

"freya" in the western isles

The west coast of Scotland is not a place for the faint hearted. Anyone flicking through a yachtsman's pilot for the area is immediately confronted with intimidating descriptions of unmarked rock strewn passages, 8 knot+ tidal races and some of the roughest and most exposed headlands in the British Isles. Add to this a well deserved reputation for truly awful weather and you might be forgiven for thinking that only the most determined of masochists would venture out into its waters for pleasure. However, rich rewards await those who are prepared to take on the challenges of sailing in the area. The splendour of the scenery is a match for anything in the world, and its wild and isolated anchorages are the perfect panacea for those seeking respite from the overcrowded and overpriced marinas of the South Coast of England.



Heading for the Western Isles

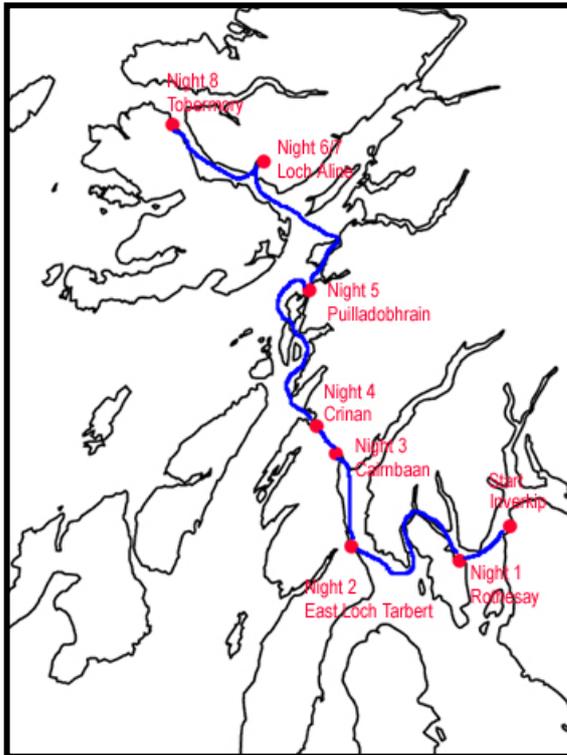
Moreover we were determined to prove that cruising in this wildly beautiful area need not be the sole preserve of those in possession of a large heavy displacement yacht. Armed with nothing bigger than our newly acquired 19' Cornish Shrimper and road trailer, we hatched an ambitious plan to cruise almost the entire length of the Scottish West Coast during the summer of 2002. As I described the plan to various sailing friends in the months leading up to the trip, I almost always came away with the impression that they thought I had finally lost my marbles; although of course they were all too polite to say this to my face!



Home for the next 4 weeks – you must be joking!!

As we collected our new Shrimper "Freya" for the first time from the Cornish Crabbers boatyard in Rock, I did for a moment wonder whether they had been right and whether my fantasising of earlier months had outstripped what could really be achieved in a boat that size; a view that was reinforced when my wife, on looking inside the cabin for the first time, said, "We're not really going to live in that for a month are we!!!!". However, with less than 7 days to go before we were due to tow her up to Scotland to be launched for

he first time there was barely enough time to get her anti-fouled; any dark thoughts as to the practicality or otherwise of what we were about to attempt were firmly pushed into the background.



With the final coat of antifouling scarcely dry, we hitched up the trailer and set off from Plymouth at 2.00 am so that we could get north of the M5/M6 junction before the Birmingham rush hour traffic could trap us in its seemingly endless log jam. 12 hours later we were in the car park of Inverkip Marina, stepping the mast ready for the maiden launch the following day. The gods smiled on us the following morning, giving us one of those gloriously calm and sunny days that are all too rare in this part of the world, allowing us to launch “Freya” in conditions which truly befitted her namesake, the Norse god of love and beauty.

Not wishing to waste the fine weather, we set straight out from Inverkip on a leisurely motor sail down the Clyde to

Rothesay, our first port of call. The good weather lasted for the next 2 days as we gently worked our way around Bute to East Loch Tarbert and then on to Ardrishaig and the start of the Crinan Canal. We had quite expected to spend these early days of the cruise sorting out the myriad of minor teething problems that inevitably occur when a new boat is launched for the first time. However, it was a most pleasant surprise, and a great tribute to the craftsmanship of her builders, when we discovered that a yacht advertised as “ready to sail” really was just that! Far from being occupied with lots of little jobs in the evenings, we found ourselves with plenty of time to enjoy the delights of the local bars.

Our passage through the Crinan Canal attracted a lot of attention from various lock keepers and assorted passers by who were clearly surprised to see such a “wee” boat heading out towards the Western Isles. It also brought howls of complaint from the long suffering crew of one, who found the task of operating the lock gates single handedly a back breaking task.



