KINGFISHER IN THE RAIN



Summer Cruise 2026

This rather damp title reflects a predominant facet of this year's cruise. It really did rain on us at some point on every day of our five-week cruise except one. During the same period no rain fell at all on the Solent area where Kingfisher usually lives. So far as we could see, all of it fell on the Western Isles of Scotland where, following another Fife Regatta in the Clyde, we chose to spend what we fondly supposed would be our 'summer'.

But let it not be supposed that we regretted our choice of cruising area. We have come to a fairly unshakeable conclusion, after cruising in many waters, that the Western Isles is, by far and away, the best cruising ground in all the world, in rain or sunshine, fair winds or foul and (in a motor yacht) even in flat calms. The purpose of a log like this, apart from bolstering fading memories as we get older, is to paint a picture in words and pictures that captures the essence of why that statement is true. If this account fails to come up to proof, perhaps when read in conjunction with our 2022 log of cruising in the same waters, then we will have failed in our artistry. It won't be because the waters themselves fall short.

Those who have read one or more of the six earlier logs in this series can skip over this paragraph. For those who have not, Kingfisher is a 42 ft, 14 ton, displacement twin-screw motor yacht designed by John Bain and built of teak on oak by Silvers in the Gareloch in 1935. She served as a mine countermeasures vessel in WW2. Her main duty now is to serve as mother ship to our 1904 Fife racing cutter Mikado, but she has latterly become our main cruising platform as advancing age has made getting cold, cramped, wet and sometimes frightened cruising two-up in an outright racing machine less attractive. She has all the mod cons (including for Scotland the essential central heating) discretely hidden behind the original cabin furniture and teak panelling, all the necessary electronic navigational aids, and two small, quiet and economical modern Nanni diesels in a sound-proofed engine room to enable her to purr along at a stately 8 knots cruising speed. She was accurately advertised to us in 2019 as looking after two in utter luxury, four in comfort and eight at a pinch. She is an excellent sea boat offshore up and down wind, and her inevitable tendency to roll on a reach is kept within reasonable bounds by a steadying sail and bilge keels when under way, and otherwise by very careful choice of anchorage. Kingfisher is crewed by a top-heavy (in terms of rank not profile) elderly crew of Admiral, the writer's long-suffering wife Beverly, who decides where to go and makes the restaurant bookings, and the writer, as Captain, charged with getting there.

This year's timeframe was constrained at one end by the usual July work crisis, and at the other end by the need to return south for a 70th birthday party of a dear friend in early September. Following a wet, cold and windy (but great fun) Fife Regatta mothering Mikado in early June, Kingfisher was waiting for us at Largs Marina when we stepped off the night sleeper, having been under the watchful eye and endless care of our good friend Peter Wright in the meantime, fully fuelled, watered, titillated and raring to go.

Week 1 – Largs to Loch Moidart. 160 nm.

Day 1: _Tuesday 28 July. Largs to Tarbert. 22nm

Arriving by sleeper gives plenty of time to get ready for a same-day departure. Our preparations included shopping in West Kilbride (small specialist food shops preferred to the

soulless supermarket in Largs), finding and fitting our West Coast chart chip for the Garmin plotter, (eventually discovered in the Admiral's bedside-table drawer), giving Peter a slap-up lunch in Scotts (the now rather good restaurant in Largs Marina) and bumping into Vincent and Claire de la Roche, owners of the 55ft Fife cutter Merry Dancer (of which more anon).

We were off by 1430, into a very light west wind, overcast with some heavy showers. We normally leg it for the Crinan Canal, to get into the real Western Isles as quickly as possible. But there was no chance of getting through the whole canal that day, and we were easily seduced by the happy memory of a superb fish dinner at the Red Herring in Tarbert on Loch Fyne, enjoyed on a lay-day in the Fife Regatta when the fleet was berthed in Portavaddie, just across the loch. We arrived at 1750, just after the rain had reduced visibility to half a mile, well in time for another fishy feast, including scallops with black pudding and seafood linguine.

The Red Herring didn't disappoint, and nor did Tarbert generally. After some lean years it is well on the way back to more cheerful prosperity, more active shops and pubs, more fresh paint, and a truly splendid malt whisky shop, with numerous different types of our favourite dram from the Springbank distillery in Campbeltown, at the other end of the Mull of Kintyre.

Highlights on the short passage included a sight of the paddle steamer Waverley passing majestically inside Inchmarnock at 16 kts, and a flock of at least 200 little grey seabirds, probably guillemots, all of whom crash-dived as we approached. A disadvantage of cruising Scotland in August is that the immense flocks of breeding birds at the famous nesting places (e.g. the Treshnish and Handa islands) have all dispersed, the parents taking their newly-fledged young out to sea. What we hadn't appreciated till this year was that they then do their sea-training in sheltered waters, in very large numbers, and so are still there to see and admire, particularly on calm days.

The first passage in a new cruise is also a time to check all the systems on board, before passing beyond easily accessible professional help. Everything seemed to be working, except for a large deviation in the magnetic compass driving the auto-pilot, and the perennially grumpy echo-sounder, which insists on going into blinking suspended animation as the depth drops below 2 metres, just when you need it most. ('Blinking' is not just a term of abuse. It really blinks!) The writer fixed the compass (once I had discovered the tortuous way back into the dealer's set-up menu with the assistance of AI) but the echo-sounder remains impenetrable.

Day 2: Wednesday 29th July – Tarbert to Crinan. 16nm

Wednesday dawned cool and drizzly, and stayed that way until mid-afternoon, when the sun came out. We made an early start into a gentle NW 2, on the nose but not enough to disturb the calm surface of Loch Fyne.



Waiting in the sea lock at Ardrishaig

We arrived at the sea-lock at Ardrishaig at 0810 just before the canal opened for the day. Scottish Canals have really got their act together! In times past they only operated the two locks at each end of the canal, leaving the remaining 13 locks to be worked manually by the crews of the boats passing through. This is quite challenging for a large-ish boat with a crew of two. Often the lock would be in the wrong state (full or empty) and have to be prepared. It is hard for one person to keep the boat from sheering around (going up) or getting left hanging on the wall (going down), while the other person moves the gates and works the

sluices. So we usually took a pilot, typically a retired lock-keeper with a bicycle and a long boathook to prepare and work the locks and take and release your lines.

But now Scottish Canals have taken the whole thing in house, providing a cheerful team mainly of youngsters on summer holiday jobs to do all the work, and making for a fast passage through locks usually prepared in advance, albeit for a considerably increased fee. Mechanically (apart from the sea locks) the canal is still very old-fashioned compared with what we are used to in Europe, and at the moment in need of serious repairs each winter. But a long-term commitment to keep the Crinan Canal running seems still to be there, with the increased fees fairly matching the much-improved service.

The operators like to maintain maximum traffic-flow and minimum use of water by requiring boats (other than puffers) to go through in groups. We were lucky to be joined by a small but very beautiful Swedish-built, now Hamburg-based, varnished wooden motor boat called Larch Maria doing an inshore canal-assisted cruise from the Clyde to Inverness. Not much fun for them in the rain, but plenty of room for both of us, side by side, at the calm end of each lock (going up). They were demonstrating just how much adventurous cruising you can do in a small, non-offshore, boat making judicious use of canals, lorries and ferries, and waiting for safe sea conditions.



The beautiful Larch Maria, our companion through the canal

We usually do the Crinan canal in two bites, stopping at half-time to enjoy the Cairnbaan Hotel at the Southern end of the up and down ladder of 9 locks in the middle of the route. This time we planned to try and get through in one day, which was just as well because the

hotel was closed for a long, slow, complete refurbishment. Even the scaffolding was going rusty! The new efficient lock-working system made for an easy one-day passage, bringing us to the pretty canal basin at Crinan by 1430, mooring opposite the puffer Vic 32, just ahead of the sun, and in very good time for another excellent fish dinner at the Crinan Hotel (Cullen skink, moules, halibut).



Kingfisher moored opposite Vic 32 in Crinan basin

There we enjoyed two delightful, and quite extraordinary, chance meetings. The first was meeting Carol, who had re-discovered Kingfisher when we passed through on a rainy day in 2022 after having sailed in her in the 1970s. Neither we nor she had been back to Crinan in the intervening 4 years! The second (the following morning) was Hugh who turned up with his wife in a magnificent Rolls Royce two-tone Silver Shadow. He had been the lucky owner of the Fife 8 metre Ierne (a true rocket-ship if you could control her) and a competitor with Mikado in the 2003 Fife Regatta. Again, we had hardly seen him since. What a small world!



Chance meeting at Crinan

Day 3: Thursday 30th July. Crinan to Ardinamir. 12nm

As always going to or from Crinan, this was a day to get the tide right, since we had to pass through the Dorus Mor (opposite the infamous Gulf of Corryvreckan). For the first time there was some real wind, a W 6 to start with, moderating slightly to WSW 5-6 during the afternoon. A good day for staying in sheltered water, taking the inshore route, inside Luing and aiming for the Cuan Sound between Luing and Seil as our way North towards Mull, Skye and the Outer Hebrides.

The tide didn't go fair till the afternoon, so we spent a leisurely morning, putting the world to rights with Hugh at the coffee shop and having a look at the Crinan boatyard, where they were putting on the last coat of antifouling to the newly-restored puffer Auld Reekie. Then we were off at 1300 into a spectacularly varied, constantly changing and beautiful day of sun, heavy showers, gusty wind and ragged cloud. A late lunch and siesta anchored in Kilchattan bay on the east side of Luing, overlooked by a fine old cemetery, was followed by a serene evening's wildlife-watching all alone in the tiny shallow natural harbour of Ardinamir, just short of the Cuan Sound. We saw dozens of geese, a few curlew and a strange herd of local stripey cattle, the belted Galloways or Belties, grazing on the shore. The highlight was a little chick on a training flight, landing on our foredeck (a foot away from us in the wheelhouse), getting rescued and taken home by its anxious parents. Not sure what they were, maybe sand-martins.



The lonely chick



And the Belties

Getting into and (the next day) out of Ardinamir reminded us of the huge benefits of the Antares mini-charts. They are put together by a small group of private yachtsmen, published on the internet and useable for a modest fee. They provide wonderful detail of the tiny coves, bays and natural harbours which make Scottish cruising so special, far beyond the detail or reliability of Garmin, Navionics or, sad to say, even the Admiralty. Put these chartlets alongside the Navionics equivalent and judge for yourself. They always identify the best holding ground, and their navigational directions are first-class.

Day 4: Friday 31st July: Ardinamir to Loch Etive. 40 nm

This was our first significantly long day's passage, and the first on this cruise to take us somewhere completely new. We had in the past generally begrudged the detour involved in going up Loch Linnhe (apart from racing in West Highland Week in Mikado), preferring to do a sharp left up the Sound of Mull towards Ardnamurchan Point, the true gateway to the far north. But that involves (as we were now to discover) missing out on two of the most spectacular sea-lochs of all, namely Lochs Etive and Leven. So we thought that this time we would have a go at Loch Etive. Apart from at slack water this literally involves having to sail or steam up, or down, a waterfall. So you have to get the tide just right, and preferably do it at high or low water.

Low water at the falls of Lora (as the waterfall is called) was at about 1530, and the tide didn't go fair in Cuan Sound until midday. So we had time for a first quick look up Seil Sound, which narrows until it passes under the famous Bridge over the Atlantic, navigable by

dinghies and kayaks and perhaps even by Kingfisher, but we weren't going to try it. But half-way up, on the East side of Seil, is Balvicar Bay with its little boatyard.

It was a cold day for August, mainly sunny but with sharp showers and a S 4 wind. Off we went at 1100, watched by a magnificent grey heron on the shore. Nothing special at Balvicar, apart from a true sister ship, Trevora, another 42 ft Silver leaf, distinguishable from Kingfisher mainly by her ketch motor-sailer rig, though no sails were actually bent on. She was last heard of for sale in Bangor and it was good to see her back in home waters.



