

Scotland Cruise 2015 – Week 1

By David & Maggie McMullan & Clodagh (our 2-year old Springer Spaniel) on Steel Pulse

We set off from Bangor on Friday 19th June at lunchtime to catch the ebb tide to help us on our way north. Our plan for the trip was very loose – to see more of Skye and the Outer Hebrides. We had passed them briefly on an earlier trip to the Orkney Islands in 2011. So we wanted to spend more time exploring them during a 6 week cruise. Our boat Steel Pulse is not well set up for short-handed sailing, so with just the two of us aboard, much of the trip was motoring. And as many know, the wind is usually on your nose anyway when cruising! We had not used the boat much before we departed this year, so fingers were crossed that everything was working properly.



As we proceeded up the coast past the Gobbins, we could see the new walkways under construction for the Gobbins walk, which is supposed to open this year. It runs from the southern edge of the cliffs up to the caves.

From there it was a relatively uneventful journey up outside the Hunter Rock and inside the Maidens, with a sighting of a pair of Porpoises off Larne. We stayed well offshore to get the most out of the ebb tide and passed Torr Head in deteriorating visibility about half a mile off. From there we crossed in fog over a very smooth Rathlin Sound to Rue Point at the south of Rathlin Island and up the west side into the harbour/pontoon area. Since our last visit there they now have 3 pontoons, giving more alongside berths, but unfortunately the Manor House was closed (not sure if it is just too early in the season for them or closed for good). In the morning we walked down towards Rue Point, with Clodagh loving the long rough grass to hunt for rabbits and in the afternoon set off over to Port Ellen on Islay, our first Scottish Island.

On Rathlin in the morning the sun was shining, but the murky weather was sitting further north over Islay and we didn't see Port Ellen until we were 5 miles off. On the crossing it was fairly calm, once we were passed the



confusion of tide and waves around Bull Point, with the 'upside down' lighthouse.

We spent two nights in Port Ellen, enjoying walks out around the coast on either side of the port. A small leak on the saloon hatch was fixed with 95% success. An occasional drip still occurred during a heavy downpour. And we did get a fair bit of rain or drizzle in our first week – Scottish cruising weather!

Monday lunchtime we left and went around to and up through the Sound of Islay, between Islay and Jura and on to a new anchorage for us in Loch Tarbert. The wind was blowing NW F4-5, so at the top end of the Sound of Islay it got a bit bouncy, as the wind met 2kn of tide exiting the sound. However once we were in the entrance to Loch Tarbert it was more sheltered and we tried out for the first time the detailed Antares charts running on a laptop. This made entry at low water through and past the rocks from the first into the second loch much easier, although the leading line markers installed by Blondie Hasler would probably have got us there as well. It was also a reminder for us that the tides in this area are almost 6hrs different from Dover. Whereas we had been making use of the flood tide up the Sound Of Islay, it was low water locally. The anchorage, which we shared with two American boats, was very sheltered and we enjoyed a long walk ashore in the morning. Having an active dog aboard gets you out for lots of walks.

On Tuesday we left and headed west over to Colonsay for our first visit. Weather forecast during the night was to be SE F4-5, so we were unsure how sheltered the harbour and anchorages would be. There is a yacht berth at the onshore end of the pier, which was in use, but we were invited to tie up alongside them. It turned out they had come up from Coleraine and had just arrived in ahead of us. After a quick look around, we dropped into the hotel for a drink and decided to eat there in the evening as well. They gave us a table with a lovely view looking out over the harbour and on to Jura.



The following day we headed north and up the west side of Mull. Enroute to Mull, Maggie spotted our first Minke whale of the trip. We went up the Iona sound, past the Abbey and other buildings and there was a large cruise ship anchored to the north of the sound, ferrying boat loads of tourists to and from the island. From there on past Staffa, with



Fingal's Cave also crowded with tourists, and on to an anchorage on the north side of Gometra Island, half way up Mull.

There was already a boat at anchor in the anchorage, so we anchored nearer the mouth. After a trip ashore in the dinghy, we saw we would have had enough room and depth to move up alongside them. The evening forecast mentioned the fatal words 'Strong Wind Warning' for the following day. So we decided, as it was quite benign at present, to haul anchor and move around into the security of Tobermory that evening.



We arrived there at 11:45pm and just had enough light to easily see other moored vessels and the visitor moorings. We picked our spot and moored up for the night. The following morning we moved onto one of the pontoon berths.

Most of the harbours in the Outer Hebrides have fuelling facilities for the local fishermen, run by the council and accessed by using a fob. We applied for our own fob before leaving Bangor, but asked that they send it to us care of the Harbour Master in Tobermory. When we contacted the Harbour Master to request which berth to use, they advised that the letter was waiting for us.

The weather forecast for the following week was a mix of frontal systems passing over the UK, so we stayed in Tobermory for a couple of days.

To be continued in the Wk2 episode.