

DESTINATION SCOTLAND



Venturing into Myth

My great-grandfather, Donald McKechnie, had been born and bred on the Island of Jura – sometimes described as the wildest island in the Inner Hebrides – and the house in which he lived still stands on the shores of the island which today has a population of just under 200 people and 5,000 red deer. I had long been fired by the romantic notion of bringing to this spot a boat designed by his great grandson and built thousands of miles away across the globe by skilled craftsmen in faraway Taiwan. And so it was that

we found ourselves cautiously feeling our way into Glengarrisdale Bay in Venture II, my Fleming 65, on the remote northwest corner of the island.

The exposed location and rocky bottom prevented us from anchoring in the bay itself but my daughter and I were able to get ashore in the tender and make our way to the white-painted, red-roofed cottage that serves today as a bothy (travellers hut). It was a special moment pushing open the unlocked door of the humble dwelling that had been home to my ancestor and imagin-

ing what life must have been like 160 years ago. That evening we anchored in another bay three miles up the coast under a sky painted with the glorious colours of a Hebridean sunset. The following morning, while still on Jura, we visited Loch Tarbert, a sea loch which almost divides the island in two. You need to be sure of your exact position as rocks shown on the chart carry no physical markers. Once inside through the tricky entrance we found ourselves in a protected anchorage with only the cry of wild geese to disturb the serene surroundings which bore



ENTERING LOCH SKAVAIG, ISLE OF SKYE.

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY TONY FLEMING

**THE WESTERN ISLES OF SCOTLAND PROVIDE A
MAGNIFICENT CRUISING GROUND, COMBINING WILD
AND RUGGED SCENERY WITH MYTH AND HISTORY.**

& History

VENTURE II WITH SEALS IN LOCH SKAVAIG.

no signs of human activity. Raised beaches, as much as 40m above the existing sea level, are a feature of the area. When the ice receded 10,000 years ago, sea levels rose and flooded many low-lying areas. Relieved of the immense weight of the ice, the land rose – stranding the original coastline well above the present levels. These beaches consist of smoothly rounded pebbles which have been naturally graded into different sizes so that all pebbles at one location are small while elsewhere they may be 125mm across. The stones have been

polished to their present shape and smoothness by the action of seas which have not touched them for 10,000 years. Food for thought as you hold one of these pebbles in your hand and feel its smoothness against your skin.

Back to the Mainland

From here we completed our circumnavigation of Jura and made our way to Ardfern on the Scottish mainland. Marinas are scarce up here but this is one of the best. The following morning not a breath of wind disturbed the surface

of the water and every yacht in the marina was perfectly reflected in the glassy surface. From Ardfern we passed through a channel called the Dorus Mor which lies just off the tip of Craignish Point to the east of the infamous Gulf of Corryvreckan, separating Jura from the adjacent island of Scarba. The Sailing Directions describe this channel in the most frightening of terms – and indeed the author of 1984, George Orwell, almost lost his life here. Certain combinations of wind and tide create truly ferocious conditions when it would be extremely foolish



VENTURE II ANCHORED IN VILLAGE BAY, ST. KILDA.

to attempt to navigate the Gulf, but, provided one treats it with respect and makes the passage at the right state of the tide, it can be perfectly safe. For us, the notorious passage was calm and, after passing through it, we had the mountains of Mull to port as we followed a ferry into Oban – one of the larger towns north of Glasgow on the West Coast.

Fuelling facilities are few and far between in these parts and you need to take advantage of them when available. We phoned the local fuel company and they brought a tanker truck down to the dock. A hose was run across two intervening boats and, as we can fill all the tanks from a single fill, the exercise was quickly and easily accomplished. This was the first fuel we had taken on since leaving Southampton. The fast running, modern-styled powerboats with

limited range are not well suited to cruising these waters. You really need a sturdy boat with comfortable amenities for living aboard and a good range.

Mooching around Mull

From here we moved to the large Island of Mull. Our route took us through the Sound of Mull with wonderful mountains on either side punctuated with prominent lighthouses and ruined castles. The sea was calm and the weather mostly sunny with broken cloud and occasional showers. We arrived at the picturesque town of Tobermory with its multi-coloured houses lining the harbour. We were allocated a convenient hammerhead berth in the small marina.

