

Rounding the Butt of Lewis in strong wind

Cruising to Loch Roag, Isle of Lewis

Boyd Holmes



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to explore Loch Roag on the west, Atlantic side of the Isle of Lewis in the Outer Hebrides, but would we get there and back in the allotted time? With Atlantic passages and a lee shore we could not be sure.

On the Isle of Skye in 2020 a native had told me that the correct pronunciation of Roag (Ròg in Scottish Gaelic) is 'ro-agg', but in Harris and Lewis it is pronounced 'rogue'. Pronunciation and spellings vary throughout the Gaidhealtachd, the Gaelic (Gaidhlig) name for the area in which the language is spoken. On the subject of Gaelic, is it Mòr or Mór? UKHO charts are inconsistent, but Ordnance Survey maps use Mòr,

June 2021 should have seen *Blue Damsel* on the RCC's cruise in company off the West Coast of Scotland, which is the boat's home turf, but the continuing uncertainties surrounding the global pandemic obliged the organisers to knock that jaunt on the head. But with two and a half weeks set aside our plan became



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The crew, Dave and Transatlantic Janice

for the all retired crew. Dave was able to address the problem through the application of physics and some of his superior strength by rigging a crane from the mast for the wind generator. A negative aspect of the first day was the lack of the excellent butty van at The Rest and Be Thankful on the road to Ardfern, Tuesday being the owner's day off. Breakfast was taken in a café in Inverary.

Tides dictated an early exit from the Cuan Sound on Wednesday morning. Leaving by the west entrance and having grappled with the kelp on the anchor chain, we were clear of the sound and its overfalls by 0755 bound away for Gallanach Bay on the north of the Isle of Muck in sunshine and a steady south easterly breeze. Our

as does Maggie (Magidh) my adviser on the language.

It is always rewarding to start the day in Cumbria and to finish it in a Scottish anchorage and so it was to be on 1 June, sailing to our usual anchorage in the Cuan Sound. Aboard was Janice Little ('Transatlantic Janice'), retired outdoor pursuits instructor and former director of outdoor education for Cumbria; Dave Pratt, recently retired head of science at Keswick School and an active member of the rather too busy Keswick Mountain Rescue Team and me as skipper.

We'd taken delivery of the new four-stroke outboard motor at Ardfern Yacht Centre and the weight of this engine soon became an issue

Dave takes the plunge in Gallanach Bay, Muck



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passage to Muck was enhanced by seeing porpoises, seals and, just outside the anchorage, a raft of over one hundred Manx shearwaters, topped off by a minke whale. Taking his lead from the whale, Dave dived into the bay where the sea was a chilly 12.6°C. His pals in Keswick MRT would have been impressed by his physical bravura, as doubtless was the cuckoo whose chorus immediately followed.



Blue Damsel on the pontoon in Castlebay

Setting out at a civilised hour and after a full breakfast cooked by Janice, what had started as a light breeze rose to 30kts by the time we approached the Bo Vich Chuan south cardinal mark off Castle Bay, Barra; having added a couple of dolphins to our list of sightings of sea life. Achieving over 9kts over the ground in the entrance channel was a fitting climax to a great sail across the Sea of the Hebrides, with less than one mile of motoring logged for the day out of nearly 40nm recorded. We wanted a peaceful night after our exhilarating sail and so, to the surprise of the pontoon attendant, berthed on one of the fingers in the tight space between the Castle in the bay, Barra



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Blue Damsel a Sun Odyssey 45

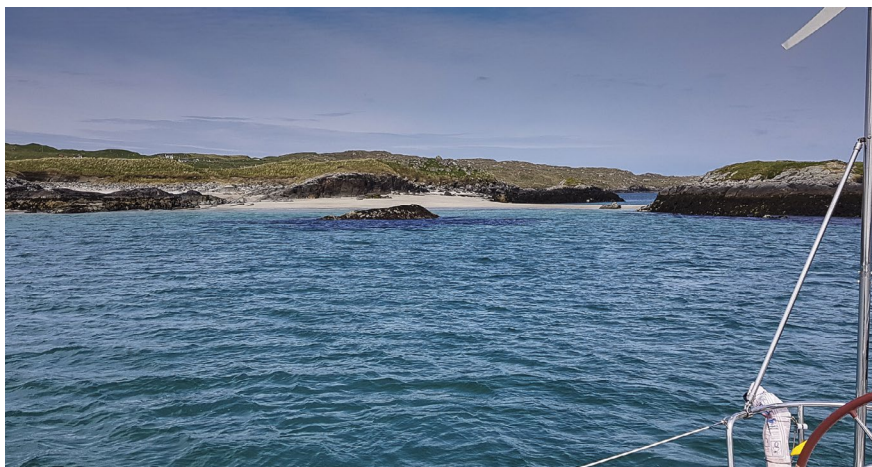
main pontoon and the rocky shoreline to be told that most visitors were unwilling to go there because of the closeness of the shore. Fortified by pints of Guinness in the public bar of the Barra Hotel and Janice's beef stew we slept soundly with the wind on the bow all night.

