

## A salty shopping trip to the tailors of Harris

*Pepper's Cruise to Scotland*

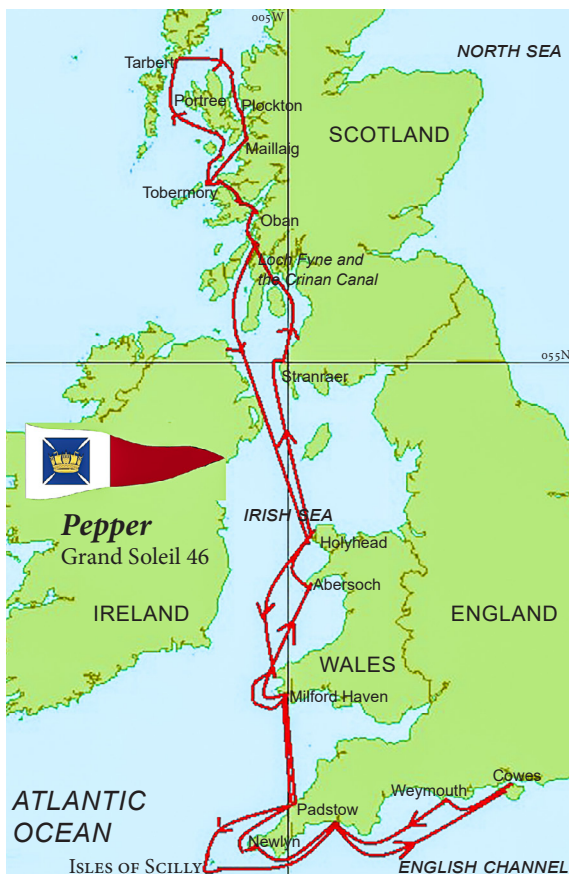
Mark and Jo Downer

We set off for our cruise to Scotland immediately after Lockdown had ended on 19 April 2021. The aim had been to join the Royal Cruising Club's Meet in the west coast of Scotland. Unfortunately, the Meet had been cancelled due to social distancing issues, but we decided to get up there and use the itinerary to visit the very best that Scotland had to offer and go shopping for Harris Tweed jackets.

We had both retired in October and so now had time to get away on *Pepper*, our Grand Soleil 46. We bought her from Enkhuizen in Holland six years ago and only now, during the winter, had the opportunity for a refit which included renewing all rigging, fitting a new rudder, upgrading the navigation system, sorting out the charging of all our electronics etc.

We set off from Cowes and spent the next 16 days heading west to Falmouth via our regular haunts of Dartmouth, Salcombe, Yealm and Fowey. As the weather was settled from the north, we even managed a couple of nights outside Charlestown and Mevagissey harbours.

When we arrived in Falmouth the weather turned against us, and we spent five nights waiting for the winds to change in



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Heading north past the Longships Lighthouse, Lands End, with Jo dressed for an early summer's day our favour. We set sail from Helford on the 5 May in sleet and rain with the promise of improving weather throughout the day. However, by mid-morning and with the auto pilot not doing well, we diverted to Newlyn which was an experience. The harbour master berthed us alongside what he described as a green trawler which we were told had not been to sea for months, but in reality was just a pile of black rust. Time to dry out and have breakfast; however half an hour later we were asked to move to allow the trawler out! The good news was that the rain and sleet had stopped and a glimmer of sun was breaking through. With a 15 knot cold northerly, it seemed like the perfect time to cut and run. We had been following Mike Griffiths' *Dragonfly* (RCC) on AIS. He was a clear day ahead of us and had spent the night in St Ives. St Ives did not look a good anchorage, so we passed wide to catch up with *Dragonfly* now in Padstow.

On paper Padstow entrance looked good; however we were arriving near low tide with a following sea and on closer inspection, one of the channel markers was clearly in the breakers so we tentatively took a harder east line closer to the rocky outcrop with a religious eye on the depth sounder. We picked up a mooring just astern of *Dragonfly* who were already snuggled down for the night. Knowing how shallow the bar was, we planned to depart early the following morning and retrace our passage over the bar on the falling tide but with more depth.

We had been expecting the wind to turn southwest since departing Cowes but it remained predominantly in the north until we arrived in Scotland on the 13 May meaning most of the passage north was cold, up wind and usually over 25 knots.

