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Reprinted from Sailing Magazine

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# Cheers!

Scotland's rugged West Coast is a beautiful  
cruising ground to be savored with a fine Scotch



The Classic Malts Cruise fleet meets at Talisker, Skye.



**F**rom the **Yachtsman's Pilot to the Isle of Mull** comes this classic example of West Coast Scotland navigation: "From southeast steer with Lagavulin distillery bearing 315 degrees to pass clear southwest of Ruadh Mor—taking care not to mistake Ardbeg (another whisky distillery) for it." Having left the shoal patch to starboard it is then simply a case, advises the pilot, of heading for the perches marking the narrow entrance to the bay... "so that only the letters ULIN are visible on the wall to the right of the castle."

The castle is Dunyvaig, a 12th century stronghold of the Lords of the Isles. This is the southeast coast of Islay and the bay an ancient anchorage where the war galleys of the Macdonalds once swung to hempen ropes. Eight centuries later, on a clear night in

July, 20 or so yachts lay quietly there as the wild sound of a ceilidh, all whoops and yells, skirling bagpipes and blood-curdling cries, wafted over the dark water from the direction of the old maltings shed. What marketing genius, staring idly from the frosty windows of an office in Glasgow some



wearisome winter afternoon, had the inspiration for the Classic Malts Cruise: that annual excuse to mix water with whisky; a jaunt round the islands of the west taking in three distilleries and as many anchorages as time permits?

Distillery signs and classic malts apart, sailing directions to the West Coast of Scotland have their own unique flavor. The **Clyde Cruising Club Guide** suggests, for the shallow, twisted entrance to Loch Houran Beag (*beag* meaning small) that you line up a patch of wild flag irises with a dip in the skyline. The writers cannot guarantee you will make

it, and wisely suggest sounding the channel with a dinghy. It is that which brings sailing people to these waters. When Ronald Faux, researching a book called **The West** some years ago, let slip his intentions to one who loved sailing this intriguing coast, he was told: "You must be mad. Do you want the place to fill up with people? This is the world's finest sailing. For heaven's sake don't let the secret out."

It must have taken the genius of Douglas Adams' cartographer from the **Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy**, Slartibartfast, to draw such a coastline, with so many crinkly bits, so many places to hide a boat from the prevailing winds. Take just one; that enchanting little hidden anchorage on the west side of South Rona, marked by a white arrow on an adjacent rock, called Aarseid Mor. There, we anchored our little sloop *Sally II* in clear water on a blazing day in June with not a living sole within 10

miles. Then, the last of a bottle of malt in hand, Rona and I wandered to the trig point above the anchorage and, as the setting sun turned the surrounding rocks to pink, drank a toast to both Ronas, the West Coast and all who sail there.

May to early October are the best months for these waters. Only a climatic change akin to that which wiped out the dinosaurs—and an effective midge repellent—will ever attract enough boats to spoil an area with as many anchorages as there are yachts to shelter in them. The Clyde Cruising Club's directions name over 200 anchorages and list hundreds more. You could lose every yacht on the Solent

*Talia*, a Discovery 55, powers on a windless day as it leaves Oban en route to the Isle of Skye with Scotland's mountainous mainland in the background. A Hallberg-Rassy sails in the distance, as seen through a porthole aboard a classic clipper ship, below.



in just 50 square miles of Scotland's West Coast. I've met those who've cruised the ends of the earth and only Antarctica, the inlets of Chile, Patagonia and the fjords of South Island in New Zealand elicit the same smile.

Sailing these waters is oilskins and thick sweater territory, even in July. It is for the hardy rather than the hedonist. It presents challenges to the navigator. It can be daunting under glowering skies in a rising gale. The great whirlpool of Corryvreckan, aside from stirring the peat-colored waters between the islands of Jura and Scarba, appears to have been put there just to scare the hell out of soft southern-

ers. The cauldron of Brechan, where legend has it that Niall, the grandson of the King of Ireland, and the crew of his 50 curraghs drowned, is a fearsome place in a gale. It allegedly took St. Columba, and a handful of earth from the grave of his old friend St. Kieran, to still the boiling waters. Even in settled weather, Corryvreckan resembles a big plughole after bath time.