After a tidy departure from the berth the following morning we made the short passage to Acairseid Mhòr, Eriskay, where we left the two visitor moorings for others and anchored well in. Dave's cuckoo returned, but this time he declined to take the plunge, opting instead to take a yomp ashore to the Am Politician pub on the island. Perhaps 12.6°C in Muck had taught him a lesson. The run ashore was the first job for the new outboard motor and we discovered that not only is it significantly heavier than its predecessor but also more sensitive to choke. Dave later pushed back against Janice's culinary prowess in Castle Bay, Barra by preparing an excellent salmon supper.

Bob Bradfield (RCC) has surveyed many anchorages on the west coast of Scotland and created invaluable detailed charts, and his notes on the Antares chart of Calm Bay in the Sound of Harris are dismissive, describing the name as the best thing about it. It was calm, which was welcome after a 37nm passage which started in a brisk, sunny breeze but ended by motoring into rain. Tasty as they were, that night the Tesco fish pie and Co-op angel cake could not compete with Janice's and Dave's successes in the galley. With the prospect of an Atlantic passage the next day we opted for an early bed and a peacefully calm night.

Sunday's destination was Scarp or, if we were lucky, Loch Roag itself. We were away before 0900 but not before Dave had cooked a substantial breakfast intended to sustain us if the Atlantic swell made lunch an unattractive proposition. Having raised sail just outside the anchorage, we were able to sail the length of the Stanton Channel in the Sound of Harris and then on to our anchorage off the southeast of

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Shiaram Mòr anchorage, Loch Roag

Shiaram Mòr at the south of the Kyles of Pabay, Loch Roag; another day with less than one mile under engine out of 44nm and manageable swell, tacking on two fast broad reaches in continuous sunshine. Having added fulmars, a great skua, black guillemots, puffins and shags to our wildlife catch we were doing well with only the juddering from the recently fitted feathering propeller to cast a small shadow over a superb day's sailing. I had thought the prop was supposed to remain feathered when the gearbox was in neutral, but this might not be the case. Next morning Dave's cuckoo returned, this time accompanied by a heron and, despite this, he still declined to swim.

The boat's AIS had started to play up and with it the anchor windlass, the latter alternating between a go slow and an all out strike. The problems with the windlass

Blue Damsel on Miavaig pontoon hammerhead

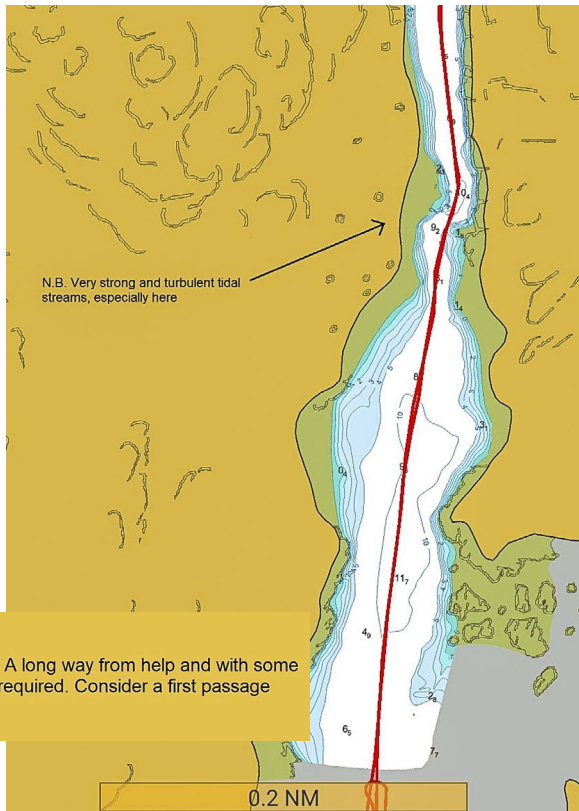


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were to continue for the rest of the cruise but, unlike the AIS, it did not pack up altogether. After a pit stop for water and rubbish disposal on the pontoon in Miavaig we moved on to the nearby anchorage behind Floday finding *Telo*, a Vancouver 34 Pilot with the same livery as *Blue Damsel*: navy blue hull and red antifouling, already anchored. When *Telo*'s owners Donald and Charlotte MacDonald joined us for drinks we discovered that they are both accomplished musicians with interests in jazz and Scottish and Irish folk music and a deep understanding of the similarities and differences between the related folk traditions. Donald played a variety of musical instruments, including the tenor saxophone and the Irish bouzouki, while Charlotte was a flautist. What a joy it would be to join them in a Donegal lock in.