Back Breaking Work

Although it would have been tempting to spend a day or so

recovering from these exertions in Crinan, we were keen to press on and get through the Dorus Mor tidal race and the potentially exposed Firth of Lorne whilst the weather remained calm; a decision that was vindicated 2 days later when we were forced to spend 2 days stormbound in the sheltered waters of Loch Aline.



Fine sailing in Loch Shuna

Setting straight out from Crinan to reach the Dorus Mor at slack water, we chose to take the longer but more sheltered route northwards through Loch Shuna and Cuan Sound. As reliable as our 9HP single cylinder Yanmar diesel engine had proved to be, we did not fancy pitting it against the 8 knot spring tides that potentially threatened to suck us into the infamous Gulf of Corryveckan should we opt for the shorter route through the Sound of Luing.

After an overnight stop in the classically beautiful Puilladobhrain anchorage, and a short trip ashore for provisions in Oban, our luck with the weather finally ran out when we reached Loch Aline in the Sound of Mull. Described in the pilot as “the best anchorage between Oban and Tobermory” it proved an ideal place in which to sit out the storm. The only thing that threatened our harmony was being cooped up in the confines of a small cabin for 48 hours without being able to escape ashore.

A break in the weather allowed us to make a quick dash to Tobermory, accompanied by a shoal of dolphins who followed us for much of the passage. Here we faced a critical decision. Our original plan called for us to continue northwards and eventually haul the boat out at Kyle of Lochalsh. However, this involved rounding Ardnamurchan Point, the most westerly point on the British mainland, and arguably the most exposed headland on the entire West Coast of Scotland. The pilot describes rounding the headland as a “seminal point” in any cruise, and it was not something that we wished to undertake in a 19’ boat in anything less than perfect conditions.

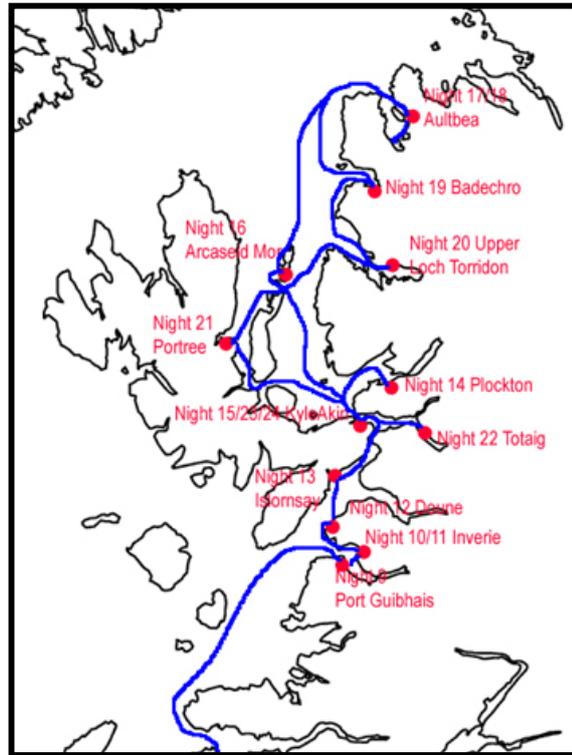
After many hours spent poring over synoptic charts and listening to various forecasts we eventually concluded that if we were to round the headland it would have to be done in a short weather window of SW 4-5 that was forecast for the following morning. After that, it appeared that conditions would not be suitable for at least another week, by which time there would have been insufficient time to reach our original objective.



Rounding Ardmurchan

Although this forecast was right on our upper limits, we set out from Tobermory the following morning “just to have a look” at the conditions. As we motored out the harbour in my heart I feared that we would be returning within a few hours. However, as we worked ourselves clear of the lee of Mull it became clear that the winds were a good force 1-2 less than had been forecast. By this stage we were bounding along on a comfortable broad reach, the sun was shining, and the waters around the headland some 3 miles distant looked surprisingly calm.

A quick check of the barometer and on the sky to our west showed no immediate sign of the approaching front, so we made the decision to go for it. 2 hours later we were still enjoying glorious sailing conditions, with the Point of Ardnamurchan well behind us, Muck and Eigg on our port beam, and the rock infested shores of the Sound of Arisaig on our starboard side. We had originally planned to spend several days exploring the many anchorages and harbours in this area, described in the pilot as “one of the most navigationally challenging” on the entire West Coast. However, whilst these anchorages would have offered us a safe haven in the forecast gales, we knew that once we were in them there would be no chance of escaping until long after the gales had passed and the sea state had subsided. We therefore reluctantly opted to continue heading northwards towards the harbours of the Knoydart Peninsula and Sound of Sleat, which would leave us more options in the unsettled weather that lay ahead.



