

Escape to Barra

Roger Coutu's 2013 cruise from Troon to the Outer Hebrides

The 2013 sailing season was a bit unusual because I had American visitors most of the summer who don't understand how short the sailing season is in Scotland. Undeterred I departed mid-June after a fortnight's glorious weather had passed.

The reason for the delay was I waited for fellow TOA member Steve Leigh to join me as crew. Steve is homeported on the southeast coast of England and had read about my exploits in the TOA magazine, he wanted to do some sailing in Scotland so he contacted me last winter. Being an agreeable sort of guy I accepted and as promised he showed up the day before departure with his sea bag.

I figured Steve would be hungry so I had him meet me at my house, Sharon cooked us a full Scottish breakfast complete with black pudding before we headed down to the boat. There sure was plenty of food

because Steve is vegetarian... so after a few last minute changes to the food load-out and looking for a place to stow the 2 cases of red wine he had brought with him we were off.

Monday, 10 June: Troon to Port Ellen, Islay. 68.4 nm, 13 hours. Departed at 0415 with force 3 easterly winds. Loaned Steve my spare sailing boots to prevent him from wearing the wellies he had brought with him on my freshly painted ivory decks. The Mull of Kintyre rounding was benign, wind increased to F5 easterly with heavy swell once we were clear and into the Sound of Jura.

We stayed in Port Ellen the following day to recuperate and watch the rain. Steve cooked breakfast and missed the big square boaty frying

pan completely when cracking the eggs. Afterwards we took a bus to visit the Bowmore distillery and round church at the top of the hill. We didn't have a reservation but they were sympathetic and gave us a free dram with a provision... we had to watch their DVD. After the tour we made our way back to the boat for dinner via a pub or two.

Wednesday, 12 June: Port Ellen to Ardmish, Gigha via Ardmore Islands and Caolas Gigulum. 22.5 nm, 6 hours. Departed 1315 in southwesterly force 2-3. Upon clearing Port Ellen we headed north taking the inshore passage through the Ardmore Islands. From the description in the sailing directions I was expecting it to be like a wildlife sanctuary but the only thing we saw was rocks.



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It was very pretty though and we managed to keep the drifter flying the entire way, the restricted manouevering kept it interesting. Once clear we crossed the Sound of Jura heading west to Gigha via Caolas Gigulum which is the name of the channel running between the Islands of Gigha and Cara. We anchored in Ardminish and made a brief visit ashore for dinner.

Prior to weighing anchor the following morning we explored Achamore gardens, the rhododendrons were gorgeous and in full bloom. The only shop on the island was shut due to post office embezzlement and the locals have warned the prisoner not to return to the island after she gets out of jail. The community has grand plans to expand the pier and add additional moorings which could potentially affect anchoring space.

Thursday, 13 June: Gigha to Ardfern Marina, Loch Craignish. 33.2 nm, 7 hours. Weighed anchor at 1345 in a westerly force 4. Upon departing we did a drive-by and briefly chatted with Colin who was working on a fish farm on the NE coast of the island, he is a buddy who also sails with the Troon Cruising Club.