With strong southerlies forecast for the near future we discussed our respective plans for escaping Loch Roag later in the week. Donald and Charlotte, having set off that day for the Sound of Harris, were driven back by the strong wind and swell. They politely declined when I suggested they join us in rounding the Butt of Lewis and we later discovered from AIS that *Telo* spent a further ten days in the loch.

8 June was the day for our attempt at entering Little Loch Roag by the hazardous, narrow and rocky entrance channel. Described in the notes on the Antares chart as 'one for the extremists only' and 'a long way from help and with some strong tidal streams, great care is required' users are advised to consider a passage only at slack water. This was a strong hint that the tides required careful study. With low water predicted to be at 1231, I decided to start my slow speed approach against the last of the ebb just after 1200.



SUMMARY

This is one for the extremists only! A long way from help and with some strong tidal streams, great care is required. Consider a first passage only at slack water.

Antares chart created by
Bob Bradfield (RCC)

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Having entered the inner loch with the tide running at about one knot against us, we agreed with Bob Bradfield that, once inside, the loch was quite dull and so decided to go out again against the first of the flood tide. Returning through the channel at what should have been 15 minutes after low water we found the tide still ebbing, but only just, and so continued and headed for our anchorage, this time to the northwest of Shiaram Mòr. After a lazy afternoon recovering from the stress of transiting the narrow channel into Little Loch Roag Janice raised the culinary stakes by cooking a lovely pork stew in Guinness, following her Ulster origins.

On 9 June we opted to visit Camas Bosta and its anchorage and the narrow and shallow channel known as Caolas Cumhang through to Bernera harbour between Great Bernera and Little Bernera. We regretted not having spent the previous night in Camas Bosta with its sandy beach and fascinating *Tide and Time Bell* by Marcus Vergette, one of a number around the UK coastline. For Caolas Cumhang, a channel with only 60cm of water at LWS and a rock at the western entrance drying 1.3m, the Clyde Cruising Club sailing directions advised a reconnaissance in a dinghy, advice which was irresistible. Dave, having undertaken the research on tides and



Tide and Time Bell by Marcus Vergette

map recce (study of the chart) was nominated as pilot for our transit of the channel. Bob Bradfield had been surveying in the area earlier in the season and kindly provided a draft Antares chart for the channel by WhatsApp. Being a draft chart we were not able to use this in real time with GPS running on a tablet or phone, but so thorough

was Dave's research that we were happy to undertake the transit in *Blue Damsel* as the tide was rising, when the greater hazards were the long fishermen's floating lines which had been identified by Bob. Having successfully passed through the channel and adding two sea eagles, more black guillemots, terns and a great black backed gull to our wildlife count we moved on to Loch Risay on the east coast of Great Bernera to spend a windy but secure night in the inner, well sheltered, anchorage. We anchored in 8.2m having avoided the rock shown on Bob's draft chart at 1.3m below chart datum, but which was absent from the UKHO chart.

After Loch Risay we motored against the strong southerly wind to Kirkibost harbour in Dubh Tòb where we had hoped to take on water and where, on a short run ashore, we exchanged pleasantries with a harpist in the commercial recording

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studio at the pier. In view of the strong wind we decided not to go alongside the pier for water and after re-anchoring to avoid the rock shown on Bob's third draft chart settled down for a Rocna secure night in the harbour with the wind still blowing strongly from the south.

Our final exploration in Loch Roag was to be of the small bay between Bratanish islands and the standing stones at Callanish. As we had all either visited the stones in the past or were planning to do so from the land later in the summer, we decided not to go ashore and opted to anchor for a coffee break and to watch the mechanical harvesting of kelp by machinery that looked like aquatic hay bailers. Not getting a good bite in the kelp on both of our attempts at anchoring I became relaxed about the environmental impact of this kelp farming activity on the seabed.

