

Uisge Beatha - Part 2

Cruise of West Coast of Scotland, July 7th – July 16th 2005

It was a beautiful morning, just after sunrise, and we were sailing smoothly at 2knts on a flat calm sea. I emerged from down below with a hot coffee for Mac, who was on the helm, to find myself face-to-face with a round black face, saucer-like eyes and whiskers tilted at a quizzical angle. I'm not describing Mac, but a large grey seal a few yards off the starboard quarter. Before I could exclaim it slid below the water with barely a ripple.

One of the many significant attractions of sailing around the remoter Scottish islands is the abundance of wildlife. Apart from seals we had been entertained by porpoises, sea otters, black guillemots, gannets, puffins and birds of prey.

Our cruise had started on the Antrim coast where the Army Sailing Association (Northern Ireland) keeps 2 yachts in Glenarm Marina: 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. In July 2005 we had sailed Moyle Maiden and that cruise is described in last year's REME Journal.

Last year our cruise took in the east side of the Kintyre, including the Island of Arran, and, via the Crinan Canal, the Inner Hebrides. It also included a few distilleries. This year our aim was to keep west of Kintyre and sail up as far as the Island of Mull, visiting Tobermurray, Iona and Fingal's cave. Oh, ... and more distilleries of course. The crew consisted of Mac, Richard and my two daughters, Leonora and Henrietta.



From left to right: John (the author), Richard & Mac

The first few days had been a bit grim; it can be cold and wet in Scotland, even in July. We left Glenarm on an overcast day in a moderate to fresh breeze and moderate sea. In the North Channel (between Northern Ireland and the Mull of Kintyre) it started to rain and the seas became rough; we came to appreciate the sea kindness of a traditional long keel yacht. As we approached Islay, the distinctive white, square lighthouse of Carraig Fhada stood out in the gloom, signposting the entrance to Kilnaughton Bay and the harbour of Port Ellen. We moored at the new 20-berth marina, and went ashore to find a pub in which we could get warm and dry. Considering that Port Ellen is the main ferry terminal, has an airport with regular flights to Glasgow, is home to the Island's fishing fleet and boasts a maltings supplying the other distilleries on Islay, it is a surprisingly small town. It has 2 small grocery stores, 2 streets, a couple of bars, one hotel and one bank - but without a cash machine. The marina does not even have showers or lavatories.



Port Ellen in the Murk

Later, as we prepared supper disconsolately in our cabin, we could look through the hatch at the huge Caledonian MacBrayne (called by everybody CalMac) ferry, moored nearby. Its bottom half was partially obscured by driving rain and its top half completely obscured by swirling mist. The girls were cross with their father because I had unwisely said I had thought of Croatia for this year's sailing holiday!

Next day we set sail for Craighouse Bay on Jura, again in overcast conditions. A moderate breeze on the quarter and smooth sea conditions ensured a rapid passage to begin with, but as we sailed across Islay Sound (separating Islay and Jura) the wind died and the sea developed a steep chop on top of an underlying swell. After suffering these unpleasant conditions for a while, the wind backed and freshened and we found ourselves tacking into Craighouse bay with the side decks awash under full canvas. Again, we noted the good manners of a traditional, heavy displacement long-keeled yacht; with most modern yachts we would have had to reduce canvas to make such good progress to windward.

The main attractions of Craighouse Bay are the beautiful setting, sturdy, free HIDB (Highlands and Islands Development Board) moorings, a world famous distillery and the Jura Hotel, complete with showers and an excellent restaurant. The menu depends

upon what local produce is available and the prices are as reasonable as the food is fresh. An added attraction on this Sunday (9th of July) was the World Cup final which we watched in the bar with half the population of Jura.



Craighouse bay at Dusk

The distillery in Jura provided us with our most memorable whisky tour last year, but this year we resisted the temptation – being intent on exploring pastures new rather than nostalgically re-visiting old haunts. So, the next day we set off on a short sail across the Sound of Jura to a narrow peninsular on the mainland which divides Loch Sween from the Sound of Jura. Our destination, Carsaig Bay, is on the Jura side of the peninsular, at a point where the peninsular is so narrow that only a short walk separates the Bay from the delightful harbour of Tayvallich on Loch Sween. Carsaig Bay provides a peaceful and sheltered anchorage and we had the place to ourselves, apart from a catamaran whose ability to anchor practically on the beach, in a snug little nook out of all the wind and chop, we rather envied.

There are no facilities at Carsaig Bay and we took it in turns to make the trek to Tayvallich by dividing the crew into a shore party and a boat party. It is worth the effort for, despite offering a store and a pub, Tayvallich provides one of the most beautiful and sheltered harbours I have seen. There is a road, but to get to it

necessitated scrambling over rocks, wading through sodden bracken, fording streams and negotiating bogs; it was also raining. Of course, after you have dried out in the pub, you have to face the return journey, arriving back at the boat sopping and bedraggled.

Our next port of call was Oban. After the solitude of the last 3 days, not to mention the inclement weather, we all felt we could do with the creature comforts and bustle of a large town. Leo and Hennie decided that they were going to get there by land. Unfortunately, buses from Tayvallich only ran on Mondays, Thursdays and Saturdays – our trip to Oban was on a Tuesday. However, two attractive young women never have to wait long for a lift, and so it proved.

