

## CRUISING IN SCOTLAND



# SKYE HIGH!

*Editor David Glenn had long nurtured a desire to explore Scotland's coastline north of Ardnamurchan. A family cruise in August proved it was worth the wait, offering hospitality and scenery matched by few locations in the world*

I was beginning to tire of suggestions that in the time it had taken us to drive to Skye from Salisbury we could have flown to the Caribbean and back (almost). If it hadn't been for the increasingly dramatic scenery which opened up before us as we headed north past Loch Lomond then through the awesome Glen Coe (the drive is quite spectacular), my loyalty to our summer cruise plan may not have withstood the jibes.

They say that the drama of Scotland's coastal landscape doesn't begin until you are north of Ardnamurchan, so I was determined to reach a cruising ground which had always held so much promise. I was not to be disappointed. As we crossed the Skye road bridge at the Kyles of Lochalsh en route to our charter boat, the surrounding scenery took our breath away at almost every turn.

Our somewhat ambitious intention was to circumnavigate Skye in one week, so Isle of Skye

Yachts at Ardvassar, at the tip of a hammerhead that forms Skye's southern flank, seemed strategically placed. Charmian and Mark Entwistle run about a dozen yachts, all kept on swinging moorings tucked behind the small ferry port of Armadale.

### Refreshing simplicity

It seemed a throwback to chug out in a small launch then load cardboard boxes of kit and provisions onto our yacht as it bucked in a chop whipped up by a westerly gale. But the Entwistles had the transfer process down to a tee and there was something about the simplicity of it all, including the refreshing lack of a marina, that set the scene for the week. Our yacht, *Sleat Lady*, was an extremely well equipped and neatly turned out Bénéteau 393. She didn't miss a beat all week – full marks to Isle of Skye Yachts.

There were several reasons to make it over to the mainland for the first night. We needed to blow away



All photos: D & M Glenn/Jyypix

Top: the author (far left) keeps a keen eye forward having just cleared the Skye Bridge. Left to right: Will, Adam, Paul, Annie and Lottie. Above: lucky heather for *Sleat Lady*. Right: the anchorage at Eilean Aoinidh, known as Totaig, in a perfect morning calm

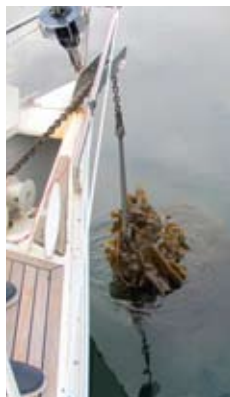




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Above: Portree, the 'capital' of Skye is a useful staging post on a cruise. Below: kelp in abundance demands careful anchoring



the cobwebs from the long haul north for a start, and with the wind down to 20 knots on the beam we fairly bowled across the Sound of Sleat in the gloom of the late afternoon, heading for the dark hills of Knoydart.

This area is so remote and impenetrable by land that the only way to reach Inverie and the Old Forge Inn and restaurant is by boat. As if to confirm this, we arrived to see a truck on a landing craft – no one was prepared to argue with the assertion that the Forge is the remotest pub in Britain.

Two of our crew were travelling down memory lane because they had spent a summer courting on the Knoydart estate longer ago than either of them probably cared to remember. So, fond memories for Paul and Annie and the challenge of new ground for the rest of us made for a notable visit.

Mindful that the fresh westerly would make this a lee shore, I was praying that the promise in the pilot of a sturdy mooring was true. Sure enough, a well-maintained riser and pick-up buoy allowed us to sleep soundly, helped by a whopping meal at the Old Forge which was packed with revellers. How they

all got there was a mystery. We indulged in a vast amount of locally caught shellfish, good wine and beer, and in full oilies dinghied back to the boat in the pitch dark, oblivious to the persistent rain that is euphemistically referred to locally as Scotch 'mist'.

## Shooting the narrows

The following day we awoke to sunshine and a moderate following breeze which made the passage north in the Sound of Sleat a simple run. Having just completed a navigation course in countless winter evening classes, my wife Manda was eager to test her skills in earnest. She gulped when she read that the tidal stream through the narrows at Kyle Rhea could run at 7.5 knots – the need to time things correctly was paramount. We duly shot through under sail and were spat out at the other end, hardening up for a fun beat through the Kyles of Lochalsh and under the famous Skye bridge before easing sheets for a glorious afternoon run down to Plockton.