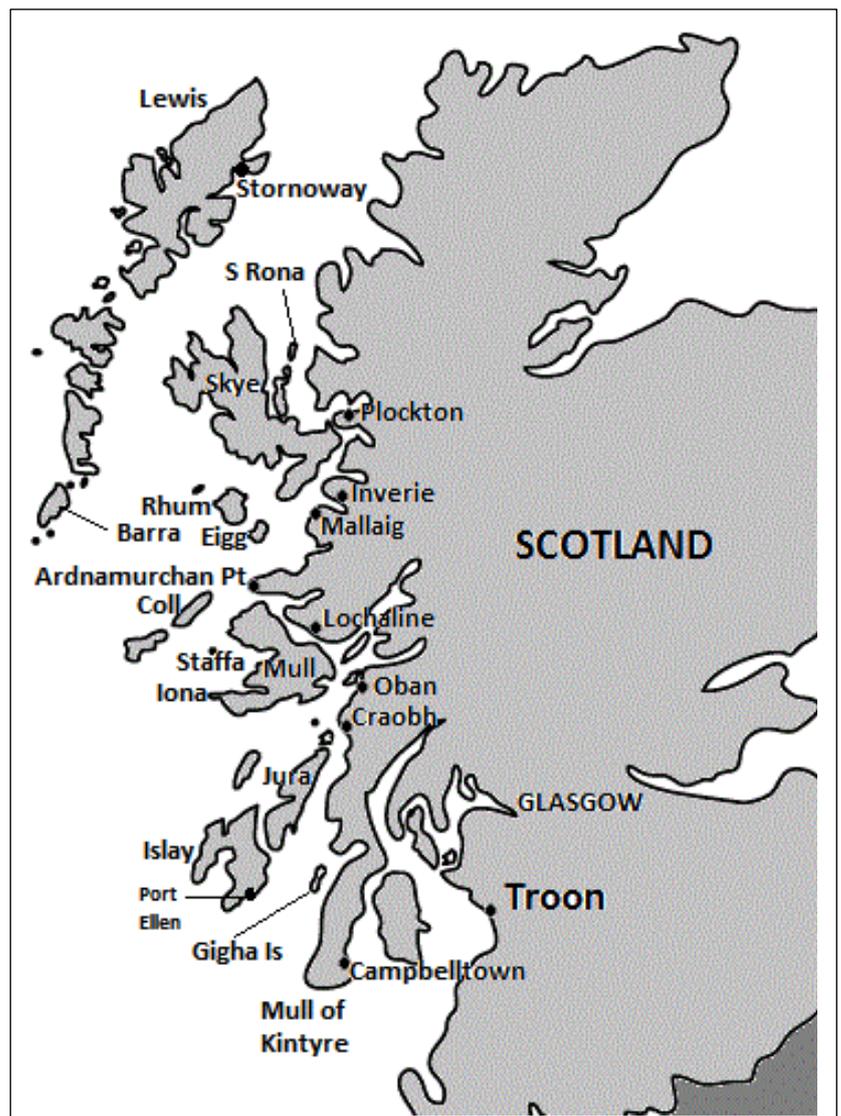
Heading north up the Sound of Jura we sailed west of the McCormaig Isles. We then sailed on a beam reach up Loch Craignish in the company of a couple boats we had previously met in Port Ellen who were participating in a UK circumnavigation for Old Gaffers. Upon arrival at Ardfern marina we had a challenging upwind berth but eventually we were tied up safely. We ate dinner and had showers.

Friday, 14 June: Ardfern to Puilladobhrain via Cuan Sound. 21.2 nm, 5 hours. Steve departed for home mid-morning and I completed the remainder of this cruise single-handed. Following a celebratory bacon roll (remember Steve is a vegan) I got underway solo at 1330 in a south/southeasterly force 5-6. I approached the Cuan Sound from the

‘I was expecting wildlife...the only thing we saw was rocks...’

In the Cuan Sound two boats were stopped mid-channel as they attempted to go against an adverse tide, upon clearing the channel the Coast Guard went zooming by to make them turn around. A force 7 gale was blowing as I entered Puilladobhrain and it was packed with boats, it took a couple attempts to get the anchor set with decent swinging room. The nearest boat told me not to worry because his was a “rental”. Once I was settled in for the night a fellow boater rowed over to invite me ashore for a pint but the weather forecast was horrible so I declined.

Saturday, 15 June: Puilladobhrain to Oban Marina. 6.7 nm, 2 hours, northeasterly force 4. Departed 0930 and arrived at 1130. While entering Oban Bay the Russian cargo vessel “Free Ocean” was being towed in from the north by three tugs; she had spent a few days aground near Tobermory.