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Normal attire for Mark for about 60 days

We would normally have planned to use Ireland and The Isle of Mann as stop overs; however, these were out of bounds due to Covid restrictions, so we sailed into Milford Haven, Abersoch and Holyhead in Wales as alternatives.

Over the next few days, the weather eased, and we had a few lovely days in Arran and Loch Fyne before heading through the Crinan Canal. The most dangerous part of the journey so far was going through the first sea lock gate at Ardrishaig at the southern end of the canal; the gates were temporarily being operated by mechanical diggers which seemingly offered zero control on flood speed. Sluices were either open or closed. We were squeezed into the lock with two other boats and with our engine running forward at full power to stem the deluge we rose rather quickly up the barnacle covered stone walls, life jackets would have been useless as there was too much air in the water for them to have been any use. The reported depths of 2.8m in Crinan are not accurate and this was the only place we touched the bottom in the whole of our trip and we draw 2.1m.

As the whole canal system closes for part of the week, we were locked in for four nights which allowed us to explore this lovely part of Scotland. So, with wheels attached to our tender, a bottle of wine and an empty wine bottle full of spare petrol (being careful not to confuse the two as the outboard doesn't run well on wine), we set off for a bit of portaging to either end of the nine mile canal.

Then came the winds as we were heading north through the Sound of Jura between Lung and Louing on our way to Oban where we had booked our second Covid jab the next day. We tacked into head winds which reached 50 knots with



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Heading north upwind in the Sound of Jura with winds which reached 50 knots

one knot of tide against us in the south part of the Firth of Lorn. *Pepper* handled the weather well with two reefs in the main and our staysail small jib. However, we gave up on this leg and bolted into Loch Buie on the south of Mull to rest for a few hours before heading north again for that Covid jab.

Our plan was to follow the RCC cruise's itinerary, but in no particular order, aware that the RCC selected ports would have been carefully chosen. We continued north through the Firth of Lorn to the Sound of Mull and onward Tobermory in 21 knots and torrential rain, but at least it was downwind. After a couple of nights relaxing in this beautiful village, we left the shelter of the harbour sailing straight out across the loch forgetting not all deep water remains deep and neglecting to check the chart before departing. I looked east of our track to see an east cardinal, thinking this strange, I looked west to see the corresponding west cardinal marker. We had inadvertently strayed across a patch of isolated rocks mid loch and were halfway across with clear patches of kelp showing above the water. Time to switch on the Nav on the iPad as we continued to pick our way gingerly through the remaining rocky outcrop. For the remainder of the trip, we checked the navigation religiously regardless of what the echo sounder indicated as the current depth.

We headed around Ardnamurchan Point towards the islands of Muck, Eigg and Rhum. Again, it was 30 knots of northerly and we followed two Mayday broadcasts on channel 16 which continued for a few hours during our upwind passage north. Unfortunately, one did not end well and remains a reminder to us of the perils of cold water in the early season.

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Grand hall at Kinloch Castle, Rhum

We picked up a mooring and spent a night in Loch Scresort in Rhum with the backdrop of the fantastic Kinloch Castle which we later discovered was up for sale for offers in the region of £60,000. Although almost derelict, this castle remains fully furnished including stags heads on the wall and a Steinway piano in the galleried hall. It is quite a sight to behold the moth eaten furniture and plaster falling from the ceilings as we cautiously peered through the windows under the decaying glazed veranda roof that surrounds the building. Such was the draw and enchanting desolation of Kinloch Castle that we returned later in our cruise with our boys in tow. However, the second visit was quite a contrast to the first, the weather had turned into wall to wall rain with strong wind, again. We knew the weather was against us and for a short while we were the only boat in the bay until we got trumped by a 60 foot Oyster who, in turn was trumped hours later by an 80 foot Oyster. Very envious of the fact that they both had hot showers and heating, we snuggled down for the night. The next morning, we went ashore for a walk with the boys, visiting Kim's Kitchen for tea and cakes, literally in her kitchen.

