

## The Classic Malts Cruise by Roy Harper ("Lady Eleanor")

There are six malt whisky distilleries in the Western Highlands which have joined up for marketing purposes, under the banner of "The Classic Malts", and each year they sponsor a cruise of 200 miles around the Inner Hebridean Islands for 100 yachts.

I entered my Cornish Shrimper "Lady Eleanor" on their website in Feb., and immediately started making preparations, with mixed feelings of anticipation, excitement, and not a little apprehension.



On Thursday 17<sup>th</sup>. July I hitched up my boat and trailer, and left Newport, Pembs. at 9.00 starting the 500 mile journey to Oban. Torrential rain that day ended a five week drought and it then rained almost every day for the next two weeks! The journey took 24 hrs, including 6hrs. sleep on board south of Glasgow, arriving at the delightful marina at Dunstaffnage, 5 miles north of Oban, in time for a hearty breakfast. My crew Tony and Debbie arrived by car from Bath mid afternoon, by which time Lady Eleanor was lying prettily at her berth fully rigged and gear stowed. I always feel a Shrimper will grace any mooring, and this was no exception. We had arranged that my crew would sleep ashore each night using B. and B.s when available and their tent at the remote anchorages. This worked out well, but the cabin was pretty full whilst on passage.

We drove into Oban that afternoon, checked in at the cruise office, walked around the town, had a beer or three, then sat on the quay wall eating fish and chips from the paper. What a good start!

Saturday was spent touring Oban distillery, provisioning at Tescos, and then we drove in two cars 40 miles south to Ardfern, where we left one with the boat trailer. This manoeuvre would avoid a 60 mile sail at the end because the cruise was to end at the Lagavulin distillery on Islay. We attended the cruise briefing at 18.00hrs. when we were issued with our logo bearing fleeces, caps, and flag. The cruise then started for real. We were warmly greeted at the distillery with a free glass of malt whisky, very generous of them we thought. There followed a marvellous buffet which was well organised to cater for the 500 or so participants, improved even more when we discovered the bar was also free for the whole

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night. We felt sorry for the chap serving the soft drinks; he looked quite lonely! Cleverly, the distillery was cleared by 21.00hrs. with a local band, bagpipes wailing, leading the whole party down to the pier for an open air concert. By this time we were making new friends. Lady Eleanor was the smallest boat in the fleet, and she was, without doubt soon to become the darling of it.

Sunday, we sailed out of Dunstaffnage at 9.00 in a force 3 southerly, a perfect sail with a flat sea, magnificent scenery, and our cruise flag, the size of a bath towel, fluttering from a halyard I had rigged from the top of the port shroud. We did not let a rain shower dampen our spirits as we hoisted a string of 40 flags from the bowsprit to the top of the mast and down to the stern. We had been asked by the organisers to "dress all over," and many of the yachts had obliged. It was a moving experience to watch so many fine yachts circling Oban bay, and as we passed close to the town quay, Lady E. seemed to receive a specially loud cheer from the crowd, almost drowning the sound of the bagpipes from the lone piper, standing there in highland dress.

We sailed off, up the sound of Mull against a slightly foul tide, into the calm waters of Loch Aline, where we picked up a visitor's mooring, amongst a dozen other cruise boats. We huddled together in the cockpit beneath a hastily rigged canopy as the rain fell, but soon felt better after a fry up which included some foil packed, partially cooked potato which Debbie had found in Waitrose. We had sailed 22 sea miles that day and slept well despite the rain.

Monday. We sailed silently off the mooring in a force 2 southerly. My plan was, given that petrol for my outboard would not be available at the majority of our anchorages, we would sail northwards to Skye each day we enjoyed favourable winds, but sit tight and go walking and fishing when they were too strong or heading us. I carry two tanks, giving me eight hours motoring, so I resolved to top up at every opportunity, and keep one for emergency use only.

