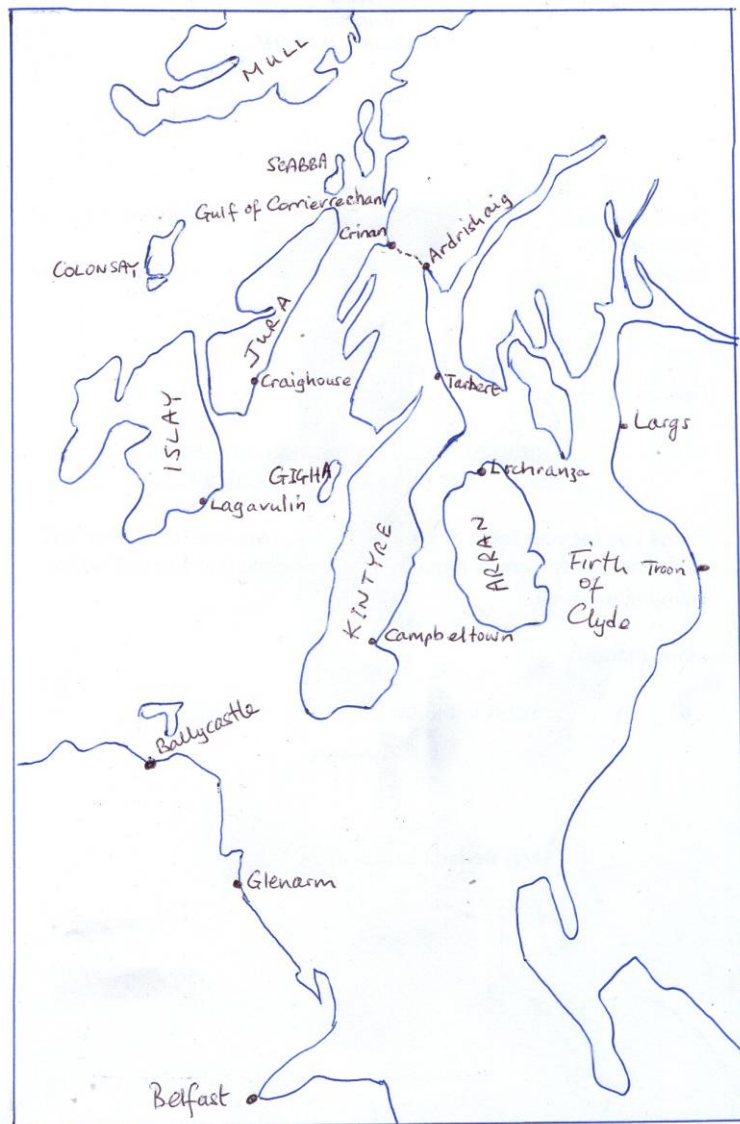


## Uisge Beatha - Part 1

### Cruise of West Coast of Scotland, July 23<sup>rd</sup> – July 31<sup>st</sup> 2005

Standing on a street corner in Ballycastle, County Antrim, I had a moment of mild dislocation. The noise and bright lights were disorientating. Cars zipped past at alarming speeds. Tractors roared past carrying young farmers and their girlfriends dressed in party clothes. Ambling down the middle of the road was definitely not an option and stepping off the kerb required faster reactions than I felt capable of. This, I realised, is what over a week of cruising the western coast of Scotland had done to me – I could no longer cope with the hustle and bustle of ‘normal’ civilisation.



**Map Showing Places Visited on this Cruise**

Ballycastle was by far the liveliest of our ports of call. We had started, though, further south along the spectacular Antrim coast near Belfast, from a new marina in Glenarm, so new in fact that it's not even mentioned in Reeds Nautical Almanac. This small Protestant town was a much more downbeat place. A sign in a pub advised us to, "Pick up your litter, drop it in Carnlough", implying little love lost for the largely Catholic town just up the coast.

The Army Sailing Association (Northern Ireland) keep 2 yachts in Glenarm: a Tradewind 35', called 'Gerona', and a Dufour Classic 35', called 'Moyle Maiden'. We had chartered the Tradewind for the uncommon experience of sailing a heavy displacement long keel yacht. But it was not to be, due to engine trouble, and we had to settle for the less sea-kindly, lighter displacement, beamier Dufour; this was probably just as well as it would perform better in the light winds we were to experience during most of the following days.