Plockton – it doesn't sound Scottish does it? In fact, the name comes from the Gaelic *ploc*, meaning



lumpish promontory, and the village was once an important fishing community. With a number of pubs and hotels to its name, Plockton is now a tourist attraction, although one has to keep that description in perspective. The village seemed wonderfully quiet and well kept on our visit and it came as no surprise to learn that it was maintained by the National Trust.

We were impressed at the Haven Hotel too. The man on the desk whipped out a new iPad to provide an instant shipping forecast, and earlier a local announced proudly that he could suggest several good anchorages even though he'd "been on the lash for three days". It proved later that he was right too.

The palm trees in the hotel's front garden were evidence of the North Atlantic Drift warm current, which keeps things mild even this far north, but more appealing to me were the 15ft clinker-built Plockton Local Boats that sat merrily at moorings off the village. These attractive dayboats are being revived by the Plockton Small Boat Sailing Club and new examples are being built – the fleet now tops 20.

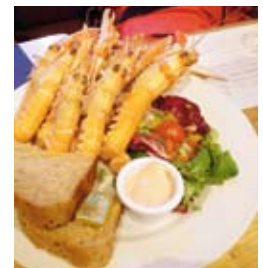
We paid our mooring fees in another hotel. Almost

everywhere we went the fee for an overnight stay on an invariably excellent mooring was £10 (anchoring is free). "Who do I pay?" I often had to ask. "Just pop it in the honesty box on the quay," came the reply. For a 40-footer this seemed astonishingly cheap and honesty boxes were a novelty.

Our progress north through the Inner Sound was slowed by a period of calm. We decided at this stage that a circumnavigation, while possible would deny us the chance to visit some promising-looking anchorages, so Manda reconfigured the plan to stay within the Inner Sound and make Gairloch and an appealing sounding place called the Badachro Inn our most northerly port of call.

### More Scotch 'mist'

We dropped the pick for lunch off Applecross Bay. It was a wide anchorage and potentially magnificent – only potentially because it didn't look its best in yet more Scotch mist. 'Lunch in full oilskins,' read the log and we soon got under way and set a course towards the intriguing island of Rona.



Few people used to equate Scotland with good food, but this has changed dramatically. We ate well whenever we were ashore



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Lottie surveys the perfect anchorage on Fladday. Below: was this HMS *Astute* a few weeks before her embarrassing grounding?

Eric Hiscock, the mid-20th Century cruising pioneer, said that Acauseid Mhor on the west side of the island was one of the finest anchorages in the world. It was indeed extraordinarily well sheltered and with only one other yacht we soaked up the tranquillity – most of us. For some extraordinary reason younger members of the crew decided it was time for a swim! They were in for less than 30 seconds and arguably wetter out than in.

## Mink shoot

Rona is privately owned by a Dane and managed by the hospitable Bill Cowie. We met him on the landing stage to ask for permission to walk on the island. This prompted a longish discussion about the dead mink he'd just dispatched by rifle on the foreshore. He gleefully revealed it in a plastic bag. Wild mink play havoc with the local bird population, which includes sea eagles. It's about balance, said Bill.

After a fairly challenging yomp across the island

we reached Church Cave, a natural cavern which has been turned into a place of worship. Like Iona, Rona is thought to be one of the islands where Christianity was first introduced from the Irish mainland. Pilgrims visit here to light candles and sign a visitors' book that is kept safe in a metal box.

Suitably mud-splattered (a pair of proper walking boots is a must on a cruise like this), we returned to Bill Cowie's lodge to post letters with Rona stamps and to check out the weather online.

Water and basic provisions are available, although Bill confessed he thought he'd poisoned Princess Anne last year when she arrived in the anchorage in her *Rustler*. "She came ashore and asked for a glass of water, which of course, I provided," he said.

The following day some official checks were being conducted on the island's water supply. "We were told under no circumstances were we to drink the water due to possible contamination," said Bill. As far as he was aware no ill-effects were suffered.





With the north-westerly easing, we took the chance to head further north and had a fairly lumpy sail in a cool breeze to reach another sublime anchorage, this time at Badachro near Gairloch at the head of a large inlet bearing the same name.

In brilliant late-afternoon sunshine, we weaved our way into the main anchorage then squeezed through a narrow rocky channel to pick up a mooring in a beautifully secluded pool.

### Seal playground

Two large seals seemed to be using this quiet corner as their playground and we felt a bit mean spoiling their fun, but they seemed to be quite used to visitors and the younger members of the crew were able to paddle to within a few feet of them.