While the Girls were making their way overland, Richard, Mac & I had a spectacular and enjoyable sail north. The weather was sunny and breezy and we had the tide just right. As we passed the north tip of Jura we could make out the farmhouse George Orwell stayed in when he was writing 1984 and glimpses of white water reminded us of the whirlpools in the Gulf of Corrievechan where he was nearly killed while on a fishing trip.

The Gulf of Corrievechan lies between the islands of Jura and Scarba. To the north, there is another channel with ferocious tidal rips called the Grey Dogs, or Little Corrievechan. As we passed it safely to port we were impressed by what looked like a permanent wall of white water. A few minutes later we were amongst the Slate Islands, which at their peak in the 19th century quarried over 9 million slates annually. Leaving the islands of Luing to starboard and Lunga to port, and with many small islands ahead, we were now travelling at 10knots over the ground. This is definitely a place where it pays to have worked out the pilotage in advance!

Safely through the Sound of Luing, we then headed north-east towards Oban. Taking the sound between the Island of Kerrera and the mainland, we made the most of the tide and arrived in Oban only 30 minutes after the Girls. Our intention was to stay in the marina on Kerrera but we had reckoned without the start of the Classic Malts Cruise, which takes place over 2 weeks every year. The marina harbour master informed us over the VHF that there was no way she could fit us in ... “oh, and by the way, we advise against taking up a mooring in Oban Bay because none of them are

maintained”. Well, that didn’t leave us with anywhere to go, so we decided to inspect the moorings ourselves. I mean, what sort of Harbour Authority would fail to maintain moorings in a place like Oban, a major port, yachting centre, holiday destination and gateway to the Inner Hebrides? However, the first group of moorings we looked at were definitely decrepit and we decided to give them a miss. We did manage to find reasonably new moorings opposite the Oban Sailing Club and, as it was a club night we watched the racing and were kindly allowed to make full use of their showers.

The weather was now improving and we needed to make a decision. To continue, or not to continue, with our original plan of sailing around Mull, visiting Iona and Staffa? The original plan was feasible, but it would have meant almost continuous sailing. We all felt that it made no sense to get a ‘tick-in-the-box’ for having been there if there was no time to go ashore and explore. So, we adopted a more relaxed schedule and stayed in Oban the next day.

This decision gave us chaps the chance to have our first distillery tour. Oban Distillery is one of the oldest distilleries having been founded in 1794; it actually predates the town which grew up around it. Part of the largest drinks company in the world, Diageo, it is primarily known for its aged 14year old single malt, promoted as part of the *Classic Malts of Scotland* range. The tour was a slick and thoroughly professional affair, but lacked the personal touches we had come to appreciate in the more remote distilleries; the free sample wasn’t as generous either!

A remarkable sight in Oban is McCaig’s Folly. This was built in the style of Rome’s Colosseum to give stonemasons employment in the off-season. However it was never finished and is used these days as a walled garden, high above the town and offering spectacular sea views over Kerrera and the Island of Mull..

So far on this cruise we had been spoiled in the culinary department. For the first time in all my sailing we actually had a dedicated cook on board. Hennie had regularly been producing 3 course meals and even cake. As is traditional on our Scottish cruises (all 2 of them!) we had to have a haggis supper. Unfortunately, we left it late in getting to Oban’s Tesco and ended up with a vegetarian version of Scotland’s famous dish. Mac looked a little sick at the prospect of addressing

something that Robert Burns would hardly have believed possible, but he rose to the occasion and soon the boat was reverberating to the sounds of:

Fair fa' your honest, sonsie face,
Great chieftain o' the puddin-race!
Aboon them a' ye tak your place,
Painch, tripe, or thairm:
Weel are ye wordy of a grace worthy
As lang's my arm.

Etc.

Reluctantly waving goodbye to the Isle of Mull, which would have to wait another Scottish cruise, we turned south seeking a Robinson Crusoe experience. While in Carsaig bay we had been told that the best beaches in these parts are on Oronsay. The islands of Colonsay and Oronsay are joined at low water and are the most westerly of the Inner Hebrides, exposed to the full force of Atlantic gales. Colonsay is eight miles long by 3 miles wide and Oronsay 3 miles by 2. The weather continued to be kind to us and a westerly wind meant we made good progress reaching south. Our first thought was to tie up alongside the pier in Colonsay but the rusty ironwork and swell soon splintered the fender board, so we beat a retreat to Queen Bay, where we dropped the hook.

Colonsay is one the smallest Hebridean islands and one of the remotest communities in the British Isles with a population of about 100. However, it was far too busy for us, so when another yacht joined us in our roadstead, we decided to head for Oronsay. Legend has it that Columba visited Oronsay on his journey into exile from Ireland. On climbing a hill though he discovered that he could still see Ireland, so he continued to Iona where he founded his religious community. Nowadays, Oronsay is a nature reserve and boasts a ruined Augustinian priory.

