

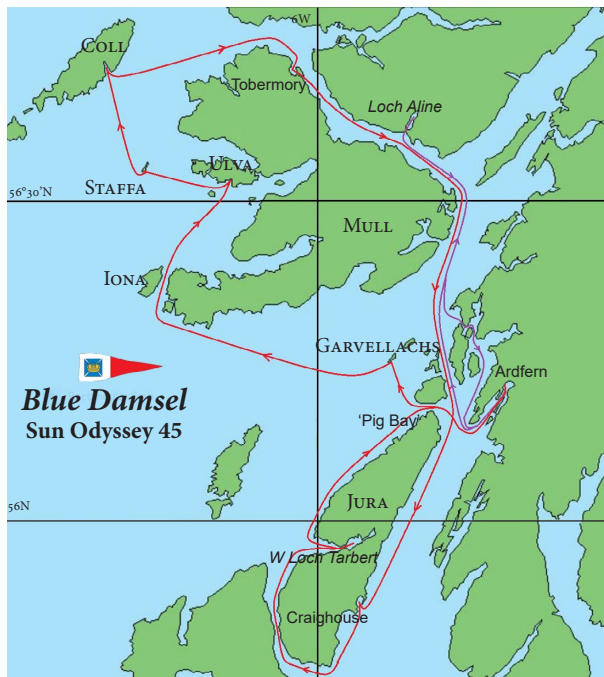
## ***Blue Damsel's 2019 Commissioning Cruise***

An Antares Odyssey off the West Coast of Scotland

Boyd Holmes

Living in rural Cumbria is not for those happier in warmer climes, but most Cumbrian sailors draw the line at cruising off the west coast of Scotland in winter. Sailing in Scottish waters in early April has its attractions but is not without risk. Snow on the ground on 3 April answered one of those risks, as did the car thermometer and the drifting snow on the M74 on our way to Argyll. Dick and Andy never advocated aborting the trip, although the deep snow around Andy's home in the Lake District fells suggested he might have wished to do so. Dick and Andy reported for transport duty in Hayton at 0755 and proceeded to fill Dick's estate car with the usual collection of boat kit, including dinghies, outboard motor and a Honda generator. So successful was Dick, retired chartered surveyor, as loadmaster that my 4X4 had an easy time of it. The customary fortifying Scottish breakfast at the Tarbet Tea Room on Loch Lomondside prepared us for stowing *Blue Damsel* at Ardfern in the early afternoon, and in much better conditions than those prevailing in sub-Arctic Cumbria.

Whilst filling the water tanks with the boat alongside the Ardfern visitors' pontoon we discovered a 'minor' problem with the pressurised water system: the domestic water pump ran almost constantly. Our solution was to switch the pump off at the control panel and get out of the boatyard and down Loch Craignish in order that real life could begin. After a night spent in the hurricane hole



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*Blue Damsel in Pig Bay*

behind Eilean Righ, the in-service water tank was less than half full whilst the large volume of water in the bilge was definitely fresh. So, after adding 2 and 2 together and arriving at the answer 4, we decided that our tank was haemorrhaging its contents into the bilge. Failing to identify any obvious leak, we opted for the easy solution and put back in to Ardfern Yacht Centre to ask the workshop to investigate. After an inquisition about disconnected transom showers and the like, Mike from the boatyard spotted that a pressure relief valve on the calorifier had 'popped', or possibly been used to drain the system in the autumn lay-up.

Having missed the last of the south-going tide in the Sound of Jura, we headed north up the Sound of Luig with the first of the flood tide for a brisk and chilly sail to Loch Aline, triggering voltage alarms after only three hours' sailing. As this part of the cruise was with the transport crew rather than the engineering crew, we decided to let the boat engine and then the Honda generator take the strain and sort out our deficiency of electrical power until the engineering crew could come aboard and investigate. A blowy but secure night at anchor at the head Loch Aline followed.

