

# Never Did Fair Scotland Look So Fair

## Western Isles

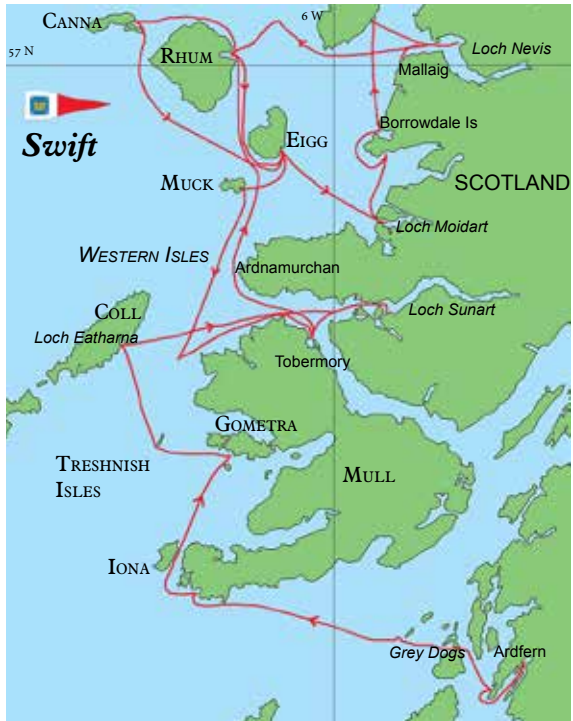
Christopher Elliott

Sailing in Scotland is a gamble. It could be miserable for weeks, as Atlantic depressions hit the jagged coast full-square, with high winds, driving rain and chill. Or, it can give the most beguiling sailing on the planet. The secret is, like going skiing, to keep returning enough times to catch the good weather, the bad being the ticket to the good. This year, the months of May and most of June were blessed with sunshine, gentle winds and calm seas. Fair Scotland was at its fairest.

We took over *Swift*, our 42-foot charter for three weeks, at Ardfern on 4 June. The cruise was to be in two halves, with a crew change planned for Lochboisdale in the Outer Hebrides. Maggie and I had arrived a week earlier, with a trailer full of everyone's luggage, to potter around on our small boat, *Otter*, and get things organised. With some apprehension,

we spied *Swift* out of the water having her rudder repaired, following a grounding on rocks in Croabh Haven the week before. This was to haunt us later.

The crew assembled. Our oldest friends John and Judi Ashcroft flew in from Dubai, whilst my godson, Tom Fogden, and his mother, Lyn, came



## Never Did Fair Scotland Look So Fair

up on the overnight sleeper to Oban. We set off in splendid weather late in the afternoon, quickly passing through the Dorus Mor - 'the great door' - and on a couple of miles north to the sheltered anchorage of Achanarnich Bay, snuggling in behind Eilean Ona. This is completely open to the SW, but sealed by a tidal door from swell, and always calm. We climbed to the Iron Age fort on the hill, as the sun sank over Mull in a magnificent, magenta sky.

The tides dictated an early start, but even at 0400 we were a bit late. We motored up the Sound of Luing towards the narrows at Fladda, but it was clear that the tide was already beginning to change. In two miles we would be fighting six knots or more. Then a thought occurred. The Grey Dogs is a narrow slash only tens of yards wide between Scarba and Lunga. The tide pours through like a mill race and slack is only about fifteen minutes, but it had the potential to save several miles of adverse tide. The risk calculator kicked in and a decision, perhaps at the edge of the sensible, was taken to attempt it. We drove through the narrowing gap at full speed in an unknown yacht and with un-proven engine, with the tide 3-4 knots against us and insufficient space to turn if we got it wrong. Apprehension was high, but with great relief we emerged unscathed.

By 0600, we were secured in the Garvellachs, just behind John and Jane MacInnes (RCC) who had spent the night there in *Shivinish*. Eilean Neave is only accessible when the swell is low. On it lies the remains of a settlement founded by St Brendan and lore has it that St Columba's mother rests under a gravestone on a lookout hill above. There are traces of medieval farmstead walls and two splendid, very large, nearly intact, beehive cells for monks. It is an utterly charming, fascinating place.

