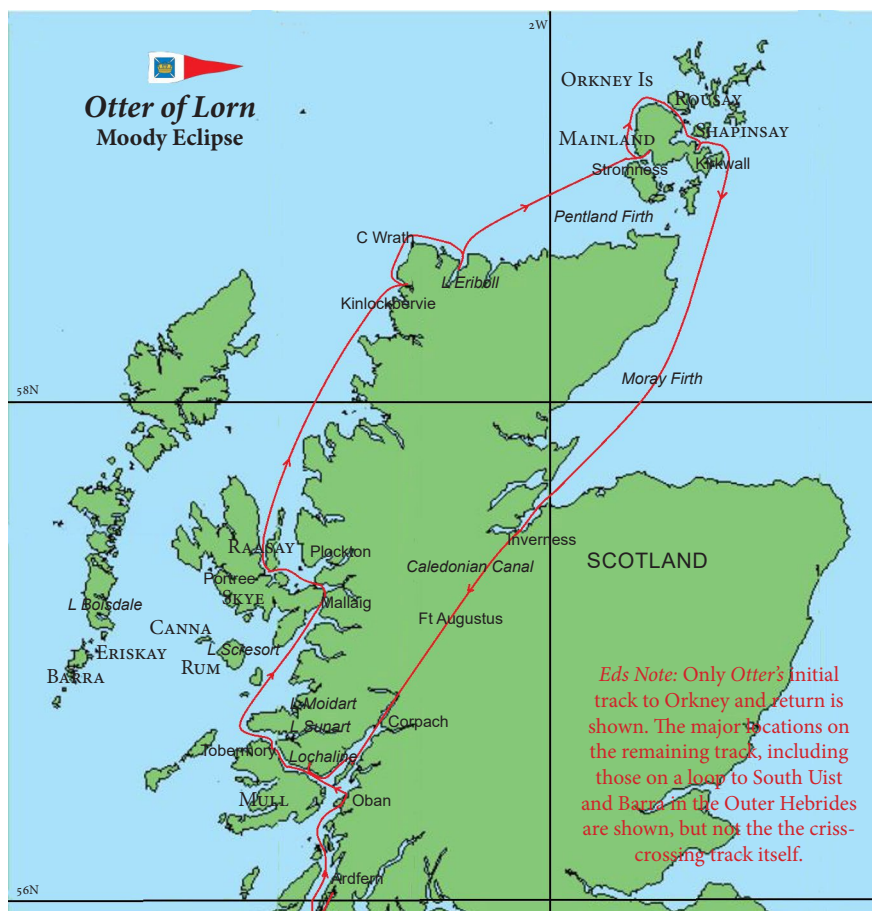


## Those Marvellous Weather Forecasters,

or, Muckle Flugga, but Only Just!

Christopher Elliott

Two thousand and nineteen was not, by universal acclaim, a good season for cruising in northern waters. We had high hopes of sailing from Ardfarn to Shetland, but found ourselves stuck in Kirkwall for ten days instead, with strong northerly winds and gales accurately predicted by Those Marvellous Weather Forecasters (TMWF). With this certainty closing down our hopes, we made for Shetland from Orkney on a North Link ferry; we hired a car and for three days visited many of



## Those Marvellous Weather Forecasters,

the anchorages.

I open our account of *Otter's* ten-week cruise in the summer of 2019 with this tale because Those Marvellous Weather Forecasters consistently allowed us to cheat an otherwise dismal summer, because of the step-change in the accuracy



*Otter of Lorn*

of their forecasts over the last decade. We could make the best of what was presented, adjusting our plans with ease to what the weather allowed.

We left Ardfern in the third week of May with a crew of John Ashcroft (RCC) and Cedric Hollinsworth, both pretty resolute souls and specifically on board for three weeks to give us the best shot of getting around Muckle Flugga, the most northerly point of the United Kingdom. The night before departure we hosted drinks on board

*Otter* for other RCC folk, Christopher and Valentine Thornhill, John and Tracey Lancaster Smith, Mike and Pam Jacques. This went well enough, but extended into a delicious supper, unplanned, of *confit de canard* around the saloon table of Mike and Pam's mighty *Umiak*, lasting well into the early hours.

Next morning, John and I sailed *Otter* the 25nm around to Oban to collect Cedric from the train. We devoured a beginning-of-cruise lunch in the Oban Fish Restaurant, before catching the late afternoon tide northwards towards Tobermory. We had a rather grisly beat up the Sound of Mull in strong winds and rain which was a telling portent of the weeks to come.