As the novelty of anchoring in the Cuan Sound appealed to Dick and Andy, Friday morning saw us weighing anchor by 0720 and, having put two reefs in the mainsail whilst in Loch Aline, we arrived at the channel into the Sound of Mull just in time to meet the in-coming ferry, causing an abrupt U-turn on our part and a further short delay whilst the ferry reversed into its berth from the narrow and shallow channel.

With the wind coming from dead ahead and reaching 30kts in the Sound of Mull, we had a bumpy ride under engine until Duart Point. There followed a bracing early-April sail across the Firth of Lorn before entering Cuan Sound with the tide just before 1030. Happily, the boat's chart plotter reconciled with the chart of the Cuan Sound anchorage in Antares charts, produced by RCC member Bob Bradfield, MBE. So entry to the anchorage was not as hazardous as it might have been in the days before GPS; we had two means of electronically plotting our position in real time. The greater hazard was the unwillingness of the anchor chain to run out with the windlass set to freewheel, and the windlass then only

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running at half speed when dropping the anchor under electrical power, causing us to fall back too close to the rocky shore. That problem resolved itself as we set the anchor for the third time, but the windlass had booked itself an appointment with the engineering crew, which was to arrive the following day. After a hearty, cooked brunch, and having exclusive occupation of the well-sheltered anchorage, we enjoyed a restful afternoon in the sunshine.

Return to Ardfern on Saturday morning in a light and chilly breeze, with only 5 knots of wind aft of the beam, was uneventful until we encountered four warships entering the Gulf of Corryreckan from the east. Sailing folk lore has it that HM warships are not permitted to transit the Gulf as a result of some wartime disaster, but either that apocryphal instruction has been revoked or was unknown to the captains of these unidentified ships, which were all observing AIS silence.

Dick and Andy jumped ship in Ardfern to be replaced by the engineering crew comprising my future son-in-law, Steve, Steve's dad, Alan, and two of Alan's



chums from the Keswick Mountain Rescue Team, Mark and Paul. I wasn't sure how useful the team's fast-water-rescue training would be on a recreational sailing vessel, but their advanced first aid skills might come in handy.

After I had told the team of my plan to pass through Corryreckan with the flood tide and that their first night would be spent

The team - waiting for a shout from the Lakeland fells at anchor in the Garvellachs, the ever-inquisitive team members surreptitiously consulted the Clyde Cruising Club sailing directions. With the sailing directions describing the Garvellachs as well worth a visit, ' . . . but the anchorages are too exposed to be suitable for staying overnight, except in settled weather and even then a swell can set in,' there was some consternation amongst the team about their skipper's sanity and what might be in store for the rest of the week. I had visited the Garvellachs before Bob Bradfield had started work on Antares charts, but his chart of the approach to the anchorage off Eileach an Naoimh affords considerable comfort when passing south of the rocky spit at the south eastern entrance, and in choosing a suitable place to anchor.

Sunday's passage from the Garvellachs to Craigaig Bay, Ulva, via the deeper water route on the east side of the Sound of Iona, passed quickly thanks to a steady breeze of F4/5 from the east. The sailing novices from the team tried their hands at the helm and later took to deploying and recovering the anchor buoy. With four energetic crew on board every little distraction had to be engaged in order to generate the impression of meaningful activity. Another night, another Antares

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anchorage.

On Monday 8 April, with a gentle but steady breeze from the east, landing on Staffa for a visit to Fingal's cave was on the cards. Anchoring in about 14m in the usual anchorage off the south-east corner of Staffa, and not in the rather tight anchorage found by Bob Bradfield north-east of the landing place, the team rowed ashore in the dinghy, but decided against taking it into the cave because of the swell in the cave and off its entrance. With the crew ashore I took a call from Alan's wife to inform him that their son Matt, who had just completed his superyacht crew training with UKSA, had been offered a couple of jobs in the Mediterranean and needed Alan's advice on which offer to accept. My chances of an onboard masterclass from Matt later in the season were looking slimmer than ever.