And yet, wherever you sail you are no more than 10 miles from shelter. Wild it can be, yet those who sail here are glad there's always protection somewhere within a couple of hours' brisk sail. Take aboard the stern lessons of navi-

gation and seamanship on these rewarding but unforgiving waters and you can sail anywhere. They breed a hardy, no-nonsense yet convivial brand of yachtsmen.

If talk of unforgiving waters and hardy, weather-beaten old salts has you reaching for a travel brochure, there is an easier way to see the grandeur of the West. Ship aboard something, preferably old and sturdy, skippered by a man who knows. Some years ago a wooden vessel, 70 years old, a converted 73-foot Danish sailing trawler called the *Eda Frandsen*, with Jamie Robinson of Knoydart at the helm, first brought me to these waters on the pretext of a

prolonged whisky tasting session. The Classic Malts Cruise has since become a fixture in the Scottish cruising season, and brings yachts from far and wide. This year, although fewer Stars & Stripes flew from backstays, the fleet was as international and eclectic as usual. Mostly above 40 feet, they came from all over Europe for this loose cruise in company.

The smells and sounds of that first Hebridean cruise remains with me. Acres of stiff brown canvas to haul and reef, and the muffled rush of water, two inches of pitchpine and oak away from your ear, and light from dawn at 3 a.m. to dusk around midnight. One



such warm July saw *Eda Frandsen* anchored in Loch Harport off Talisker at the end of a lazy voyage from Mallaig via loch Scavaig on Skye. At Talisker we had sampled a 15-year-old malt that you will never be able to buy off the shelf. The fire turned to honey. “Tell me,” I asked the distillery manager as we stood in the cool, damp store room where hundreds of gallons of clear liquor were acquiring the color and taste

of a classic malt, “could anyone tell what they were drinking after a dram or two of this stuff?” “Probably not,” he admitted. But that, I thought, was surely the idea. Sweet oblivion. Scavaig on Skye is a typical example of the West Coast’s dual personality. On seeing Loch Coruisk, a freshwater loch at the northwest end of Scavaig, Sir Walter Scott wrote: “Though I have never seen many scenes of more exten-

Kilt Rock and waterfall near Staffin sends cascading water into the Sound of Ramsey on Skye.



sive desolation, I have never witnessed any in which it pressed more deeply upon the eye and the heart.” He had arrived here on the cutter *Pharos* with Robert Stevenson, the lighthouse builder, in 1814. *Pharos* would have been not dissimilar to *Eda Frandsen* and the scene that met our eyes, identical, though separated by 185 years.

Cruising is always weather dependent. The choices are huge: through the Sound of Harris for the remote islands of St. Kilda or snugged up against a southwesterly gale in one of the anchorages on the Small Isles—Canna or Rum, for example, where, in the eccentric Edwardian castle of Kinloch, long before the world at large had such things, Lord and Lady George Bullough enjoyed such luxuries as hot seawater baths, air conditioning to clear the billiard room of cigar smoke, an orchestion (a kind of mechanical jukebox they play to visitors today), and a private telegraph system that linked them to the racing at Newmarket. Victorians loved the wildness of the island, described by Sir Scott as “... one heap of rude mountains, scarcely possessing an acre of level land. The wildest and most repulsive of all the islands.” That’s as maybe. To arrive by boat in loch Sresort is to see Rum as Bullough did from the deck of his 812-ton steam yacht *Rhouma* in 1901. Many would say the only way.

That year we sailed Sealgair from Oban to Islay, then via the little-visited Garvellachs to Columba’s Iona, past the basalt columns that guard Fingal’s Cave on Staffa to anchor in the north side of Muck, a green, fertile little island where time seems to have stopped in 1960. We had three Frenchmen aboard, one of whom had a schnozzle tailor-made for nosing whisky.

