

THE LANDS OF GIANTS & LEGENDS

Ben Kemp shares the delights of exploring Northern Ireland, the Hebrides and St Kilda by sail with his young family

The sharp angular cliffs of Hirta on the isolated St Kilda archipelago were now getting too close for comfort. We needed to tack our 1973 Nicholson 32, Blue Venturer, to get into Village Bay but we were struggling to turn her in the heavy swell and the waves. The steering had also become unusually heavy and sluggish. A check of the windvane soon confirmed the problem: the rudder was jammed. My partner Alison took my spot on deck as I clipped on to the push pit and climbed over



the transom, a good bucketful of Scotland's notorious icy waters hitting me square in the face. Crouching at the bottom of the transom ladder I managed to reach underwater to the rudder and detach it, pulling it back aboard via the lanyard. The relief as we motored into Village Bay and dropped anchor close inshore was palpable.

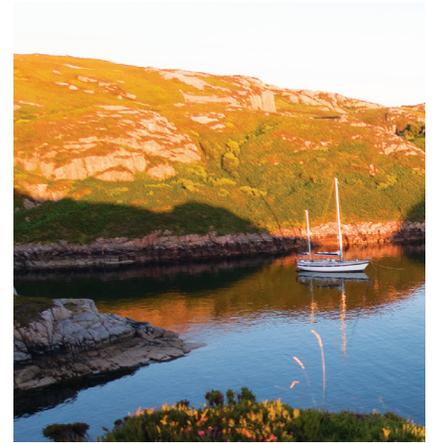
Village Bay, St. Kilda

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Exhausted, we put the kettle on. Our sons, Reuben, 9, and Donald, 7, had already forgotten about the near danger we were just in and were already back on form, spotting with excitement a basking shark just metres from the boat. I, in my ignorance and tiredness, mistakenly asserted that its fin was in fact nothing more than kelp. We managed to stay awake long enough to eat dinner before passing out.

Our voyage had started a few weeks earlier from our home mooring on the Gareloch, in the upper Firth of Clyde. Plans had still been vague when we had thrown off the lines and pushed Blue Venturer's bow through the cool deep waters. The Mull of Kintyre, Northern Ireland, then northwards, with ideas about Skye, the Hebrides, and then maybe, just maybe, St. Kilda. After a tranquil first night at Millport we continued to Campbeltown, pausing for lunch and a swim off Arran. Opinion was divided amongst our crew as to the merits and method of sea swimming. I favour the direct plunge off the guardrail approach.

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ABOVE: A steady Force 6, regularly gusting Force 7 meant *Blue Venturer* was heavily reefed and close hauled while sailing to St Kilda

RIGHT: Reuben and Donald cross the famous Carrick-a-Rede rope bridge

BELOW: Down draughts from the Cuillin of Skye can make the otherwise sheltered Scavaig uncomfortable

BELOW FAR RIGHT: Reuben enjoys the Sound of Iona, which can have a strong tidal flow at times

Provided one avoids immediate heart failure, the overall experience is, I think, superior.

Setting off the next day with the tide, we picked up the stream proper as we approached the Mull of Kintyre, taking the inner passage between this iconic headland and the small island of Sanda.

Reputation notwithstanding, the Mull was kind to *Blue Venturer* and her crew. We enjoyed the exhilaration of the tidal conveyor belt, and were soon out in the North Channel, bound for Ballycastle, on the north coast of County Antrim, Northern Ireland.

PASSAGE TO SKYE

The following day the warm sunshine made North Antrim feel more like the Mediterranean than Northern Ireland. We walked in the footsteps of the mythical Finn McCool, stepping over the unique hexagonal shaped rocks which make up the Giant's Causeway. Carrick-a-Rede was to test the boys' head for heights. This rope bridge connects Carrick-a-Rede island with the main land and was first erected by salmon fishermen in 1755. Half way across we stopped and looked down at the Atlantic Ocean beneath us. Dehydrated and now sunburnt, we returned to the boat, with Alison and I wondering whether our young crew might have acquired an unrealistic expectation of the Northern Irish climate.

Rathlin Sound's tide can reach 6 knots and unsurprisingly we found ourselves working hard to hold our own against the tide when crossing the next day. But we managed it, squeezing into the picturesque but popular little marina at Church Bay, Rathlin Island. Alison was on the bow and the boys manned the port guardrail as, gritting my teeth, *Blue Venturer's* pulpit slid into the narrowest of berths, somehow



missing by inches all other vessels and obstacles.

