

# Sailing out of Lockdown

Into the waters of the Lorn

Robin Bryer



Robin

When I first sailed it was also a special time for my parents and brother, the first time they had been able to sail after the Second World War. That first peace time cruise took us from the Solent to Sark and beyond. The world-wide pandemic, known as Covid 19, which for us began in 2020, has been likened to a war. But in many ways it was (and is) worse, being invisible and not between conquerable nations but suffered by all nations, challenged by insentient nature.

In wartime people could eat, drink and dance together and theatres could boast that they never closed. None of that for us. *Morven*, my mahogany four ton sloop, had been launched in early June but it was not until 15 July that I was allowed to sail her, even on the shortest of cruises. “Come quick,” said John Dunlop, proprietor of Crinan Boatyard, “- and don’t stop, there have been fresh outbreaks in Carlisle and Lockerbie”, both on my route from Dorset to Argyll. “Who knows,” he added, “we all may be put in another ‘lockdown’ soon.” So I made my drive across the familiar border in record time, but for the first time so late into the year.

I had been expecting an escape, at last, to the familiar. But no. Only one person at a time in the chandlery, for a start, and only if wearing a mask. Yachts were for the most part still ashore. Mine had been the first to be launched, late though it had been. The moorings in the bay were, for the most part, bobbing in rows with no boats attached to them. It made *Morven*, moored by the island, beneath the heronry, more easily visible from the pontoon. As I rowed up to her, a very welcome sight. John MacIndoe had been able to get into the yard and work alone on her brightwork, topsides and bottom so that she was all agleam, far more so than if left, as she usually would be, to my amateur efforts, had I



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been able to make journeys to her before now. The sparsity of boats moored nearby made it even easier to sail off the mooring as I took the first of the tide northward early next morning. My first sight of the Paps of Jura as *Morven* dips gently to the breeze, emerging into the greater waters of the sound is, for me, the true start of the sailing year. Now, so late on, they were, sadly, hidden in mist, but at least I knew they were there and we were truly underway at last.

As we slid through the Dorus Mor bound for the Sound of Luing, I reflected on what bids me north to these waters year after year, summer month after summer month, in the same dear old boat. What was it I had missed in these long months that had been denied me? It is the beauty, certainly, but mainly the product of that beauty – a variety of islands and lochs and, with that, choice of where to go. A pleasure to share, certainly, but even better savoured alone, when there is no



Morven

“where are we going?” and “when will we get there?” other than in one’s own mind. That inner dialogue involves obedience to wind, tide and boat, with the auxiliary best left slumbering beneath the cockpit floor.

That proverbial eight hours of tidal flow, taken at the flood out of Crinan, can take you near or far, depending on how the wind will help, and for how long. How too will I get back in the limited time I have, still working (the Lord be praised)? It is a happy conundrum and so it was again, but perhaps not for long, given challenges both worldwide and personal, but at least for now. As in life, ones aspirations on the first sail of the season hereabouts tend to dwindle.

If you make it through the Dorus Mor (appropriately named ‘The Great Gate’) will tide’s end see you as far north as Tobermory or no further than Shuna Island in Loch Shuna? Will you be somewhere in between? Over the Firth of Lorn? In the Sound of Mull? Up Loch Linnhe ?

I had the ghost of a plan. Today it was to be up the Sound of Luing, via the Sound of Insh and thence to the Sound of Kerrera for a walk round the Isle of Kerrera, something of an annual ritual for me. Starting so late, I should not leave it too long. True to form, the swell in the Sound of Insh spilled the following wind from my sails, so I abandoned Kerrera as a destination for that day, even though in sight ahead of me, and bore away instead over the Firth of Lorn, with the wind now giving me a spanking reach into more honest waters. So came lunch time.

Where next? Loch Aline? Even Tobermory? But, off Duart Castle, the wind and

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the sea, as so often, became fickle again, the former dying away and heading me, not helped by the wash from a McBrain ferry spilling what little wind I had in my sails. So I bore away again, this time into the Lynn of Morvern. Where next? Loch a' Choire? I rang the fine restaurant there, not short of modern gadgets is my 86 year old boat. Luckily, no answer, because just then the wind started blowing briskly from the south east and a' Choire ('Cauldron'), so called for its swirling winds when the true wind blows through its entrance, as it now did.

