

Log of the cruise of Hunter Medina 20 "Red Lady" 11/5/2016 to 2/6/2016

The original plan had been a cruise up the east coast to Inverness, through the Caledonian canal, down the west coast and back via the Clyde. However the forecast was for north-easterlies until we reached Rattray Head when it forecast stronger north-westerlies, against the North going tide we hoped to use. This is described as producing significant overfalls there, so the plan was abandoned and crew changes were rearranged for a cruise to and from the west coast via the Clyde.

Tuesday 10th May

After just managing to mount the engine and load the gear before the tide floated the boat my son Ewan and I left North Berwick at 16:30 to sail to Anstruther for the night. It was a beat into the north-easterlies so we took a tack east to visit the Bass Rock, before heading north. The harbour master had left us a key to the pontoons and we posted our harbour dues through his letterbox in the morning. However by the time we got ourselves sorted out for this first night aboard it was late, so we just ate aboard.

Wednesday 11th May

The forecast was reasonable but a berth holder who had just driven from Lower Largo said he would "not go out there in a lifeboat" so we walked round to have a look over the sea wall. We decided it was OK for a run up river although a beat to the east would have been a different matter. We were reassured to see that his was a large but roly looking motorboat. We went off under reefed headsail alone and the seas at first would certainly have made the boat a bit of a handful with the main set, but as we moved up river the seas became flatter particularly west of Elie, presumably because we had less wind against the ebbing tide once the estuary widened out. It was a beautiful sunny day but the wind died and we had to motor for a bit. We were surprised to pass a few loaded ships anchored off Kinghorn which an A.I.S. based app. Indicated were bound for Grangemouth. We had printed off the daily chart from the "Forth Crossing Bridge Constructors Joint Venture" website which indicated they would be mooring barges in the Rosyth channel, so we're surprised to pass under the railway bridge to see their barge moored in the main channel and a deck section being raised. A quick call to the guard boat on channel 8 directed us to the Rosyth channel and explained the absence of movement of the large commercial traffic. With flat water above the bridges, a following tide, the main channel to ourselves and the mainsail and spinnaker set, we clocked 7.6 knots over the ground, passing Blackness Castle. We made the Carron sea lock by 4.30 and managed to get the mast down and stowed in half an hour, as the sea lock keeper had to be away early. We then locked up between the Kelpies and spent the night moored beside them ready to start up the canal next morning.

Thursday & Friday 12 /13th May

A sunny and otherwise pleasant passage through the Forth Clyde canal was marred by finding a body near the west end which we put a rope round and gently moved a few meters to a pontoon under the Erskine bridge. A long delay ensued while a variety of emergency services dealt with it, including photographing our boat hooks presumably to document the absence of heavy or pointy bits, and checking our alibi for being there and towing a body along the canal.

Because of the delay we made tea for the lock keepers, and while retrieving a cup at the next bridge I managed to collect the bridge with my head, so it was as well that it happened in that order or I would have been trying to explain to the constable the combination of signs of a struggle involving my head with a dead body on the end of our mooring warp.

The sea lock keeper at Bowling kindly worked late so that we could get our mast up in order to catch the narrow time window to exit on the falling tide next morning.

Saturday 14th May

Motored down the channel and set sails off the tail of the bank, but the wind died off Cloch light. While drifting a pod of porpoises swam past and shortly after Ewan had a swim round the boat, but they never came back to join him. The wind gradually picked up and we beat down past Innellan and the East coast of Bute until we could make the channel past Millport, to sail back up the Largs channel to the marina.

Sunday 15 May

Departed Largs in sun and a calm sea at 7.30, motoring to Toward Point where we hoisted sails and progressed slowly in the sunshine. But with the tide at Burnt Island narrows to catch at noon, a little more motoring was required. The wind came in west north west at 1pm off the mouth of Loch Riddon, presumably a sea breeze, and we had a brisk sail past Tignabuaich and down the West Kyle. The fine views of Aran from Ardlamont were marred by the loss of my crew's hat which we failed to pick up despite making 6 passes before it sank. A beat up Loch Fyne to Ardrishaig in strengthening wind ended with us motorsailing hard on the wind from Tarbert to make supper with the new crew. The sea-lock keeper at Ardrishaig had gone so we tied up to the pontoon outside the open sea-lock, rather than going into the lock and having to tend our lines overnight. There were now 4 people to accommodate, so one slept in his car, as two large adults in the Medina forecabin would be just too much of a squash.

Monday 16th May.