With the sailing directions telling us that the Butt of Lewis is considered to be more dangerous than rounding Cape Wrath, our final night in Loch Roag was spent in Bernera, where we deflated and stowed the dinghy securely on deck, put



Kelp harvesting off the Callanish standing stones

three reefs in the mainsail and took down our masthead flag in readiness for the Atlantic the following day. With Windfinder forecasting 30kts of wind at the Butt and showing 3m waves I wanted to reduce the opportunities for unhappy but predictable incidents. The sailing directions also told us that 'unless the wind is both fair in direction and moderate in strength, and the tide is going in the same direction' the point should be given a berth of at least five miles, something we were keen not to do when we already had a passage approaching 60nm ahead of us.

On 12 June we got out of bed at the antisocial hour of 0500 and after a quick breakfast were away at 0555, setting sails in the Kyles of Bernera before hitting the big swell outside Loch Roag. The tide was predicted to turn against us at the Butt

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at 1051, being one hour and thirty minutes after HW at Ullapool, and with 26nm from our anchorage to the Butt we didn't have much room for slippage. As running with the wind directly on the stern did not appeal, using Dave's strength on the wheel we sailed on a broad reach until north of the Butt when we went about (no gybing there thank you). We weathered the Butt on the next tack, which carried us to within half a mile of the point. With wind, swell, waves and tide in alignment



Relaxing after rounding the Butt

we had little to fear from the Butt itself and were happy to be heading for more sheltered water on the east side of the point.

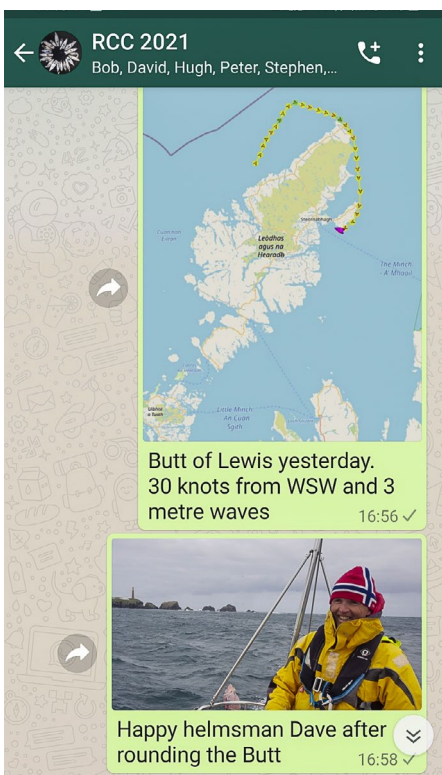
Some miles after rounding the Butt the wind helpfully veered to the west and we were able to sail comfortably down the east of Lewis until headed by the wind after Tiumpnan Head and so we motored round the south of the Eye Peninsula and the final slog into Stornoway Harbour. David Wilkie on *Moonlight of Argyll* (RCC), a well appointed Hallberg-Rassy 45, had arranged a comfortable berth for us and so *Blue Damsel* lay head to wind, gently blown off the pontoon in the lee of the RNLI lifeboat. With

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Question: Count the RCC burgees in Stornoway. (Answer: 3)

RCC WhatsApp group burgeoned in the pandemic



full flagging restored, our culinary odyssey continued as we, along with John and Jane MacInnes of *Shivinish* (RCC), enjoyed Lyn Wilkie's lovely chicken curry on board *Moonlight*.

Those who know Stornoway's strict Sabbatarian principles, will recognise the contradiction in the idea to have 'a day of fun in sunny Stornoway' as entered in the passage plan for Sunday. True to form, the town's facilities were largely closed and it rained. David appeared after breakfast when he serviced our windlass and was able to report NFF (no fault found). After an audit of wet stores we decided it was safe to invite the Wilkies and the MacInneses for drinks at 1800, an event which passed off without any obvious casualties and which was followed by a quiet night.

After shopping for chandlery in the wonderfully stocked Fishermen's Co-operative we left Stornoway on Monday at 1100 to cross the Minch to

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Ullapool for a planned crew change. Having first obtained the obligatory clearance from the harbourmaster on VHF channel 12, we were able to lay the Shiant Isles on one tack. There is now an abundance of birdlife in the islands following the eradication of the black rat population between 2014 and 2018. After a night at anchor in the islands we sailed on to Loch Thurnaig in Loch Ewe and then to the Summer Isles at the entrance to Loch Broom before meeting the outbound crew on the Ullapool pontoon on 17 June and bidding farewell to Janice and Dave with whom I'd ventured round the Butt.

Boyd fashions Fishermen's Co-operative!