Landfall on Barra, Outer Hebrides

It was a sunny day, perfect for exploring Oban. Spent £10 for a scallop lunch on the railway pier at MacGillivrays Shelfish Shack. Attended Mass at the Cathedral and bumped into a guy I went to school with who was on holiday with his family. Afterwards I had an excellent fish supper at the Oban Fish Bar and a poor pint at the Harbour Inn. I then noticed Tim from Cornwall who I've ran into on previous occasions standing in front of the Celeidh House, he solo sails junk rigged and aptly named China Blue. We went in and it was very touristy, full of Frenchmen pushing each other at the bar. Unfortunately Rachel Walker who I hoped to hear wasn't singing until the following night.

Sunday, 16 June: Oban to Oronsay, Loch Sunart. 28.3 nm, 7.5 hours. Departed at 0935 in a northwesterly force 2-3. Uneventful but a warm day and a beautiful night with very light

wind, I sailed in shorts and t-shirt for the first time this year. The Sound of Mull was like a motorway with boats everywhere. My original destination was Loch Drumbuie but there was a queue of boats waiting to get in so I diverted and went another mile and anchored in beautiful Oronsay which was empty and better sheltered.

Monday, 17 June: Oronsay, Loch Sunart to Castle Bay, Barra. 53.3 nm, 12 hours. Weighed anchor at 0500 and notified Stornoway Coast Guard of my plan to cross the Sea of the Hebrides as I approached

Ardnamurchan Point. The wind was force 2 and I motored nearly all day wearing a pair of shorts, half-way across the dolphins joined the crossing.

Anchored near Kissimul Castle. Discussed the 0530 rescue operation I had listened to on the VHF with an RNLI guy (who also happened to

'The Sound of Mull was like a motorway... boats everywhere'

be Barra's sleeping policeman) over a pint at the Craigard Hotel. Ate a burger then went to bed.

The following day it was time to explore. I took a bus around the entire island stopping for an excellent breakfast and the main attraction... watching a plane land and take off at the beach airport. En route I met Alistair and Lindsay off of Skye rental boat *Rona II* which was on an adjacent mooring. Upon returning I discovered the tide was out and their dinghy was wedged precariously on the quay wall so I sorted it out for them.

In the afternoon I took the bus to Vatersay and spent several hours hiking along the coast through the machair fields, they were in full bloom and gorgeous. I then paid my mooring fees at the town hall (£6.72 per week!) and took a shower at the primary school swimming pool which is available out with school hours for another strange price, £1.05. It was the first time in my life that I had shaved without a mirror and I was petrified that I was going to slice my throat. After dinner Alistair and Lindsay came on board *Escape* to help me consume some of the wine Steve had forgotten to drink.

Wednesday, 19 June: Castle Bay, Barra to Tobermory, Mull.

53.9 nm, 11.5 hours. Long-range forecast were for gales so I gave up my quest to reach Stornoway and decided to head back to the mainland. Poked my head out of the hatch during one of my middle of the night head calls and I noticed how beautiful it was outside so I got underway immediately in a southwesterly force 3-4 at 0200. Sailed on a beam reach almost the entire way,



shipping and fishing traffic was light so I slept in 15 minute intervals with the tiller pilot engaged. At 0900 the wind increased to force 5.

Upon arrival in Tobermory the harbourmaster was reading the latest issue of the Troon Cruising Club yearbook with my 2012 article in it! Ate a greasy fish supper on the pier and had a pint at the Mishnish. Did laundry (£6).

Thursday, 20 June: Tobermory to Loch Cuan



Escape in Castle Bay, Barra



Beam reach in Loch Craignish

(northwest coast of Mull). 10.3 nm, 2 hours. Long-range forecast forgot to mention gales so I headed outside the Mull once more, getting underway at 1345 in a southeasterly force 4-5. Upon exiting Tobermory I saw Colin again, this time he was heading south in his workboat as I was heading north.

On the chart Loch Cuan looks like a small bay but it is quite sheltered from anything but onshore winds, there are a lot of rocks so be careful during entry. Once anchored you are rewarded with stunning views of Coll and Ardnamurchan.

