

# The Good, the Bad and the Horrendous

Passage from Stornoway to Ardfern

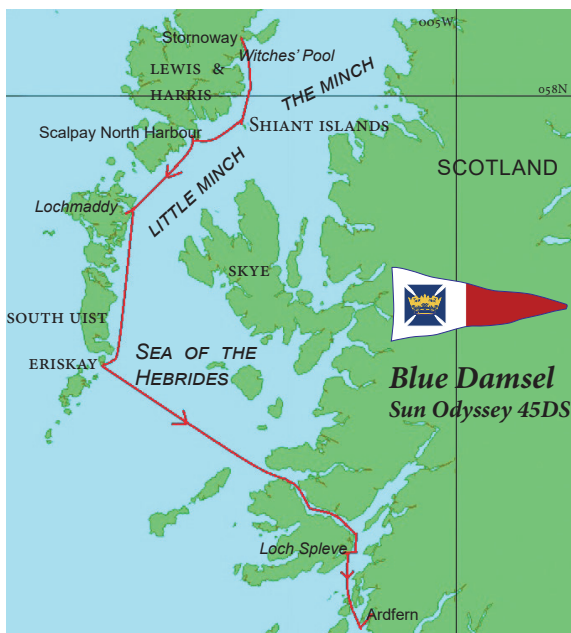
Boyd Holmes



Marinas might lack the charm of remote and sheltered anchorages in the West Highlands and Hebridean Islands but some, like Stornoway Harbour, Isle of Lewis, do offer sailors the chance to walk for a pint of Guinness and a haircut. Stornoway offers perfectly sheltered pontoons in a well managed, working environment with a strong maritime tradition. It is also an excellent place for crew changes, being served by the ferry from Ullapool on the Scottish mainland.

Some crews enjoy the ferry crossing more than their subsequent experience in the Minches.

*Blue Damsel's* previous crew slipped away on the early ferry, 23 June, and I set about cleaning and reordering the boat pending the arrival of my husband and wife crew. The *Criterion*, a bar which must surely qualify as a gem worthy of the National Trust for Scotland, provided the venue for my lunch of fish and chips from the nearby chip shop, helped on its way by a refreshing



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pint of the black stuff. A number of bars in the Hebrides, like the Criterion, allow customers to bring food into the premises, perhaps reflecting the lack of anything more substantial than the crisps and nuts available. Thus fortified, I met Helen and Lewis MacLean as they came off the ferry. With their kit stowed on *Blue Damsel*, a Jeanneau Sun Odyssey 45DS, they set off on a supermarket run and I headed to the well stocked Fishermen's Co-operative in search of polythene hose to protect the anchor snubber and a winch handle. It was an economical visit, with the modest length of hose provided free of charge and nearly £100 saved through the lack of any winch handles suitable for use on an amateur's sailing vessel.

To start our journey back to Ardfern, I then opted to motor seven nautical miles against the strong southwesterly wind to the Witches' Pool in Loch Mariveg, (Loch Mharabhig). Despite recording over 30 knots of wind, the sea state was benign and we were safely anchored by 1720. *Pastime of Innisfree* (RCC), came in and, her skipper deciding that the pool was a bit tight for both boats, moved on to the anchorage in the pool just to the north. Having unkindly denied them the pleasure of their first choice of anchorage, we opted to mitigate our impertinence and invited Charles Lambrick and his crew on *Pastime* to join us for drinks on *Blue Damsel*. After the second round of gins served from *Blue Damsel's* Royal Navy half gill tot measure (one gill = 142ml of spirit in new money) we secured absolution for our sin.



Lewis and Helen relax outside the bothy on Eilean an Tighe

On Friday morning the anchor was weighed after a quiet night to disclose an accumulation of mud and weed. Lewis hacked off the weed with the boathook and the mud was washed away by going astern during a farewell visit around *Pastime*.

With the wind blowing F4 from the southwest conditions were perfect for sailing to the Shiant Islands where we anchored just off the shingle beach and Lewis and Helen made landfall from the dinghy. After they had inspected the charming but basic bothy on Eilean an Tighe we weighed anchor and were bound away for North Harbour, Scalpay. On the passage to Scalpay between the Shiant Islands and the Isle of Harris we saw a pod of four or five cetaceans with tall dorsal fins and white

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patches on their bodies. We thought these were likely to be orcas.

