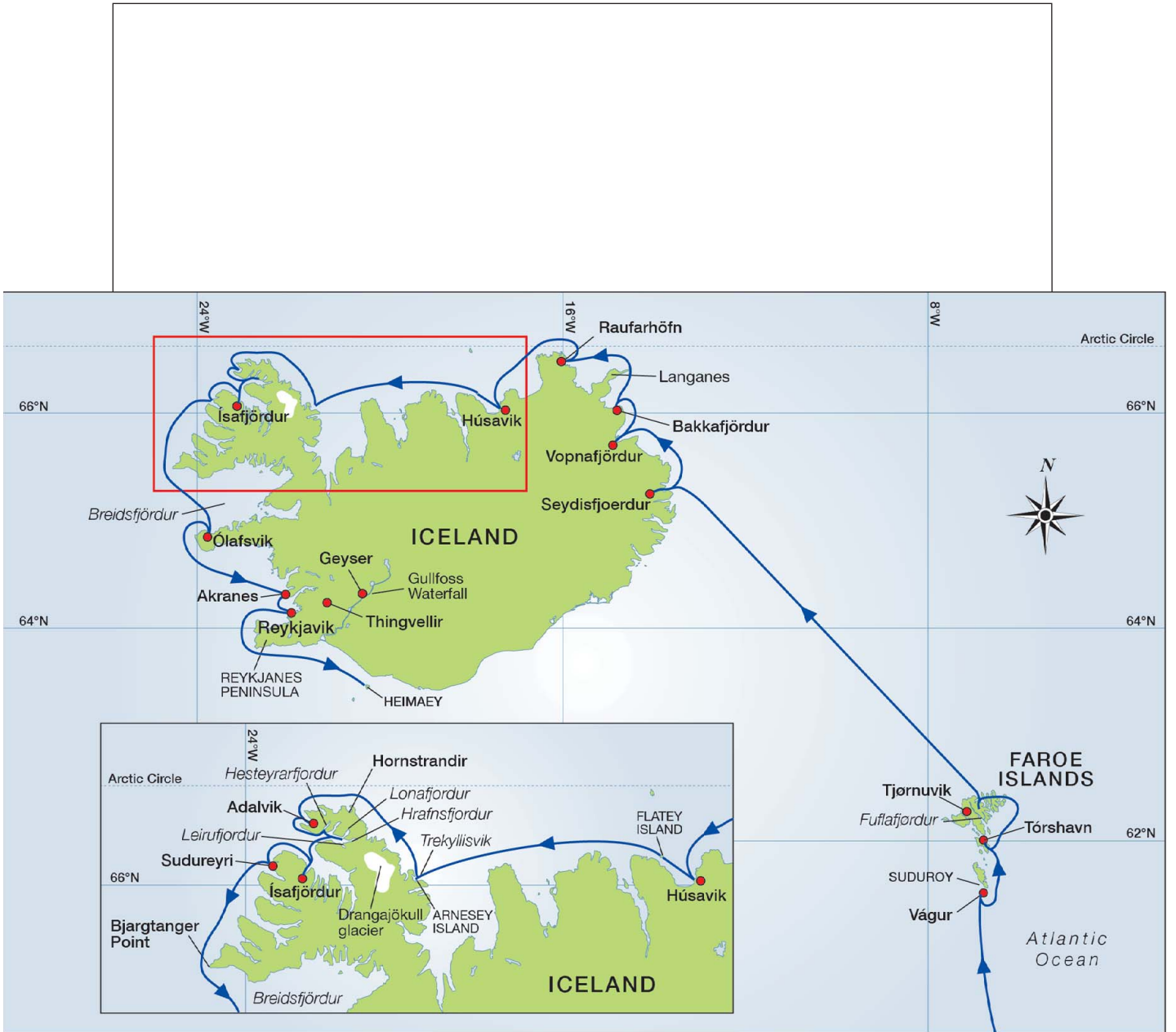


we would be against the prevailing currents, but more of that later. We had e-mailed our details to the Icelandic Coast Guard, so when we arrived two days later a customs officer was waiting on the dock and formalities were completed in record time.