That little deviation set us up to arrive in Cuan Sound just as the tide turned fair, to sweep us North, round the strange mining village of Easdale, through inside Kerrera, straight past Oban (gawping at the beautiful schooner anchored off), and on up past Dunstaffnage Marina, to moor briefly at 1435 opposite the pub below the Connel Bridge, to await low tide at the Falls

of Lora beneath, while the rain got going again.



Magnificent schooner at Kerrera

By 1515 the ebb tide has slowed down enough for us to have a go at steaming up the falls against it. Better we thought to stem the last of the ebb tide than to be swept through by a flood tide, with limited directional control. Although Loch Etive is one of the larger Scottish sea lochs, its entrance is almost completely blocked by a shoal over which the water cascades, leaving a narrow deep-ish channel on the starboard side through which to wriggle, right under the Connel bridge.

Once you are through the narrows the tide becomes negligible, and the navigation easy, until you reach the second of Loch Etive's dangers, the power cable stretched across the Bonawe narrows half-way up. But that was well above our stumpy mast, and from there on until the head of the loch the scenery just got more and more spectacular. Taller and taller mountains crowded closer and closer on either side, with their heads in the cloud and streams pouring down their sides. And not a single other boat did we see after Bonawe, or any people, even ashore, apart from a single lonely soul in a tiny orange tent right at the head of the loch.



Upper Loch Etive. It doesn't get grander than this.

Where Scottish sea lochs penetrate into a mountain range there is often quite a lot of wind at the head, blowing either straight up or straight down. This time it was straight up, making the shallows at the head a poor lee shore for anchoring for the night. So back we went, looking for a cosy bay on the side of the loch. It was easily found, at Inverliver Bay on the south east side, still in spectacular scenery but out of the wind, anchoring at 1835 in 10 m. Our deck log describes it as a perfect night anchorage, and it was.

Day 5: Saturday 1st August: Loch Etive to Loch Aline via Oban: 29nm.

Saturday dawned showery, but the wind had mercifully died away. There were patches of cloud on the mountains, but welcome streaks of blue sky as well, making the scenery even more spectacular than on the previous evening as we motored down the loch to await the slack water by 0900, on a buoy in Achnacreemore Bay on the north side of the lower loch, just above the Connel Bridge. Then, with a slight flood still against us we went carefully through the narrows at 0950, arriving in brightening but still calm weather at the new marina at Oban at 1040.



Steaming back down Loch Etive in the morning

Oban was a compulsory stop for us, because it appeared to have the last M&S in our planned cruising area, and we needed to stock up with all the necessary goodies for those

nights when there might be no nearby restaurant. In time gone by there was only a rather inconvenient marina on Kerrera, needing a ferry crossing to Oban proper, unless you just anchored in the sometimes choppy bay and used the dinghy. But now there is a new small marina right in the centre of town, ideal for short stays. We got a plumb berth right by the gangway ashore, usually reserved for fishing boats to unload, but free on a weekend, just a ten-minute walk from the large M&S food hall. Better still, a kind lady in the checkout queue offered to drive us back to the marina with our heavy bags of provisions. Typical Scottish warm kindness!

By 1330 we were off up the Sound of Mull, the weather also providing some belated warmth and even occasional sunshine. We had the humbling experience of being passed by a large super-yacht called Big Eagle, flying the flag (of convenience?) of St Vincent and the Grenadines. We must have appeared to her as no more than a fly on the windscreen!



Big Eagle

These days you can plan a cruising itinerary in the Western Isles almost as a series of hops between excellent restaurants. The next one for us (based on happy past experience) was the White House in Loch Aline, half-way up the Sound of Mull on the right. It's only a mini-loch compared to Loch Etive, but full of interest and goodies. Perhaps the most interesting is the mine just inside the entrance, which produces some of the purest silica sand in the world. It was opened during WW2, providing a vital raw material for optics like range-finders, periscopes and gun-sights, and is still going strong, mainly serving the electronics industry.

The deep mine discharges its silica into small coasters berthed alongside, with minimal impact on the environment.



Ardtornish House

Then there is the grand Ardtornish Estate with its Victorian mansion house, beautiful gardens and good café at the head of the Loch. Just a short bike ride or longer walk along the loch side, which we did (by bike) on the following morning. Making it all easy is the very nice little pop-up marina, taking about a dozen visiting yachts, with a welcoming building ashore with all the usual conveniences, as well as a mini-bar and café, plus electric bike hire, for exploring the beautiful country around the loch.

But the real attraction is still the White House, a tiny restaurant in the village by the ferry to Mull, serving a delicious menu largely from local produce, including seafood and Ardtornish venison. Our choices included langoustines with seaweed chutney, mackerel with rhubarb kimchi, hazlenut-crusted halibut with beetroot risotto and orange & chocolate souffle with vanilla ice-cream.

But here I'm going to indulge in one of my occasional rants. Many nice restaurants now use on-line booking. And very often the app tells you that the chosen restaurant is fully booked. But if you don't give up, and take the trouble to phone, you often find that there is space. Why is this? On this occasion we were one of only three occupied tables (admittedly in a restaurant which has only ten), not enough for the poor owners to break even, yet the online app was still saying fully booked! We were told that the problem is that people who book online don't get in touch when they later want to cancel. They had expected to be full, but ended up almost empty. I don't know how a business can prosper in those conditions. And yet the owners provide heavenly food in this remote location. End of rant.

Day 6; Sunday 2nd August: Loch Aline to Tobermory: 13nm

After our bike-ride to Ardtornish (see below) we were greeted by a warm but overcast day, with a southerly force 2, not enough to ruffle the surface of the Sound of Mull. Our two-line laconic deck log entry just notes that we left Loch Aline at 1250 and berthed on the fuel jetty at Tobermory at 1500. What is left unsaid is that this was an unremarkable passage over (for us) a well-trodden route, renewing happy memories but providing little new worthy of note.



But we were planning a drinks party on board at Tobermory. We have just started using the Marine Watch app to track the movements of friendly yachts (from their AIS signals) and knew that we were going to be joined by both Chico and Merry Dancer. Chico is a quite big wooden MFV type of motor yacht, originally built as a yacht on fishing trawler lines in Great Yarmouth in 1937. She charters out of Oban, and our good friends Louise and Frank

Robertson had chartered her (fully crewed) for the week. She had been mother ship to Kentra at the Fife Regatta, where we had first met her, and (the writer, not the Admiral) drooled over her twin six-cylinder Gardners in her palatial engine room.

Merry Dancer had also been at the Fife Regatta, after our encouragement to come when we met her in 2025 in Brittany. She is a 55 ft Bermudian cutter, one of the great last trio of sisters designed and built by William Fife III at Fairlie, in 1938, as a fast cruiser before WW2 spelt the end of the Fife era. She is now owned and immaculately maintained by Vincent and Claire De la Roche, and they were passing through Tobermory on a cruise with two friends Paul and Natalie, before the yacht was due to be sailed back to Brittany at the end of the 2026 season. We had enjoyed some very close racing with her at the regatta in our Mikado.



Mikado leading Merry Dancer at the Fife Regatta

So that happy three-way meeting promised a good party on board, and so it proved, before we all went our separate ways.



Day 7: Monday 3rd August: Tobermory to Loch Moidart: 28nm.

Perhaps slightly the worse for wear after the previous evening's festivities, we made a late start northwards at mid-day, in what the Scots call "smurrin", a unique but persistent mixture

of shower and mist, with a very light F2 from south by east, leaving us with almost no wind over the deck, and an unusually gentle passage round Ardnamurchan Point, beyond which yachtsmen can say that they have truly arrived in the North, as the wonderful Small Isles Muck, Rhum, Eigg and Canna come successively into view or, as on this occasion, begin to loom out of the mist. We passed a brave coastal cruising Wayfarer dinghy on the way.



With a calm offshore wind it was a good opportunity to visit Sanna Bay, a delightful set of sandy beaches just North of the lighthouse on Ardnamurchan Point, usually inaccessible to passing yachts due to the prevailing SW wind and swell. The bay made a good short lunch time anchoring stop, before continuing north east at 1400, still in smurrin.

Our day's destination was Loch Moidart, just north of the Ardnamurchan Peninsula, probably the writer's top favourite among all the Scottish sea lochs. Nothing spectacular about the loch itself, apart from its intricate entrance, ancient forest and general lack of depth. What sets it apart is Castle Tioram, a small ruined castle on a little tidal islet overlooking a remote, peaceful anchorage (providing you avoid the disused submerged power cable, or buoy your anchor). Getting in has become much easier with GPS, and assisted with Kingfisher's shallow draft (1.1 m as opposed to Mikado's 2m). The anchorage

off the castle makes the effort much more than worthwhile.



Tioram Castle

It's not just the picturesque beauty of the castle in its wooded setting that sticks in the memory, but it's romantic history. It was owned by the Clanranald family. On leaving to support the Jacobite rising in 1715, the chief burned it down deliberately. He figured that, within the year, he would either be the owner of a much more comfortable house in London, or dead. He was of course (dead) right. He died in the fighting, and the castle has remained a spectacular crumbling ruin ever since.

Apart from a short intermission as we arrived at 1630, enabling the writer to go for a good row with the camera, the smurrin continued until the evening, so we didn't go ashore.

Week 2: Loch Moidart to the far North: 240nm

Day 8: Tuesday 4th August: Loch Moidart to the Point of Sleat, via Loch Scavaig and Rhum: 48.5nm

The time was approaching when we needed to make a choice of route North. Should we go outside Skye, up the Minch, or along the more sheltered route up the Sound of Sleat, through the Kyles and up the Inner Sound? It wasn't an easy choice, because the weather was behaving in a rather peculiar manner. For the whole of early August, the Western Isles lay in a large, slow-moving area of low pressure, with strong winds offshore but quite light winds

inshore. The strong stuff was forecast to cross the Outer Hebrides into the Minch, but not to come inshore of Skye. We decided initially to hedge our bets, by a first visit (for Kingfisher and the Admiral, but not the writer) to the wild Loch Scavaig, at the foot of the Cuillins. Those awesome mountains in Skye form a sort of horseshoe facing the sea, with the freshwater Loch Coruisk inside. It debouches at the seaward end of the horseshoe via a short stream-cum-waterfall right next to the salt-water Loch Scavaig, where the non-climbing yachtie can anchor, walk up along the stream and get a front row seat to gawp at the most spectacular loch and mountain scene anywhere in the British Isles.

But Loch Scavaig is no tea party. It has a beastly submerged reef right in the entrance, and is prone to terrible gusts blowing down (or up) the Cuillins even on otherwise calm days. Nor is it easy to get ashore, at least for the elderly. The only landing (a few metal steps) is usually occupied by a local boat carrying climbers or tourists. Otherwise you have to scramble up weed-strewn, slippery rocks. So, after a 0700 start, we approached it, in continuing smurrin and then showers, but little or no wind, getting our first sight of the Cuillins through the decreasing visibility at 0950, and getting our anchor down, alone apart from a tripper boat, in the middle of Loch Scavaig, at 1100, below an enormously high waterfall.



First sight of the Cuillins

Then it was a short row ashore, scramble up the slippery rocks, and a very wet, muddy walk up to Loch Coruisk. Even then the high Cuillins were only rather dimly visible in all the murk.



The path round to Loch Coruisk

It was, you may say, just about worth it. But some hot soup on our soggy return to Kingfisher was a much-needed restorative.