We woke at 0500 next morning to a popping sound. We could see Macgohans Bar, close by the Tobermory slip, well ablaze and putting up a thick cloud of white smoke and sparks, with several fire engines trying to contain the flames. There was nothing we could do to help so, with this dismal sight just behind us, we slipped our buoy on a calm, grey morning, rounding Ardnamurchan Point two hours later. From there, we had a cracking sail in bright sunshine up to Sandaig Bay (aka *Ring of Bright Water*) to await the tide through Kyle Rhea.

Setting off again in the late afternoon, we anchored in Churchton Bay, Raasay, just as it was getting dark. Up again at dawn, after 75nm and 14 hrs under engine, supported by only fitful winds, we were approaching Kinlochbervie 10nm below Cape Wrath. An easterly gale next day kept us firmly inside that magnificent

## Christopher Elliott

natural harbour, but with not a soul seen all day and with the wind rattling the sheeting on some derelict fish halls. Well briefed by the doyen of Shetland cruising, Christopher Thornhill, our plan was to sail directly to Shetland from Cape Wrath, only staging through Stromness on Orkney if needed. As the moment for decision approached, TMWF gave us a prediction of F6-7 from the north, so the Stromness option looked easily the most sensible.

Except, even that was not perfect. Stromness Sound, through which the tide flows at up to 10kts, far too strong to battle against, equally becomes untenable if wind and tide are in contest in either direction, producing monstrous seas. We needed a slack tide or wind with tide, which would take delicate timing if we were starting from over 65nm away.

As dawn broke next day, we motored out of Kinlochbervie into a dull, grey ocean towards Cape Wrath. Something out in the Atlantic was sending in a large swell, which crossed with the rapidly building strong northerly and produced a nasty, confused, lumpy sea. We rounded the Cape a tedious three miles offshore to escape the over-falls. The wind increased and backed, but it was already clear that we would miss that day's slack-water window into Stromness Sound. All were relieved when we slipped into Loch Eriboll, finding shelter in Rispond Bay soon after lunch. There is not much room in that watery crevice if all the fishing buoys are to be avoided, but we found a satisfactory corner and set out to scale the nearest peak. Our spirits lifted as we climbed above the bay, for the surrounding area is five-star beautiful, with magnificent sandy beaches and easy walking across heather to find views in all directions.

I should pause at this moment to explain the special skills of John and Cedric. Both were tycoon-types after successful business careers, but they are also dedicated chefs, Cedric leading with John happily chopping things up in preparation. We ate magnificently for those three weeks: fillet steak, duck, haggis and the rest - with me condemned forever to the washing up in support. It was an important counterpoint to iffy weather to be able to sit down to fine wines and splendid meals, for yachtsmen, as well as armies, march on their stomachs.

The sea was no kinder the next day, but, with no excuses left, we set off towards Stromness surrounded by high mountains dusted white with overnight snow. We had a wild and very cold crossing, but it was clear and sunny and morale was high.

John proved to have an absolutely iron stomach by insisting on dismantling the cooker for a couple of hours to clear some water in the nozzles – it was positively



Cedric and I approaching Hoy - air temperature a biting 6°

### Those Marvellous Weather Forecasters,

gut-retching to watch him at it, whilst clinging on. Cedric, the least experienced of us, nevertheless proved a natural at the helm and easily won the prize for the least helm movements in that tricky sea. *Otter* excelled, rising majestically over even the seventh waves. By late afternoon we surged into Stromness just as the westward ebb tide was ending. Spot on.



Stromness is a kindly and interesting

Off the Old Man of Hoy

place, with a splendid history, well recorded in its really first-rate local museum. Up until this moment our minds were still completely fixed on getting to Shetland, but we thought we deserved time ashore after the previous days of battle, so we went for a long walk in bright sunshine through the town and along the Sound, with supper in a local pub. The swooping purple and green landscape of Orkney looked absolutely splendid in the clear air, with the rocky island of Hoy rising majestically to the south in contrast.

But it was to prove a fatal decision, as TMWF were soon to point out. We had idled away what turned out to be the only feasible window to get to Shetland in the next two weeks. As the developing weather pattern emerged that night, we worked out that we could either stay where we were, or make the 35nm trip around



Old WRNS HQ, now Scapa Flow museum

to sit it out in Kirkwall, the Orkney capital. Hearts sank and the disappointment was pretty acute, until the bright idea emerged of making it to Shetland by ferry instead. Two hours later, with all three of us on telephones, we had the magic combination of tickets, a car and an apartment booked in Lerwick. With that secured, we planned to leave *Otter* in Kirkwall from whence the ferry departed.