My first attempt at docking on the Scalpay harbour pontoon owed little to the books on close quarter handling, but doing better at the second attempt we were securely alongside by 1645 hours. Deck log: 'Warm & sunny @ 1718.'

The forecast for 25 June was predicting winds of F5 to 6 from east-south-east, with sea state smooth or

slight which was good for the passage to our primary destination, the anchorage in Poll nan Gall between North Uist and the Flodday Islands, with Loch Maddy on North Uist as an alternative.

In the morning, with both shore power and water available on the pontoon, we indulged in on-board showers and a hearty cooked breakfast before leaving



the pontoon and the shelter of North Harbour at 0930. Expecting to be close hauled in winds of up to F6, we put a third reef in the main whilst still on the pontoon, with Lewis wrestling the snap shackle on the luff to its bespoke ring on the mast. Having left Scalpay we settled down for what should have been an enjoyable passage to Poll nan Gall. Soon, however, the wind veered to south of



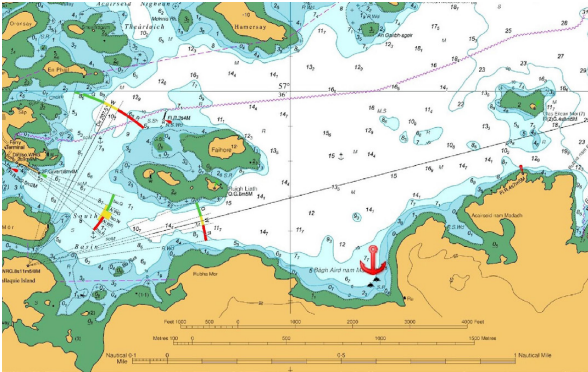
*Blue Damsel, Tobermory Harbour*

south east and was blowing not less than F7, regularly reaching over 35 knots with numerous big waves coming over both the boat and us. Passing the Sound of Harris the mountainous seas bore little resemblance to the forecast of smooth or slight. The possibility of further alternative destinations was discussed, but Leverburgh in



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the Sound of Harris was an uncertain option and, whilst I had anchored in Calm Bay (Bàigh a' Chàise) in the lee of North Uist in June 2021, I was conscious that there were pilotage issues to consider. With *Blue Damsel's* saloon behaving like the drum of a washing machine, going below to make a considered appraisal of Calm Bay was not an attractive option and so we pushed on to our planned destination. We had managed to sail for 14 miles before starting the engine and motor-sailing the last ten miles to Loch Maddy, arriving around 1400 hours very wet and badly knocked about.



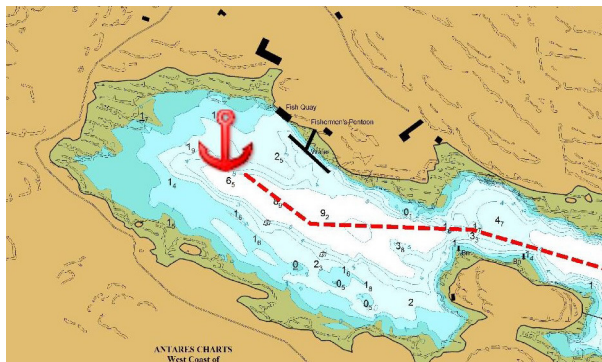
Loch Maddy anchorage

Our chance of getting a berth on the Loch Maddy pontoons was never going to be great, but given the wind strength and direction, that chance was nonexistent. A yacht was already being blown hard on to the hammerhead and it would have been hazardous to attempt docking on any other

pontoon, even if one had been free – which seemed not to be the case. The alternative, anchoring in Ardmaddy Bay (Bàigh Aird nam Madadh), proved to be a happy solution to our predicament. The bay was well sheltered from both wind and waves and after the anchor got a good bite with 30 metres of chain in 10 metres of water Lewis let out a further 15m of chain before attaching the snubber. Whilst it was windy and wet, we enjoyed a secure night at anchor although the events of the day could well have caused an epidemic of post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