A straightforward passage through the Crinan canal in the company of a Loch Fyne skiff with whom we had shared the locks on a previous cruise. and with whom we sailed to the wild anchorage by Goat Island on the east side of Loch Craignish to spend the night.

Tuesday 17th May.

Morning dull but a light wind which was fine to sail off the anchor and beat down the narrow passage between the island and the mainland shore, before bearing away to the Dorus Mhor to catch the first of the flood, which then helped carry us up the Sound of Ling. Passing Kerrara a light drizzle increased then the wind dropped until we had to motor to clear the ferries coming out of Oban. Half way up Lismore the sails came down and we picked up a mooring at Port Appin. At first we were tide rode with rain blowing under the side of the boom tent, but by lifting the keel we were wind rode which was drier and more comfortable. A short row to supper in the Pier House was worth it just for the seat by the wood stove.

Wednesday 18th.

A sunny brisk sail north past Castle Stalker and through the narrow passage at the south end of Shuna Island which has been buoyed by Linnhe Marina who kindly let us to take on water at their service pontoon. Sailing out of the north end of Shuna Sound we bore away to Loch a' Choire. When we were half way across Loch Linnhe a sea eagle carrying a fish flew low across the loch behind us to the west side of Shuna where it presumably had it's nest.

We picked up a mooring in Loch a' Choire and had a walk ashore. After. a sail back across Loch Linnhe in light air, there was a mixture of sun and storm clouds as we went back south through the Lismore Passage to Lynn lorn and Dunstafnage. The wind gradually built until we were starting to get over pressed, so we dropped the main and were almost at our waterline speed with headsail alone. We were surprised to find Dunstafnage Marina all shut up at 7.30 despite a lot of sailors about, so we opted for a meal aboard.

Thursday 19th May

Left early for a brisk sail to Oban Marina on Kerrara as a south wind force 5 to 7 were forecast for the next couple of days. This allowed one crew member to jump ship, correctly anticipating that we would be stormbound for two days. The marina was unusually quiet when we arrived but by the evening it had quite a buzz with 3 peaks competitors.

Friday 20th May

After watching the start of 3 peaks with a running race and row or paddle out to waiting yachts off Oban sailing club in the very brisk southerly, we took the train to Taynuilt and had a look round the blast furnace on the banks of Loch Etive which ran on local charcoal, explaining the loss of oak forrest in the area.

Sat 21st May.

Very heavy rain and a contrary tide in the sound of Mull meant that we did not leave until shortly after noon. With 2 reefs in the mainsail and a well reefer jib as we were now only two up we had a fast close reach to the Lismore light, in sunshine and showers. Contrary to what we expected from the predicted tides, there were slight over falls and wind over tide chop at the Lady rock. We talked of the very favourable wind we would

have once we bore away into the sound of Mull, with the wind funnelling up the sound. It did funnel, but against us, before it died just as the Barra ferry came up behind us. We motored for a bit until our course converged with the Loch Aline ferry which got us beating again, with the wind gradually freeing off until, passing Fiunary, we were able to shake out the reefs and enjoy the evening light as the showers died. Once on the Tobermory pontoons we sorted out the boat and went for a walk in town.

Sunday 22nd May

Fine sunny broad reach up Loch Sunnart and afternoon tea in a small pretty anchorage before the narrows just west of Strontian. Thought of spending the night there but we were joined by a fleet of half deckers cruising in company, so decided to motor back down the Loch to Loch Drumnabuie, where we anchored in a small inlet in Oronsay Island.

Monday 23rd

In light wind with anchor warp rather than chain, we were able to quietly sail off the anchor, beat out of the entrance and ghost along the Morven shore to fly the spinnakers once in the Sound of Mull as far as Fiunary, when the wind died until we had motored past Loch Aline then another spinnaker run in force 3-4 to push through adverse tide at the Lady Rock with quite a chop from the wind over tide, back to Oban marina for a crew change.

Tuesday 24th

After a crew change we departed at 5pm for Loch Creran in very light wind and had to motor part of the way to catch last of flood in the entrance at 8 pm. The engine stopped as we were leaving Oban bay about to pass between Maiden island and the reef off the mainland shore, so quickly unfurled the jib and altered course into the main fairway despite a distant ferry approaching. The problem was the usual one of the fuel line disconnected while we were stuffing fenders into the aft locker and so was quickly fixed allowing us to resume our course north of Maiden Island. Picked up a hefty mooring in the first bay in the entrance to Loch Creran with a fine view down the Lynn of Lorn to the hills of Mull. Anchoring is discouraged in the fragile rare marine environment in the loch.

