

A Journey through the Hebrides – Summer 2018

Two Months Cruising in the Western Isles

Christopher Elliott

It was the cruise of a lifetime, enabled by that blessed (but temporary) state of ‘retired, but still active’: two months cruising around the Hebrides and the Western Highlands of Scotland, in almost perfect weather and one storm, with five changes of crew. *Otter* is our 33 foot Moody Eclipse, a design with a true deck saloon, where the seasons can be viewed from comfort whilst seated inside, and especially valued in the changeable weather of the Highland seas.

We left *Otter*’s home berth at Ardfern, Argyll, towards the end of May, after a winter of upgrades and much fiddling with improvements. On board were myself and Kit and Penny Power (RCC). Kit might be an octogenarian, but he remains as strong as any and with truly geological layers of experience laid down over a lifetime of cruising; Penny, his highly capable sea-wife. With such a strong crew, we were confident of testing our skills in a passage



Otter of Lorn



through the Gulf of Corryvreckan, only to find it a complete doddle in the benign conditions prevailing. A gentle sail, with a pod of dolphins dancing off the starboard bow, took us 28nm across calm seas to the snug anchorage at Ardalanish at the end of the Ross of Mull, where we ate our supper in the cockpit in the warm sunset. What had happened to the normally testing Scottish weather?



Next day we threaded A puffin, tame and inquisitive, on Lunga Treshnish Isles onwards through Tinker's Hole, out through the shallow Sound of Iona and on to Ulva Ferry in bright sunshine. The man who kindly took our lines there said, 'Nothing happens here and there is nothing to see'. He was wrong. That evening, we set out on the first of many fine walks of the cruise, this time three miles around the hinterland of Ulva in warm sunshine. Kit and I strode out to the island's 'Telford' church and inspected the laird's residence at Ulva House, whilst Penny showed her considerable talent sitting on a rock by the shoreline painting. It was all too sublime to last, surely?

After a leisurely breakfast we made westwards for the Treshnish Isles to view the puffin colony there, but a brisk northerly made landing problematical over the difficult boulder beach of Lunga, so we retreated to the teardrop-shaped harbour of Gometra, surrounded by hills. Penny found another suitable rock for her paint brush and paints, whilst Kit and I set out to walk around the island to add a route to my project for the RCC website of *Fifty Walks from*



Anchored off Tioram Castle at twilight, Loch Moidart

Scottish Anchorages. This had been in gestation for half a decade, but recent prodding from Charles Lambrick (RCC) gave it a new electricity and it will reach at least eighty walks... or more before release.

Next morning a second attempt at landing on Lunga was successful. But to our great disappointment only a scattering of puffins was visible, timorous and furtive, when there should have been thousands. A bearded ornithologist, having camped there overnight, emerged down the

path to explain why.

‘You are early. . .’

‘Yes?’

‘The bonxies (skuas) here will predate on the puffins until the trippers scare the bonxies off and the puffins will reappear.’

And so it was - as the first hundred tourists wheezed up the hill from the boulder landing beach, the puffins returned from the sea in their thousands. A fascinating example of learned behaviour.



Fred, swimming in Mallaig Harbour

In the next days we anchored off Tioram Castle in Loch Moidart, Penny found Bonnie Prince Charlie's cave near the Borrowdale Islands, we had a crustacean lunch in the sunshine on the seafront at Arisaig (anchoring out in the skerries overnight), lunched in Camus Daraich (a beautiful sandy bay to the east of the Point of Sleat) and we managed to persuade the Belgian at The Old Forge in Loch Nevis to serve us a langoustine supper; local sailors will recognise a sense of triumph at that last event.

After nine days of beautiful weather it was time to say goodbye to Kit and Penny at Mallaig and welcome my wife Maggie and Gillie Green (RCC) on board. There was a two-day break in between, so I had glorious days in hidden anchorages around Loch Nevis to sort things out and prepare.

