

Scottish Cruise, 1997, Summary

In early August, 1997, I was fortunate enough to serve as crew aboard Mike Bolton's yacht *Revel*. I had met Mike and his wife Patsy two years previous when, by coincidence, we chartered for the same week aboard *Lorne Leader*, a gaff ketch rigged Brixham Trawler of 100 tonnes built in 1892. In the 1990's, she was sailing the Western Isles with working charter crews.

Mike was the consummate yachstman. He was well known in yachting circles on the west coast of Scotland and, more widely, throughout Britain. When I sailed with him, he was a member of the Royal Cruising Club and had contributed greatly to cruising in that area by co-founding and acting as Secretary of the West Highland Anchorages and Moorings Association.

For two consecutive seasons, vizt., 1996 and 1997, I was invited to crew aboard his Oban based yacht *Revel*, a Rival 34. With him and his daughter Sally, I enjoyed a total of four wonderful weeks of cruising the Scottish Isles. This document chronicles the second of those cruises.

During this second cruise, we covered approximately 330 nautical miles and crossed the Minch twice. Among other delightful places, we visited the Hebridean islands of Iona, Staffa, South Uist, and Harris.

Sadly, Mike succumbed to a stroke in 2004 and is no longer with us. It was a privilege and an honour to have met and sailed with him.

Sailing Highlights

A difficult Start, Oban — July 24, 1997

I flew overnight from Pearson airport in Toronto to Glasgow, arriving in Glasgow on the morning of July 22. After refreshment in the Willow Tea Room on Buchanan Street, I took the West Highland Line train north to Oban. My sleep deprived brain was vaguely aware of the clickety-clack of the train's wheels as we left the lowlands behind and the oncoming Highland scenery soothed my senses.

On the morning of July 24, following a shower and light breakfast, we went down to the harbour and rowed out to *Revel* on her mooring. The surrounding hills were shrouded with mist and there was no wind evident as we made our way through a steady rain punctuated by showers; we were faced with a damp and somewhat inauspicious start to the cruise. Mike, with his customary *sangfroid*, simply hopped into the dinghy, had me drop the mooring lines, and towed *Revel* off her mooring. A few minutes of steady work at the oars and we were out into the tidal stream and being carried down the Sound of Kerrera.

A wee bit of breeze came up after lunch and we soon left Kerrera behind as we entered the Firth of Lorne. We sailed down the Firth in the cold damp wind and then anchored at Garbh Eileach, a small island in the Garvellochs. The anchorage was small and, as events would prove, had rather poor holding.

As we went ashore for our customary walk, a glance back showed *Revel* was dragging her anchor and perilously close to the rocky shore. A tumbling dash for the dinghy, frenzied row, and clamber aboard was quickly followed by all hands to their stations. Mike started the engine and took the helm, I worked the windlass, and Sally ran below to the cable locker to ensure the rapidly arriving chain would not jam. After resetting the anchor, we took warps ashore as an extra precaution.

All in all, a good recovery to an unsettling experience. In the time I cruised with Mike, this was our only experience with a dragging anchor.

Spectacular Sailing and Scenery — July 25, 1997

The next few days proved to be far better, both from weather and scenery perspectives. We departed the anchorage under sail and set our course for the Ross of Mull. We had a grand beat to the west along the south coast of Mull into a force 3 or 4 breeze. The sea sparkled under a brilliant sunny sky. Progress became routine with a tack as we got close inshore and then back onto the favoured tack after gaining some offing.

We passed through the Torran Rocks and managed to cut the corner inside Eilean Nam Mur as we entered the Sound of Iona. A fair tide gave us an extra bit of speed as we reached up the Sound past the Abbey and Cathedral. We rounded to north coast of the Ross of Mull and anchored for the night at Camas Tuadh near an outdoor education centre.

The next day, we slept in a bit and had a late start while I put a few extra stitches in a headsail seam that had started to chafe. After getting underway, we had a brief sail south to Iona and anchored in sand off a beautiful white beach that could have graced any Caribbean island. We had a brief run ashore on Iona to both the Cathedral and the village.

Again, up anchor and sail on. This time north to Staffa for a visit to Fingal's Cave. With no safe anchorage, Mike volunteered to stay aboard while Sally and I went ashore in the dinghy. The island's unique rock formations and spectacular cave were unlike anything I had seen before. Great hexagonal columns of basalt thrust up from the sea to create a strange, barren, but thoroughly captivating scene. Inside the cave, a somewhat slippery and treacherous walk was accompanied by the sound of the Atlantic swell crashing into the far reaches of the cavern.

Back aboard, we found Mike had enjoyed his time playing boat as *Revel* jilled about in the swell. A brief sail north brought us to a good anchorage in a glen near Gometra Harbour. We "showed how it's done" by sailing into the anchorage, furling headsail, and then anchoring under main alone. As we approached the chosen spot, Mike cleverly slowed *Revel* in the evening breeze by forcing the mainsail aback and, thus, allowing me to drop the anchor with no fuss. The cable payed out as we drifted back in the breeze and a brief snub of the chain set the hook.

across the Minch

July 27 saw us up early and away to the north-west to see how far we could get on. The best course we could lay ran us directly into Coll where we decided to take the easy route to the north of the island with a favourable wind and tide. As soon as we rounded Coll, we were back hard on the south-west wind and off across the Minch for a rollicking good sail. The Aries wind vane steered as we averaged five-and-a-half knots. An increasing wind caused us to reef as neared Vatersay in the outer Hebrides.

That evening's forecast decided our course of action for the next few days. The wind increase we had experienced crossing the Minch was but a taste of what was to come. There were south-east gales on the way!