The boats were very fully equipped. In fact there was so much safety equipment that it was difficult to find enough stowage for provisions. The 'grab bag', on Moyle Maiden, was a 40 gallon drum – good job we had an 8-man liferaft for the 6 of us! It was reassuring, though, to see life jackets with a crutch strap and spray hood and with a buoyancy of 250N guaranteed to keep you afloat no matter how much you had to eat and drink the night before.

On leaving Glenarm, we set course for Campbeltown on the Mull of Kintyre. One of the Mull of Kintyre's minor claims to fame is that it gave rise to an unofficial guideline used by the British Board of Film Classification, from 1992 to about 2002. The BBFC would not permit the general release of a film if the angle of a man's penis to the vertical was larger than that made by the Mull of Kintyre on maps of Scotland. This 'rule' was also used for a while by TV broadcasters and some publishers.

It was a dreary, cold, moist crossing in poor visibility, dead calm and a flat sea. We just pointed the boat in the right direction, set the throttle to give a cruising speed of 6 knots, and arrived 6 hours later. Boring, except ..... we saw an abundance of wild life: Black Guillemots playing aerial and underwater tag; Gannets plunging vertically into the sea like javelins, Puffins, Seals, Dolphins, Porpoises and even a Minke whale

crossing our stern less than half a cable away. Despite the noise of the engine it was the best day of the whole trip for seeing wildlife.

To the only true-bred Scot on the crew, Andrew MacDonald, or (inevitably) Mac, Campbeltown is a painful reminder of how the more politically savvy Campbell clan (Mac would say 'duplicitous') succeeded in wresting power in the western islands away from the MacDonald clan, with the help of the English. The MacDonald's title of Lord of the Isles now belongs to Prince Charles.

The town sits in a deep and wide bay and has clearly seen busier days. As can be seen from its architecture, its heyday was in Victorian times, when it boasted 34 whisky distilleries, as many churches, and thriving shipbuilding, coal and fishing industries. Nowadays there is only one distillery left, a pontoon for yachts, a bankrupt ferry service to Ballycastle (which no one wants to buy from the receivers even though it has a £1m per year subsidy) and a RIB to take tourists to see the local wildlife. Rather incongruously, there is also an Art Deco cinema nestling amongst the heavy Scottish baronial architecture.

The next morning was beautifully sunny as we departed for Lochranza on the Isle of Arran. Despite some wonderful sailing on very sheltered waters, we were forced to resort to the motor again, and this was to become a feature of our trip. The wind would come up, we'd sail, it would die down, we'd roll away the genoa, start the engine and put up the motoring cone. Considering how often that cone went up and down, we were fortunate that we had someone on board who was young, quick, agile and nimble-fingered. Richard's 14 year old son Joe became our 'Cone Monkey' – compared with the job of 'Powder Monkey' a young lad would have had on board a Man-of-War, it was a sinecure.

My main concern about Lochranza was the warnings of katabatic winds, violent squalls and poor holding in soft mud. As the wind was so light I hoped we might be spared this excitement. We anchored in the spectacular harbour, with a ruined castle and steep sided mountains on three sides, and were entertained by seals on the rocks and red deer on the hillsides. Before long the wind had increased substantially, funnelled down steep-sided valleys to the east of us. By the time we turned in it was blowing a steady F5/6 and, fearing a dragging anchor, I set my alarm for 3am and the

turn of the tide. My caution was justified, for although we stuck fast, another yacht did start to drag its anchor about that time. They were woken by the anchor alarm they had set on the GPS – why didn't I think of that?

Was what we experienced a katabatic wind? It was clearly 3 wind forces above anything forecast and anything we experienced before or after. However, an excellent article in this September's Yachting Monthly explained that, in settled high pressure, winds can be squeezed and accelerated between the tops of mountains and the top of the anticyclonic temperature inversion layer. This would explain its strength and persistence. So wind funnelling perhaps, not a true katabatic effect.