After collection from the train, Maggie nodded approvingly at the chambermaid's work (*Otter* had passed muster from the co-owner) before getting to grips with the supplies. Meanwhile, Gillie has many sea-miles in her own boat, including some very challenging events, and is an inventive and original cook. All these talents were to prove themselves in the next two weeks.

We set off north almost immediately up the Sound of Sleat to anchor overnight in Sandaig Bay, site of Gavin Maxwell's *Ring of Bright Water*. Next morning, we did our big shop at the Kyle of Lochalsh Co-op and anchored in the snug hole of Totaig, opposite Eilean Donan Castle in Loch Duich. A low white haar mist had flowed in from the sea, with a brisk wind in the opposite direction to that forecast, so the evening was not one for sight-seeing. Next day we passed on to Plockton under that elegant new bridge that crosses to Skye; which child gazing at its outrageous slenderness would not want to grow up to be a civil engineer? There we ambushed Duncan, returning from his pots, and took back a prize bucket of langoustines to *Otter*. A child of the area, Duncan had left after university to become a government meteorologist, but returned later with a wife, herself a qualified fish scientist, to work a more traditional calling. He explained some interesting things: there was a good living to be made, with half the year's profit made in the 18 days before Christmas; a recent ½ degree rise in sea temperature had encouraged octopuses to move



Under the Skye Bridge to Kyle of Lochalsh , with the Cuillins of Skye in the background

north and they now ravaged his creels, following the lines connecting them from creel-feast to creel-feast. The rise in sea temperature had also brought an onslaught of sea-lice to local fish farms. The traditional method of cleaning lice from the fish with peroxide had to be replaced by less-chemical methods: holding the salmon in huge fresh water tanks on ships for 10 hours (the lice fell off, were collected and used themselves as fish meal) and by introducing lice-gobbling wrasse from Cornwall into the fish pens. Duncan's langoustines were prepared that night in the pressure cooker – don't laugh, it works well – and we banqueted supported by a bottle of white wine.

The weather was now brilliant blue with calm seas again. We sailed in light winds across the Inner Sound to make for Fladdy harbour at the north end of Raasay. In recent years, the exploits of the local postman and poet, Calum MacLeod, in building a two-mile road to his settlement single-handed had become renowned and a



Otter anchored in Fladdy Harbour, Raasay

book written. Sadly, by the time the road was finished, the population had dispersed and its first use was for the hearse to collect Calum after he died. Less well known was that the recently-hatched Second Lieutenant Elliott of the Royal Engineers, aged 18 years, had laid out the route of Calum's road and stayed overnight with him, with a promise that the Sappers would return to build the road for him. This promise was broken as the developing troubles in Northern Ireland absorbed all the energies of the Army. Maggie and Gillie walked two miles to the start of the road with this story ringing in their ears and my original construction plans and cross-sections to hand. I noticed that in teenage enthusiasm some soft-ish ground was described as a 'bottomless hag' and with the remote possibility of a few rocks sliding down as a 'highly dangerous overhang'; I learnt moderation later. We anchored that night five

miles north in the snug cove of Acarsaid Mhor on Rona.

Penetrating further and further north towards Cape Wrath, the ancients must have had the impression of tipping towards the edge of the earth and, to those formed and cushioned in the countryside of southern England, journeys to



Maggie and Gillie at Inverewe Gardens

‘The North’ and ‘The Highland Fringe’ even now engender both nervousness and adventure. Having breached the steep-sided lochs and crowded mountains of the Central Highlands, passed through the deep cleft of Kyle Rhea with the improbably dramatic Cuillins of southern Skye fading behind, the landscapes start to widen out and become softer in the ‘Flow Country’. Up here, the ice has planed off the land into a more forgiving and level vista, punctuated by extraordinary mountain islands with precipitous sides. Suilven, Foinaven, Quinag are all names redolent of some mysterious pre-life, standing sheer and proudly apart from each other. And instead of a wilderness absent a population, this softer land is continuously fringed by lines of small white houses, spaced out and separate from each other, as the prosperity of Aberdeen,