We set off at exactly low water next day from Stromness, with only a few ripples and whorls disturbing the black surface of the Sound. We had an excellent sail up past the Kitchener Memorial on Marwick Head and then down through the roosts (tidal rips) of Eynhallow Sound and into Kirkwall. We had two days to wait, so we explored the chapel made by Italian prisoners of war in a Nissen Hut, spent an intriguing two



## Christopher Elliott

hours at the Scapa Flow museum in Lyness, visited the Neolithic village at Scara Brae, gazed up into the high ceiling of St Magnus Cathedral and climbed to the top of Widefoot Hill...mostly in the rain.

We departed on the overnight ferry northwards to explore Shetland. Arriving in

Lerwick at seven in the morning, we had possession of our hire car by eight and then set out to drive sixty miles and cross two 'voe' (inlets) by ferry to get close enough



Shetland Bus Memorial

to at least photograph Muckle Flugga, our original objective. We tramped up the moorland path on the northern tip of Shetland to Herma Ness to spy the elusive goal, just visible beyond stacks covered with thousands of sea birds.

With that in our pocket, in the next two days we visited excellent museums in Lerwick and Scalloway and saw the Shetland Bus memorial, trekked for six miles around the dramatic rocky headland of Westerwick and, with only two hours to spare, got the first tripper boat for four days out to the haunting Moussa Broch on its solitary island, the only complete Bronze Age, five-story, fortified, stone roundhouse in the world: astonishing and a privilege to see.

We returned to Kirkwall by ferry on the third afternoon with a sense of triumph at making the best of the cards dealt to us. With TMWF promising a short improvement, grabbing the moment, we sailed out of Kirkwall (ironically with weather just right for coming back from Shetland, if we had got up there) and had two good Orkney days to explore

Shapinsay with its magnificent castle and Rousay with its superlative prehistoric remains, quite the equal of the more famous Scara Brae. As we were arranging the hire of bikes to circumnavigate Rousay, a local referred to the extensive archaeology on the island and observed laconically, 'Ah yes...Rousay...not many people live



Muckle Flugga at last



Moussa Broch

### Those Marvellous Weather Forecasters,

here... but lots of people have died here.'

We had originally intended to complete a crew change in Kirkwall, but a local Orcadian commented in the pouring rain, 'Summer has clearly not arrived in Orkney this year yet... and sometimes it never does.' This was enough to set my companions plotting and, even though aeroplane tickets had already been bought and plans made, they very gallantly encouraged me to let them help sail *Otter* southwards to Inverness.

The 115nm, overnight sail down to Inverness was a delight. With good winds, clear skies, cruising chute up, we made rapid progress to the southern entrance of the Pentland Firth. Suddenly, though, we found ourselves in very large seas indeed and a strong counter current. I worked out later from a larger-scale tidal atlas that we had chosen to pass just south of the Pentland Skerries exactly at the moment when a pretty violent eddy sets up there for an hour. We crashed through the white water for a mile and I shuddered to think what it would be like in a gale. We were set back somewhat, but managed to be off Wick before the tide changed in the late evening and, by the next dawn, we were well up the Moray Firth. By early



Gillie and Maggie beating down Loch Linnhe

afternoon we had entered the Clacknaharry Sea Lock of the Caledonian Canal and were moored in the Seaport Marina for the first crew change by the evening. After three great weeks together, John and Cedric left and, three days later, my wife Maggie (RCC) and Gillie Green (RCC) arrived.

We were blessed with settled weather and fair winds down through the Caledonian Canal,

including a delightful evening moored by the grassy canal bank at Fort Augustus in warm sunshine. However, TMWF started to rev up again, with a strong blow anticipated from the south-west just as we were due to exit from the Canal at Corpach. We tarried for 12hrs in the final basin to see if it would improve but, if anything, it worsened, so we reluctantly motored out into Loch Linnhe with F6 on the nose and wind against the tide. Where we just stopped dead; our engine was definitely only an 'auxiliary'.