We sailed 34 miles that day through the sound of Mull, past Tobermory, round the dreaded Ardmurchan point, which luckily was quite benign with a slight wind and favourable tide. By 3 o'clock, we had arrived off the isle of Muck, which appeared to be an attractive anchorage. The Imray pilot was quite specific with it's directions to enter the tiny harbour. There are two reefs extending from each side of the entrance, and the leading marks are the edge of a small pine plantation, and the gable end of a lone cottage! We made it safely and as the only sheltered moorings were all taken up by five fishing boats, we dropped our anchor and slowly dropped back with the wind, paying out 40 mtrs. of chain, and dried out at 7 o'clock on a patch of sand, no wider than 10 mtrs.

Tony and Debbie went ashore, and when they sought permission from the lady in the cottage for a site to pitch their tent, her reply was "anywhere you like as long as it's not in my garden", but went on to recommend a flat area near the beach

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where they would not be troubled by midges. She then offered to cook an evening meal for us, which was typical of the hospitality from the Hebridean islanders. We dined on locally caught prawns, locally reared lamb and locally grown raspberries. As I crawled into my sleeping bag I thought "Shrimpering does not get any better than this!"

Tuesday. I had calculated that I would float off at 5 o'clock so did not need an alarm call for 5.40 shipping forecast: moderate westerlies today, but the three day outlook was grim, even mentioning gales. We left at 7.00 aiming to get to Skye and the shelter of Loch Harport by nightfall. We sailed through the sound of Eigg, then the sound of Rhum, and enjoyed our first decent spell of sunshine, especially so as we watched a golden eagle quartering over the mountain side on Rhum. We then saw a menacing line of cloud far in the south west. The wind increased to force 5 and we put two reefs in the main. It rained heavily and as the tide had turned, we motor sailed round the impressive cliffs marking the entrance to the loch, past Ornsay then sailed the five mile length of Loch Harport, anchoring in 3 mtrs. just off the jetty of the Talisker distillery. We had covered 46 miles in 12 hours, and were thrilled that, having sailed 102 miles, we had reached the most northerly point of the cruise. Little did we know what was to come!

We knew we could rest, and enjoy the delights of Skye for the next two days, as the party was scheduled for Thursday at the distillery. Tony and Debbie booked into a B. and B. for three nights, and we enjoyed haggis at the only pub before retiring early.

When I awoke on Wed., it was still raining. Several other cruise yachts had arrived and anchored near me in deeper water, and more arrived during the morning. They were practically all at least twice the size of Lady Eleanor, and as I watched the antics of some crews trying to drop their anchors in confined spaces, and deep water, I appreciated the shallow draught of the Shrimper, albeit I had 30 mtrs. of chain out.

The strong winds that had been forecast, hit us around midday, and one 50 footer nearby, dragged its anchor, taking seven other boats with it, several hundred mtrs. down the loch. It took an hour to sort out the mess and my neighbouring skipper on a 45ft. Bavaria told me he had registered 54 kts. of wind.

We spent the next two days exploring Skye, (in the rain), and I managed to winkle a few of the beautifully red spotted brown trout from the local burn with my fly rod. The Talisker distillery laid on a "nosing" and tasting of the six classic malts, followed by a barbecue and ceilidh, all good fun, but getting back to our boats at midnight, in the pouring rain, on board the water taxi, was a hazardous, yet jolly affair.

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Friday dawned with a hint of sun, and the rain had stopped. We sailed off our anchorage at 8.30, threading our way through the anchored fleet, waving to our newly found friends, with shouts of "see you in Islay in a week's time". We had a smooth sail in a force two on our beam for the 28 miles down to Rhum, highlighted by a minke whale, longer than the shrimper, surfacing just 50 feet off our bow. We anchored in loch Scresort, cooked the mackerel we had caught on passage, and then just sat and watched the shadows lengthen over the surrounding hills and mountains of Rhum, That night it poured!