We landed from the dinghy in a narrow gut amongst the rocks and kelp and wandered for an hour. By 1000 we had recovered to *Swift* and then set off across the Sound of Lorne for the Ross of Mull. John was principal navigator and keen to hone his skills, so we eased into David Balfour's Bay to gasp at the spectacular white sands there, before threading our way through the myriad rocks to anchor in the tide off Iona. Soon ashore to explore the closed lanes and terraced houses, we retraced our steps after visiting John Smith's grave (now adorned with curious inscribed pebbles by people who felt some connection with him). Eating ice creams - 326 calories each - outside the splendid, new Iona Heritage Centre, we thought the island looked more prosperous and buzzing than on our last visit.

We made our way northwards with caution up the shallow stretches of the Sound of Iona, to pause by the dark mouth of Fingal's Cave on Staffa - dum di did di dum dah, dum did di dum dah. We lingered a while to take in the splendour of the rocks and navigated carefully through the inner lead on the eastern side using Bob Bradfield's superb Antares chart of the area. Bob's charts have transformed access to many of the

‘delicate’ anchorages and passages in the Western Isles, allowing confident pilotage where previously it would have been foolhardy to approach. That night, we anchored with two French yachts in perfect calm and security in the bosom of Gometra. The chefs were finding their mark and we had a splendid meal in the cockpit in gathering twilight. Many tales were told and a dram or more disappeared easily in the never-quite-dark evening.

Next day was The Big Event, a visit to Lunga in the Treshnish Isles to view the thousands of Puffins, Guillemots, Razorbills, Shags and all



A friend on Lunga, Treshnish Isles

the rest that nest there. John brought us safely through the southern approach and we anchored in white sand before tackling the rather treacherous landing over large boulders. The black-suited Puffins charmingly walked around with little concern, as though taking a drinks order! The high sea-stack to the west was covered with Guillemots

and Razorbills. Kittiwakes and Shags peeped out from under the rocks. Lyn got an enormous shock when a hidden, mother Shag suddenly squawked a shrill warning inches away from her left ear.

We stayed ashore for a good four hours, gazing and musing. Leaving this ornithological paradise and recovering to *Swift*, we reflected on the significant increase in tripper boats, off-loading hundreds of people. This did not seem to have wounded nature and we thought it proper that so many people should have the chance to share the experience. But we missed having the island to ourselves as in previous years.

We weighed to cross to Coll and made out through the northern channel of Lunga, a clutch of skerries very reminiscent of the area of the Little Russel off Guernsey. With *Swift* securely on one of the new, visitor’s buoys in the wide-open Loch Eatharna, the crew repaired ashore to a delicious supper in the gardens of the Coll Hotel in Arinagour, determining to explore the island on bikes next morning. The weather was calm and the sun high in a blue sky until well after 2200.

Next morning turned overcast with a little rain, but our biking platoon set off on the single track road across to the western coast, before turning north to Bagh Traigh Gharbh, just beyond the island’s burial ground. We paused at the top of one hill, thoroughly out of breath, and were enchanted to hear the distinctive ‘krek krek’ of a corn-crake, but of course never saw it. The bay was a stunning crescent of white sand, girded by low

## Never Did Fair Scotland Look So Fair

rocks. It was three hours before we could drag ourselves away from this astonishingly beautiful place. The highlight had been watching mother seals teaching their young to fish; or maybe they were just putting on a show.

Handing in our bikes mid-afternoon, we learnt that we had cycled 13 miles. It certainly felt like that. The tide was fair for the north, so we slipped from Coll and made 24 nm to Loch Sunart, anchoring in a delightful bay out of the tide east of the Island of Carna. The laird of Carna paddled past to lift his lobster pots in the early evening and he invited us for a drink ashore, but supper was well advanced and the willing spirits were defeated by collapsed limbs, so we whiled away the twilight in the cockpit in perfect calm.