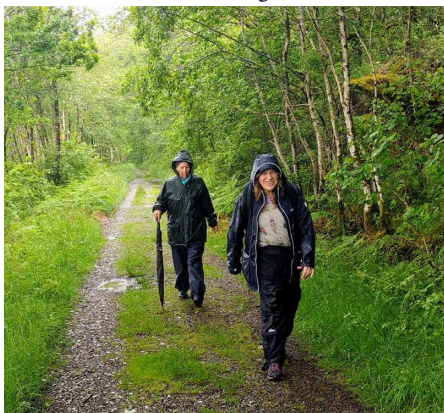
So up went some scraps of sail and we tacked the whole length of the loch to the Corpach Narrows, handing the sails four hours later at the entrance and swooping through in a very strong tide and big seas. We found a snug refuge in Kentallen until the tide set fair again, when we set off for Port Ramsay at the north end of Lismore for the night.

Next morning the wind had abated to F5, but was still on the nose and we

## Christopher Elliott

were now in the wider part of Loch Linnhe, giving us a boisterous tack down to the entrance of the Sound of Mull. We pushed on in the knowledge that we had booked a table at the fantastic White House Restaurant in Loch Aline and nothing else mattered. We reached the pontoons in time for a shower and still made our reservation. Life was better and our crew, all over 70, were feeling rather heroic.

After a leisurely start next morning, we set out in the rain to walk along the delightful shoreline track to explore Ardtornish Castle. But I had been too unfeeling of Gillie's very recent double hip operations in planning this. After three miles, two distinguished looking ladies were standing beside the road with their thumbs out. A few minutes later, a kindly estate worker scooped up *Otter's* weary girls to take them back to the yacht in his truck and I followed, rather shame-faced, on foot.



Walking to Ardtornish Castle. . .

The sun shone briefly the next morning and we made a fast passage to Loch Moidart, stopping in Tobermory for the tide to change. Gillie took us expertly into that dark and wooded loch to anchor off the turreted outline of ruined Tioram Castle just as the light was fading. Next morning, we sailed across to anchor for lunch and a walk, in calm waters

amongst the Borrowdale Islands. Then moved on to Mallaig, where we said goodbye to Gillie over a very large crustacean supper.

Maggie and I then had a couple of days to ourselves in settled weather cruising both sides of the Sound of Sleat, falling in with Mike and Pam Jacques for an outstanding meal together at Kinloch Lodge at the top of Loch na Dal.

The next crew were Hew and Beverley Helps, *Otter* stalwarts, and we departed Mallaig for Canna



Hew and Beverley exploring Canna

in fine weather soon after they arrived on the overnight sleeper. On cue though, TMWF were already predicting another bumpy ride, so we decided to make the jump across the Sea of the Hebrides to the Outer Isles whilst we could. After a quiet night in Canna, we had a fast passage to Eriskay in company of Bill and Gracie Bergius on *Northern Whistler*, with whom we were to share the next four suppers, each one getting more elaborate, as the weather closed in with F6 and rain from the west.

### Those Marvellous Weather Forecasters,

We climbed a few hills, drank a pint in Am Politician (the pub celebrating the grounding of the *SS Politician* and immortalised in *Whisky Galore!*) and overnighted in the bare but functional new marina in Loch Boisdale, South Uist. We sailed down to Vatersay to dip our toes in that silky sandy bay and moored overnight in Castle Bay, Barra, all thankfully in the lee of the outer islands. Consulting TMWF made it clear that the blow was set to continue, so we decided to return to the mainland to sit it out. We had a lumpy passage, but with an excellent sailing wind we were soon back in Canna, taking up a buoy as the weather closed in, yet again alongside *Northern Whistler*. We had a day ashore exploring Canna House and going out across Sanday Island to find the Puffins on Dun Mor stack, with several pairs of Bonxies (Skuas) hurtling angrily towards us like low-flying fighter aircraft as we intruded into their airspace.

But this is the moment to digress to talk about two things that measurably improved our lives this summer, which may be of interest to others if they are as badly versed in modern electronics as I had been. Last winter was my first real year of retirement, giving time to read those unopened manuals on the cabin shelf and which had only been skimmed in busier times. I knew that we would need good weather forecasts on *Otter* if we were hoping to sail direct to Shetland, away from other shore transmissions. However, our NAVTEX set most often just stared back with a useless doodle pad of unintelligible half-sentences and random letters, as the signal came and faded. I was curious to find out why it underperformed thus. I read that the link would drop out due to local electrical interference, particularly in marinas, and that NAVTEX signals always stumbled when crossing any land. Turning the next page showed that NASA Instruments had, to our good fortune, just produced a new type of NAVTEX aerial that overcame these problems. Called the H Vector Antenna, it uses the magnetic rather than the electrical part of the transmitted signal. We found one and fitted it, half expecting to rue the purchase. Not so, the set was transformed and we had faultless NAVTEX signals and excellent forecasts from it through the next ten weeks, whether alongside in harbour, in the middle of the Great Glen or out at sea.