The decision which way to continue north could not be put off any longer. Worsening forecasts for the Minch made the inside-Skye route the clearly favoured candidate, so at 1400 we set off south-east for the Point of Sleat. We hadn't gone far when we noticed on Marine Watch that the beautifully restored gaff cutter Eda Frandsen was heading across our course, to an anchor in Loch Scresort on the east side of Rhum. So we altered course for a brief tea-time meeting, escorted into the anchorage by a school of dolphins. Eda Frandsen charters out of Mallaig and is run by Mungo Watson and his wife Stella. We had originally introduced the then teen-aged Mungo to classic boat sailing in the 2002 Fife regatta, and his career on the water had gone from strength to strength. We had last encountered him in Loch Nevis in 2022, but never been on board Eda Frandsen. This was our opportunity, and it did not disappoint. She has a wonderfully traditional and cosy interior, rather like a Bristol Channel pilot cutter, and a big powerful rig to have fun with if you have oilskins which keep out the smurrin. The charter guests were all ashore (braving the worst midges in the world) so we briefly had the yacht and her delightful owners all to ourselves.

Then it was off again, to a tiny sandy bay just round the Point of Sleat called Camas Daraich (thank you again Antares), where we anchored for the night at 1910, in a near calm, but still raining.

Day 9: Wednesday 5th August: Point of Sleat to Loch na Dal via Camus Fearna: 17nm

Dawn on Wednesday revealed a showery NW 20 kt airstream, which rather confirmed our choice to stay inshore. The plan was to visit our much-loved Camus Fearna (the home of Gavin Maxwell and Tarka the Otter) and then head back to the Skye side of the Sound to the reportedly excellent Kinloch Lodge for dinner, for which we made an early booking which involved paying a non-returnable deposit. The hotel restaurant boasted a visitor's buoy right outside, so what could go wrong?

But first we spent a little time photographing more dolphins, and then Merry Dancer again, on her way from Loch Scavaig (where they went swimming!!) to Mallaig. That was the last we were to see of her, sadly.



The sun arrived just in time for the photography, and we had been rain-free for 2 1/2 hours by the time we anchored in Camus Fearna at 1325 for a run ashore in the dinghy. It's a matter of luck whether you can anchor or land there, because the bay and the beach are completely exposed to the prevailing SW winds. But there was enough north in it this time, to our delight, because we just love the place. It has a tiny white cottage where Maxwell used to live, a beautiful gravestone where his ashes are buried, and another stone memorial to his otter Edal. The place has no road within several miles, so is usually quite deserted, but we did meet an intrepid couple of pilgrims who had trekked down in their wellies and waterproofs through the dripping woods to get there by land.



Edal's memorial at Camus Fearna

Then, at 1540, it was off to our planned dinner venue, only a few miles away across the Sound, back in the smurrin with half a mile visibility, but with only a F2 wind. So it looked as if the split forecast (strong outside Skye / light inside) was proving correct.

Kinloch Lodge lies near the head of the modest Loch na Dal, just north of Isle Ornsay. The much-vaunted hotel visitor's buoy looked rather neglected, to we went a bit further up the loch to anchor, right opposite the hotel, in 5m, expecting a nice easy run ashore in the dinghy after a late siesta.

How wrong we were! By 1730 it was blowing a full westerly gale down the loch, with nothing but a mass of foaming white water between us and the only landing place. Either there must have been a wriggle in the forecast line between strong and light winds or, perhaps more likely, the high Cuillins now to the west of us were picking up the higher wind stream and hurling it down the loch. Whatever the cause, it would have been madness even to try to get ashore, so the dinner engagement had reluctantly to be abandoned. The hotel managers kindly repaid our deposit and were most solicitous about whether we were going to go hungry. Not that they could have done anything about it, even with a dinner-carrying drone. Anyway, we had plenty of supplies.

Day 10: Thursday 6th August: Loch na Dal to Ullapool, via Loch Torridon: 90nm

This proved, rather unexpectedly, to be our longest day's passage. It started at 0615 in order to catch the tide through the Kyles, in mercifully dry if cold conditions, with even the odd welcoming shaft of sunshine. We were through the Kyles and under the Skye Bridge by 0830, and past the Crowlin Islands by 0845, into increasing sunshine and a light NNW wind. The Inner Sound is an important submarine exercise and trials area, and we had an interesting VHF discussion with the range safety officials, who clearly had us under close observation. But no submarines, even periscopes, were seen, and we entered Loch Torridon (for our first time) at 1100.

Half-way up the loch we passed the lovely Kentra motoring out, her owners and crew all dressed up to the nines in oilies and looking rather enviously at our enclosed wheelhouse. They only have a tiny doghouse (just about big enough for their dog) and the steering position is completely exposed. They suggested we should head for Loch Shieldaig, which runs south from the main loch inside an island noted for nesting sea eagles. So, we did that, arriving just after midday. The eagles had unfortunately gone fishing, so we didn't see them.



The lovely Fife Kentra

That might have been to end of our sailing for the day, but for the facts that (i) the writer's sore stiff neck, which he had been nursing uncomplainingly since dawn, had got really painful and (ii) our otherwise well-stocked first aid kit had run clean out of pain-killers.

There was no way we were going to go rowing ashore, and nowhere to go alongside to get pills (even if there had been a supplier of them in the village), so the only solution was to hot-foot-it for our next planned destination, at Ullapool, where there was both a convenient new pontoon from which to walk ashore, and a late night pharmacy.



Anchored in Loch Shieldaig, off Loch Torridon

So, after a regretfully short trip into the beautiful upper Loch Torridon, we rang on full speed and steamed north, followed by a gentle SW wind, to arrive at the new Ullapool mini-marina at dusk, where there was indeed a supplier of painkillers and heat patches to put the writer at least partly out of his misery.

Days 11 and 12: Friday and Saturday 7th and 8th August: Ullapool. 0nm

We were due to pick up the writer's very old Scottish friend John Young on the Sunday at Ullapool, for a few days cruising north with us. We were there a bit early but the forecast was for unremitting wind and rain over the next two days, so we thought we might as well hunker down for a couple of days.



John Young at the helm

We have commented in a previous log (Kingfisher Goes Home 2022) how much Ullapool exceeds expectations. This proved to be as true in the rain as in the sunshine, and the new visitors' pontoons made it all even more accessible. Friday's high point was a splendid seven-course tasting menu at the Dipping Lugger on the quay by the ferry terminal. A lack of recollection about the highlights of Sunday may be attributable in part at least to the excellent wines of the night before, but it certainly included a good bookshop, a well-stocked off-licence and some memorable crab sandwiches at the chippie on the quay. We were certainly cheered by having the central heating on for much of the day. Not being under way, the deck log is silent as the grave, except that some notes on the Sunday page suggest that we spent some time planning the next few days, when we wanted to go further north than ever before, and cover quite a lot of previously unexplored ground. For that purpose, as the notes show, careful study of the Antares chartlets was a central part of the exercise.



Ullapool harbour in the rain

Day 13: Sunday 9th August. Ullapool to Edrachillis Bay. 53nm

John duly arrived just after 0900 and we were off down Loch Broom by 0930, in a breezy WSW f4-5, with sun and broken cloud. A real tonic after days of strong wind and rain. We wriggled our way north through the Summer Isles (Horse Island, Tanera Mor, Riskol and Mullagrach, turning onto a nice (i.e. non rolly) broad reach at Rubha Mor, and rounding our last big headland, the spectacular Point of Stoer, by 1330, turning north east into sheltered water.



Approaching the Point of Stoer from the South, you first see the majestic lighthouse complex on the cliff. Then, as you round, you suddenly se the Old Man of Stoer, a very high sea stack just off the cliffs. Once seen never forgotten.



We were surrounded by abundant wildlife: dolphins, gannets, fulmars, kittiwakes, guillemots, shags and terns, who were no doubt there in profusion because of all the fish beneath the surface. Throughout this cruise we have been surprised by this abundance. As already noted, the chicks' summer sea-training going on is almost as good to watch as the nesting on the cliffs.

The plan was to find a nice quiet anchorage somewhere in Edrachillis Bay for the first night, before forcing north to Handa Island and Loch Laxford the following morning. We briefly anchored at 1420 in the tiny, rock bound Culkein Drumbeg (only possible using Antares and hairy even then), followed by a drift around the peaceful, unusually tree-lined Loch Nedd (rather like a Cornish creek), before pushing up to the head of Loch Beag, past the new-ish Kylesku bridge, where we anchored at 1745. All very beautiful and wild, but too squally for a quiet night.



The rather hairy Culkein Drumbeg

So, we upped anchor and steamed back down under the bridge to the sea, preferring the very sheltered little Badcall Bay, where we anchored in 4 m, as usual on our own, at 1955, in time for a slap-up dinner on board, of steak, dauphinoise potatoes and broccoli, followed by Bakewell tart and custard. Maybe not cordon bleu, but satisfying comfort-food nonetheless.



Under the Kylesku Bridge

Day 14: Monday 10th August: Badcall bay to Loch Roe via Handa and Loch Laxford. 32nm.

Monday dawned bright and sunny (at last!) with a NW4 wind reducing during the day, and a NW swell going gently down. We were off by 0745, to our first stop at anchor in Port an Eilan at Handa at 0845, nicely out of the swell in what was in effect a narrow shaft of sea between two lines of rock, ending in a perfect sandy bay. Handa is of course famous for its bird-life, but this was August and all the chicks were having their sea training, leaving the island empty apart from its keepers and a few visiting tourists who presumably hadn't been told that all the birds had flown.



Port an Eilan at Handa

We didn't land, having a long day's itinerary ahead of us, and left at 1030. But just rounding the point between our anchorage and the Sound between Handa and the mainland, we fell foul of an artfully concealed bit of floating line attached to a creel float, which got round our port propellor and then dragged the main creel line into the tangle before the cutter could detach it. No amount of help from the timely-arrived fishing boat Fulmar (whose creel it was) could undo the mess. We suspected from their rather docile friendliness that they were feeling a bit guilty about the floating line. Creels ain't meant to have 'em. They are just an accident waiting to happen.

We motored on the starboard engine gently back to the calm water of Port an Eilan, for the writer to do his famous diving exercise to free the port prop. This involves using a mask and snorkel of the one-way type, which only sucks air down the pipe and then expels it at the mouthpiece. Then you attach a hose pipe tube to the top of the snorkel pipe, and tie the

other end of the tube to the guardrail, before diving over the side. Thus ventilated, you can work away completely underwater for as long as you like, cutting through the gordian knots around the prop with a sharp knife, or unblocking cooling water inlets. Last time the writer had to do it was in the old inner harbour at Dover. How much nicer was a sandy bay at Handa on a sunny morning!

We were off again, on both engines, before mid-day, and into Loch A'Chadh-fi, a secluded branch of Loch Laxford, by 1255 for lunch, sheltered from the wind in the sunny calm spot behind a convenient island. This small loch is (or maybe was) the base of the famous outward bound training school run by John Ridgway, in which our shipmate John had, long ago, been an instructor. So, it was a sort of homecoming for him. There was no activity to be seen, but Ridgway's lovely Bowman yawl English Rose was laid up there, pulled right up a steep bank in a presumably gale-proof cradle. A rather magnificent, if slightly forlorn, sight, in this wild and apparently deserted outpost of civilisation.



Loch a Chadh-fi, the Ridgway base.

Well, that was as far north as we got on this cruise, and we lost no time in re-tracing our steps, back inside Handa and across to the Point of Stoer. We had feared a roly reach across the bay but, in the event, the NW swell had sufficiently declined to give us a comfortable passage with the aid of our trusty steadying sail. John needed to be back in Ullapool by lunchtime on the following day, so we chose the little-known Loch Roe, just north of Loch Inver, for our overnight stop.

There is nothing particularly special about Loch Roe, and it's not well-known. It's quite small, very shallow, surrounded by gentle hills rather than spectacular mountains and not

easily accessible below half-tide. Without GPS it's quite hard to spot from the sea. But we came away liking it as much as any we found on our cruise. Maybe it was partly because this was one of our very few mainly sunny days. But it was a genuinely peaceful and charming place, tree lined, good for exploration in the dinghy and simply full of seals, everywhere you looked. The best anchorage was free of moorings, and there were no intruding fish farms to spoil the view. There were only a couple of other boats, and nothing to disturb a peaceful evening and night.