Eileach an Naoimh, in Gaelic “the rocky place of the saints,” is the largest of the Garvellachs, where St. Columba came to escape his ministry on Iona and the pressures of bringing Christianity to these benighted islands. Some ruins and a clutch of curious stone beehive structures, monks’ cells, are still evident ashore. That infallible guide to the Scottish islands, by Hamish Haswell-Smith, tells us that they were used by the followers of St. Brendan, who arrived here in AD 542, a full

21 years before Columba. Later, the two saints were to meet here, on the island, the young missionary and the old monk. Columba chose his hide-out well; these islands are inaccessible in all but the lightest of breezes. The pilot does not recommend the spot for an overnight stay, as the wind funnels in from the south and the holding is poor.

I leapt ashore onto rocks made slippery with weed and paced off through the ruins of the monastery gardens to the high point, 255 feet above sea level overlooking a sheer drop to the rocks below, where I sat on a grassy outcrop. Above, the wheeling black backed gulls scolded me for disturbing their young ones. I spent no more than two hours on Eileach an Naoimh but, like the visitor Mary Donaldson before me, I felt its power. In **Wanderings in the Western Highlands and Islands**, she wrote: “For the infinitesimal space of one and a half hours, while the mist steadily fell, I was alone on this wonderful islet, one and a quarter miles long and only a quarter of a mile broad at its widest part, and all the time I was conscious of a most strange but lively sense ... that I was in actuality transported back to the very days of St. Columba.”

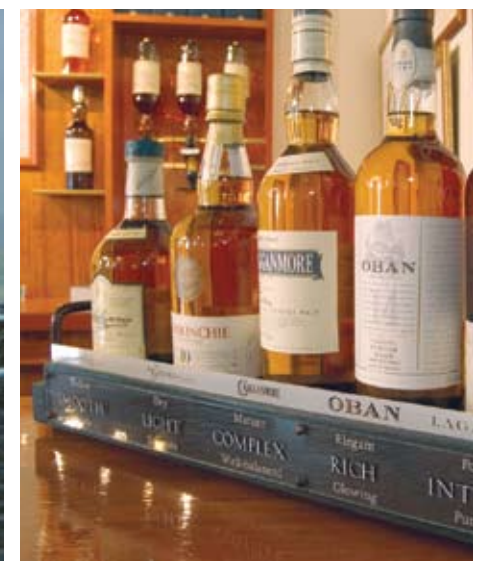
The main Celtic sea route from Northern Ireland, from whence he brought the word of God, passes through the sound of Jura, where we were bound that day. St. Columba was even said to have passed through the Gulf of Corryreckan where, as divers confirm, there are vortexes that pull you down, and down means 50 fathoms. It is a fearsome place in a gale—you can hear its roar in Crinan, nearly 10 miles away. The pilot devotes two pages to it; pithy stuff about 8-knot tides and being “... one of the most notorious stretches of water anywhere around the British Isles.” Martin Martin, a 19th century traveler, wrote of Corryreckan, where “... the sea begins to boil and ferment with the tide of flood and resembles the boiling of a pot.” The pilot concludes by saying that, unless sure of the conditions (i.e. flat calm, slack water) “avoid it.” The normally terse Admiralty pilot writers warn of its terrors in words verging on the hysterical. Even at a mile off, the pull of the gulf is noticeable. Like



A bagpiper plays as the boats parade around Oban, top. Oban pipers in Highland dress lead the sailors back to their boats to depart the next day after a tasting at the Oban Distillery, above. Sailors keep track of their marine life sightings on a chalkboard, right.







The crabbing port of Tobermory on Mull is a colorful, traditional town, previous page. A raft-up of the fleet shows the wide range of entires, including a replica of Joshua Slocum's *Spray* called *Spray of Wight*, top. Heavy weather and big waves at times were challenging for the fleet, above left. The range of Scotch whiskeys tasted during the cruise is displayed, above right. Each distillery has a distinct taste caused by the "peaty" water, barley and the distillery's preferred taste.

standing on a precipice, you long to fall, in an atavistic desire to see what nature at its most ruthless can do. Maybe it's just in the mind.