It was in Lochranza that we went on our first distillery tour. Yes, I will now own up! This cruise was about more than sailing. David, Mac, Richard and I were determined to do some serious research into the genesis of malt whisky, what many call 'water of life', or to give it its Gaelic term, 'Uisge Beatha'. Arran boasts the newest distillery, only opened in 1995, and returning 'legal' whisky production to the island for the first time in 150 years.

Later, as Arran slipped astern we had a beautiful view of the highlands of this impressive island. The day before we had had a superb view of its lowlands. As it is itself an island it is easy to understand why Arran is called 'Scotland in miniature'.



### **The Crew (minus David), Arran in the Background**

Our next port of call was the town of Tarbert in Loch Fyne, a picture postcard place and a very popular yachting destination for all the marinas in the Firth of Clyde. As it was Monday we had missed the crowds, but we couldn't escape the prices. A pontoon berth charged Solent prices but did not offer the same facilities. Restaurant prices were a good bit higher than the Solent, so we settled for take-away fish and chips on the boat.

Despite the picturesque setting, we were keen to get into the Crinan Canal as soon as possible, so left early for the sea lock at Ardrishaig. The Canal connects Loch Fyne and the Firth of Clyde, to the east of the Mull of Kintyre, to the Inner Hebrides to the west. We wanted to go through the canal in one day so we would have as long as possible to explore the western islands on the other side of the Mull of Kintyre. Estimates of the journey time we had received from various people varied from 6 hours, if you're lucky, to 2 days. In the event we took 9 hours including a leisurely stop for lunch; however, it wasn't particularly busy and we were 6 reasonably fit people kept busy operating locks for a lot of that time.

But what an experience! The fee of £93 seems steep but it does entitle you to stay for 3 days with no berthing charges and there is so much to see and do that I wonder now why we didn't stay for as long as possible? Well, because we were on a mission and had a lot of 'research' to do on the islands of Jura and Islay.



### **Moored Alongside Towpath on the Crinan Canal**

The 9 mile canal has 15 locks and 7 bridges and rises to 68 feet above sea-level. All the bridges are operated for you as well as three of the locks (including the sea locks at either side), but the rest you do yourselves. We had crew enough for the task at hand, but not so some of the other yachts we met. David took pity on a Swiss skipper and jumped ship to help him out. Those of us left behind debated his motives; could he have been tempted by the boat, a brand new Jeanneau 54DS, or the all-female crew? When he eventually rejoined us he seemed more impressed by the ice-cold beer; since our fridge was not working, he probably found his welcome back a little muted.



### **Passing Through a Lock on the Crinan Canal**

The previous 2 days had been sunny, and so was our trip through the Canal, but the cooling effect of the sea was absent so it actually felt hot. Mac's daughter Ania even took off her scarf, hat and oilskins for the first time. The scenery was also very different. Here, the imposing, but largely barren, monumental solidness of the Mull and Arran had given way to a much softer, more verdant landscape. On our descent towards the sea lock at Crinan, we were rewarded with what the Crinan Canal's Visitor Guide called some of 'the most spectacular views in Scotland', first over the River Add as it winds its way inland and then, as we approached Crinan itself we were rewarded with views of the Hebridean islands of Mull, Scarba and Jura. As we relaxed that evening over an excellent meal at the Crinan Hotel, we were even rewarded with a magnificent sunset – sometimes you just don't deserve your good fortune!

The next day we set sail for Craighouse Bay on Jura. We were just about to cast off and enter the sea lock, when Richard stepped aboard; that doesn't sound noteworthy but we had thought him fast asleep in the fo'c'sle and had been preparing for sea quietly so as not to wake him. In fact, he had got up far earlier than all of us and had been enjoying an early morning walk in the woods above Crinan. If he hadn't come back when he did we could have been halfway to Jura before discovering his absence – clearly a skipper can never take anything for granted.



**View at Crinan, Exit from Sea Lock on Right**

Despite now being on the west of the Mull of Kintyre there was no more wind than on the east. Whilst floating on the glassy sea and gliding slowly towards Jura it was so quiet we could hear a passing pod of porpoises breathing as they came up for air.

The island of Jura, 28 miles long by 8 miles wide, has a population of 200, just 1/10<sup>th</sup> of what it used to be 100 years ago. Craighouse boasts its only hotel and its only shop. The main attraction for us was its world-famous distillery, where the four men on board happily continued their research. This was probably our best distillery tour. The tour guide was exceptionally friendly and knowledgeable and, as a recent



graduate of the University of Glasgow, who had followed her native-born boyfriend to Jura, she was living proof that young people may be beginning to re-populate the Island.