The next day, with a deteriorating forecast, we moved 60 miles north to Vopnafjörður, arriving just as the wind increased to 30 knots. The best berth for a yacht was port side to on the inside of the lifeboat pontoon, a downwind, leeward approach with a beach close to starboard. Interesting, but fortunately the lifeboat had just finished tying up and there were five strong guys to take our lines. The wind blew, it rained for three days, and all the fishing fleet were in. We hired a car and had a trip inland.

Vopnafjörður





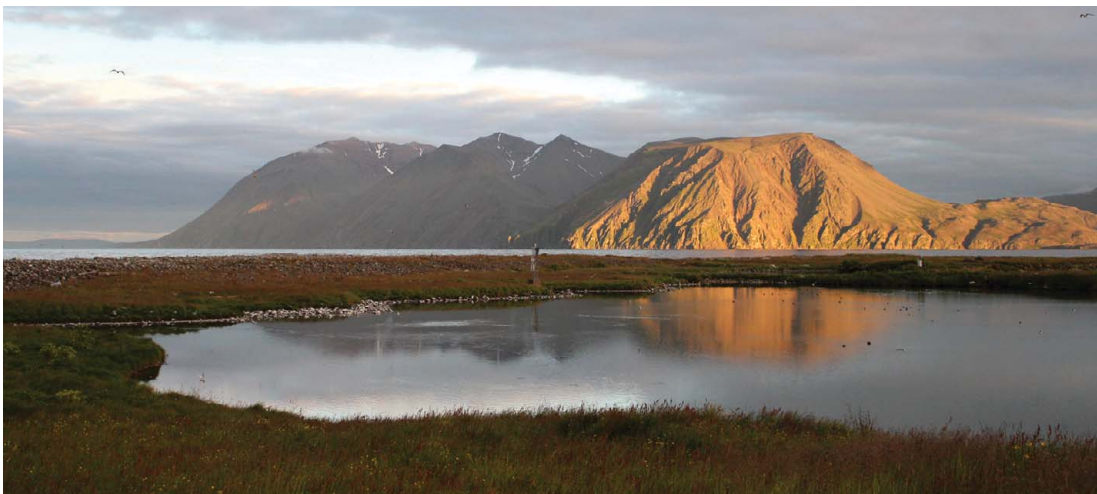


Flatey Island...

Once the weather cleared we moved on to Bakkafjörður fishing harbour, which was much more sheltered than the pilot suggested although we only had 20cm under the keel as we entered. The very friendly harbour master made no charge. Langanes is the turning point on the northeast coast, and has a fearsome reputation for strong currents and rough seas well offshore. The pilot suggests a close rounding at slack water, but determining when that might be is a bit of a challenge. In the end we settled for 30 minutes after local low water and rounded about 500m offshore with 1 knot of current under us, some lumpy sea and a speed of 6.5 knots. The stream soon turned against us, but Raufarhöfn was only 30 miles downwind across the bay. We were soon alongside the tyre wall, where we were also able to top up with diesel courtesy of a local fisherman who had an account at the pump.

The north coast of Iceland is spectacular, with a proliferation of wildlife, dramatic cliffs and distant, snow-covered peaks. On 2 August we crossed the Arctic circle and then headed southwest towards Húsavík and Flatey island, reputed to be the whale watching centre of Iceland. We were not disappointed.