Somnolent seals at Loch Roe

Week 3: Loch Roe to Loch Maddy 140nm

Day 15: Tuesday 11th August. Loch Roe to Loch Ewe via Ullapool. 53nm



The amazing mountains of Sutherland

After coffee and hot croissants at 0700 we were off again by 0730, past the amazing isolated mountains of Sutherland, with a view to spending a little time in the Summer Isles before dropping John off at Ullapool. Our first destination was the beautiful shallow sandy anchorage at Tanera Beg where, in 2022 and again with John, we had been entertained by a large school of dolphins. We saw a few dolphins on the way there, but nothing like the performing troupe of 2022, and only a few birds. But the anchorage hadn't lost its magic, which is very hard to capture on camera, because you need a sort of all-round vision to appreciate it.



Friendly performing dolphins in company

The writer had been reading the famous books of the naturalist Frank Fraser Darling who with his wife had lived and crofted on Tanera Mor during WW2. We couldn't resist a look into the main harbour there. The island has recently been purchased by the Wace Foundation, determined to make if viable again after virtual dereliction. We saw a lot of construction and restoration work going on. The island now has two resident luggers and even a beached puffer, the Davenham, which is reputed to house a small cinema in its hold. But the harbour is overshadowed and spoiled by a very large fish farm. So, it has some way to go before becoming truly attractive again.



The puffer Davenham on the beach at Tanera Mor

After saying goodbye to John and re-fuelling at Ullapool, we set off again at 1600, the general plan being to head for a suitable jumping-off point for a passage across to Harris. The day had started grey with a SE 2-3 wind but, by tea time, it was sunny, flat calm, and WARM!! We had a big dolphin escort back down Loch Broom, and two of them stayed with us right across Gruinard Bay.

Loch Ewe seemed to be the best place for an overnight stop, but the question was, where? First, at 1900, we tried Slaggan Bay on the north-east side of the loch. It has a lovely sandy beach, but too much swell rolling in to give is a peaceful night. So off we went up-loch, passing just east of the Isle of Ewe, until we found a perfectly sheltered little bay on the east side of the island, anchoring just after 2000.

Day 16: Wednesday 12th August. Loch Ewe. 5nm

A forecast of strong S or SSW winds in the Minch, moderating after 24 hours, easily persuaded us against a roly reach to Harris, in favour of a sort of lay-day in Loch Ewe, to catch up on a bit of work and life-admin, and do a bit of beaching. We started at 0800 by a half-mile move SE to somewhere with better internet access. After an early shower the day became mainly sunny, if windy. At lunch-time we moved across the loch to a pretty bay called Camas Eoin Thomas with two small sandy, swell-free beaches, although not much shelter from the by now 25kt wind blowing over the treeless hill to windward. But we had a nice run ashore and beach walk among the rock pools. As usual there were no other boats

around, apart from one RIB which soon sped off.



Camas Eoin Thomas in Loch Ewe

This was the day of the forecast eclipse of the sun. Sadly, the clouds rolled up before the evening eclipse, although it certainly did get quite dark.

Day 17: Thursday 13th August, Loch Ewe to Scalpay via the Shiants

The forecast drop in the wind duly occurred overnight. By 0630 when we raised the anchor, it was SSW3 on a grey, misty morning that got thicker as the day wore on.

We hoisted our steadying sail from the outset, more in hope than expectation that there would be enough wind for it to work. In the event the swell had gone down and the passage across the Minch was reasonably smooth.

Our course lay roughly across the tide, once clear of the mainland, and we were aiming off more than 15 degrees to maintain our course over ground, towards our first destination at the Shiants, where we could wait for a fair tide down to Scalpay. The visibility started at about ½ mile, but improved a bit after 0800, enabling us to see the Outer Hebrides (the mountains of Harris) by 0845, and the Shiants emerging from low cloud at 0900.

Lots of wildlife: seals, gannets, razorbills, guillemots and puffins kept us intent on our surroundings, until we dropped anchor at the Shiants at 1020, just east of the shingle bank between the two main islands. For all the short time we were there, the tops of the cliffs were shrouded in cloud, in a way that made them look even higher than on a clear day.

Nothing living was seen ashore apart from a few amazingly brave mountain-climbing sheep (or perhaps goats). They appear to look after themselves alone, entirely happily.



The Shiants in low cloud

We were off again at mid-day, leaving by the north entrance and then turning west. Meanwhile the viz closed down steadily until by 1300 it was down to ¼ mile, and shortly after that, thick fog with viz down to 100 yds. We had shortly before spotted that rare thing on our cruise to date, a yacht under sail. Its sighting gets three exclamation marks in the deck log. She seemed to be on a slowly converging course so, for the first time in years, we turned on the radar, which lit her up perfectly.

The combination of GPS, AIS and radar left us comfortable to continue to, and through, the Sound of Scalpay. We saw the cliffs on either side just before the Scalpay bridge loomed into sight over our heads.



Scalpay Bridge looming out of the murk

By 1355 we were safely alongside the visitors' pontoon in Scalpay North Harbour, shortly thereafter to be joined by the mysterious sailing yacht, which turned out to be Dragon of Rhu, a big Dragonfly trimaran being excellently single-handed by her owner. We realised that we had seen her more than once on our passages south from Handa, typically making best use of her very shallow draft (with foils and rudder up) by anchoring close off windward sandy shores.

In sharp contrast to 2022 (when we found Scalpay seriously deficient) we managed while there to add another good restaurant to our itinerary, the North Harbour Bistro. Delicious local seafood at sensible prices certainly puts Scalpay back on the gastronomic map.

Day 18: Friday 14th August. Scalpay to Tarbert: 4nm

Scalpay was just a prelude to our main goal in Harris, which was the excellent little pop-up marina in East Loch Tarbert, just by the Calmac ferry terminal. And the reason was unashamedly gastronomic, namely the opportunity to have another amazing meal in the extraordinary Flavour restaurant, in an unlikely location on a small industrial estate 20 minutes walk from the marina and out of town to the north east.

We arrived in Tarbert by 1135, on a clearer, drier, colder day, still pock-marked with showers, but much nicer that the previous day's mist and fog. After a quick look (on Antares recommendation) into Ob Lickisto, a little cove a mile to the south east, we berthed in the Tarbert marina alongside Wandering Aengus RNSA, an Oyster 406 still being cruised

(to our admiration and delight) by a brave couple in their 80s. The ex-naval husband had known the writer's late father. A bracing walk across the narrow neck of land separating the East and West Lochs helped build up our appetite for dinner.

This was a simple repeat of 2022, and if anything the cuisine has got even better. We were amazingly lucky to get the last available table in this small place, where the tables nearly surround the open kitchen, and where the head chef / owner keeps up a running commentary on his wonderful work in front of the diners. This time it was a nine-course tasting menu, with wines to match. One could write a whole chapter on his work, but a few pictures say more than words can describe. I would summarise it as disciplined art. Each little morsel of food is an individual work of art, decorated with a pattern of tiny flowers and stems picked personally by him from local hedgerows and fields, on his way to work. But each is precisely replicated before our eyes by him and his sous-chef assistant, again and again, for each of the fourteen guests making up a full house. And as the name of the place proclaims, the flavours are exquisite, beyond the power of words or pictures to describe.



Disciplined art at the Flavour Restaurant, Tarbert, Harris.

Day 19: Saturday 15th August: Tarbert to Opsay via Ensay: 29nm

We have, over many years, "done" the Outer Hebrides several times, in Mikado and Kingfisher, but never the complex area of winding channels, shallows, reefs, tiny islands and strong tides known as the Sound of Harris. It's really the only passage-way between the sheltered east and wild west sides of the Outer Hebrides, between the Butt of Lewis at the very top, north of Stornoway, and the Sound of Barra, almost at the bottom. It's also the jumping-off point for St Kilda, to which we still cherish the hope of sailing, if only a suitably settled period of weather comes our way at just the right time. It didn't in 2022, and it didn't this time either. The rest of the little tidal passages through the islands have been closed off by man-made causeways between the islands. But the Sound of Harris is not just a passage-way. It's a fascinating semi-maritime area in its own right.

We thought we would take a nibble at it on our way South, aiming first at Ensay, at the south west end of the main channel through the Sound, opposite, but slightly west, of Leverburgh. It had been recommended to us by Mungo of Eda Frandsen as having a good sheltered beach on its north east side, and good walking over to sand dunes and lovely beaches on the north west side. Since navigating the Sound of Harris depends on getting your tides right, we made a late-ish start at 1025, after early heavy rain had moderated into cloud and showers, blown along by a W4 wind.

We reached the east entrance of the Sound, passing Rodel's little harbour and medieval church at 1240, and coming to an anchor off the sandy north east bay of Ensay, overlooked by the little island's rather sombre and solitary house, where the returning smurrin chased us from the cockpit into the wheelhouse for lunch. Unfortunately, there was a swell diffracting round into the bay from the north west, so that lying across it at anchor was proving rather roly, while the smurrin was a sufficient discouragement from going ashore. Ensay got a bit of a thumbs down. Maybe it will live up to its reputation on another day.



The sad, solitary house on Ensay beach

Assisted as always by Antares, we next thought we would have a look into Opsay basin, a tiny anchorage at the south-east end of the Sound, consisting of half a dozen little islets at high tide, joined up by drying shoals and reefs at low tide, making a perfect refuge, sheltered from all wind directions, even at high tide. It was completely deserted by human-kind. Even the nearest fish farm was just out of sight. But oh, what wild-life! We saw seals, herons, oyster-catchers, curlew, terns, gulls and geese. But the jewel in the crown was a herd of about 40 red deer that had colonised the surrounding islets. And on a motor round the basin in our silent electric-powered dinghy (perfect for wild-life watching) the writer almost ran into 10 deer swimming across between two islets. Never have I been more foolish not to take my camera with me!

A rather grey afternoon turned into a golden evening, to end a truly special day.



Herd of red deer at Opsay

Day 20: Sunday 16th August: Opsay to Loch Maddy: 12nm

This was another smurrinney / showery day, with a gentle S3 wind ahead of us on the short run south to the entrance of Loch Maddy in North Uist.

Loch Maddy harbour doesn't set the blood racing, whether for beauty, facilities or anything else. It's just a Calmac ferry terminal with a pop-up marina and a rather dour hotel. But it's a good base for exploring the central Outer Hebrides by bus or car. So we thought we would do a little exploring on the way, first to Vacasay basin, a larger version of Opsay, and then to Loch Portain, just opposite the harbour in Loch Maddy.

We were nodded goodbye by a solitary antlered red deer at we left Opsay, and didn't find much to write home about in Vacasay (nothing in the deck log, in the photo album or our memories). But Loch Portain was attractive. Reached up a long, narrow and in places shallow channel, it opens out round a 90 degree right-hand bend into a calm, completely sheltered anchorage, surrounded by low hills with the mountains of North Uist peeping over them in the background. One other anchored yacht soon departed, leaving us in solitary possession, overlooked only by a few small houses. A much better place to stay than Loch Maddy harbour, but with no obvious road connection to the rest of North Uist.

At 1300 we set off for Loch Maddy harbour, having booked a hire car for the following day. Arrival an hour later wasn't improved by the simultaneous arrival of a heavy shower, or by the complete failure of the port engine rev-counter on the short passage across. This turned out to be caused by a detached wire on the alternator. Just for once the writer summoned up the necessary electrical skills to identify and fix the problem quite quickly once alongside.

Emboldened by this success, he embarked upon fixing the much more persistent problems of throttle alignment and under-reading by the starboard rev-counter. Google AI provided an almost instant guide to adjusting the tacho, which has since happily read the almost same revs as its sister on the port side, when both engines' revs are synchronised by ear. Whether either of them is reading the correct revs is quite another matter. But that awaits using a specialist rev-reading tool as part of the winter refit. The throttle adjustment took a bit longer, but a reasonable alignment was eventually obtained, by adjusting the little bottle-screws that connect the throttle lines to the levers on each engine. All a bit complicated because the engines have dual throttles cum gear-levers, one set on deck and the other in the wheelhouse.