Awoken by the demands of nature at 0300, I was astonished to see a great, white wall slowly approaching across the water in the loom of the night. Fog had been forecast, but it hardly ever comes, does it? This time it came with a vengeance and we



The bicycle platoon

were soon enveloped in a mysterious, dense, unvarying, grey world. Next morning the plan to scale the peak on Carna was abandoned, not least because it was invisible, and we resolved to leave what had become a rocky prison as soon as possible, whilst the tide was still slack. Ten minutes later, we inched out past the jagged reefs at the entrance, using double navigators with electronic charts and all senses alert, seeing no more than 10 metres ahead. Swaying in the tideway with everyone tense, the anchor winch suddenly burst noisily into life, all by itself, trying to pull the anchor through the lead. No amount of fiddling with the deck switch would silence the demented animal, so we switched off both the engine and batteries to isolate it, gliding without power through dense fog in that narrow rocky channel. This seemed to do the trick and the anchor motor disconnected itself. Peace was restored.

We headed out into Loch Sunart, but found that keeping a steady course was difficult in the dense fog, until we abandoned chart plotters and slaved the helmsman to a compass bearing as in days of yore: a good

## Christopher Elliott

lesson that one. We were concerned about fishing boats and several were heard thumping away. Hugging the coast to keep out of traffic, we were astounded to see another yacht passing straight across our bows at right angles only yards ahead. As he disappeared into the gloom, he cried back, 'I did see you on my plotter at 100 metres.'

We crept along north of Oronsay, with the island shore coming and going, but it was all too much and we eventually decided to pop into the narrow gut of Sailean Mor until it cleared. The entrance was only about 70 m wide, so I thought that this was one for the skipper and took the helm. But as the western headland suddenly loomed out of the mist only yards ahead, I freaked completely and turned immediately back out to sea. What



Maggie with supper at Cafe Fish

I had seen, of course, was the reflection of the headland in the still water, making it appear very much closer than it was. Another lesson re-learned, and we were soon safely anchored, but with a thoroughly spooked crew.

After an hour, we decided that the fog was not clearing, so we resumed our cautious progress towards Tobermory, arriving there in the early afternoon as the fog suddenly cleared. Tom was leaving us to get back to his new venture of starting a digital-skills academy in East London, but not before we all assembled in Café Fish on the pier, on another glorious evening, for huge plates of delicious *fruits de mer*.

Next day, we caught the afternoon tide north and made an easy passage to Loch Scrisort, Rhum. As we entered the Loch, the Mallaig lifeboat came rushing in, took a casualty off the pier and then roared out again. We had a peaceful night at anchor surrounded by the wild hills. The girls reckoned that they had been rather rushed about and had limited enthusiasm to go ashore, so next morning John and I set out to climb Hallival, getting about two thirds of the way up before the mist descended and our leave passes expired. After an easy passage around the north of Rhum, by late afternoon *Swift* was neatly anchored in the glorious watery amphitheatre of Canna Harbour and all collapsed asleep. Perhaps the girls were right and we had been going at it a bit.

I rowed ashore to book supper for ourselves at the renowned Café Canna. The regular ferry, which has transformed life on the islands, had just discharged a pallet of Oban lager for the cafe, delivered on a shovel-loader. The owner, Chris, a native of far-away Skye, needed help unloading, so

## Never Did Fair Scotland Look So Fair

the next half hour was spent as part of a happy chain passing bottles into the bothy ceiling, and being suitably rewarded at the end. Questioning Chris, 'What sort of dressings do you use on your lobsters?' evinced the wounded response, 'Why would our lobsters need any dressing?' So it was, two hours later, that the whole crew tucked into the most delicious whole lobsters. A wonderful meal, carefully presented, cheerfully served and hugely recommended.



Sailing towards Eigg

We had always planned to do our crew change-over at Lochboisdale on Uist, but the forecast did not look good. Six days before hand-over day, we made the decision to disappoint all and do the change-over on the mainland at the railhead at Mallaig instead. The berth was cancelled, the

car to get us to climb Thacla was unbooked. This was a difficult and disappointing choice, but it proved prescient when the hand-over period was raked by westerly gales later.

We weighed next morning and had a glorious sail down to Eigg, spying the strange Doric tomb of the Burroughs dynasty in a remote valley on Rhum as we passed. Eigg was celebrating its 'Independence Day', the day when the inhabitants had bought the island as a co-operative in 1997. On the air was a sweet-scented 'smoke' as we approached the café from the pier; indeed, many of the Eigglanders we met later extolled the virtues of such smoke. Maggie and Judi remained behind, whilst John, Lyn and I climbed the mighty Sgurr, which rose prow-like to a thousand feet above the settlement.