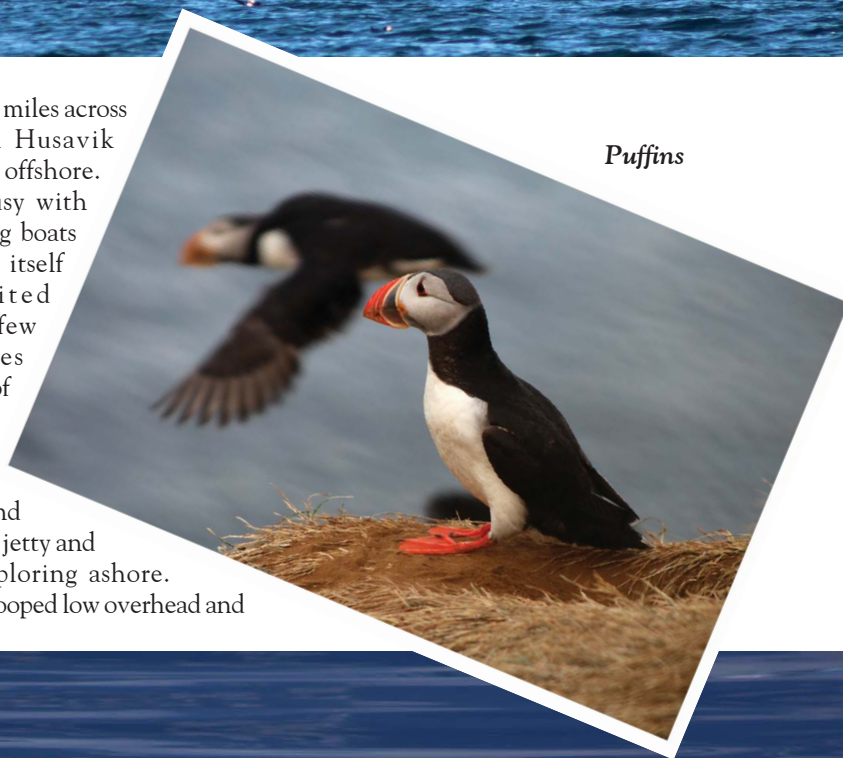
... and the view from Flatey





*Whale watching near
Flatey Island*

Flatey lies 14 miles across the bay from Husavik and 1.5 miles offshore. The bay is busy with whale watching boats but the island itself is uninhabited except for a few holiday homes and millions of seabirds. We found just enough depth on the outer end of the concrete jetty and were soon exploring ashore. Arctic terns swooped low overhead and



Puffins



Fulmar

rafts of fulmars, puffins and eider ducks fed on shoals of sand eels in the bay. It was late in the evening but the low sun still shone, casting long shadows in crystal clear air over an almost surreal landscape.

Flatey was an extremely special place with a unique atmosphere which impressed us all. We were sad to leave next morning, but the northwest fjords beckoned. An overnight passage took us 90 miles west into Trekyllisvik where we anchored off Arnesey island. We had heard about the excellent fishing to be found in the fjords, so once depths shoaled to 30m we hove-to and cast a line. Cod are easy to catch. Three hooks equals three cod at a time, and with 15 minutes we had a bucket full – but the chips took a little longer.

The 55 miles of coastline from Trekyllisvik to Hornstrandir is normally a lee shore, and the chart shows a complex mess of shallows, reefs and islets, so we circumvented the lot and made our way around to Aðalvík and the entrance to the northwest sounds. The anchorage at Aðalvík looks a bit open on the chart, but it proved to be fine as we tucked in under the headland with 3m under the keel. There was a hostel ashore inhabited by a few sea kayakers and some trekkers, and the walking was excellent around an abandoned airfield which gave us a welcome chance to stretch our legs.

The northwest peninsula is a high plateau roughly 60 miles across, with deeply indented fjords several of which give access to the Drangajökull glacier. Interestingly,



Leirufjordur





Glacial outfall

several of these glaciated fjords have submerged terminal moraines at the entrance with rocks and shallow gravel banks down to 5m or less in depth. Once again our forward-scanning Echopilot came into its own. We visited Lonafjordur, Hrafnfjordur and Leirufjordur, where we walked up the wide outwash valley through extensive moraine fields and along the milky torrent which gushed from the mouth of the glacier. The anchorages were all secure and we had mainly good weather for three weeks – a truly great cruising ground. We could easily have spent a whole season in the area but it was already mid August and time to keep moving.