Saturday morning I awoke early for the shipping forecast; not good. We were in for a spell of strong southerlies, and our destination was due south! We set out with two reefs in the main, and it took us seven hours continual tacking to sail the eleven miles to the Isle of Muck, where we anchored off a beach on the north shore this time. Once again the pilot's directions were precise, and in order to avoid submerged rocks, we had to line up a yellow painted barn with the corner of a stone wall: it did not take us long to realise that the barn had recently been painted green!

**Taking the ground on the Isle of Muck**



For the second time we received some island hospitality. The resident fisherman not only offered the use of his tender lying on the beach, but also to provide me with ten litres of petrol, when he learnt of my slight anxiety at running low on my first tank.

We spent the next three nights and two days stormbound on

Muck. What an idyllic island. We walked, we fished, we watched the birds, we listened to the corncrake, and we caught three brown crab in a folding pot I always keep stowed beneath the cockpit sole. We dined on duck cassoulet, half-hour fresh mackerel, and once again on island lamb, courtesy of the dear lady living near the south anchorage which was an hour's walk away. We did try to sail south once, but it took us three hours to sail four miles, beating into a force six and a big atlantic swell. I felt it was getting dangerous, so we turned downwind, not an easy manoeuvre, and retraced the same four miles in forty minutes, back to our white sandy beach and aquamarine sea on the lee shore of Muck.

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By Monday, I had concluded that it was impossible for us to reach the Lagavulin distillery, on Islay in time for the end of cruise party on Thursday, especially as the three day weather outlook was for force seven southeasterlies, so we made the decision to abandon the cruise and sail to the mainland as soon as there was a break in the weather. I studied the charts, and read the pilot. I learnt that it is a tradition to tie a sprig of heather to the bow of the boat after sailing north round Ardmurchan point, in order to have good luck for the return passage. I did this, and woke on Tuesday to a much lighter wind, and a forecast of a brief imminent change to the northwest. A fair wind at last!

We set sail immediately, but it took us all day to beat the 22 miles to Tobermory on the isle of Mull, as the northwesterly did not materialise. It rained most of the time, and we were cold wet and tired when we finally picked up a visitor's mooring off the colourful quayside. We felt much better after a superb curry ashore in the Indian restaurant.

We left at 10.00 with fair weather to make the south going tide through the sound of Mull, and we were accompanied by a solitary common dolphin through the harbour entrance. Sod's law prevailed, and we then enjoyed our best sailing conditions in ten days. We goose winged for five hours, with whisker pole in the jib and a halyard reeved through the aft of the boom as a gybe preventer, covering the 28 miles back to Dunstaffnage, well in time to drive to Oban for another beer and fish and chip supper on the quay.

We collected the trailer, and my car, from Ardfern on Friday morning, recovered Lady Eleanor, and I said farewell to my crew, thanking them for being such marvellous company. I set off on the 500 mile journey home, with mixed feelings: disappointment at failing to complete the course, contentment with the many magical moments, and a longing to do it all again in fair weather.

One thing is for sure. Next year at the start of the National Shrimper Week in Wales, I am going to tie a sprig of heather to my bowsprit to ensure good weather and fair winds in the Haven, and for the ensuing week's cruise round St. David's Head to Newport!

**Next years Classic Malts Cruise will be held from the 17th-30th July, 2004**  
**For enquiries, please contact World Cruising Club, 120 High Street, Cowes, Isle of Wight, PO31 7AX, email [classicmaltscruise@worldcruising.com](mailto:classicmaltscruise@worldcruising.com), tel +44 (0)1983 296060, fax +44 (0) 1983 295959. Entries for the Classic Malts Cruise 2004 will again be limited to 100 yachts, with places allocated strictly in order of receipt of completed entry forms and payment of the entry fee. All entries must be on the official Classic Malts Cruise 2004 entry form, which will be published in early January 2004. To obtain an entry form please contact World Cruising Club.**