My next foray was to find out what our DSCVHF (digital selective calling) could really offer. Of course we were familiar with hitting the big red button in distress and the ability to ping a friend if you knew a yacht's MMSI number. But I learnt that all Coast Guard stations also had an MMSI number and would respond to a DSC poke for a radio check. I rang Stornaway Coastguard to see if they had any enthusiasm for this process, rather than the more usual calling by voice. They responded very positively, saying, 'Well, all the tankers use it all the time... but, if a single yacht were to do so, it would be a first!' Encouraged thus, we rather nervously entered Stornaway Coast Guard MMSI into our VHF radio DSC list and then punched the required two-key sequence. This automatically sent our full details and requested a conversation on a given channel. Two minutes later the VHF burst into life with, 'Good morning, *Otter of Lorn*, I have your current position. How many on board and where do you expect to be this evening?' Brilliant!

I also learnt that my VHF would display another vessel's unique MMSI number



### Christopher Elliott

alongside it on the set's AIS list, allowing you to send a routine DSC call request merely by hitting the target vessel's name in the list. This was put to good use as we left Canna in thick fog and drizzle, knowing that the rather large inter-island ferry *Loch Nevis* would soon be following us on the same track. We scrolled down the AIS list on the VHF screen, selected *Loch Nevis* and, by pressing one button, sent a DSC message requesting a routine call. The Officer of the Watch came straight back and replied pithily: 'Aye, *Otter of Lorn*, we have seen you. Hold your course!' It was enormously comforting to know that, as her great grey bulk slid past in the mist at a safe distance five minutes later. DSC gets the thumbs up.

We had a rollicking sail eastwards towards Mallaig and found a snug anchorage for the night in the north-west corner of Loch Nevis, although it was raining hard and with low mist, which cleared later as a bright moon emerged. TMWF gave a glimmer of hope for the next couple of days, so we set out next morning with a fair tide south to explore the Sound of Arisaig, fetching up in a beautiful sandy bay in clear, calm weather on the north side of Loch Ailort. We climbed the local peak, wading through the thickest of bracken and heather and spotting red deer on the skyline, before watching the sun go down over the Small Isles with a snifter, or two, and a delicious supper of duck breasts and salad.

In perfect calm we made our way to the head of Loch nan Uamh next morning, West Highland train time table at hand, to watch the Jacobite steam train cross the viaduct, packed of course with young wizards at the end of summer term at Hogwarts. Once anchored, the train appeared very suddenly from behind a hill. Cameras clicked and some got excellent shots of the railway engine belching smoke and pouring steam high up above the viaduct arches, whilst others had to be content with a single frame of the guards' van.

Later that afternoon, we sailed in a warm wind four miles across the loch to anchor in Saideal Druim off Arisaig House. A peer into Bonnie Prince Charlie's cave-refuge and a walk around the big house rounded off the day. With only a day left before the next crew change, we sailed south to explore the area around Ardtoe, tucked into an open sandy bay on the north side of the Ardnamurchan Peninsula.

A lengthy walk ashore along an enormous strand of white sand was accomplished

Jacobite



### Those Marvellous Weather Forecasters,

before the mist descended and we retreated to *Otter's* warm cabin. Hew and Beverley were leaving by train south next morning, so we had an early start in torrential rain back to Mallaig.

Nicholas and Lizzie Heaven were the next crew and they were blessed with the finest weather of the cruise. We decided to go north. Long days with good winds and bright sunshine allowed easy passages to Raasay, Portree, Rona, to visit the cave



Nicholas and Lizzie on the summit of Barkeval, Rum. Triumphant, but pretty exhausted!

church, and Flowerdale Bay in Gairloch, to climb up to the magnificent waterfalls to watch the sunset. From Flowerdale, we departed through the challenging Badachro Narrows, just for the thrill of it, and had a glorious spinnaker run for 30nm down to Plockton, where we anchored in the early evening. The next day dawned clear and we had another gorgeous sail

south under the Skye Bridge, through Kyle Rhea and on for a late lunch in a small nook just short of the Point of Sleat. There, a wild scheme was proposed, which the crew gallantly agreed to. By 1900 we were anchored in Loch Scresort on Rum and already starting up the track to the summit of Barkeval, one of the four high peaks on the island. After a steep climb through rough ground, we reached the summit at 2100 for a magnificent panorama in all directions. We were back down to *Otter*, waiting patiently in the bay below, by 2300, just as the final light was fading. Showers and a steak supper saw us in our bunks by 0130, with a huge feeling of achievement. Next morning, we sailed back under spinnaker to Mallaig for the final crew change.