Wednesday 25th May. Had a gentle early morning sail up lochCreran in light airs while there was still an adverse flooding tide in the entrance. Approaching the entrance the north wind freshened considerably and a yacht outside could be seen moving fast with headsail alone, so we picked up a mooring and dropped the main before being whisked by a following tide and wind back out into the Lynn of Lorn. After a couple of hours brisk sailing in the sunshine the wind died so we motored past Kerrara before it filled in from the northeast, allowing a fine sail to Puillobhran on the north end of Seil Island.

Thursday 26th May

Good run past Seil and Easdale islands, but the strength of the wind meant we had to abandon a planned visit to the Garvellachs, to be sure we could catch the mid afternoon tide at the Sound of Ling and the Dorus Mhor. After a pleasant sunny sail to loch Craignish we picked up a mooring in the bay and climbed the island on the west side of the loch. We locked into Crinan Basin for the night where we met the first seasonal flush of the midge.

Friday 27th May

A dull but dry day, we made good progress through the canal again with the help of a local friend and the Russian crew of the charter boat with whom we shared the locks. They were due back in Largs by next morning so they headed off down Loch Fyne into the fading light while we moored for the night on pontoon outside the sea lock.

Saturday 28th

A tricky departure past a beamy fishing boat next to us on the pontoon with the flow out of the sea lock pushing us onto it, but the thoughtful lock keeper asked if we were about to depart before opening sluices to empty lock.

On flat water in light air our Medina Kept pace with larger boats whom we had accompanied through the canal, beating down loch Fyne. Thought we were doing quite well until passed at speed by large yachts in the Scottish series off Tarbert, tacking downwind. The leading boat had a huge jeniker subtly promoting Old Poltney which we felt was OK as we had some of the product aboard.

Decision time at Ardlamont as we would have to motor to catch the tide at the burnt islands if we kept to our original plan to sail through the Kyles of Bute so we headed south and had a great spinnaker run to the south tip of Bute when an onshore breeze developed. It predictably died at 5pm and we had to motor across to the Cumbraes. Compensation however in that the smooth sea allowed us to see a large pod of porpoises off the south tip of Bute. The airstrip on the south end of Bute was busy with 7 departing small aircraft.

Sunday 29th May

A light morning mist burned off to give sun all day. After a little motoring in the morning calm a brisk wind developed from the north and we beat with one reef in sunshine past Innellan, but the wind then dropped so we shook it out by Kip marina and beat close past the Gantock rocks off Dunoon. We had to motor from Cloch point and, with the tide under us ground speed built once we entered the channel. Locked in at Bowling at 4:45 with 0.3 m under keel as soon as there was enough water in the harbour. This was to enable us to get the mast down ready to start up the canal in the morning. We had been looking out for the paddle steamer Waverley since entering Clyde and finally saw it heading up river well laden with trippers as we were washing up the supper dishes.

Monday 30th May

Another misty morning but it burned off by 9:30 by which time we were on our way, progressing swiftly with a combination of regular and volunteer lock keepers. We made Kirkintilloch by 5pm. With the crew going ashore for a run along the wooded towpath for the last 2 miles. As usual we had supper in the converted canal stables then on to the plush 'South Bank Marina' in Kirkintilloch.

Tuesday 31st May

Lovely sunny passage especially in the morning on the rural and wild wooded part of the canal. Ate aboard in the evening under the Kelpies in sun and wind.

Wednesday 1st June

Had to wait until noon for enough tide to get down the Carron river which meant that we had plenty time to go through the lock between the Kelpies and put up the mast with the crane at the new sea-lock. A gentle beat down the Forth to the bridges on fairly flat water was followed by stronger winds and short steep seas east of the bridges. We had motored under the bridges to avoid the construction traffic and kept motoring eastwards as there was a bit of commercial traffic by the Hounds Point oil terminal and progress would have been slow beating into the waves. Anchored in the bay on the south side of Inchcolme island, under the Abbey. After a walk around the abbey and the island we ate aboard. The pilot described the bay as suitable for small boats to take the ground but as the tide fell we had to move into deeper water near the entrance as the bottom was not completely smooth. This meant we got some of the swell setting into the bay as well as wash from passing ships, so we were rocked to sleep.

Thursday 2nd June

The cruise finished with a slow but sunny passage back to North Berwick with a calmer sea and only a few fishing boats on the move.

Iain McNeill.