Tanera Beg with Suilven in the distance

Edinburgh and Glasgow has created the wealth for second and retirement homes. We visited Badachro in Gairloch, the exquisite Inverewe House Gardens in Loch Ewe, moored at Lochinver, before rounding the Point of Storr, where two climbers were triumphantly cresting the top of the precipitous Old Man. Our furthest north was to be Loch Nedd, egged on by Libby Purves’ (RCC) wonderful description in the Clyde Cruising Club Guide of a sheltered paradise. And it was so. Maggie, Gillie and I sat with our new friends Anne and Gavin - both refugees from academia in Edinburgh - in their new greenhouse in the early evening, avoiding the midges, sipping their proffered wine and discussing their plans for their self-build emerging below, all under the gaze of the monstrous towering bulk of Quinag rising behind us.

The forecast had begun to warn of a big storm moving in from the Atlantic, so we reluctantly turned to seek refuge in Plockton, 75nm to the south. We

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had enough time on the way to spend an idyllic night in Tanera Beg in the Summer Isles, under the watchful eye of the great plug-mountain of Suilven, and then a glorious run south with the spinnaker on a shy reach. We made Plockton 36 hours before Storm Hector arrived with its sustained gusts of more than 60kts, giving us a challenging time at anchor recounted elsewhere. Sufficient to say, Maggie commented afterwards that she had ‘felt terror’ for the first time in her life.

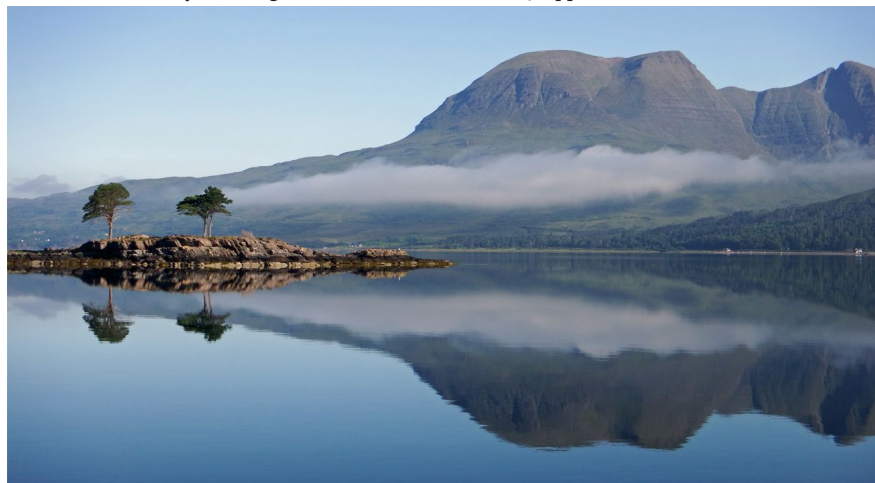
Maggie and Gillie departed at Kyle of Lochalsh after two wonderful and eventful weeks and I returned to Plockton to ride out another gathering F8 at anchor alone. A few adjustments as a result of Storm Hector meant that this was done with ease.

Our next-door neighbours from Easton Royal were *Otter’s* next crew, Hew and Beverley. Farmers at heart, they had taken to the cruising life with enthusiasm. The clackety-clack train from Inverness brought them to Plockton Halt mid-morning, something over a mile from the jetty and requiring a herculean carry of bags. But in the glorious scenery there were no complaints and Beverley soon made her mark on the galley. The wind had died now and the sun emerged, so after a walk on the brae above the town we set off early next morning to sail north to Gairloch, arriving late afternoon. Another trek into the hills above Badachro ended in torrential rain and the excuse for a delicious crustacean supper at the Badachro Inn, as the rain beat

Early morning anchored in Ob Gorm Mor, Upper Loch Torridon



Plockton, by Gillie, after surviving Storm Hector



down relentlessly outside.