The notorious Glen Sannox at Loch Maddy

Day 21: Monday 17th August. Alongside at Loch Maddy. Car trip round the central Outer Hebrides.

The pre-booked hire car duly arrived at 1000, and we set off on an all-day car trip around all the islands connected by causeway, from Berneray in the north to Eriskay in the south, taking in North Uist, Benbecula, South Uist, Flodday, Grimsay and countless tiny connected islands on the way. It was a quite long and informative journey, spoilt only by continuous heavy rain from lunch-time onwards, which ruled out enjoyment of the sand dunes and beaches along the west side of many of the islands. This is a sailing log not a travel guide, so the detail will be omitted. The highlights included an excellent seafood lunch on Eriskay at the AM Politician café (named after the wartime wreck immortalised by Compton Mackenzie in Whisky Galore), a spectacular very modern catholic church on South Uist, a superbly designed small distillery on Benbecula and a nice load of fresh langoustines picked up from a

seafood warehouse at Kallin. We also picked up some very soggy walkers and drove them back to Loch Maddy. They were clearly having a much worse day in the rain than we were!



Then it was back to Kingfisher, on with the central heating, and hunker down to await the forecast better day on Tuesday.

Week 4: Loch Maddy (North Uist) to Loch Don (Mull)

Day 22: Tuesday 18th August. Loch Maddy to South Rona. 45nm

We had, in effect, three choices where to go from Loch Maddy. We could have continued down the east side of the Outer Hebrides, but we had done exactly that passage in 2022. Or we could have explored the west side of Skye, taking in Lochs Dunvegan, Bracadale and Harport, and then the Small Isles. But in the end another forecast of rough stuff in the Minch persuaded us to go for the sheltered route again, round the northern tip of Skye and back to the Kyles via the Inner Sound.

The glass was falling slowly all day. An initially bright start at 0710 with blue sky and clouds faded into grey smurrin, with visibility down to half a mile by 1030. Thereafter things improved a bit. Dramatic views of the Skye shore emerged from the murk as we approached the northern tip, then dodging close inshore, inside Eilean Flodigarry, with wind by now howling out of Staffin Bay.

Rain or shine, running down the north-east coast of Skye is one of the most beautiful passages anywhere in the Western Isles. The viz improved enough, still with showers and ragged cloud, to give us a spectacular view, of crags, waterfalls, almost uninhabited bays with their backdrop of tall mountains, while we ploughed along a flat sea, entirely protected from the SW wind and swell. Perhaps the high point was the huge waterfall at Elishader, which we stopped to admire at 1205, in full spate from cliff top to the sea, with tourists no larger than pin-pricks looking down from their viewpoint on the cliff top.



Huge waterfall in north-east Skye

It is never possible for the writer to ignore South Rona, by now looming up to port, with its near perfect landlocked natural harbour at Acairseid Mhor, where we moored to a visitor's buoy at 1320.



Acairseid Mhor harbour, South Rona

South Rona was, we discovered, under new ownership and management. New landing stage, smart new visitors' buoys, but as yet no facilities ashore (the old ones having been ruled non-compliant with modern health and safety regs). The new interim manager Steve (replacing

Bill, of “beware of the Bill” fame) gave us a detailed account of the work being done, and we took the belated opportunity to gather a nice sprig of heather with which to adorn the bow, in the tradition of yachts passing north of Ardnamurchan point.



Heather on the bow

We were joined in the evening, for convivial drinks, by Chris and Sally in their rugged little trawler yacht Nell. We had last encountered them at Loch Aline. They were still taking a much more leisurely path north, with plans to reach the Orkneys.



Kingfisher and Nell in Acairseid Mhor, South Rona

Day 23: Wednesday 19th August. South Rona to Inverie, Loch Nevis. 43nm.

This was a fairly uneventful passage down the Inner Sound, starting at 1010, catching the tide through the Kyles, and then down the Sound of Sleat to the beautiful Loch Nevis (meaning heaven). We waited briefly for the fair tide at the Crowlin Islands, in the very narrow channel between the two islands, deep enough to squeeze in at the north end, but blocked by a reef at the south end, and guarded by a solitary seal. Quite a tight fit, even for a shallow draft boat like Kingfisher.

We were attracted to Loch Nevis by its proximity to Mallaig, where we wanted to do our last re-fuel of the cruise. It is mainly a busy commercial and fishing harbour, now with a small marina in a less than ideal position in northerly aspect winds (which had already arrived), so we wanted somewhere more settled for the night. Inverie Bay seemed ideal. Inverie is a small village on the north shore of Loch Nevis, miles away from any road connecting with the rest of Scotland, and only accessible by ferry or by hiking in over the hills. There is a good pub there called the Old Forge, priding itself as the remotest pub in the UK. It is much frequented by hikers, and has plenty of good visitors' buoys to accommodate pub-loving yachtsmen.

Although it remained showery, we were treated to a beautiful sunset, followed by a slowly rising east wind, from which we were perfectly sheltered.



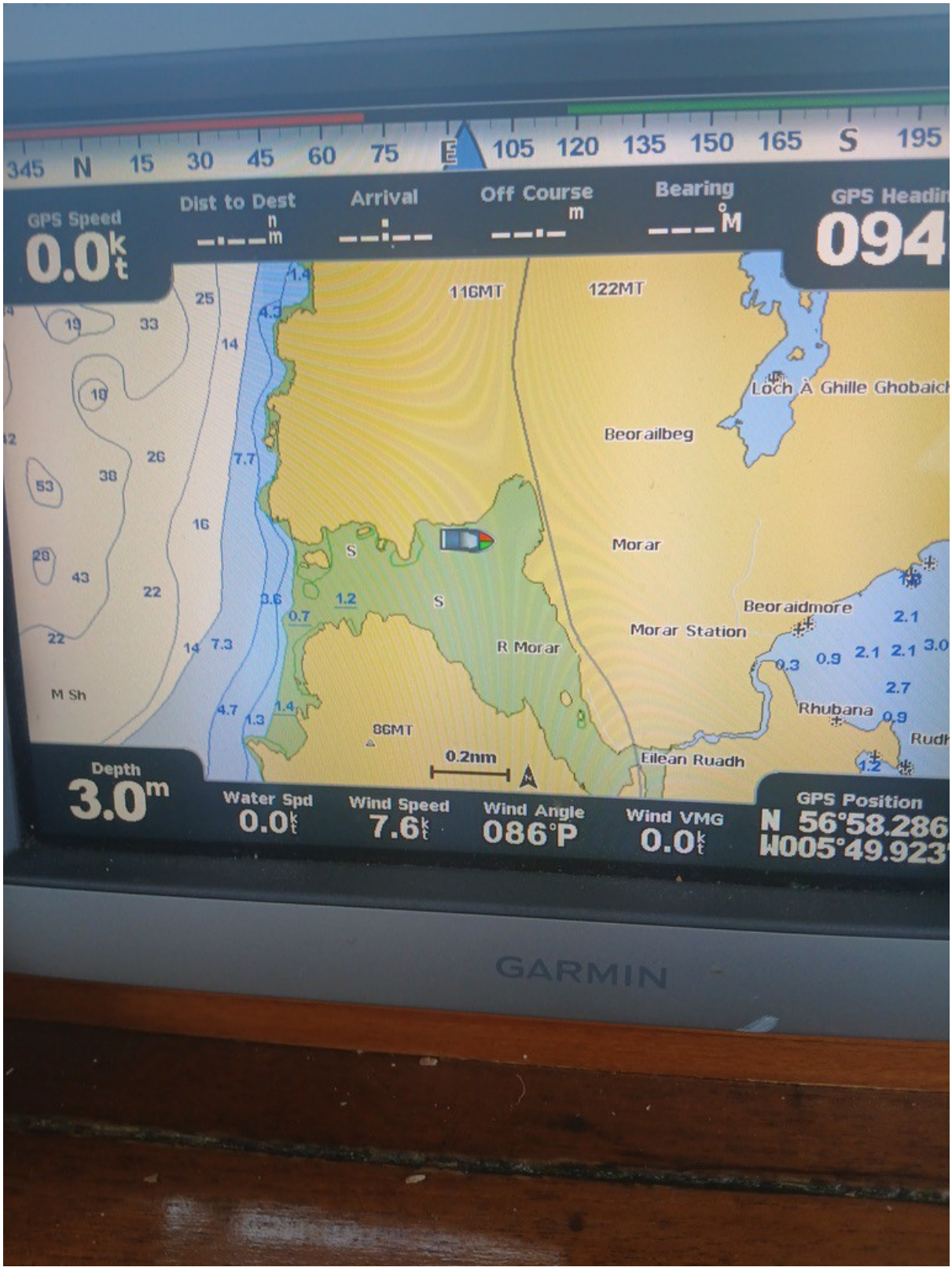
Sunset at Inverie, Loch Nevis

Day 24: Thursday 20th August. Inverie to Arisaig, via the sands of Morar. 14nm

We duly re-fuelled at Mallaig, in the otherwise empty commercial dock. The fuelling kit there is designed for much bigger and thirstier craft than ours, so it was quite a challenge to get the diesel to flow slow enough for our little filling pipes. But we managed, and were soon on our way south again at 1025.

Immediately south of Mallaig, right opposite Eigg, is the mouth of the freshwater Loch Morar, reputed to be the deepest loch in the whole of Scotland, but inaccessible up the little river that joins it to the sea, under low road and rail bridges. What makes it memorable are the white sands through which the river reaches the sea. Generally regarded as a complete no-no for yachts, there is a shifting bar at the seaward end, with the famous white sands inshore, the river following a winding route through them, never more than 2m deep and generally less, even at mean high water.

But the conditions were perfect to try and explore, with a light northerly (offshore) wind, no swell and high-water neaps at 1300. The Antares team had done a reasonably recent survey, which proved remarkably accurate in marking the winding track of the river among the sands just under water. So, at 1100, on the last two hours of the flood, we crept gingerly over the bar and up the river-bed to the only potentially suitable anchorage at the NE corner of the sandy entrance.



We did it! Anchored in the white sands of Morar

A great sense of achievement in going where no substantial yacht has ever gone before was slightly marred by the need to get back out again before high tide. We might have been able to lie over low water in the tiny deeper pool where we anchored, but the next high tide would

be in the middle of the night, and we could not have an assurance that, by the next high tide on the following day, a prevailing swell would not have arisen, (as indeed it did) making the bar impassable. So out we went again after only a very short stay. The disadvantage was that the famous white sands are only visible (or walkable) at low water, so we never saw them, apart from a narrow strip at the high-water line. Still, you can't (safely) have everything.

Once outside the bar we turned south again, on a very roly, custard-spilling, reach out to sea, at the beginning of the run down to Arisaig, one of our favourite places on the west coast, and north of Loch Moidart. There is nothing special about the harbour at Arisaig, apart from its proximity to a station on the scenic (still partly steam-hauled) West Highland Railway. The attraction for us lies in the mile or so of reefs separating the entrance channel from the sea outside. At high tide they are a myriad of tiny islets with little channels between them, perfect for dinghy exploration. At low tide they all become joined up by sandbanks, so that you can explore the whole area on foot.



Anchored inside the sandy reefs outside Arisaig

We arrived shortly after high tide at 1310, anchoring in the shelter of the reefs on a beautifully sunny, breezy afternoon. Following lunch the writer explored the shallows in the dinghy while the Admiral had her customary siesta. Then, after tea, with the tide nearly

down, it was on wellies and both of us ashore to explore on foot, with not another soul in sight.



The Arisaig reefs on foot

What makes these reefs so special is the extraordinary backdrop of the Cuillins, Eigg and Rhum on the western skyline.



Thje Sgurr of Eigg over the Arisaig reefs

And as evening advanced the sun went down behind them, producing an unforgettable sunset, eventually replaced by a perfect half-moon in the gathering darkness. The deck log concludes: “Altogether a perfect day!!” and it truly was.