Corryvreckan, the Grey Dogs Channel, Cuan Sound, Tinker's Hole, Iona, Staffa, little Muck and mighty Rum have strong resonances in legend and literature—the Torran Rocks, for example, on which Robert Louis Stevenson's hero David Balfour in **Kidnapped** was wrecked, and whose name still attaches to a bay off the southwest coast of Mull, where he fetched up after his ordeal. The Ross of Mull, at the island's southwest corner, is thickly strewn with reefs; no place to be in a gale with a small yacht and just a stone beacon on

one of the rocks and the usual transits to follow, involving the edges of islands open of (or in line with) prominent headlands or white bothies (cottages).

Tinker's Hole is a classic Highland anchorage, protected from all but the worst the westerlies can fling, but not a good place in a southerly. Inevitably, a large rock lies dead center of the best approach to what the pilot describes as resembling "a half-flooded quarry." Stevenson came here while his uncle Alan, the "lighthouse Stevenson," was building Dubh Artach, and knew it as Fiddler's Hole, under which name it appears in several of his tales.

It lies in the sound of Iona, the island

Columba chose as a base for his mission. And you can see why he did; the quality of light is special. Even in high summer, with the path to the cathedral flocked with tourists, the place has a serenity. This is, however, the place to buy a Columba T-shirt, ashtray, peace candle, book about meditation, Celtic cross made in scratch-resistant acrylic or handmade Iona chocolate (made on the nearby Isle of Mull).

Skirting the basalt cliffs of Staffa, where a boatload of tourists were picking their way around the edge of Fingal's Cave, we made for Muck, the smallest of the Small Isles and my favorite. It lies about five miles north of Ardnamurchan point, the most easterly edge

of the Scottish mainland. The name comes from the Gaelic "muc-mahara," meaning sea pig, or porpoise. During the Napoleonic wars the islanders made potash for gunpowder from the kelp that carpeted the shore. Like so many islands, it was depopulated in the 19th century and about 300 families, cleared to make way for Lord and Lady Muck's sheep, embarked for Nova Scotia and Cape Breton Island. Today it is as if time stopped in the 1950s.

From the island's highest point, 443 feet above sea level, the whole island and its surrounding islands and away to the mountains of the north make a dramatic panorama. Wild flowers abound. The summer air is warm and

soft. In the bay that day below me a trawler circled. I probably heard a skylark. Over to the north the island of Eigg—once known as the "island of big women"—rose above the sea, and Rum beyond, its twin peaks Hallival and Askival rising to a Muck-humbling 2,345 and 246 feet respectively. I could imagine Sir George Bullough's huge yacht *Rhouma* patrolling offshore.

From the heights of Muck I descended through the fields of wildflower, stopping to chat with the owner's family, baling hay in the farmyard. "It certainly is a lovely place," I said. "Yes, on a day like this," they laughed. Perhaps not in a southwesterly winter gale, their eyes told me. Which seemed to sum up cruising the West Coast. □

## Classic Malts Cruise

The annual Classic Malts Cruise is a two-week event, beginning at Oban, ending at Talisker on Skye, which takes in three distilleries—Oban, Lagavulin and Talisker. Yachts are free to choose any route they want, the fleet congregating for whisky tastings, barbecues and ceilidhs at the three distilleries. Entry is free, but limited to 100 boats.

*Classic Malts Cruise, World Cruising Club, 120 High Street, Cowes, Isle of Wight PO31 7AX, [www.worldcruising.com](http://www.worldcruising.com); Clyde Cruising Club, [www.clyde.org](http://www.clyde.org); Sail Scotland, [www.sailscotland.co.uk](http://www.sailscotland.co.uk).*