It was here that I set my collapsible lobster pot for the first time, tying it to my stern cleat. In the morning I was a bit annoyed to discover that the line to the pot looked like it had wrapped itself around my stern and the prop. But it didn't happen and everything was okay, I was able to retrieve the pot containing a dozen crabs and one weird fish. Threw all overboard and made note to self that the boat doesn't make a good buoy.

'A beautiful sunset over Jura with another glass of Steve's red wine...'

Friday, 21 June: Loch Cuan to Loch Aline via Loch Drumbuie. 26.8 nm, 10 hours. The extended forecast includes gales again and they were expected to arrive on Sunday so I decided to abort my plan to sail south through the very exposed Ross of Mull.

Weighed anchor at 0930 and headed back inshore, northeasterly force 3-4. Anchored in Loch Drumbuie for lunch and a nap to commemorate the longest day of the year.

Upon awakening I sailed to Loch Aline and anchored for the night just before heavy rain arrived.

Saturday, 22 June: Loch Aline to Oban Marina. 12.6 nm, 3 hours. Weighed anchor at 0930, wind is southerly force 4. Gales are predicted everywhere within the next 12 hours. They were calling it an "unusually deep area of low pressure". Space was at a premium in Oban and I felt like a zoo animal since my berth was directly across from the ferry landing where there was a constant queue of people watching what I was doing.

The following day I took a walk to the monument above the marina to obtain an accurate weather observation since the berth was very sheltered, the forecast was accurate and we had a force 8 gale blowing from the north.

Monday, 24 June: Oban to Carsaig Bay, Sounda of Jura via Cuan Sound and Dorus Mor. 28.5 nm, 7 hours. Underway at 1400, northwesterly force 4-5. Excellent sailing conditions today and few boats sighted, 10.5 knots through Dorus Mor!! Beautiful sunset over Jura with another glass of Steve's red wine. The only drawback at this anchorage is it is very weedy so you better have a decent windlass on board.

Tuesday, 25 June: Carsaig Bay to Gigha. 23.1 nm, 5 hours. Weighed anchor at 0700, southwesterly force 2-3. Motored nearly the entire day and upon arrival I anchored in the SE corner of the bay. Showers £1. Ate dinner with Joe from Stornoway at the Gigha Hotel. He is working on the island for 6 days, had been here one and said it felt like three already. Joe was provided a house on the island without a shower so he was using the boat house facilities. Midgie weather.

Wednesday, 26 June: Gigha to Troon. 65.6 nm, 11 hours. Weighed anchor at 0715 in southwesterly force 4-5. Calm seas for a Mull rounding although I encountered a 20-25 foot swell at the point for about an hour.

It was wacky Wednesday race night when I arrived in Troon and blowing a force 5 from the west. Upon pulling into my berth I was surprised to discover the tether line on my mooring had been severed at the pick-up buoy, my bow line was unattached so I couldn't pick it up in the usual fashion.

In the middle of re-executing this now complicated mooring manoeuvre a fellow club member deliberately rammed me broadside and then stated afterwards I was in his way and he didn't know what else to do... my teak toe rail was in splinters.

I was now exhausted physically and mentally so I used another club member's berth for the night



Roger Coutu receiving the Marcon Trophy last year for his log for a cruise to Eigg (TN May 2013)

'I was exhausted physically and mentally...'

until I got mine sorted. You could say my trip literally ended with a bang.

This year's cruise was interesting because the weather was in control. This prevented me from reaching my intended destination of Stornoway and shortened the length of my voyage. However I did complete my first significant offshore passage with *Escape*, made landfall in the Outer Hebrides, visited nine

new locations, and sailed more than 450 nautical miles without incident. The places we visited included Port Ellen, the Ardmores Islands, Ardfern, Puilladobhrain, Oronsay Loch Sunart, Loch Drumbuie, Tobermory, Loch Cuan, and Castle Bay.

To me, the most satisfying thing about sailing the West Coast of Scotland are the many options that make themselves available when things don't go according to plan. Maybe next year I'll just skip the planning bit altogether and go one day at a time.

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