The Drangajökull glacier



On passage to Ísafjörður, the largest town in the immediate area, we spotted another yacht going in the opposite direction. We called them up and it turned out to be Gary and Leslie, OCC, in *Spellbound*. We chatted again on VHF when we were passing Stornoway on our return trip, but sadly never got to meet face to face – one day, guys. The visitors' pontoon at Ísafjörður was largely taken up by resident boats and unfortunately Halldór, our OCC Port Officer, had to travel down to Reykjavik the day after we arrived. But we did manage to get a berth opposite his boat, which was useful. Ísafjörður has an airstrip close to the harbour and one of the nephews took the opportunity to abandon ship in order to fly home in time to get his A-level results. I thought that his priorities were questionable but his results were good – so well done Flynn.

Hesteyrarfjörður



The coastline heading south is deeply indented, and most of the anchorages involve travelling up to 10 miles inland and then out again next day. So, rather than waste time, we decided to call in at Suðureyri, 15 miles around the corner and then do an overnight for the 85 miles around Bjargtangar point and across Breiðafjörður to Ólafsvík. Incidentally, one of the reasons for visiting as many small harbours as possible is the fact that they all have excellent swimming pools with outside hot tubs, free coffee and reduced prices for the over 65s. There is nothing quite like relaxing in a hot tub with warm sunshine and a cool breeze, gazing at the surrounding mountains.

The passage across the bay was a mixture of light wind sailing with occasional engine support to counteract the adverse current. But it didn't rain. We called in briefly at Akranes before arriving in Reykjavik, where we found a berth on the Brokey Yacht Club pontoon. The clubhouse turned out to be nothing more than a portacabin with showers and toilet, directly across the harbour from the staggering architectural

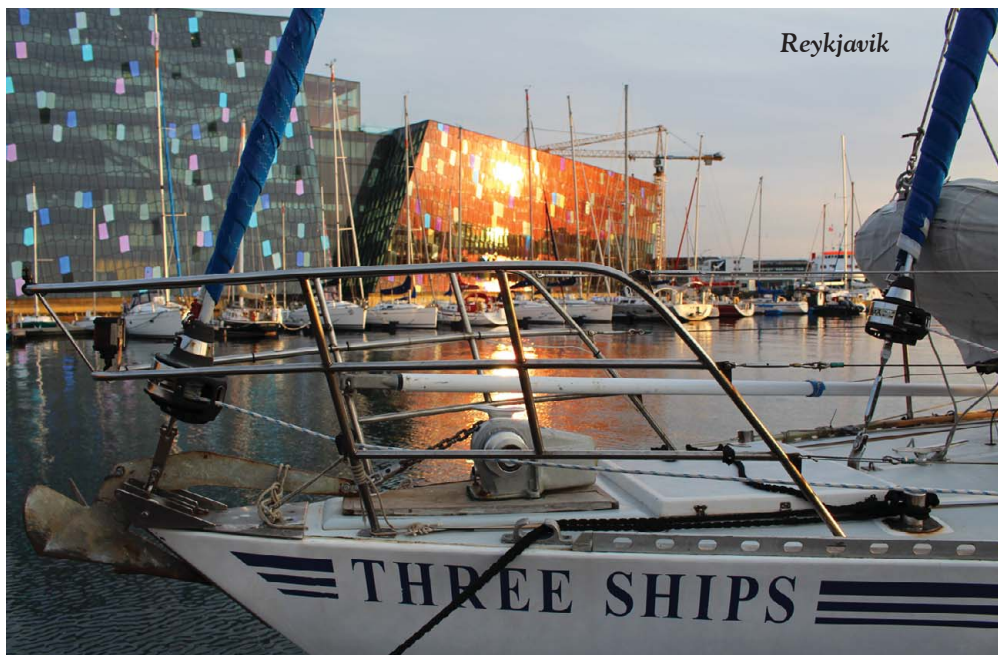
creation that is the Harpa Concert Hall and Conference Centre – quite a contrast in priority, we thought. But the Commodore was very hospitable and the cost was minimal considering we were berthed in the centre of a capital city.