Next day white horses covered the wide Gairloch Bay, so we made the short hop across it to a pontoon at Flowerdale Bay, spending the day walking up to the spectacular waterfalls at the head of the Flowerdale; it was cruising, after all. A different Duncan and a similar ambush delivered us another full pressure-cooker of delicious langoustines that evening. Departing next morning, we sailed further up the coast to Upper Loch Torridon, from where we were only to emerge with the greatest reluctance three days later.

Loch Torridon goes from the sea for twenty miles into the mountains. The anchorages at its head are picturesque and surrounded by the massive hulks of Beinn Alligan, Liathach and Beinn Damh. We spent a fretful first night at the head of Ob Gorm Mor, which is a narrow bay crowded with mussel lines. The space remaining at the head had a boulder bottom, so we had to re-set the anchor three times under a brisk night wind in that rubbly, weedy bay. Next morning we moved to the mouth of the bay to a snug anchorage surrounded by red cliffs of giant, sandstone blocks.

Hew and Beverley have a tradition of a more formal Sunday breakfast of boiled eggs, toast, marmalade with endless coffee lingering in the sun in their garden room at home. We kept the tradition; only the newspapers were missing. Near noon, we walked through a forest to Loch Damh to paddle in the clear shallow water and to view the dramatic Falls of Balgy. On return we weighed anchor for Shieldaig some five miles away to resupply, before being lured back into the loch to anchor at its head, in the bay just to west of the Torridon Hotel. A dramatic ascent through trees up a stalkers' track towards the great mass of Beinn Damh ended short of the summit, with a quick descent to the hotel bar below for refreshment. We were gifted the most spectacular sunset on the mirror-smooth loch as we walked back to *Otter* through the trees. These were utterly sublime days.



Hew and Beverley by the Falls of Balgy

We departed with a somewhat sad heart next morning for Portree, to overnight on a buoy in the bay. After a leisurely start we sauntered around the bustling tourist hot-spot, ending with lunch in a crustacean fast-food outlet – actually a delicious pile of langoustines served in the Big Mac format. Tummies full, we sailed off our buoy, headed south through the Narrows and then anchored in the afternoon sun in the bay off the big house, Raasay. After a walk up to Temptation Hill (where a potential owner of the island is reputed

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to have succumbed to Raasay's charms) and a visit to the intriguing island graveyard, we relaxed on the terrace of Raasay House drinking Skye Gold ale in the warm sunshine. A complete and perfect day.



Men can't cook. Another delicious supper

David Ross, the latter the father of my godson. The departing and arriving crews shared a merry supper together, before the former watched *Otter* become a small dot (lump in throat, I am reliably told) sailing out across the Sound of Rum next morning for Barra.

We approached Castle Bay in the early evening, after a cracking sail of 60nm across the Sea of the Hebrides, with *Otter* lifting her skirts in a good breeze just off the nose and rising to F6 by the end. After the closed-in feeling of mainland anchorages beneath their towering peaks, the Outer Hebrides seemed to have much bigger skies and wide-open vistas. For John, it was in stark contrast to his home sailing in Dubai and he revelled in it. For David, it had been his first time truly offshore, so we opened a bottle of fizz in celebration before tumbling into our bunks, well after midnight. Next morning we climbed the highest hill on Barra, Heabhal 383m, with views out to St Kilda, and then motored five miles round to Vatersay for a swim in the clear, cold water off that marvellous strand of sand, before making for the island of Eriskay in the late evening. Mercifully the galley was at last left un-reorganised.