The same view at sunset

Day 25: Friday 21st August. Arisaig to Loch Sunart. 31nm

We woke up to a cold N4 wind and occasional shower for our passage back round Ardnamurchan Point.

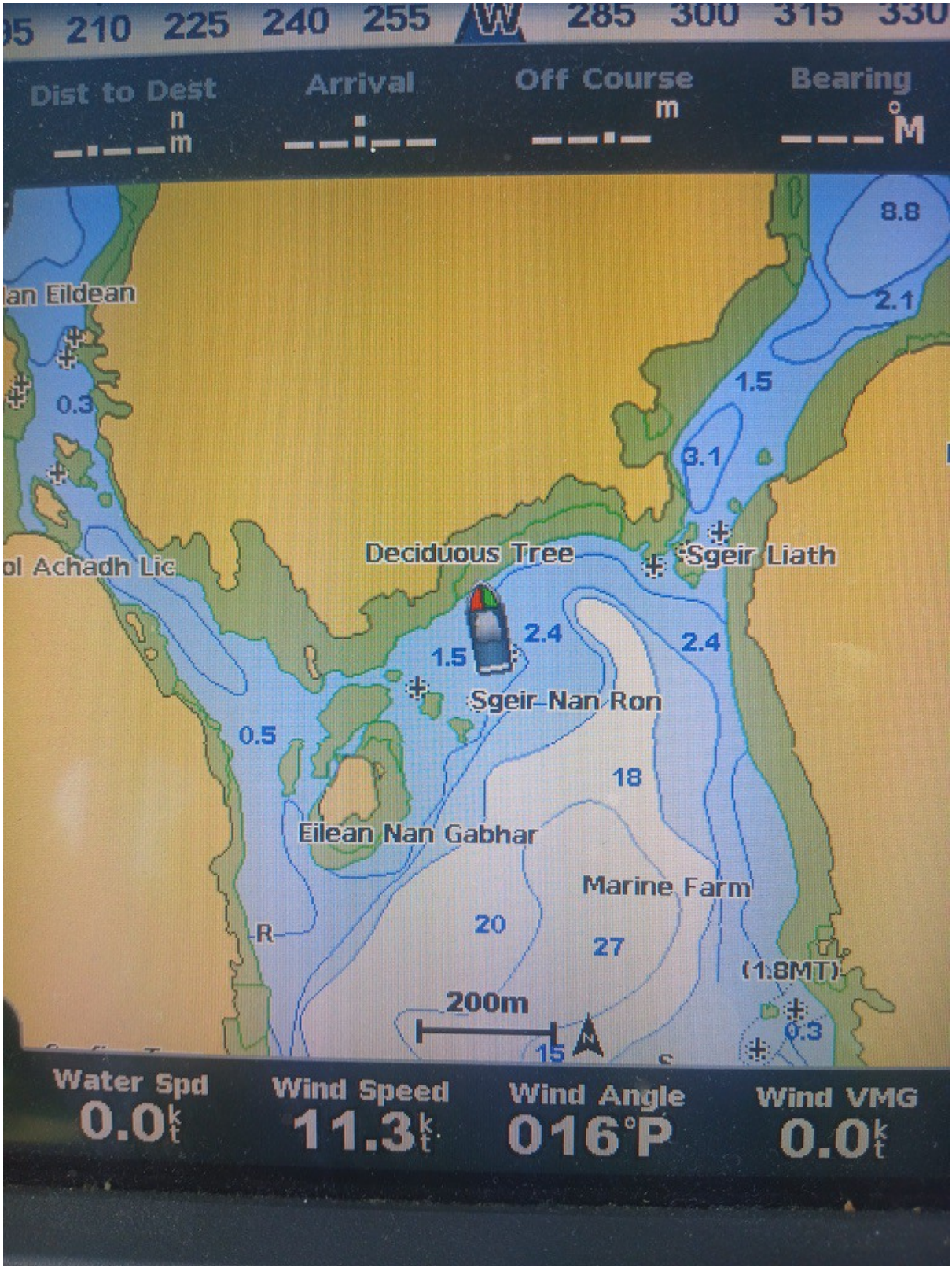


The lighthouse on Ardnamurchan P{oint

Having seen hardly any other yachts under way for days, the sea seemed suddenly to be almost full of them, all converging on the Point, going north or south. We must have seen a dozen by lunch-time. For us the pick of the bunch was a 15m classic motor yacht called Seven Sisters, going north.



We were round the Point by 1130 and decided on a visit to another minimally accessible beauty spot, Loch Teacuis on the southern side of Loch Sunart. This very remote loch has two entrances, either side of Carna Island, but both look equally hairy on a Garmin or Navionics chart, leaving it to Antares to provide sufficient detail and sailing directions to make the risks seem manageable. We took the eastern entrance and anchored just short of the narrows half-way up the loch at 1400, again with not a soul, or even sign of human habitation, in sight. But the north wind was funnelling up the loch, so after tea we re-anchored at the seaward end of the loch, between the east and west entrances, well sheltered by Carna from the by now failing north wind, for a peaceful night, after another day which started with showers but ended with warm sunshine.



Our peaceful overnight anchorage ion Loch Teacuis

Day 26: Saturday 22nd August. Loch Teacuis to Tobermory. 10nm

This was one of our shorter hops, and we had already visited Tobermory on the way north. But we wanted to stock up with provisions, and had been too busy fuelling and entertaining on the previous visit to have a proper leisurely look around.



And we wanted to sample the splendid seafood at the famous Café Fish on the pier by the ferry terminal. None of this disappointed, and the charm of the place was enhanced both by the 1929 Dickies of Tarbet motor yacht Cordelia on her buoy and the graceful modern schooner Adix, anchored in the bay. The only disappointment was the slowly deteriorating weather, which turned to rain by teatime.



The fair Cordelia, at Tobermopry

Day 27: Sunday 23rd August. Tobermory to Shuna via Loch a Choire. 30nm

We had been receiving good reports of the Boathouse Restaurant at Loch a Choire, which branches off Loch Linnhe just north east of the enormous granite quarry at Glensanda. Our Marine Watch app had revealed both Kentra and Chico anchored there earlier, presumably with a visit to the Boathouse in view. It was initially a calm grey day, with nothing to disturb a smooth run down the Sount of Mull, turning to port at Rubha an Ridire and up Loch Linnhe past the quarry. A light shower greeted us as we entered Loch a Choire, but it wasn't enough to disturb the graceful beauty of the place, or prevent a dinghy ride ashore to admire the curious sculpture at the head of the loch, before a thoroughly good roast Sunday lunch at the Boathouse.



Strange sculpture supporting the Admiral at Loch a Choire

It wasn't looking like being a good place to spend the night, because the forecast SE wind would be blowing straight up the loch. So, at 1400 we upped anchor to do the short trip over to Shuna Sound on the other side of Loch Linnhe, where there was perfect shelter between

Shuna island and the mainland. We anchored at 1430 at the southern end of the Sound, next to a fine pilot cutter, by now basking in hot sunshine, before a calm starry night, perfectly placed for our next exploration almost to Ben Nevis, on the following day.



Pilot cutter in Sound of Shuna

Day 28: Monday 24th August. Shuna to Loch Don via Loch Leven. 40nm

On our diversion up Loch Linnhe on the run north we had been satiated by Loch Etive, only a little north of Oban. This time we determined to explore further, attracted by Loch Leven, with reports of spectacular mountains, including the Paps of Glencoe, the site of the famous massacre of members of the clan MacDonald by government troops commanded by Robert Campbell, in 1692.

Starting at 0935 on a perfect, calm sunny morning, we were under the Ballachulish Bridge and moored on the visitors buoy outside the seafood café half-way up the north side of the loch by 11.50. Although we didn't see another boat under way in the loch, there were quite a few moorings lower down (enough to clutter up the main anchorages) and the tourist industry had rather spoilt the wild beauty of Glencoe. There was even a camper van park on the

foreshore.



Approaching Loch Leven

But our mooring was much further up the loch, well among the spectacular mountains all around, and well placed for our lunch stop at the café. The head of the loch appeared likely to be spoilt by decaying industry, so we gave it a miss. The mountains where we stopped are certainly spectacular, but perhaps a little less wild and rugged than those around Loch Nevis or Loch Hourn. Maybe the sunny weather and absence of cloud contributed to the sense of gentleness. No doubt it would look very different in winter.



Dwarfed by the high mountains, up Loch Leven

We were by no means done with exploring. For some time we had planned to make our first visit to Loch Don, at the eastern corner of Mull. It's an odd-ball among Scottish lochs. Although Scurr Dearg at 738m looms in the western background, the loch itself more

resembles a tidal creek in the English countryside, shallow, calm and serene among fields and woods, and teeming with wildlife. Besides sheep and Highland cattle (of which more anon) we saw or heard seals, curlew, redshank, greenshank, oyster catchers, arctic and common terns, gulls, greylag geese and ducks. There is a big tidal shoal strewn with large boulders occupying much of the entrance, where much of the birdlife congregated, inside which we could watch and admire in perfect shelter even in an easterly wind, with only one other yacht in sight, and just one small fishing boat moored upstream.

The passage there took us past another tiny castle on its little Island Stalcaire, just north of Shuna Sound and along the pretty south-east coast of Lismore Island. At 1815 we passed a strange uncrewed autonomous raft transmitting on AIS right in the entrance of the Sound of Mull. A worrying sign of things to come.



Stalcaire Castle on its tiny islet

Week 5: Loch Don to Largs. 80nm

Day 29: Tuesday 25th August. At anchor in Loch Don.

This was a completely peaceful day, with some sun, high cloud and a light east wind. We did a couple of exploratory runs in the dinghy, mainly to admire the wildlife, in particular the beautiful Highland cattle cooling their toes in the seawater. Otherwise, we just chilled, in almost complete solitude, preparing for the last leg of the cruise.