The island of Iona, adjacent to Mull, was on our list of must-see places to visit but, with wor-

ries about finding somewhere safe to leave the boat while we went ashore, we decided to leave Venture secure in the marina and rent a car to drive across Mull to Gallanach from where the ferry made the 10-minute crossing to Iona.

Christianity was brought to Iona in AD 563 when Saint Columba landed here with twelve companions. He founded an abbey which was destroyed multiple times in a series of Viking raids. The Celtic cross in front of the main entrance to the abbey has been standing for 1200 years. We spent several hours wandering through the restored abbey and examining the beautifully carved medieval grave markers that had adorned the tombs of the many Scottish kings buried here.

From Tobermory we headed west to the island of Staffa, famous for its basalt pillars from



VILLAGE STREET, HIRTA, ST.KILDA.



ABBAY AT IONA.



A WILD AND FEROCIOUS COASTLINE AWAITS YOU.

which wave action, over thousands of years, has carved the huge cavern known as Fingal's Cave. Mendelssohn visited here in 1829 when the sound of the waves booming in the cave inspired him to write his Hebridean Overture. We circled the island a couple of times but with winds gusting up to 20 knots the sea was too rough to permit us to make a landing at the small ex-

posed jetty. Given the conditions and the lack of safe landing options it is really only practical to visit this island in a small tour boat and this we were able to do at a later date.

Beauty in the Mist

From here we felt our way through foggy conditions towards Loch Scavaig in Skye and edged



STORNOWAY HARBOUR.

our way into the dramatic anchorage of Loch na Cuil. The mist slowly parted in sections like gauzy curtains being drawn aside to reveal tantalizing glimpses of waterfalls and steep crags. The anchorage was tight and we passed a rock with seals resting on top of it, peering warily in our direction as we slid past. Shortly after we dropped anchor in 3m of water, the mist slowly



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dissipated and the whole dramatic scene was revealed to our startled gaze. That night the sounds of rushing water from the nearby waterfall was our lullaby.

It was time for us to head 40 miles farther out from the mainland offshore to visit the Outer Hebrides. To reach them we passed the Small Isles with the curious names of Muck, Eigg, Rum and Canna. Enormous basking sharks cruise these waters and we had to keep a sharp lookout to avoid running into them.

The Island of Barra is famous for having the only official airport in the UK where, due to the airstrip being on the beach, flight schedules are listed as being "subject to tides". We continued up the eastern shore of the Outer Hebrides and anchored that night at Loch Maddy a few miles south of the Sound of Harris.

Wild weather to St Kilda

The remote island group of St. Kilda, located a further forty miles out in the wild Atlantic, had been high on our wish list of places to visit. The ability to reach this isolated spot is very much weather dependant as the only anchorage on the main island of Hirta is wide open to winds from the South to the North East. Luck was with us and the forecast was for settled weather for the next couple of days, with light winds mainly from the northwest.

We were underway by 0600. The sky was overcast with showers, but it was the strength and direction of the wind which was most important to us. As soon as we were into the Sound the speed of the current picked up – fortunately in our favour – but this meant it was in opposition to the swells coming from the Atlantic. The next major landmass to the West was Labrador so they had a pretty good fetch. We cleared the sound at 0845 and, out in the Atlantic, the wind gusted to 25 knots and, being from the west, was pretty well on the nose. Overhead, the skies looked quite ominous, with dark clouds and heavy rain showers. The seas were 1m to 1.2m and confused but Venture handled them well. The forty-mile passage to St. Kilda took us 4½ hours and we pulled into Village Bay just after one o'clock. Being sheltered from the wind, the bay was blissfully calm, with just a slight ground swell. The abandoned village houses, built of rough natural stone, blended into the landscape. There was a small stone jetty with stone steps where passengers can be landed but it is not suitable for leaving a tender, especially as the steps needed to be left accessible for other boats. During the night the wind dropped completely, which allowed the boat to swing around parallel to the swells so Venture rolled a bit.