A run ashore to the aforementioned Badachro Inn beckoned. Because Scotland's schools were already back when we visited in late August, we had no difficulty securing a table for seven and enjoyed not

only a superb meal with top-quality seafood, but also an unimpeded view from our table across this idyllic anchorage.

We woke the next morning to a sunny start and a glassy calm that provided a mirror image of our surroundings. Exploring on the foreshore with the dinghy and camera bag did attract one unwanted guest. Tens of thousands of them, to be precise – the Scottish midge.

Some people had suggested that cruising in Scotland at this time of year would be unbearable because of these tiny black insects that nip, but didn't appear to pack much of a toxic punch. On our cruise, they weren't too much trouble so long as we applied a mosquito repellent and carried a hat if the conditions became extreme, but I have heard they can make life unbearable ashore.

We slipped out of Gairloch after breakfast bound for Raasay and then Portree, the 'capital' of Skye. "Look a whale! Or is it an island?" Annie exclaimed. ▶▶

Top: nearly there! Cycling across Skye. Above left: safely through Kyle Rhea narrows. Above: Plockton's pretty local boats



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**We anchored off Eilean Donnan castle and rowed ashore to the back door to check out its bloody inter-clan history**

## Cruise info

Our Bénéteau 393 would cost £2,140 a week in the high season (mid-May to mid-August). It took us about 12 hours to drive from Salisbury – it would be worth spending a night en route to enjoy the Scottish scenery.

Although the weather can be challenging even in summer, shelter for a yacht is always close at hand in the area. In terms of general advice, work the tides, phone ahead for restaurant reservations and on no account forget your walking boots.

[www.skyeyachts.co.uk](http://www.skyeyachts.co.uk)

A glance at the chart suggested nothing permanent in that location. “I think it’s a nuclear submarine,” suggested a member of the crew with younger eyes. He was right. The huge mass was moving at barely five knots – on a collision course with *Sleat Lady*.

## Submarine stealth – usually

Monitoring Channel 16 carefully we stood on until we were 300m or so away, then bowed to her 7,800 tons by altering to starboard to dip her stern. What a vast and menacing sight she was as she slid silently south into the Inner Sound, where the chart indicated a submarine training area in depths that reached more than 900ft.

What we still don’t know is whether this was HMS *Astute*, which found herself hard and fast on a shingle bank near the Skye bridge a few weeks later, with her picture all over the national newspapers!

Our lunch stop at Fladday provided us with yet another interesting bit of pilotage and a magnificent anchorage in a narrow channel. We collected enough mussels from the foreshore for supper before we headed for the delights of Portree, where our £10 mooring held us safely while we nipped ashore for excellent fish and chips.

Encountering cars and crowds came as a shock after a few days in the wilderness, but Portree made a great provisioning stop and we were able to put Will on a bus to Armadale, where he could catch a ferry, then a train to London via the Glasgow sleeper to meet an interview deadline. The girls dallied for some considerable time in a smart shop called Over the Rainbow and we bought an excellent leg of lamb in the butcher’s for a meal aboard that evening.

Skye Mountain Bikes were able to deliver six new

machines the following day and we fulfilled a long-held ambition to cycle across the island.

We picked a great day of weather and it took us two-and-a-half hours’ hard pedalling to reach Loch Caroy, a part of the Loch Bracadale complex of inlets. Had I known we were within a few miles of the Talisker whisky distillery we would have pressed on, but a picnic in hot sunshine on a sheltered grassy slope was probably much better for our health.

Back aboard, we eventually crossed our outward track at the Skye bridge – that submarine was lurking nearby again – and we just about made the anchorage at Eilean Aoinidh (nearly always known as Totaig) in Loch Duich before sunset.

It was yet another idyllic anchorage, although it would have been crowded if there had been another yacht in there.

## A spectacular finale

The spectacular picture-postcard Eilean Loch Donnan castle just opposite our anchorage was irresistible and worth a visit to discover the bloody inter-clan history documented in its visitor centre.

We timed the tidal stream through Kyle Rhea to perfection once more and overnighted at the convenient and perfectly sheltered Isle Ornsay just three hours from base. A pint in the Duisdale Hotel provided fortification for a midge-racked yomp over Ornsay itself to take a look at the perfect lighthouse that guarded the island’s eastern flank.

We arrived to see the sun illuminating the tower against a backdrop of menacing black cloud over Knoydart. Heather shaded the foreground in intense colour and a perfect rainbow arced over the scene. It seemed a fitting end to a great cruise.