Highland cow, cooling her toes

Day 30: Wednesday 26th August. Loch Don to Achanarnich Bay. 22nm

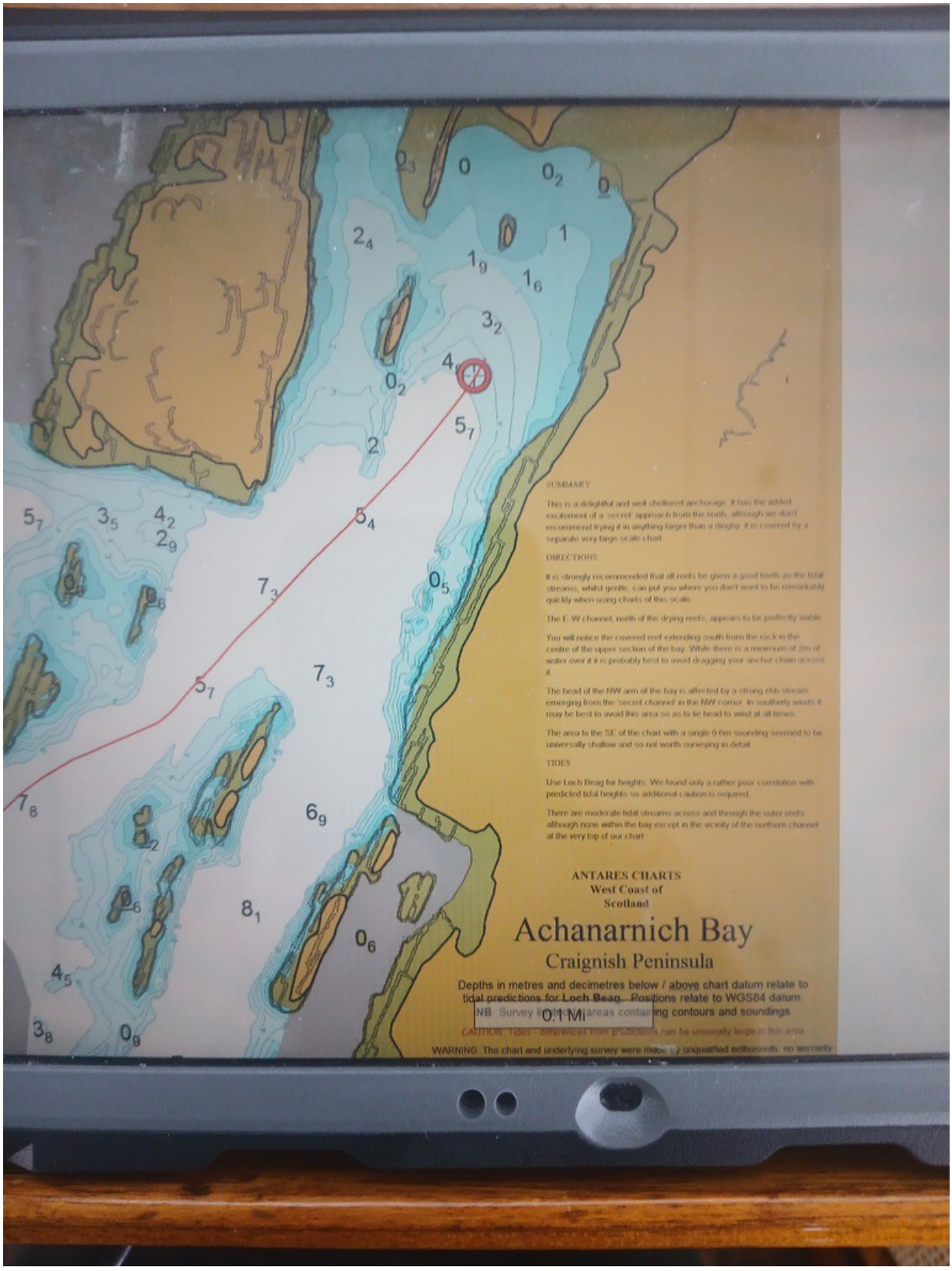
This was quite a busy exploring day. We started at a civilised 0900 with a short hop against a light easterly to the southern tip of Kerrera, to anchor close off the small, ruined but spectacular Gylen Castle. Built in 1582 on a rocky outcrop overlooking the sea for the clan MacDougall to guard the southern approaches to Oban, it was occupied by Royalists, besieged, captured and burned down in 1647 by the Covenanters under General Leslie, and has remained a gaunt ruin ever since. It looks splendid from the sea, but takes a good walk for visiting tourists, because there are no roads in Kerrera.

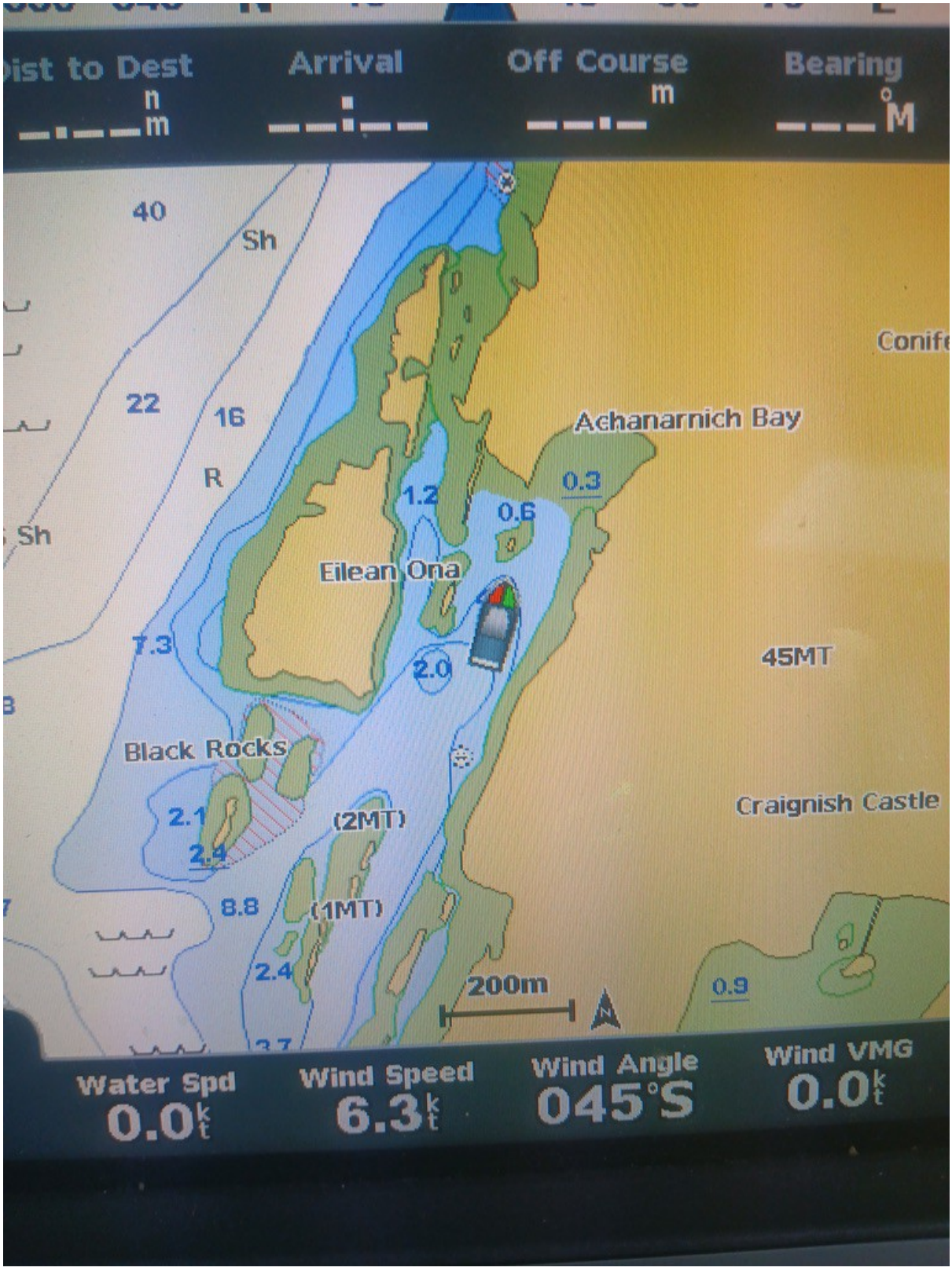


Anchored off Gylen castle

We felt too lazy to go ashore to clamber round it, so steamed off south to the famous sheltered anchorage at Puilladobhrain at the north-west end of Seil island, anchoring there at 1230. It can get crowded there but we only had to share the anchorage with one other yacht. It gave us the chance to exorcise the unquiet ghost of having gently bumped Mikado's keel on a rock there many years previously. That was before the days of Antares, and even Navionics. No such problem this time!

From there it was a two-hour run, through Easdale harbour, looking for somewhere to spend the night before Crinan. We tried but rejected Cullipool, a fishing village on the west side of Luing, and in the end settled for the tiny cove at Achanarnich Bay, on the opposite side of the promontory that shelters Ardfern, just short of the Dorus Mor. We were welcomed in by seals lying like markers on off-lying rocks, as gentle rain began to fall, but not so as to disturb a quiet peaceful night, shared with just a couple of other yachts.


SUMMARY
This is a delightful and well sheltered anchorage. It has the added excitement of a 'secret' approach from the north, although we don't recommend trying it in anything larger than a dinghy. It is covered by a separate very large scale chart.
DIRECTIONS
It is strongly recommended that all reefs be given a good berth as the tidal streams, whilst gentle, can put you where you don't want to be remarkably quickly when using charts of this scale.
The E-W channel, north of the drying reefs, appears to be perfectly viable.
You will notice the covered reef extending south from the rock in the centre of the upper section of the bay. While there is a minimum of 2m of water over it it is probably best to avoid dragging your anchor chain across it.
The head of the NW arm of the bay is affected by a strong ebb stream emerging from the 'secret channel' in the NW corner. In southerly winds it may be best to avoid this area so as to be head to wind at all times.
The area to the SE of the chart with a single 0.6m sounding seemed to be universally shallow and so not worth surveying in detail.
TIDES
Use Loch Beag for heights. We found only a rather poor correlation with predicted tidal heights so additional caution is required.
There are moderate tidal streams across and through the outer reefs although none within the bay except in the vicinity of the northern channel at the very top of our chart.
ANTARES CHARTS
West Coast of
Scotland
Achanarnich Bay
Craignish Peninsula
Depths in metres and decimetres below / above chart datum relate to tidal predictions for Loch Beag. Positions relate to WGS84 datum.
NB. Survey [illegible] areas containing contours and soundings
0.1 Mi
CAUTION: Tides - differences from predictions can be unusually large in this area
WARNING: The chart and underlying survey were made by unqualified enthusiasts: no warranty



These two pictures show how superior is Antares (1) over Garmin (2)

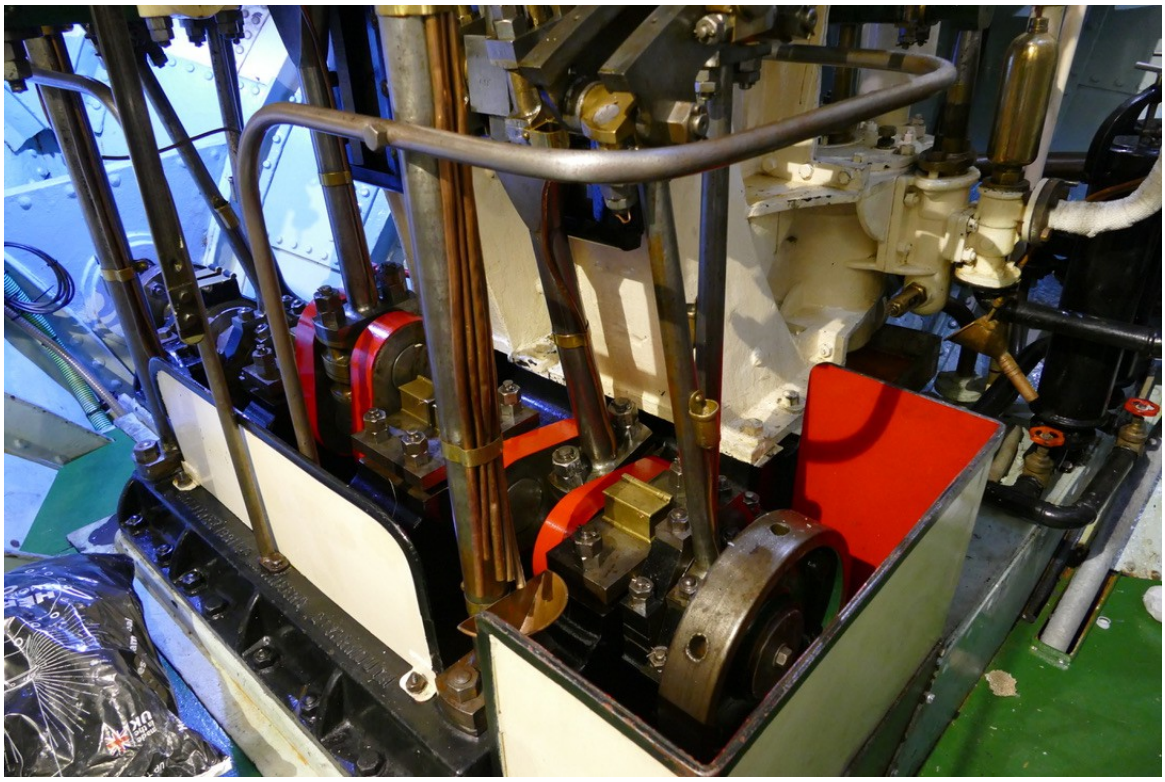
Day 31: Thursday 27th August. Achanarnich bay to Crinan Basin. 5nm



Admiral at the helm

This really was our shortest run of all, and proved to be the hottest day of the whole cruise. The writer actually put on shorts and a t shirt for the first time! Wall to wall sunshine and a light easterly offshore wind made for true summer cruising.