The islands have been inhabited for around 4,000 years and it was only as recently as 1930 that the remaining islanders were evacuated at their own request. Their whole way of life revolved around the millions of birds that breed on the islands and sea stacks that comprise the St. Kilda group. Almost nothing in the way of sustenance was taken directly from the sea itself. The collection of huge numbers birds and their eggs to sustain life



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CALLANISH STONES, ISLE OF LEWIS.



CLIFFS AT ST. KILDA.

involved perilous climbs up and down the precipitous cliffs. The island group represented the entire world for its inhabitants for thousands of years and it was only when they started to interact with the outside that their way of life began to unravel.

The slopes and fields which surround Village Bay like an amphitheatre are a rich green which is reflected by the clear water so it seems almost as if you are viewing the scene through a green filter. From the village side the hills appeared to be rounded but they have no backs to them and plummet sheer into the sea.

We walked through the village and over the first ridge to a cluster of ancient stone enclosures. From here we could see a diminutive Venture swinging at her anchor in the distant bay. We

continued hiking to the top of the saddle between the mountains of Conachair and Oiseval. On the way up, we were dive bombed by a skua and I found the boggy ground and tussock grass quite hard going, but the climb was well worth the effort. When we reached the ridgeline the land dropped vertically into the sea. With fulmars wheeling over our heads, we lay on our stomachs peering over the edge of the cliff and watched the waves explode against the jagged rocks over 200m below. The air was filled with the noise of the surf and the cries of a thousand birds. Nesting fulmars were tucked into every nook and cranny on the jagged cliffs.

Spoiled for Sheep

There are sheep everywhere and you have to be

careful where you are stepping.

These are a very ancient breed of Soay sheep that come in a variety of colours including brown and they are left to take care of themselves. Many were shedding their winter coats and looked woefully dishevelled, with great masses of tangled wool falling off by itself.

After lunch the weather greatly improved and we decided to take advantage of the conditions to cruise Venture around the archipelago. We passed the island of Soay and across the four nautical miles from there to the precipitous crags of Boreray and the adjacent stacks of Stac Lee and Stac an Armin which collectively provide the world's largest breeding colony of gannets. The huge crags soared skywards, with every ledge and crevice white not just with guano but with millions of individual birds. It was these cliffs which the inhabitants of St Kilda had to climb to fill their stone larders.

We returned to the anchorage in Village Bay for a rather restless night as the wind began to increase with gusts to 30 knots. In the morning, a look at the horizon through binoculars showed it to be a very bumpy line, indicating that the smooth conditions we had encountered yesterday had gone and we could expect rough seas for our return journey to the Outer Hebrides. The strong northerly wind was on the beam for the return journey which, with stabilizers, meant that we had a comfortable ride even though the seas were one to two metres. Stabilizers are much more effective when the waves are on the beam.

Staying in Stornoway

We arrived in Stornoway, the main town in the Outer Hebrides, which had an airport as well as ferry service to the Scottish mainland. We were given special permission to tie up alongside a floating pontoon intended for landing cruise ship passengers. Over the next few days we rented a car and drove over the entire island, the northern two thirds of which is called Lewis while the southern third is called Harris.

We saw stunning beaches with miles of dazzling white sand lapped by water of iridescent blues and greens which you would swear were tropical if not for the temperature. We visited the Callanish Standing Stones more ancient than either Stonehenge or the Egyptian pyramids. Parts of the landscape – especially in the south – encompassed huge mountains and small isolated communities linked by a winding single-track road that went by the name of The Golden Road due to its construction cost. Other areas further north were relatively flat, where the abiding impression was of bare, rocky landscape interspersed with peat bogs and numerous tarns or lochans. Trees were very few and far between and usually only around villages or individual sheltered houses.

The land comes to an abrupt end at the Butt of Lewis where an impressively tall lighthouse built by David Stevenson – father of the famous author – stands sentinel over the rocky headland. Buffeted by a strong wind, with the cries of seabirds in our ears, we stood looking out over the heaving ocean. Except for the remote island of North Rona and an isolated sea stack there is nothing between here and the Faroe Islands – our next destination on our way to Iceland. **PPB**