We still had a few miles left before our destination of Harris and those Tweed jackets. On the way we stopped off for a few days on the isles of Rhum and Canna as well as having a lunch stop at Loch Scavaig on Skye. At this Loch we were the only boat anchored in the upper pool under the imposing eye of the Cuillin Ridge. To say the scenery was fantastic would be vastly understated, it was awe inspiring. We had arrived at the raw untamed Scotland we hoped still existed. However, in this anchorage the catabatic winds were vicious, coming down the mountains from

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*Pepper in Loch Scavaig*

every point of the compass, every few minutes, we were swinging completely 360 degrees around the anchor like a dog on a lead. Laying an excessive amount of chain, we ventured ashore for a walk around the freshwater Loch Coruisk with its impressive water falls over the ice polished granite which flowed into the saltwater anchorage below. Although the holding was good it would not have been much fun overnight, so we moved on to Canna that evening for a more comfortable night.

Dolerite columns on Garbh Island,  
Shiant Islands



These beautiful areas of Scotland, were made even better by occasional, intermittent, beautifully calm and reasonably warm long summer days of sunshine.

Eventually having washed ashore at Harris we took a bus up to Stornaway to search for Tweed jackets. We looked for hours in all of the shops but found none and travelled back to Harris very disillusioned, only to be told that the best Tweed shop in Harris was in an industrial warehouse at the end of our pontoon. There was a reasonable choice and we both fell in love pretty quickly with our final attire. This was undoubtedly our longest shopping trip to a tailor.

It was sadly time to point the bow south but not before a day excursion via the Shiant Islands, one



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of the highlights of the trip. The towering dolerite columns on Garbh Island were magnificent and as the weather was so calm, we could safely get very near to the base of these volcanic rocks to admire the wildlife up close. We saw not one, but five golden eagles soaring above the towering cliffs hunting the puffins, as well as guillemots and razorbills colonies. When scared, the birds headed out to sea, passing through our rigging and leaving the decks splattered white.

Turning south down the east coast of Skye we stopped at Rona Island, Portree and Scalpay before spending time at Plockton in Loch Carron. Strange place this, the English Riviera in the north with no trace of an accent from the locals, if indeed anyone actually was local.

The next couple of weeks were spent exploring the area from the Skye Bridge down to Mallaig in the Sound of Sleat with two of our boys who had joined us for a week. Loch Hourn was a notable place that we took a shine to on more than one occasion. For some unexplainable reason there was little activity involving salmon farming in this loch and experience so far taught us that salmon farms are not conducive with wildlife.

We were not disappointed, numerous seals clustered on rocky outcrops and sea eagles nesting in the treetops. Also, enough jelly fish washing past *Pepper* at anchor that you felt you could almost walk ashore on the purple carpet they lay down as they drift past on the current.



A hidden gem above Loch Beag

There are a series of four narrows as you proceed up the beautiful loch and we went as far inland as possible. Unable to passage the last narrows for lack of water, we anchored up on a shallow shelf of sand at the head of the section of Loch Hourn that is called Loch Beag. From here we could hear a waterfall hidden in a wooded outcrop on the slopes above us; nothing for it, we launched the dinghy and headed ashore. We climbed up through fern and peat to the tree line using the gnarly exposed tree roots as hand holds and then traversed down into the deep gully eroded over millennia by the cascading water below. What a wondrous sight awaited; permanently shrouded from sunlight, adorned with emerald green moss and the air heavy with swirling spumes of mist from the sheer 40 foot drop waterfall. Below the

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waterfall was a deep plunging pool, although the water was freezing cold it was ripe for an exhilarating evening plunge, a hidden gem.

As we had planned to get back in early July to practice on our new Redwing ahead of Cowes Week, the journey home was fairly hasty with stops in Ghiga and Belfast. As the temperature rose and the sun climbed high, unshaded by mountains or cloud, we made time and took the opportunity with this settled forecast to spend a week on the Isles of Scilly with Wally the Walrus. Wally was lonely and had been unsuccessfully trying to mate with various inflatable tenders in St Mary's Sound, much to the annoyance of various boat owners I might add. He did cast his eye towards our tender which we hastily shipped aboard.

Well all good things come to an end and home was the next stop before we cast our eye south to a different horizon next year. In all we spent 83 nights on board *Pepper* and had a fantastic journey with 33 nights alongside and the rest at anchor, on a mooring or against a wall. Despite some awful cold, wet windy weather, we both have very fond memories and want to go back and explore Scotland again one day, next time hopefully meeting more members of the RCC.

Our longest commute for a shopping trip ever, Mark and Jo sporting Harris tweed