Therefore, I turned eastward towards Shuna Island (not that in Loch Shuna, obviously, but in Loch Linnhe where I now was). Next question: approach the moorings in Shuna Sound round the north east of the island or from the south west? The former is wider and I could tack into shelter, the wind was perversely now coming from the south west, the latter narrow with the prospect of gybing on a dead run with reliable but small port and starboard buoys marking the changeable channel. I chose the latter. I headed for Castle Stalker then, the first buoy identified, turned ninety degrees before the wind. After intense concentration on the buoys ahead of me, all safely passed, inside the sound, I turned head to wind into the bay at its south west end, but did not find the shelter I expected. However, I was spoilt for choice for vacant buoys to tack up to, though not as tidily as I would have wished.

The next day it blew harder from the same direction, so I walked to Port Appin for supplies in the community shop there, complete with my Covid visor, bought in Princes Street (Yeovil, not Edinburgh).

The day after, the 19th, the wind would still head me, but the turn of the tide and the early shipping forecast coincided, so I headed under auxiliary back down the channel and into the Lynn of Lorn (this time). Just short of Eilean Dubh, I thankfully switched off the noise and eased sheets towards Kerrera once more.

Just short of Maiden Island, heavy rain set in so I set the golf umbrella. Then Hutcheson's Monument on Kerrera's north east end appeared out of the mist, not just decorative but practical too. As I came into Oban Bay, the rain cleared and ahead of me was Sir Giles Gilbert Scott's Roman Catholic cathedral, for which our fourth commodore, Roger Pinckney, had been the job architect. (He had arrived early one morning in the first *Dyarchy* and rowed ashore, so he once told me, for breakfast with the bishop, and was rather surprised that he was expected to take whisky with it).

Time to round up under the other side of the Hutcheson Monument. Again I



A spanking reach

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was spoilt for choice with so many empty moorings ahead of me. Ashore I had that annual walk round the island. Mission accomplished. Supper that night was meat in a bap, rather than the fine seafood in the little restaurant there, but I was pleased to support their initiative. Dirk, the ferry which brings punters from Oban across the bay in normal times, lay silent by the pontoon as, later, the lights winked across the water.

The next morning, sadly, motor again but, with Easdale Sound finally abeam, I had more of those multiple choices again. Press on to pass Easdale's south west end and thence to Fladda? Duck through Easdale Sound and on to Cuan Narrows? Or the same, but turning instead towards Fladda again? The first would mean more motoring. The second serves no purpose other than to frighten one's crew, I had none, so why bother? The third offered a better slant in smoother water and silence once more, so that is what I chose. The result: a vintage sail back to Crinan.

But more to record first.

Off Fladda, it was time for breakfast, but I had run out of gas, so no tea to wash it down with. I do not normally drink alcohol before noon, except at a meet of hounds or taking communion. But if Roger and the bishop could, so could I. The solution: a swig of Prosecco from a quarter bottle (I always have one handy), letting the bubbles fizz in the mouth before swallowing. The first as I entered the Sound of Luing; the second with the Grey Dogs abeam; and the third, and last, as I emerged from the sound in grand style. I decided to christen the drink, or at least the way of drinking it, the 'Luing Sling' (not to be repeated too often).

My course ever more southward, sheets were eased still further. Through the Dorus Mor again, ahead of time tide wise, and back, in a way all too soon, to dear old Crinan; handing the jib as I entered the bay; nudging up to the mooring; hooking it safely aboard, and then turning to let slip the main to tumble down the mast. The herons in the heronry, in the trees on the island just feet away, watched me the while with their usual indifference.

Peace.

My little cruise had been just a variation on so many before in the past twenty five years or so, but even more precious than all these, because it had been by no means certain that *Morven* and I would ever be together again.

There was more to come, including the loveliest Cruising Club meet I can ever remember, in the Bay of Pigs, at the northern end of Jura. As I write this, *Morven* is tucked up, back safe in the shed, I having made a dash northward to decommission her a fortnight ago, in the only two clement days that October had to offer.

When shall we two sail again? Who knows, but at least we had our little fling together this summer, *Morven* and I, in the season we thought might never happen.