We were into Crinan by 0850 (an early start catching the last of the fair tide through the Dorus Mor) and spent the day nosing round the basin, in particular meeting our good friend Ross Ryan, owner of the first rule Fife 8m The Truant, and the beautiful varnished MFV Scarbh, which he uses for chartering. Ross's mother Frances Macdonald owns the Crinan Hotel, where we had a good seafood dinner to round off the day. Both Ross and Frances are distinguished painters. By this time the puffer Vic 32 had been replaced in the basin by the newly restored puffer Auld Reekie, giving the writer a chance to look round her now immaculate engine room, with vertical boiler and compound steam engine. Vic 32 had replaced Auld Reekie on the Crinan boatyard slip, where she was receiving much-needed repairs to her corroded hull plating before (hopefully) resuming charter work next year.



Immaculate engine room in the puffer Auld Reekie



Just chilling in the sunshine at Crinan

Day 32: Friday 28th August. Crinan to Tarbert (again). 16nm.

The modest mileage sailed belies the hard work and occasional anxiety of getting through the Crinan Canal in a day. It's only nine miles long, but it has 15 locks and seven bridges to negotiate. This time the anxiety was aggravated by having to negotiate most of the locks in company with a quite large plastic yacht, whose crew didn't appear to have any lock experience. We were together a tight squeeze in the typical lock, and they really didn't know how to come smoothly alongside anything, us included. But we came away with only a tiny graze on our varnished rail, albeit after quite a lot of anxious fender moving.

In the end the other boat gave up after about nine locks and stopped, maybe in pure embarrassment, but this meant that the till-then very efficient canal company lock operating team got a bit discombobulated, wanting the two-boat convoy to be maintained and wondering where the other boat had gone. But we eventually persuaded them that the other boat's disappearance wasn't our fault, and they shepherded us alone through the remaining locks, arriving at the sea lock at Ardrishaig just before 1500, all ready to go to sea again.



Approaching Ardrishaig, the Admiral with the headrope

Then it was just a short run back down Loch Fyne to Tarbert, with a short stop in the pretty South Bay at Barmore Island, before another magnificent fish dinner at the Red Herring,

washed down by some very nice Moldovan Chardonnay, served by a very nice Moldovan waiter. What not to like!

We wondered why someone from Moldova should want to make his life in a remote corner of West Scotland. Conversation with him revealed that, while he was perfectly happy in Tarbert, his long-term ambition was to move one day to New York. Even then it seemed a long roundabout way for him to get there.

Day 33. Saturday 29th August: Tarbert to Inchmarnock via Kilbride Bay. 10nm

The wet weather we experienced when in the Outer Hebrides had, we felt, rather robbed us (and particularly the Admiral) of a proper dose of sandy beaches. Of course, a beach usually only has sand on it if it is exposed to the habitual beating of the prevailing swell. So, visiting good beaches required no swell and sunny (or at least dry) weather, a combination in short supply this so-called summer. But it did look as if, for our last couple of days, we might get a bit of beachable weather, the forecast being for either minimal or offshore wind and at least some sun.

We had more than once in past years looked with envy at a beautiful beach, just round the corner from Portavaddie, stretching across Ascog and Kilbride Bays on the south west facing coast between Loch Fyne and the Kyles of Bute. We had always been obliged to give it a miss in the past, either because we were racing in four successive Fife Regattas, or because of the prevailing swell. But this day dawned flat calm and sunny. So, loaded down with prawn tails, mackerel pate and marie-rose sauce from a fish stand on the Tarbert dockside, we set off for Ascog Bay at 1010, arriving at 1050.

It turned out that we had left it too late to enjoy the sand there, because it largely covers by half-tide, but Kilbride Bay next door was just fine. The wind remained completely absent all day. The sun stayed out, perfect for beach walking and exploration in shorts and t shirts, while Kingfisher lay anchored offshore, truly a painted ship upon a painted ocean.



Painted ship upon a painted ocean. Kilbride Bay, with Arran in the background

Sandpipers hopping around at the water's edge proved to be the main wildlife attraction. As so often there was only one other yacht, which soon moved away.



The Admiral gets her sand at last

Inchmarnock island was another place so often sailed past but never visited. The narrow-ish channel between the Island and Bute offered good shelter from almost any direction (unlike Kilbride Bay which offered none) so, at 1810, we raised anchor and motored ever so gently over to the anchorage half way up its east coast, opposite St Ninian's Bay on Bute, just off the only real landing-place, ready for exploring ashore in the morning. Meanwhile we had the stirring sight of gannets fishing (more like dive-bombing) and also the yachts in the annual two-handed race from Largs. It was meant to be round Arran, but the very light wind led them to shorten it to round Inchmarnock. Even then not all finished within the time-limit, but we had the pleasure of seeing them creep past in the serenely calm evening.



Day 34: Sunday 30th August. Inchmarnock to Colintrave via Ettrick Bay. 12nm

This was our last full day. Early morning mist and smurrin caused us to abandon our plan to explore Inchmarnock. It was quite overgrown, and the deep undergrowth was bound to be soaking wet. Instead, and because the SE wind was just whispering off the Bute shore we decided on more beaching, this time on the enormous Ettrick Bay on Bute, between Inchmarnock and the Kyles. It is such a perfect sandy beach that in the Victorian era they even built a dedicated narrow-gauge railway just to give tourists access to it from Rothesay. We had seen it from a distance in June, on a round Bute bus trip during a lay-day in the Fife Regatta (the narrow gauge railway having become just a bike track) and the opportunity to enjoy it by boat was not to be missed.

It's a very gently shelving, pure sandy beach, so despite the rising tide we had to anchor some way offshore and go ashore in the electric dinghy. We found the beach, in a grey calm morning, to be almost deserted. There was none of the prevailing swell, so no heroics were needed on landing. And the waiting treat was a nice, warm, traditional beach café, serving good coffee and pastries to a small clientele, mainly from nearby camper vans.

Our beach cravings finally fully satisfied, though without sun, we left at 1215, to anchor in the (by now) sunny afternoon in Black Farland bay, also on Bute, half way up West Kyle opposite Tignabruich, and again in perfect shelter, for a peaceful last afternoon watching the occasional local yacht traffic (not much) in warm sunshine.

Our last night was to be spent, at Jamie Mathieson's kind invitation, on his private mooring at Colintrave, just east of the Kyle narrows, by the ferry across East Kyle to Bute, and near the simple Colintrave Hotel. It is a truly remarkable and maybe unique mooring, with a long rigid tube rising vertically from the buoy to the height of our (and his) foredeck, housing the warp which just had to be grabbed and cleated on board. So much better than struggling to reach and pull up small pick-up buoys with a long boathook, not least because they are always invisible to the helmsman, necessitating guesswork and frantic sign language from the Admiral on the final approach.



Jamie Mathieson's amazing mooring at Colintrave, East Kyle

Dinner at the little hotel proved delicious, leaving a peaceful walk and short row back to Kingfisher in the sunset, after the little Calmac ferry had been put to bed for the night.

Day35: Monday 31st August: Colintrave to Largs. 15nm

True to form for this year, our final (final) half-day afloat began with a heavy shower, half mile viz and increasing NW wind, happily right behind us. We were off by 0850. The rain stopped an hour later, giving us some enjoyment of the very beautiful East Kyle before passing Rothesay at 0940, and setting out across the Clyde to the Cumbraes. The memorable feature of this final run was a couple of full-power trials. Up to now, out of respect for the fuel crisis threatened by the US / Iran war, we had almost entirely limited Kingfisher to a stately seven knots (through the water) but we thought we might just clear away a few cobwebs in the exhaust before leaving her to be trucked home from Largs later in the week.

We started with full power in the wheelhouse, that is, with the throttles right forward until the knobs touched the shelf on which they were mounted. This produced 2,600 revs and 8.6 kts, with just a little steam from the port exhaust, although with only a 5 degree increase on the temp gauge, and no feelable heating of the cooling water as it left the exhaust.

Then we tried from the on-deck steering position, where you could push the throttles further down before they hit the wheelhouse roof. Whooppee! That produced 2,800 revs on the port engine and a splendid 3,000 on starboard, with a speed increase to a majestic 9.4 kts, and a wash like a speedboat. A bit of steam now from both exhausts, but no increase in temperature. Bearing in mind (i) that she had not been scrubbed since early June (ii) that there was still more to be got from the port engine by throttle adjustment, maybe the magical 10 kts may one day be just in reach. But that's for another day, and a fall in diesel prices.

We reached Largs by 1115, still awaiting some final sunshine, to transfer Kingfisher into the supremely capable hands of our good and generous friend Peter Wright, so he could get her onto the lorry south later in the week after we had sleepered back to London to renew our budding acquaintance with our newly arrived (now 3 month old) grand-daughter Delphine, for whose delightful and by now smiling company the Admiral had been pining away for at least a week. So had the writer, if only he were frank enough to admit it!


KINGFISHER



Peter's lovely dog comes to say goodbye

Conclusions

To start with, a few stats may be of interest. Ignoring trucking up and down the M5 and M6, we covered 833 nautical miles (slightly less than last year in Brittany), using about 900 litres of fuel (inclusive of heating). We proceeded at a rough average of 7kts, steaming on 31 days and spending only 4 whole days anchored or in harbour. Our average nautical mileage per steaming day was 26.9, and overall 23.8. Our maximum daily mileage was 90, and our minimum just 5. Our port engine used no oil at all (mercifully after a very expensive crank-case seal replacement in the winter) while the starboard engine leaked a pint or two into the drip-tray, from an as yet undetected source. Goodness knows how much fresh water we used, but there was of course no shortage to worry about. We got through about 5 bottles of single malt whisky, but no seasick pills at all.

This was, in many respects, rather like a happy repeat of our 2022 cruise. They both followed a Fife Regatta, both took place in what will be remembered in Scotland as non-summers, while England basked (or maybe baked) in successive heat waves. Both covered similar ground and both left us more than ever in love with Western Scotland, with its delightful and generous inhabitants and with each other. We did no night passages, endured no gales (apart from one at anchor) or wild seas, and Kingfisher looked after us perfectly, with no defects, with warm central heating when needed, and with her invariably well-behaved sea-keeping. And on neither occasion did we get the magical window in the weather at the right time to enable us to venture out to St Kilda. Sadly, we saw no other yacht, from start to finish, flying the white ensign (though of course Kentra is a Squadron yacht).

So, what was new or different, to justify another (perhaps all too long) log? Well, despite this being (if I recall correctly) the writer's sixth Western Isles cruise, we still found so much new to see and explore. We went even further north than ever before (up past Handa, almost to Cape Wrath) whereas previously we had stopped at the Summer Isles. We explored a further 15 sea lochs never visited before, together with new islands and anchorages too numerous to mention. We came much nearer to realising the concept that cruising in the Western Isles can be like hopping between great restaurants without having to cook dinner for ourselves. We explored the central Outer Hebrides by car as never before, and we saw a whole lot more picturesque castles than ever before. Of course we met more new friends, saw new (i.e. not seen before) beautiful classic boats, and had a wholly new, much more professional experience of being whisked through the Crinan Canal by the now excellent young in-house staff.

But maybe, in the final analysis, it was the elements of continuity that counted for more than the novelties. The Western Isles continue to be truly remote. On a typical day, you still only see a couple of other yachts actually under way, however many pop-up marinas spring up, and however many inactive moored or marina-ed yachts are to be seen from a distance. The scenery remains almost entirely unspoilt (apart from the mega-quarry in Loch Linnhe). And the endlessly changeable weather just goes on adding to the beauty and the variety. Midges (and most tourists, bless them) continue to stay on land, so yachts can easily avoid them. Quite simply, it really does remain, as it has always been, the very best cruising ground in the whole wide world.