Another crowded West Coast anchorage

Night was falling as we slipped past Mallaig harbour and headed into Loch Nevis. We anchored for the night in Port Guibhais, a spectacular anchorage with swinging room for no more than one yacht, nestling under a steep hill at the southern entrance to the loch. Whilst it was our most spectacular anchorage yet, with its limited swinging room and surrounded on all sides by rocks, it did not seem the ideal place to sit out the gale which the forecasts continued to promise us was



Sunset over the Skye bridge

imminent. The following morning we motored over to Inverie to seek some local

advice from the hotel as to the best place to shelter. As we sipped a morning coffee in the bar of what bills itself as the “most remote pub on the British mainland”, the barman managed to convince us that the hotel moorings would be perfectly safe and comfortable during a gale, and that we would be “surprised” by how much shelter the small

promontory to the SE of the anchorage would offer us from any swell.

In what amounted to a great triumph of hope over experience, and in no way influenced by the “Specials” board which offered us the prospect of fresh scallops and other such delights for supper if we stayed (!), we made the decision to remain for the night on the moorings. We were not disappointed with the scallops which were truly outstanding, but the moorings did not live up to the promises that had been made of them earlier in the day. As the gale rose to a crescendo that night, life inside our tiny cabin began to resemble being inside a spin drier which was irretrievably jammed in the “on” position.

There was no let up the following day, and it was not until the evening that things had moderated sufficiently to allow us to row ashore. Over the previous 24 hours I had been threatening to do unmentionable things once I got ashore to the barman who had said the mooring would be comfortable, but as the swell subsided my temperament improved and I could not escape the fact that I really only had my own lack of judgement to blame for what had been a most uncomfortable night. Equanimity was further restored by another fantastic bar meal of fresh organic black faced Knoydart lamb that evening and after a good nights sleep we were in a suitable mental state to set off again.

In the days that followed, we took the opportunity of short breaks in the weather to slowly work our way northwards via the Kyle of Lochalsh to the delightful town of Plockton. There we were joined by a 3rd crew member who had fetched our boat trailer up from Inverkip. By now we were enjoying the benefits of a persistent ridge of high pressure and with 12 days of our cruise remaining, we made the decision to sail northwards as far as Loch Ewe before returning to Kyle of Lochalsh where we would be lifted back onto the trailer.



Private tropical Beach



Another idyllic anchorage

like conditions and crystal clear aquamarine sea meant that we were able to pick our way into the bay navigating by means of a lookout stationed on the bowsprit spotting the submerged rocks. Our lifting keel enabled us to creep right up to the beach before anchoring for a lunchtime glass of wine. As we sipped the wine and enjoyed the luxury of our own private “tropical” anchorage it was almost impossible to believe that we were still on the West Coast of Scotland.

On reaching Loch Ewe we once again spent many hours poring over the synoptic charts as we did not fancy the prospect of having to beat almost 80 miles south should another string of depressions start tracking in. The charts suggested that we had at least 5 days of relatively settled weather remaining which allowed us to spend a couple of days exploring Loch Ewe before returning via Loch Gairloch, Loch Torridon, Raasay, and Portree. Having got back into the relatively sheltered waters around the Kyle of Lochalsh the pressure was off and we decided to spend our last few remaining days going back to the Knoydart peninsula and exploring Loch Huorne which we had bypassed on our journey north.

However, our luck with the weather finally ran out and on reaching Isleornsay in time for a pub lunch, the midday shipping forecast convinced us that it was time to turn

straight around and head back to Kyle if we wanted to avoid being trapped by the weather. With work beckoning and a long road journey south it was not time to be chancing our luck with the weather. In a freshening southerly breeze we scampered back to Kyle of Lochalsh and 24 hours later “Freya’s” maiden cruise was over as she was lifted back onto her trailer ready for the long road journey south.

As we de-rigged the boat I was able to reflect on what had been a fantastic experience and finally lay to rest those nagging doubts as to whether the whole project was achievable. We had just spent 28 days continuously living on a 19’ boat and in the process sailed over 400 miles through some of the most beautiful and challenging

The passage northwards through the inner sound to Rona, where we anchored overnight before heading up to Loch Ewe, was more reminiscent of cruising in the West Indies than the West Coast of Scotland. The highlight of the entire cruise came when we discovered a splendid bay in which to anchor for lunch just east of Rubha Reidh at the entrance to Loch Ewe. Although not

mentioned in any pilot, and virtually indiscernible on the chart, the mirror



Sunset in Loch Ewe

waters that the UK has to offer; a passage that many would consider creditable in a yacht twice the size. Without a doubt we had been lucky with the weather and life could have been considerably less comfortable had we suffered more normal West Coast conditions.

However, the trip reaffirmed my initial supposition that given sufficient time, judicious decision making, and patience with the weather, there is no reason why a small yacht should not venture into waters and undertake the type of cruise that are normally the preserve of much larger yachts. Alternatively the whole venture just reaffirmed other people's suspicions that we



Final reflections

really are “barking mad”!!

Either way, we are currently planning an even more ambitious cruise for the next 2 seasons which will involve sailing the entire length of the Norwegian coast – wish us luck!

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