After three hours, we recovered back to the pier just as the party there was really revving up, with colourful individuals, tattooed, be-kilted and well away, spreading good cheer. They were a merry bunch, but our girls had become very nervous of any part they might be expected to play and had retreated to the end of the pier. We whisked them back to the security of *Swift* and made for Moidart on the evening tide.

However many times you make the passage into Moidart, it is always a challenge. The duo of John and Maggie unscrambled the sharp lefts and rights around the outer skerries with aplomb and delivered *Swift* safely to the anchorage off the landing south of Eilean Shona in the late evening.

The protest that the mid-to-late sixty-year-olds were being rushed about too much and whizzed past everything, returned like the chorus to

## Christopher Elliott

a well known hymn. A 'lay day' was decided. We completed the six-mile 'Moidart Circuit' up along the loch and into the hills, had lunch amongst the sad ruins of an highland-clearances village and walked down past the reservoir loch that once served the 'big hoose'. We finished the day by gathering wood for a fire, with a BBQ and bottles of fizz on the beach by Tioram Castle, a scene straight from Hollywood central casting.

We extracted ourselves from Moidart next morning and made for lunch in the Borrowdale Islands - beautiful, so very beautiful. We weaved our way out through the narrow passages using the Antares charts and then tackled the equally tight pinch-point in the Arisaig approach channel, now near low tide. Somehow we passed unscathed, double navigators at full fret, and took up a buoy close to the pier. Ashore were ice creams and the marvellous SOE museum, telling of how special agents were trained in the war to 'set Europe alight' and how hauntingly few returned. Exhausted, the crew fell soundly asleep in front of a video presentation about the



Looking down Loch Moidart with Eigg behind

Small Isles, but were revived with further ice creams.

Our first leg was drawing to a close, so we made to position ourselves close to Mallaig. This meant a trip to Loch Nevis, Knoydart, and The Old Forge, a marvellous restaurant. Knoydart is another self-help community, full of interesting people with a determined sense of independence. We had planned cocktails on a forest track high up overlooking the settlement, but the mist descended and we soon packed up all the glasses and fled to the restaurant. For a restaurant fabled for its lack of any road access, we had a fabulous meal. At an adjacent table we found Jay Devonshire (RCC), a respected contestant in dinghies from early days in Lymington, and much local knowledge was exchanged.

## Never Did Fair Scotland Look So Fair

Early next morning we made the short journey to Mallaig, a sloppy harbour in the prevailing northerly. Helped by the very welcoming harbour master, we found ourselves a reasonably comfortable berth alongside a fish-farm support ship. The departing crew were bundled onto the south-bound train with hugs and kisses, whilst John and I set to the task of preparing for the next gang. Meanwhile, the charterer kindly sent his bosun to exchange the erratic anchor winch foot-switch.

The new crew had had a difficult journey north and worse was to come. Indeed, some wag later christened it the 'cancellation cruise'. Their sleeper booking had terminated at Edinburgh, not Fort William, because of a track problem, so they arrived rather shaken and stirred after a long taxi journey through the Highlands. This crew were all from our own village, Easton Royal: neighbours Hew and Beverley and, from further up the village, Cedric and Hilary. The plan was to have a rapid acclimatisation on *Swift* at Mallaig, on a berth that was by now thoroughly bouncy, followed by a return to Knoydart and another brilliant meal at The Old Forge. Sadly, The Old Forge was closed, so a second plan was cancelled. A wander ashore in a self-help community in Western Scotland in the late evening, with mist low on the hills, was not immediately interesting to our sophisticates from the urban south, but they took it in their stride. Next day, a reckless promise of a rollicking sail to Canna and whole lobsters (already booked) soon turned sour as we rounded the Point of Sleat and hit 29 knots of wind, shy on the

starboard nose and well above the forecast. After ninety minutes of gamely bashing into the waves, we abandoned Canna and cancelled its lobsters. We cracked sheets



Chris and John on the summit of Muck

for Loch Scrisort, Rhum, where we spent an exceptionally roly night, despite being tucked in on the northern side. Ashore for a wander around in lowering clouds and mist did not much improve spirits, but they were a stalwart crew and determined to make the best of it.

