

Two Solent Boats to Scotland

On Monday 15th June 2007 Takamaka and La Mouette set off from Largs at the start of a cruise to the Western Isles. Encouraged by accounts in the "Shrimper" of previous voyages we planned to sail via the Crinan Canal towards Tobermory. One car and both trailers had already been left at Dunstaffnage, near Oban, so there was no turning back.

A fresh following wind soon had us across the Clyde and sailing up the East Kyle of Bute to the anchorage at Caladh Harbour, a beautiful sheltered spot shared with only one other boat. As became our normal routine, we rafted up and were able to enjoy the luxury of two burner cooking. Friends from nearby came down to say hello and we arranged to pick them up next morning for the sail down the West Kyle.

The wind was light next morning when our passengers arrived. We sailed gently past the Isle of Bute to port and our friends house to starboard on our way towards the Loch Fyne. The passengers were landed at Portavadie, an abandoned oil rig construction site, which after many years is now being converted to a marina. After picking our way through the trailing ropes of a fish farm we set off for Ardrishaig at the entrance to the Crinan Canal. With a freshening easterly we were there by tea time and locked into the canal basin soon afterwards.

Having made good progress thus far we decided not to rush through the canal. The scenery is beautiful and peaceful, it was easy to believe nothing has changed for the past hundred years. The locks, except the sea locks, are manually operated and have heavy gates so, with only one shore hand between two boats, our speed was leisurely. We were not surprised to find ourselves only half way through at 7pm when the sluice handles



"we decided not to rush through the canal"

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were taken away for the night. Luck was smiling on us, only 20 yards from the jetty to which we made fast were showers and WC complete with vases of fresh flowers.

Departure from the canal at Crinan next day was timed to get us to the notorious Doris Mor at slack water in the late afternoon. There was hardly any wind when we left so we had a good excuse to motor quickly through the tidal eddies before setting sail in a freshening breeze and heading north for Croabh. Here we rested and chatted to the locals before tackling our next navigational challenge, Cuan Sound, next day.

The day started calm so we rafted up for a drift round Loch Melfort inspecting fish farms and watching groups of motor cyclists swoop past on the winding road round the loch. After lunch there was enough wind to sail so we cruised up Seil Sound to Balvicar before turning and heading for Cuan Sound just before slack water. By then there was a good sailing breeze so no excuse for motoring. We tacked into the sound, rendering La Mouette's carefully pre-planned route and GPS waypoints rather irrelevant. It was easy to identify the main landmarks and by keeping over 5 meter soundings we stayed out of trouble. Takamaka's state of the art GPS plotter on the other hand meant she knew exactly where she was all the time. Well perhaps not all the time. John's version is, "it was gusting at the time, I had too much sail up and the GPS was jumping about because of the short tacks we were making." Once past Break Rock the wind was on the beam and we had an easy sail up the West side of Seil Island with time to settle any ruffled feathers before arriving at our over night anchorage at Puilladrobhain.

There were no signs of civilisation visible from the anchorage tucked in between rocky outcrops. We shared it with about twelve other boats and it was not until we ventured ashore next morning that we discovered a footpath over the hill leading to Clachen and a pub which, no doubt, was the explanation for a lot of dingy traffic the night before. After our forage ashore we set sail for Oban via Kerrara Sound. Oban didn't look a yacht friendly place



"anchorage at Puilladrobhain"

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so we left it to the fishing boats and ferries and pressed on to Dunstaffnage to check up on our car and trailers.

It was exactly a week since we had left our home ports on the South Coast which gave us another week for exploring. For this we decided to take the advice of Andy, who we had met in the bar at Craobh, and head for Loch Sunart which he assured us was picturesque and had good anchorages.

The first day of our second week was lovely and sunny with a fresh breeze so we made good progress across to Lismore Island and round the white painted lighthouse at its southerly tip. Squiggly lines adorn the chart in this area and we were glad to be snugged down and comfortable with two reefs while other bigger boats were being well shaken up. We arrived at Loch Aline soon after midday and spent a little while trying in vain to find a sheltered place to anchor. Having failed we went back to the anchorage marked on the chart, crept inside the other anchored boats, dropped the hooks and rafted up.

After a blustery night and morning the wind eased and we set off for Tobermory after an early lunch. A light NE'ly wind carried us past the sand mine jetty, ferry jetty and through the narrow entrance of the loch. Once outside the wind swung through 180 degrees and had us beating up the Sound of Mull. Two reefs were back in again but by the time we reached the lighthouse half way up the Sound we were hard pressed and the prospect of another three hours hard beating had us turn round and scurry back to Loch Aline. A good decision. We went back to our previous anchorage and then ashore to explore and dine.



"Two reefs back in again"

Another windy night followed but the holding was good, so good that we had to motor the anchor out before setting off again in the morning. There was still a head wind but much lighter so, after six hours sailing, we were off Tobermory. We decided to go on a bit further to the very sheltered anchorage at Drumbuie, another of Andy's recommendations, but had a quick look at Tobermory first. Tobermory is a bit exposed from the east so we were pleased to pass through the narrow entrance to the anchorage at Drumbuie and find shelter from all directions.

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From Drumbuie we sailed on to Salen, in Loch Sunart, which was to be our turning round point. It was a good sail up the loch with plenty of rocks to dodge and a few rain showers about. Our arrival at Salen was greeted by sunshine and the owner of the moorings who warned us of the dire perils of anchoring and the fee for using his jetty if we landed. Despite Andy's warning we succumbed and hired one of his moorings, rafted up and sent the crew, Pete, shopping. He returned a couple of hours later laden down with provisions having walked and hitch hiked six miles to the nearest shop. Then followed a rather wet trip ashore to the Salen Hotel for dinner and back through the midges to our boats.

The next day, Thursday, was our worst day. We set off in the rain and a head wind towards Tobermory. Three hours later, her crew feeling pretty wet and cold, La Mouette decided to pop into a little inlet just north of the anchorage at Drumbuie. This manoeuvre had been missed by Takamaka who finding herself alone turned back to look for wreckage. Her sharp eyed lookout spotted LM in a cleft in the rocks and the two boats were soon rafted up in a very snug shrimper sized anchorage. After a brief council of war we decided to abandon the Tobermory plan and stay where we were.

Friday on the other hand was our best sailing day. The sun was shining and the wind was in our favour when we left the anchorage for a lovely sail back to our old friend Loch Aline. Here we picked up a mooring for lunch and decided that we would press on back to Dunstaffnage while the going was good. Pete, our long suffering joint crew and retired jumbo jet captain, was given his independence at last and sailed this leg single handed. Untangling the jammed jib furling line and berthing stern first in a head wind were taken in his stride. We took this as a reflection of the excellent training from his joint skippers but there could be other explanations.



Clachen Bridge at low water – 10.5m

The next day we hauled Takamaka out and greeted Lizzie and Chris who were going to sail La Mouette for the next week. They expressed an interest in trying the narrow Clachen sound with its old stone bridge so, while they set off for Loch Aline, we motored down to Clachen and measured the clearance under the bridge. For readers who haven't yet passed under "The Bridge Over the Atlantic" it might, one day, be

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useful to know that at LW (1.2m) Oban the vertical clearance is 10.5m. This information was transmitted to the mariners who, after poring over the tide tables, made a triumphant circumnavigation of Seil in light winds a few days later. We understand that the rocky approach to the bridge was a doddle compared with refueling the outboard motor in the overfalls off Easdale!

Words: Robin Wearn *La Mouette* (379)

Photos: John Nicholson *Takamaka* (817)