Alistair Roberts (RCC), organiser of the club's Ski Meet for 5 years, and David Ross joined next in superb weather, although TMWF were already predicting doom and wind. Fully aware of Alistair's prowess as a round-the-world yachtsman, we sailed out of Mallaig in a rolling sea and increasing wind and I expected him to encourage us to keep on



Alistair heading out of Muck

### Christopher Elliott

westwards into the great ocean for at least 24hrs. Mercifully, for David and me, Alistair was the first to propose that we find shelter, so we diverted to Rum again.

Next morning we needed to make south. It was either going to be a painfully slow zigzag under scraps of sail into a nasty sea, or slow progress under engine. We chose the latter and plugged southwards until we were having lunch in the shelter of Gallanach Bay, Muck.

Reinvigorated, we set off under sail with a kinder wind to round Arnamurchan Point and then up Loch Sunart to anchor in that enchanting pool to the east of Carna Island. After a late start, we sailed south to Loch Aline and anchored in its northern corner, so that we could knock off the eight-mile walk up to the bothy by Loch Tearnnet and back. The bothy, although still very basic, had been transformed since our last visit by a large gang of volunteers in May and June. It was heart-warming to see people giving their time and energy for the pleasure of others, for the Mountain Bothy Association charges no overnight fees.

The wind was rising next morning as we sailed down to Cardingmill Bay off Oban to sit out a sharp storm for 24hrs. As the rain lifted late the following afternoon, we motored down Kerrera Sound to anchor in Little Horse Shoe Bay, for a walk ashore for four miles to the iconic ruins of Gylen Castle on the southern tip of Kerrera, in pouring rain.

Returning to *Otter* we had a merry supper and, perhaps, just one too many glasses of port. Peering out into the black night and the drizzle, there were just enough functioning brain cells to realise that we might have shifted. With the wind increasing further, we decided to weigh anchor and find a more protected spot two miles north in the lee of Heather Island.

The mistakes that I made that night are certainly not for confession in this Journal, but nobody died and, after a bit of kerfuffle, we were eventually, safely and snugly fastened to a gigantic metal buoy two miles north. We slept soundly, confident in our new friend.

TMWF were not giving us much hope, so we decided to make directly to the well-known territory around our home port. We bounced down the Firth of Lorne and whooshed through Cuan Sound, with wind and tide propelling us, to find shelter in Ardinimar on Luing.

Alistair is an enthusiastic fisherman and David is adept - nay, loves it - at



Alistair and David below Gylen Castle

### Those Marvellous Weather Forecasters,

chopping up fish into fillets. Between the two of them we had large portions of grilled mackerel for supper that evening, delicious and exquisitely fresh. Next morning in better weather, we climbed to the high peak on the north end of Luing and then onwards to explore the new Atlantic Centre in Cullipool below. This comprises a community café and an excellent local heritage display of the sea and the slate mining industry.

It was then late July and the cruise finished in Ardfern with, what has become, the traditional final cruise supper, given by good and generous friends on their island of Eilean Rìgh in Loch Craignish. The tradition follows a pattern: a flight in a helicopter, a simply delicious supper by a couple of ardent foodies and then a long period of reflection tasting different vintages well into the early hours. It is impossible to properly thank their kindness, although they did seem to enjoy our tales of adventure. It was a spectacular end to the cruise.



*Otter's crew ready for the helicopter flight over Loch Craignish*

I returned to Ardfern a month later and was regaled by almost everyone I met about the miserable summer just past, or never arrived. Admittedly, they had just sat through the annual August Monsoon in those parts by then, but it was not our take on events. We had had some fantastic sailing for well over 1,000 miles, we had ventured around the Wrathful Cape to islands of prehistory and unique cultures, feasted like kings and queens in long evenings in *Otter's* cosy saloon, been snug in many varied anchorages, and just a few marinas. It had been a time of great fellowship amongst long-standing friends and congenial ship-mates, all guided by Those Marvellous Weather Forecasters.

*Otter* had cared for us throughout and had never made a mis-step. The weather didn't really seem to matter that much...