David and his lobster, gifted to us in Eriskay

Eriskay is where the *SS Politician* came ashore to bequeath the locals unlimited supplies of whisky and the spot where Bonnie Prince Charlie first landed. Whilst seeking directions for the latter we bumped into the local fishing-master, who very generously gifted

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us three enormous lobsters and two giant crabs, which sat clacking at each other in buckets in the shower. Towards noon, we sailed north with the tide to Wizard Pool at the far end of South Uist and then set out to climb Hecla (606m) in the early evening. It was hard going and a very long way. By 2000 we had made good progress, but a mist was seeping in below us so we turned back at Beinn Sgalabhat (450m), 150m below the summit. Pretty exhausted after a five-hour trek, we cleaned up and checked for ticks before starting to tackle the mammoth crustaceans at 2200, still in broad daylight, master-minded by David with a hammer. They were delicious!

Another crew change was drawing us back towards the mainland, so we had a glorious sail across to Canna, where we anchored amongst 20 other yachts. We took a short walk to Canna Cafe and then on to Loch Scavaig at the foot of

the Cuillins on Skye. The Pilot warns of terrible downdrafts and williwaws, but it was a gentle day and we anchored easily in the inner pool. As we returned after walking along Loch Coruisk in magnificent scenery, the skipper of another yacht said rather patronisingly, 'I see you use an anchor line; we never bother.' Our reply of, 'Well, it



The co-owner on watch

has been very useful to us twice in 50 years!' didn't really settle the score and was soon to ricochet back on us. We weighed, the anchor team forward gave the thumbs up and the engine was engaged. . . followed by a great crash in the bowels of *Otter* and then silence. The anchor line, with James Pickford's (RCC) 5kg patented centring-weight still attached, had thumped into the propeller, wound itself up into the cutless bearing and the engine had stalled. After some smart re-anchoring and twenty dives, resolutely determined not to summon any help, we were free. There was an unusually reflective silence on *Otter* that evening as we sailed across to Loch Scrisort on Rum.

Next day we sailed to the mainland and anchored again off The Old Forge at Inverie, Loch Nevis, and, at last, John and I crested that mighty Sgurr and back in three hours - well, almost. As we neared the top, the mist descended and a sharp wind rose making the final 100m of knife edge look most unattractive and the fall-away either side too alarming. John would have gone on! We spent the night at anchor at Tarbet, further up Loch Nevis, and walked in the evening sun across to Loch Morar and back. It was then time for David to leave and for *Otter* to welcome Bill Griffin, father of another of my godsons, and once captain of the mighty *HMS Phoebe*. Bill accommodates reasonably well to the reduction in scale of a yacht, indeed he has cruised extensively with Jonathan Trafford (RCC), but his forte was navigation sans

electronics. I caught him more than once sniffing at the tidal solutions app on my smartphone and clearly missing the established certainty of rubbing out and entering in pencil the times after Dover HW at the top of the page on the Admiralty Tidal Atlas.

We were on the last leg: we sailed across the Sound of Sleat and anchored overnight in the south harbour of Muck (then climbing its highest hill); overnighted off Kilchoan south of Ardnamuchan; into Loch Aline for another mighty meal at the wonderful White House Restaurant and a six mile walk up to the bothy by Loch Tearnnet for lunch next day, before sailing across the Firth of Lorne for a night in the outer pool of Puilladobhrain (appropriately, 'The Pool of the Otters'). Finally, anchoring in Ardinamar, we walked six miles next day around the north end of Luing in glorious weather. The cruise ended with a most memorable supper until the early hours with good friends on Eilean Rìgh, Loch Craignish, including a flight in our host's helicopter over *Otter* moored peacefully on the island pier below.



Otter sailing across the Sea of the Hebrides

What a fabulous cruise. We had covered the distance comfortably, usually



The author on the highest point on Rona

15-40nm per day, and visited many new places. The weather had been fair, often Mediterranean, yet with good winds too. My companions proved excellent shipmates and, with experiences shared over more than half a century, there was much to reminisce upon. *Otter* behaved faultlessly, she was a delight to sail and we had survived Storm Hector. It had indeed been the experience of a lifetime, and not one probably to be repeated in the limited years still left in hand.