We sailed north along the east coast of South Uist and anchored in Loch Skipport; a well protected little spot in which to ride out the gale. We had a good sail, mostly a reach in the gathering wind, and short tacked into the anchorage where, as was now our custom, we anchored under sail without engine assistance.

Weather Bound, South Uist — July 29 to July 31

Our 15 kg. Bruce anchor with twenty fathoms of chain was holding well as *Revel* sheered to and fro. A grumbling from the sea bed as the chain rumbled across rock led to Mike's decision to deploy a second anchor. The gale was not yet fully developed and the wind was only in the force six range, but increasing gusts in the seven to eight range warned of worse to come.

Getting the 35 pound fisherman up on deck and assembled took a bit of doing as *Revel* bounced and rocked in the wind, but all went well and soon we were riding to two anchors set some distance apart with the cables

making a ninety degree at *Revel's* bow. This gave us the confidence to have a brief walk ashore; it was a hard row back to *Revel* against the wind with three of us in the Avon Redcrest.

We stayed in the anchorage in South Uist until the morning of July 31. In the interval, we rested and listened to the wind. For me, the experience and the rock of South Uist brought new meaning to the phrase "*wind swept*".

Throughout, *Revel* rode well to her two anchors. She sheered to an fro continuously and was heeling five degrees under bare poles at anchor. As gusts came over the island and accelerated into the anchorage, the entire vessel shuddered as though she was being shaken like a child's toy in a pair of giant hands.

Part way through the gale, a forecast wind shift to the west forced us to reset our second anchor. This required two attempts as, on the first, the wind was so powerful that the engine could not hold the bow into the wind long enough to get the anchor down.

Late on July 30, we heard the news of decreasing winds and prepared to depart that next morning.

Easier said than done. During the gale, the anchors and their chain had dug into the mud very well indeed. Clearing them away was hard and messy work, as was cleaning the foredeck of mud and muck as we departed.

As we headed out, we came upon a converted Motor Fishing Vessel, the *Barkadale*. She was a heavily built sixty foot ketch with a six cylinder diesel and wearing the Scottish Saltire as ensign. The owners, Norman and Gillian Smith were acquaintances of Mike and, so, we were invited aboard for a most welcome mug of coffee. They had weathered the gale in Loch Skipport whilst riding to their 125 pound CQR anchor.

After taking our leave from *Barkadale*, we made a short sail north to Lock Madadh where we anchored near the RoRo ferry terminal. Again, we met friends of Mike. These were Bill and Pam Kellett who promptly invited us to join them for dinner aboard their Rival 38, *Islay*. We had a delightfully social evening aboard *Islay*. In addition to our crew, Bill and Pam had also invited Peter and Gill from *Lectron* to join us. Mike and Peter were well acquainted as Peter was at that time the Secretary of the Royal Cruising Club (RCC).

Tweed, the genuine Article

Our tentative plans to try for Kilda were shelved by steady rain and a westerly five gusting six. Not a good day to transit the Sound of Harris and make our way west. Instead, on August 1, we sailed north past the sound and along the east coast of Harris. Passage through a narrow rocky entrance admitted us to the well hidden and protected anchorage of Lock Scadabay. Once ashore, we walked up to a cottage and met the weaver at his hand loom producing Harris Tweed. This gave me an opportunity to try out last winter's Gaidhlig lessons as I greeted him in his mother tongue, which appeared to please. We were invited by Alasdair and Flora to tea in their cottage that evening.

The next day, we began to retrace our steps with a southerly trip across the Minch from Harris to Dunvegan on Skye. We were hard on the wind all the day with a south-west five or six against the tide making for a bouncy ride. I spent the entire day on deck and was rewarded with the sight of the cliffs on the west coast of Skye with their waterfalls cascading to the sea.

This was followed on August 3 with a long but very pleasant sail south down the west coast of Skye. We started with little wind, mostly drifting on the tidal current. However, a good breeze soon came up and we set the spinnaker in brilliant sunshine. A wonderful sight with the Cuillins as back drop. We rounded up and anchored in Loch Scavaig for the night at 21:30 after fifteen hours underway.

A morning run ashore led us up the path to Loch Coruisk where Mike rinsed off some salt with a very quick dip in this fresh and very cold water loch. Neither Sally nor I had the temerity to try it. Back aboard and an afternoon sail across to Rhum where we had a nice walk to the castle / mansion.

From Rhum, we made a short sail to Eigg where we had a good long walk ashore. On Eigg, I bought the T-shirt commemorating the buy-back of the island from an absentee landlord by the inhabitants. The anchorage at Eigg was a rather exposed bay that led to us being pooped in the dinghy on landing and nearly swamped over the bow on launching. From Eigg, we sailed to Muck, where we anchored for the night and were able to obtain fresh water.

West Highland Week

From Muck, we sailed to the lovely village of Kilchoan, which has the distinction of being the westernmost village on the mainland of Great Britain. This was one of the few times we didn't anchor but, instead, were able to pick up a visitor mooring. That evening, we watched a gathering fleet of Drascombe boats that appeared to be arriving for a rendezvous or rally.

Our choice of Kilchoan for the evening was driven by the presence of the West Highland Week fleet in Tobermory. The next day, as we beat our way south down the Sound of Mull on a favourable tide, we crossed paths with the fleet racing their way down the Sound from Tobermory to Oban. Evidence and a few harsh words suggested that they generally regarded this cruising vessel in their midst as a nuisance to be gotten around. Dodging the racing fleet aside, it was a lovely sailing day and we made our way to an anchorage at the north end of Kerrera in anticipation of our return to Oban the next day, August 8.

Denouement, back to Oban

The final leg to Oban was a non-event. Mike ran up the engine and we simply motored back to the dock at the Oban Yacht Club where we off-loaded, cleaned and watered ship, and then put her back on the mooring. A quiet end to a wonderful experience.