At 0500 next morning, we weighed from Rhum to catch the tide south. The wind was F6-7 from the north. The seas were very large, but *Swift* coped brilliantly under reefed sails. The on-deck crew revelled in it, but it was a different story for those down below. After a boisterous sail south,



## Christopher Elliott

we rounded to the south of Eigg and fetched up at anchor in South Bay, Garmisdale. Our plan had been to repeat our ascent of the Sgurr with the new crew, but this was defeated when it proved impossible to get ashore in the prevailing conditions. So we cancelled Eigg, and made for Muck instead.

In Muck, we found a much more sheltered anchorage, albeit with the wind still shrieking through the rigging and whipping up wavelets. John very nobly volunteered to remain on anchor-watch aboard, whilst the remainder resolved to climb Beinn Airein, the highest point on Muck. Two hours later, we were rewarded with the most wonderful view of all the Small Islands - Rhum, Eigg, Muck and Canna, with the Cuillins to the



Escorted into Tobermory by the Lifeboat

north and Ardnamurchan to the south. With no ferries due, we found that we could move *Swift* much closer towards the old pier to escape the wind. We nuzzled between two fishing boats and with it came a new peace. Our previous slot was immediately taken by another yacht from further out, even then rolling from gunnel to gunnel.

After lunch, John announced that he had sorely missed the morning's adventures. So Beverley and I set out with John for a second time. En route this time we met the completely charming Laird of Muck, Laurence MacEwen (the actual Lord Muck), on his venerable tractor and with hands like spanners. We had a long conversation about the passing of tasks between the generations, and how to make a living on Muck.

The next day promised everything for us, at last: blue skies, calmer seas and a voyage to the enchanted Treshnish Isles. We set off south early and the whole crew revelled in the warm air and the steady motion of *Swift*. Around noon there were two, awkward-sounding thumps from the stern sheets, like a Calor Gas bottle rolling in a locker. The mate of the watch called for my attention. The rudder stock had risen upwards, pushing off its hatch cover from the cockpit sole. Remembering the

## Never Did Fair Scotland Look So Fair

previous grounding, it didn't look good. We stood on the rudder stock and pushed it back down smoothly, like a hydraulic ram. But confidence was broken, so we made for Tobermory. On arrival there we had the indignity of being escorted alongside the pontoon by the Lifeboat, and to be met with a waiting party, a bagpiper and a journalist. We made great friends with the Lifeboat crew, offered them drinks and our thanks, then spent an absorbing hour on their huge and complicated ship.

Our charterer arrived next day and inspected the yacht. There was no logical explanation for what had happened and he soon declared the yacht as fit to proceed. Meanwhile, John and I had taken the slack day to climb Ben More, the only Monroe on Mull, and we arrived back after the inspection had been completed, very tired and wet. Feeling pretty stupid, I asked the charterer to explain his decision and climbed into the stern sheets with him. He was in full flow when I pointed out three, small, weeping cracks in the rudder tube housing. There was a long silence and, to his enormous credit, he then said, 'This yacht is going nowhere under charter.' Subsequently, it turned out that the hull around the rudder bearing had become flexible, with some delamination, allowing the rudder stock to rise as we had experienced. Once back in a yard, the bottom bearing and rudder tube had to be replaced and the whole area stiffened. We thought ourselves extremely fortunate that the problem had arisen in calm weather, not during the yachtsman's gale of the day before.

We recovered back to Ardfern via a tortuous road journey of six hours, with two crews' baggage and a week's food supplies in a sheep trailer behind. We had lost six days of the charter, but the crew were magnificently undaunted. Half of them booked into the luxury of the renowned Primrose Cottage, whilst the others slept on *Otter*. The weather remained fair and we visited castles, gazed at gardens, locked into Crinan basin and ate lobsters and scallops, walked for many miles over peat and bog, took a rather over-loaded *Otter* to Gallanach Bay for lunch and, in an eddy against a full ebb, through the Dorus Mor – that was exciting – across to Jura to glimpse the wildlife.

What a wonderful cruise: fair Scotland at its fairest, and at its most welcoming. Why would you ever go anywhere else?