The plan for Sunday was to head for Acairseid Mhòr, Eriskay, with an early start to capture as much of the easterly F4 as we could before the wind rose and the sea state deteriorated. Happily, the wind was either east or north of east for the entire passage south and so were able

Acairseid Mhòr anchorage, Eriskay



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to reach the shelter of Acairseid Mhòr (Big Harbour in English) by 1300, but not before the wind got up to 30 knots off Loch Boisdale. Whilst the wind was whipping up the sea, it was not as punishing as the previous day's horrendous passage to Loch Maddy.

I am sure Helen and Lewis will have had

their reservations about my plan to enter Acairseid Mhòr in these conditions, but the options were not great, even if it involved barrelling along the leading line towards rocks followed by hand brake turns first to starboard and then to port after passing the drying rock northwest of Rubha Liath. Once inside Acairseid Mhòr we quickly dropped the mainsail and were able to get a good bite with the anchor in 10 to 11m before putting out our now customary 45m of chain. The two unsatisfactory visitors' moorings, with their shackles tangled with fishermen's polypropylene rope but lacking warps and pickup lanyards had been removed, which improved the options for anchoring.

As forecast, the wind went south west overnight and on Monday we woke to a sunny if chilly morning. Reveille at 0530 hours was followed by a full Scottish breakfast and we were bound away for Tobermory by 0655. With one reef in the Sound of Barra from Eriskay



Eriskay ponies

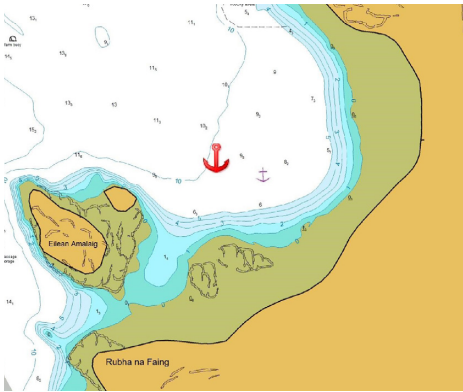


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mainsail we were making 6.6 knots in 8 - 10 knots of wind and when the wind rose to 13 knots we were able to make up to 8 knots, sailing to just short of the lighthouse at Rubha nan Gall in the western entrance to the Sound of Mull. No PTSD after this leg of our cruise.

As is customary, the wind played up around the lighthouse at Rubha nan Gall and so we started the engine for the final one and a half miles to the pontoons. We had enjoyed an agreeable passage of 46nm on one tack from Eriskay which almost compensated for the hammering we had taken between Scalpay and Loch Maddy. We were further rewarded by securing the perfect pontoon berth for the changing wind which was to rise overnight and to back from southwest to a strong southeasterly. Helen and Lewis generously hosted supper in the Tobermory Hotel and we went to bed fortified for the slog to Loch Spleve the following day. Deck log: 'Rain +++ overnight.'

If we were to round Duart Point at the southeastern entrance to the Sound of Mull before the tide turned there, we needed to be away from Tobermory by 0900. Lines were slipped in the rain at 0855 and we were soon facing headwinds of up



Loch Spleve anchorage

to 28 knots in the sound with heavy rain, but the sea state was kind until encountering a lumpy sea with unwelcome slamming after Duart Point. The tidal strategy, however, was robust, and we were safely anchored behind Eilean Amalaig in the northeast of Loch Spleve by 1300, having first tried to anchor in the north east corner of the bay. Bob Bradfield's Antares chart was correct in identifying the anchorages in the north of the bay as dull with the presence of rocky patches. Whilst

trying to set the anchor we had drifted over a rocky patch and so took greater notice of Bob's summary which told us that only some of the rocky patches are identified on the chart.

Wednesday's forecast was for a light wind from the south, which indicated another day under engine. With the tide requiring a prompt start before it turned against us in the Dorus Mòr we were away from our anchorage, having removed clay from the seemingly invincible Rocna anchor, by 0650 for a pleasingly uneventful return to *Blue Damsel's* mooring at Ardfern.