A video was playing in the Distillery's shop showing the state of the infamous Corrievechan whirlpools at various states of wind and tide. The Gulf of Corrievechan lies in between the islands of Jura and Scarba and is classified by the Royal Navy as 'un-navigable'. One of Jura's most famous visitors, George Orwell, who stayed in a remote farmhouse while he wrote '1984', was nearly killed there while on a fishing trip.

For £5 each we had an excellent tour and afterwards were able to sample very generous drams of 4 or 5 different whiskies. Although it was not yet lunchtime the 2 groups of people who had started the tour as strangers to each other were the best of buddies by the end.

Another attraction was Jura's only hotel and restaurant. On enquiring at the bar what was on the menu that night, the answer came back, "I don't know, it depends what gets caught this afternoon". We can report that it was not only fresh but delicious and very reasonable.

We were lucky enough to pick up a mooring in Craighouse Bay, and this was something we did later in Lagavulin Bay. Moorings tend to be few in this area, but if you can find one they also seem to be free. On leaving Jura, though, we knew we were definitely going to have to anchor again. Our destination was the small island of Gigha, pronounced Geeya. There are moorings on the east of the Island, but since the forecast was for strongish north-east winds, we went instead to the sheltered anchorage of West Tarbert Bay. Since Gigha is only 6 miles by 1 mile and it was mid-week, and the weather was overcast and wet, and since the anchorage was 4 miles from the only pub, I thought we would have the anchorage all to ourselves. I was therefore surprised to find another 5 yachts already sheltering in the roadstead. Apart from staying alongside a pontoon, this was the most 'crowded' it had been all week. It was, though, wonderfully sheltered against the swell and, apart from the wind and gulls, very peaceful; an ideal location to review and consolidate our research findings.

The following day the wind was still with us and we made rapid progress west-by-south to Lagavulin bay on the island of Islay. Getting into the Bay was by far the trickiest bit of pilotage we attempted. The entrance is strewn with rocks, and the ‘Clyde to Colonsay’ pilot warns of ‘underwater obstructions’ in the entrance. However, we knew that the Bay was capable of hosting many yachts during the Classic Malts Rally and that it had a couple of moorings. So, given that the entrance was calm, we went for it and were rewarded with a free mooring in a beautiful location, right opposite the Lagavulin distillery.



### **Lagavulin Bay**

Within easy walking of Lagavulin Bay were two other distilleries, the famous Laphroaig and the less well known Ardbeg. Lagavulin was closed which was a pity since it produces one of our favourite whiskies. Laphroaig was the biggest distillery we visited and unusual in that it still malted some its own barley, drying it using peat from its own peat beds; its whisky is famous as the most ‘medicinal’ of malts, full of anti-oxidants with a peaty, smoky smell and taste.



### **Lagavulin Bay, Looking Seawards, Moyle Maiden in Foreground**

The biggest surprise was the Ardbeg distillery. In the recession of the 1990s when so many distilleries were bought up or closed down, Ardbeg almost went to the wall. It was rescued from ruin in 1997, and in these days of expanding demand for malts, doing rather well. It also boasts an excellent restaurant, which seems to act as a magnet for anyone on Islay. To our surprise, the 6 year-old malt, much younger than the standard 10 year-old offering from longer established distilleries, was every bit as good, if not better, than all the others we had sampled so far; distinctly peaty, it is after all an Islay malt, but smoother than Laphroaig, fresher and fruitier – we had found a new favourite ..... and successfully concluded our research.

So, with the mission accomplished, and with the evidence from our research providing extra ballast, we set sail for Ballycastle on the north coast of Northern Ireland, which is where this tale began.

The attentive reader may remember that this article was entitled ‘Uisge Beatha - Part 1’. There isn’t yet a part 2, but we were so impressed with the cruising in this part of the world that we will be back before too long. The next cruise will have to

take in the islands of Colonsay, Mull and Skye, as well as visiting Islay again and Oban. Which is the odd one out in the above list? Colonsay, because it is the only place without a distillery.