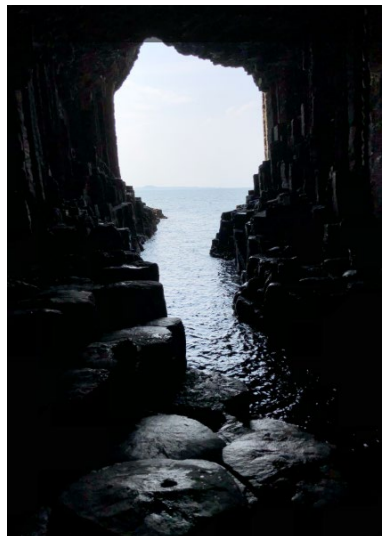


Fingal's Cave looking in

After Staffa we crossed to Coll via the Treshnish Islands and anchored off Arinagour beyond the beacon in Loch Eatharna, encouraged by the Antares chart to go further in than prudence might otherwise suggest. Noting that the CMAL (Caledonian Maritime Assets) moorings had not been recommissioned after their winter break, and wanting to remind CMAL that yachties have an eye on CMAL's not-always-yacht-friendly activities, I sent a short email to the amiable harbour-master at CMAL's HQ in Greenock about this omission. Admittedly, I don't generally pick up a mooring in Loch Eatharna, but I just might have preferred the security of one. In the absence of the harbour-master on leave a prompt retort was issued by CMAL's redoubtable Director of Harbours, Lorna Spencer, MBA, CDir, FIOD, FICS. My point had been made – and noted.

On running ashore in the dinghy to the well-regarded Isle of Coll Hotel, we found that a substantial extension to the hotel had been almost completed. How this will change the cosy atmosphere of the hotel and its iconic back bar is a question for another visit.

Engineering duties caught up with the team on Tuesday after several long tacks had taken us across from Coll to Tobermory, where we had the pick of the pontoons.



...and out

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With no other yachts on the pontoons, I phoned the harbour-master for the usual access codes only to be told that these would be issued after attendance and payment at the harbour office. Happily, the pontoon manager, Rob, with knowledge of the ancién regime, offered to come down to our pontoon and take our money. We repaid the favour by fishing his blown-away £5 note out of the water with a boat hook, for which he offered a discount of £2 on the mooring fee of £36. Sadly, his card machine was playing games and so we paid £35 in banknotes, settling for a discount of only £1.

Whilst alongside the Tobermory pontoon Alan set to work on electrical tasks, including replacing blinking LED lights with new, brighter lights and investigating our battery problem. Steve and Mark refreshed the markings on the anchor chain. Paul serviced the aft head's toilet pump with a kit of parts acquired from the Tobermory chandlery. Unsurprisingly, neither the chandlery nor Mackay's harbour garage could supply an alternator belt for a Yanmar 4JH5E marine diesel engine at such short notice. Supper on board was followed by an early bed as reveille was to be at 0600 in order to exit Tobermory Bay by the Doirlinn passage at 0750.

The Doirlinn dries 0.7m at LAT – Antares chart again. *Blue Damsel* draws 2.3m and my Absolute Tides app told me that we should have 2.5m of water in the shallowest part of the channel at 0750. Alan's Navionics app was indicating 20cm more, so, unless we were very unlucky, the depth at 0750 should be enough for our purpose, remembering that here we are talking of a seabed of Scottish rock and not east coast of England mud. Having left the pontoon at exactly 0730 we entered the Doirlinn at 0750, when the least depth recorded in the passage was 2.9m. We were then able to long-tack down the Sound of Mull until just after Duart Point when the wind died away for the rest of the day. Whilst Bagh Gleann nam Muc (Pig Bay) in the south-western entrance to Corryvreckan had been identified as a possible anchorage for the night, this had seemed a bit optimistic – until the wind died. With no wind and a calm sea there was an evens chance of motoring down the Firth of Lorn and past the Fladda light before the tide turned against us in the Sound of Luing. The tide did turn about a mile north of Corryvreckan, but motoring on we were able to make use of the pull of Corryvreckan as the flood tide picked up and carried us into the gulf and along to Pig Bay.