In Caolas Mor we had our Robinson Crusoe experience. We anchored close to the beach in splendid isolation. The beaches were every bit as good as we had been told, pristine white sand, free of rubbish, but with plenty of driftwood with which we built a fire and made our barbecue. Weather conditions were also perfect with blue skies and a gentle breeze. Apart from the wildlife and the highland cattle, who came to inspect us, we had the island to ourselves. As dusk fell we came to appreciate how remote we were; the only sign of human activity came from the loom of Rubha

a'Mhail lighthouse (on the northern corner of Jura); despite the panoramic views we could see no house lights, no headlights, no light pollution and no boats. Just before midnight a plane went overhead, but apart from that, the scenery could not have been much different from when Columba visited.



A Beach on Oronsay

As we went to sleep that night we set the anchor alarm, only to have it go off 4 hours later at 4.30am. I went on deck as the dawn was breaking to survey the roadstead. The wind was still light and we were still facing the same way we were when we went to bed. The rocks behind did look somewhat closer than before we went to bed; was this because the tide had gone out thus revealing more rocks, or because the anchor had dragged? I decided I would trust the electronics, and so a weary crew weighed anchor and we reluctantly left our idyll for Lagavulin Bay. Later, we discovered that the anchor alarm had been set for 10 metres – the anchor hadn't dragged, we had moved further away from the anchor as the tide went out!

It was in this bleary-eyed dawn, as we sailed towards the Paps of Jura that I mistook Mac for a seal. Due to their prominence in the landscapes of this cruise the Paps became the way we measured our progress around these Scottish islands. They are three mountains, with tops rounded by glaciers into breast-like shapes. On this sunny

morning as we rounded the Rubha a'Mhail lighthouse and entered the Sound of Islay, we had a magnificent view of the Paps. Ahead of us were two distilleries, Caol Ila (Gaelic for the Sound of Islay) and Bunnahabhain. Thanks to our unplanned early start we were entering the Sound at the right time; as the tide accelerated us towards the pinch-point at Port Askaig, our speed increased from 1 Pap per hour to two distilleries in half an hour.



Gerona Anchored in front of the Paps of Jura (taken from Oronsay)

It is funny how our most memorable experiences are often forced upon us; the anchor alarm may have robbed us of our sleep but it gave us the best sail of our cruise. A roseate dawn gave rise to a perfect day with excellent visibility. The steady breeze and flat seas made for exhilarating sailing aided by strong spring tides. The Scottish scenery was at its most magnificent with its colours enhanced by the strong sunshine.

The end of this leg was not perfect though. As we inched into Lagavulin Bay, we were right at the bottom of a Spring tide. In the clear waters the sea bottom looked as if it was 6 inches below the surface. Further, the complicated pilotage instructions were not making sense. What was that unmarked lump of concrete awash on the starboard beam? I now found myself in that uncomfortable position where I had to make a decision, for doing nothing was not an option, but I had no idea which way to

go. I put helm down to starboard and ... gently grounded. Long-keeled boats are not good in reverse, but with all the crew imitating trapeze artists hanging out to port, we came off and now I did know the right way to go. Later, we made sense of the pilotage instructions: the lump of concrete should have supported a beacon, which was being repaired in time for the visit from the Classic Malts Cruise.

Sitting on the only yacht moored in Lagavulin Bay it is hard to imagine how busy it would have been in the past. The existence of Dunyvaig, a ruined MacDonalld castle, at the entrance to the Bay, alludes to the military significance of the place. It is astonishing to think that Islay provided 1000 men for Robert the Bruce's army at Bannockburn in 1314, all of whom embarked at Lagavulin bay. How could Islay afford to risk 1000 men as the current population is only 3400 men, women and children? In fact, up until the Clearances in the 1830s, Islay supported a population of about 18,000.



Dunyvaig Castle, Lagavulin Bay

Being in a historical mood, we followed up a very stimulating visit to the famous Lagavulin distillery, with a taxi ride to Loch Finlaggan; the site of a number of artificial islands which formed the seat of the MacDonalld clan, who, as Lords of the Isles, ruled Kintyre and the Hebrides, having wrested control from the Vikings. For

Mac (a MacDonald) this naturally took the form of a pilgrimage. However, despite 400 years of occupation, the 500 years that have passed since the site was abandoned have taken their toll and not much now remains to be seen.

Our last port of call was, as last year, the bustling town of Ballycastle on the Antrim coast. Its very busyness acclimatises you to a return to 'civilisation', after the peace and solitude of a Hebridean island cruise. Besides, we wanted to show the Girls how the young men of these parts go a-courting in their tractors. The weather was still sunny and warm and Mac and I were tempted to go for another swim. Our previous attempt in these icy waters had been at Carsaig Bay and was ignominiously short. It was just as cold in Ballycastle, but we did manage to stay in longer and have a proper swim. A week later I was swimming off the beach in Bournemouth and can attest to the very much warmer sea temperatures we have down south.

Our cruise did not achieve our original objectives. We failed to get to Mull, Skye or Iona. The distances are just too long to do this in 9 days, if you also want to spend time ashore. A third cruise beckons.