Before leaving Reykjavik we hired a car and travelled the famous Golden Circle route past Geyser, the Gulfoss waterfall and Thingvellir on the Mid-Atlantic Rift where the North American and Eurasian tectonic plates are moving apart at 2.5cm annually. This was the site of the historic Icelandic parliament, and probably explains why the annual meetings took place in temporary buildings.

On 24 August we left Reykjavik for the 120 mile passage to Heimaey, departing at 0430 in order to catch the tide around the Reykjanes Peninsula some 40 miles to the southwest. Once more light airs prevailed. At midday we rounded at 7.5 knots and no wind, but a breeze soon filled in and we had a good downwind run to Heimaey. Arriving at just after midnight we found the harbour entrance interesting as we headed in the darkest of nights towards a port hand mark beneath an even blacker cliff. But the buoyage is good and we were soon alongside the fuel dock in the inner harbour. The harbour master was relaxed and very helpful, and once the diesel tank was full we moved to an adjacent pontoon.

In January 1973 Eldfell, a 200m volcanic peak next to the town, erupted and within hours had destroyed half the town and dramatically improved the harbour entrance, making it one of the most secure harbours in the country – until it erupts again, perhaps. Happily the fishing fleet were all in harbour after a storm and the entire population was evacuated overnight. I last climbed the volcano in July 1993 and it hadn't changed much – still hot spots underfoot, but lots more tourists.

The weather was still unusually unstable and so on 28 August we took the opportunity to jump onto the back of a northeasterly-moving low pressure system and use the fresh northeast winds to give us a flying start on the 560 mile passage back to Scotland. The decision was good, although a brief ridge saw us motoring for 12 hours before we met



Wet watch

the southwest winds on the other side, and on the evening of 1 September we picked up a mooring at Loch Gairloch on the east side of the Minch.

Then we were back to a week of tidal gates and head winds until, on 9 September, we picked up a mooring in Craighouse on Jura where we met up with Richard and Alison Brunstrom, OCC, on *Vulcan Spirit* for a meal in the local pub. The next day the weather relented as a ridge of high pressure crossed the country, providing a brief period of northwest winds. We dropped the mooring at 0500 and caught the flood down the North Channel. By



evening we were off Chicken Rock, and when the next front arrived early the next morning with 25 knots from the south, heavy rain and very poor visibility, we were only 4 miles from Puffin Sound. Navigating buoy to buoy on compass bearings up to Beaumaris reminded us of our sea school days, but by 1330 we were through the Swellies and into the dock at Port Dinorwic. Home again after a memorable, highly recommended ten week trip and another 2600 miles on the clock.

Some reflections

- This was a very 'doable' trip with short crossings and, given the time, plenty of good sheltered harbours to wait out poor weather.
- If circumstances had allowed, setting off a month earlier would have enabled us to include East Greenland on the trip.
- Stocking up in the UK with 12 weeks' food saved a fortune and meant we were not continually searching for produce. There were plenty of other ways to contribute to the local economy.

- Mobile phone coverage was excellent and tethering allowed us to have good internet access all the way around.
- The Icelandic met office – en.vedur.is – provided excellent, accurate forecasts.
- The *Arctic and Northern Waters* pilot suggested that some harbours were free – some were, but we always made enquiries to avoid being branded cheapskate yachties.
- All berthing was alongside tyre walls, so some big fenders and a plank made life easier.
- We met very few yachts, but it was encouraging to encounter four other OCC boats.
- An anti-clockwise circumnavigation is not the best in terms of passage planning, as it's against the prevailing currents and any northeast wind tends to be light at that latitude. It got us to where we wanted to be quicker than going south about, however, so no regrets.