Heeding Bob Bradfield's warning that that the depth shown on the UKHO chart as 3.9m should be less than 1m, but taking advantage of his observation that the 1.2m sounding is much further out from the shore due to a cartographic constraint imposed by the scale of the chart, we entered Pig Bay by the channel east of Eilean Beag to anchor in just over 4m in the south-eastern arm of the Bay shortly after 1430. The team, always keen to stretch their legs, took a run ashore to Jura in the dinghy and walked over the hill to get a good view of the gulf in full flow. A beautiful sunset, its appearance enhanced by the customary sundowner, followed on from a clear blue sky which had been with us since leaving Duart Point.

The tide was kind the following day, Thursday 11 April. After weighing anchor at 0850 and hoisting the mainsail in the anchorage we were bound away for Craighouse, Jura, with a fair tide and a steady SSE wind from forward of the beam.



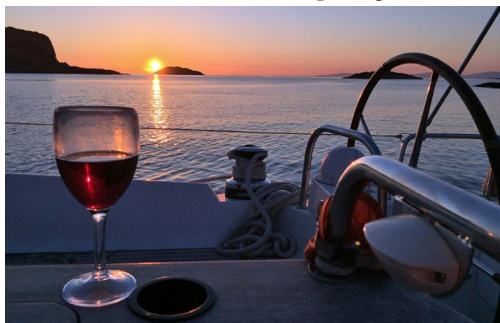
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After a great sail down the Sound of Jura we entered Loch na Mile and the Bay of the Small Isles by the south channel. Whilst the community moorings were in place and unused, we dropped the anchor for a lunch stop. As expected, the anchor failed to set in the thick kelp, so we added an extra 10m of chain for good measure before Alan and Paul set off ashore in the small dinghy to replenish our supply of tea and coffee at the shop in Craighouse. The team had depleted the boat's stock of these essentials through their unrelenting enthusiasm for a brew. After lunch we motored from Loch na Mile to the south of Jura and then caught the tide turning north up the Sound of Islay.

Sailing up the Sound with a freshening wind, and passing the Caol Ila and Bunnahabhain distilleries, we were soon in Loch Tarbert, Jura, commonly known as West Loch Tarbert, and ready to engage with the beacons and transits installed by the Cockleshell Hero and Transatlantic single-hander, Blondie Hasler. Avoiding Boghachan Baite, a series of rocks which cover at high water, we picked out the first two transits without difficulty. In the afternoon on a sunny day the beacons for the final, back transit are often difficult to locate – as proved to be the case. The most anxious part of the route into the middle loch is the pinch point in Cumhann Mor, at which point the transit expires, but the Antares chart helpfully shows 'Optional route – inbound or outbound'. We dropped the anchor in the recognised anchorage just after Cumhann Mor, endeavouring to land the anchor on the very spot identified by Bob on his chart.

My studies of the tides in the waters around Jura taught me that if it is possible to sail south down the Sound of Jura in time for a lunchtime visit to Craighouse on the way to Loch Tarbert, then the following morning it is possible to sail up the west coast of Jura and through Corryvreckan and the Dorus Mor with the ebb tide, before reaching the tidally-calm waters of Loch Craignish. With two reefs in the main and a decreasing amount of headsail we made the passage from our Loch Tarbert anchorage back to Ardfern in just 4½ hours whilst recording gusts of over 30 knots, but generally with the wind blowing a healthy F6 from the south-east and east.

Our plan to take on diesel at Ardfern was thwarted by a vessel which appeared to have been glued to the fuel pontoon, but as we had only used a quarter of a tank in 10 days this didn't much matter and, at this time of the year, were able to pick our spot on the visitors' pontoon. *Blue Damsel* was back at home after logging 170 miles under sail out of a total of 251 miles logged in 10 days of dry but chilly weather. I never had to call upon the team members to administer first aid, nor was Alan able to cure the failure of our tired but youthful batteries to hold charge which, given the constraints of time available and the tools on board, was inevitable.



Sundowner in Pig Bay