From Rathlin we sailed northwards, a fine breeze carrying us on a broad reach to a wild anchorage amongst the remote and magical Ardmore islands, off the southeast coast of Islay. The wind having backed to the north, we were obliged the next morning to tack through the Sound of Islay, but emerged on a favourable tide to another idyllic west coast anchorage, this time at Scalasaig, Colonsay. Tinker's Hole on Erraid off Mull, Staffa, and Tobermory all followed before sailing onwards towards Skye.

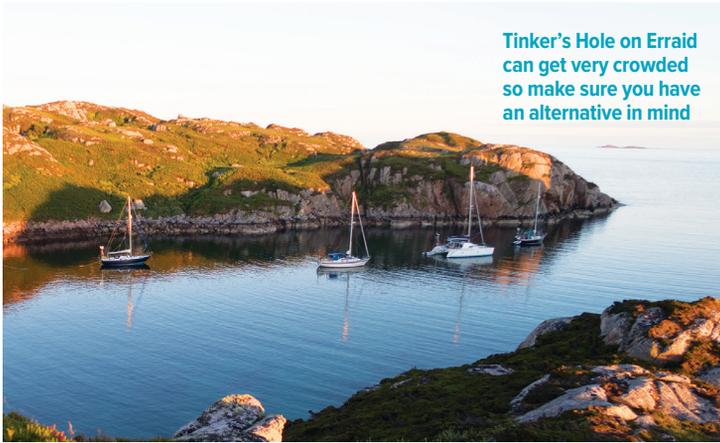
Alison and I used to be seasoned climbers, frequenting regularly the Cuillin of Skye, amongst whose gnarly peaks we got married some 16 years earlier. We were keen to introduce the boys but the weather had now turned, and in poor visibility and heavy rain we navigated the small mountainous basin of Loch Scavaig. We took two attempts to get the anchor down, nervous about the lack of water and down draught from mountains we have long learned to respect.

A choppy and unsettled passage followed, as we beat a northwesterly course up the southwest coast of Skye. Approaching North Uist, something caught my eye off our starboard side: a dorsal fin, but larger and slower than that of the dolphins and

porpoises we were used to. A blowhole then appeared, and suddenly a beautiful minke whale surfaced right next to *Blue Venturer's* port side.

It looked about the length of our hull and was no more than a metre away. Awe struck, and just a little intimidated, we enjoyed the privilege of sharing this space and moment with this most magnificent creature.

Ben Kemp



Tinker's Hole on Erraid can get very crowded so make sure you have an alternative in mind

ENDURING ROUGH SEAS

The delight soon turned to dread once we were stormbound in Lochmaddy, waiting for improved conditions to make it to St Kilda. With the wind dropping, we decided to go the following day. The sea was still forecast to be lumpy, with winds of Force 5-6, from the south, veering to the west, and dropping, but favourable conditions were forecast for the next couple of days. We set off just after dawn.

Heading up the eastern seaboard of North Uist and Berneray, the choppy but moderate conditions gave no clue as to what was to follow. We navigated the Stanton Channel through the Sound of Harris, without incident, before making out into the Atlantic.

It was tough going. The wind was a steady Force 6, gusting Force 7, with a heavy swell, sometimes up to five metres. The direction was more from the west than anticipated, forcing us to be close hauled for the entire 50-mile passage to St. Kilda.

For the first time we all experienced seasickness, but everybody was safe, clipped on as *Blue Venturer* kept powering through the mounting waves. These were the most challenging conditions we had ever experienced, as we sailed, for the first time, beyond the reach of visible land. We were relieved to have finally arrived in Hirta's Village Bay.

It was like a different world the next morning with sunshine and calm. Ashore, we climbed the steep hills and explored the small, stone turf-covered cleits which litter Hirta. Further climbing revealed awesome views of this dramatic archipelago. With the sun dipping, we returned to the boat to light the barbecue.

Conditions on our return voyage were contrastingly benign. We motor sailed and marvelled at the sunset across a glassy Sound of Harris. After a few hours rest in Lochmaddy we raced foggy Ardnamurchan Point at midnight, the moonlight reflecting off the surging whitecaps. By the time we arrived at Tobermory, the boys were long asleep in their bunks.



CRUISING ST. KILDA

A UNESCO World heritage site, the St. Kilda archipelago is beautiful but also extremely remote. There are no facilities here although you can fill up on water. The 50-mile passage is exposed so it is vital to plan carefully, ensuring that your chosen weather window covers not only your passage but your stay on the islands.

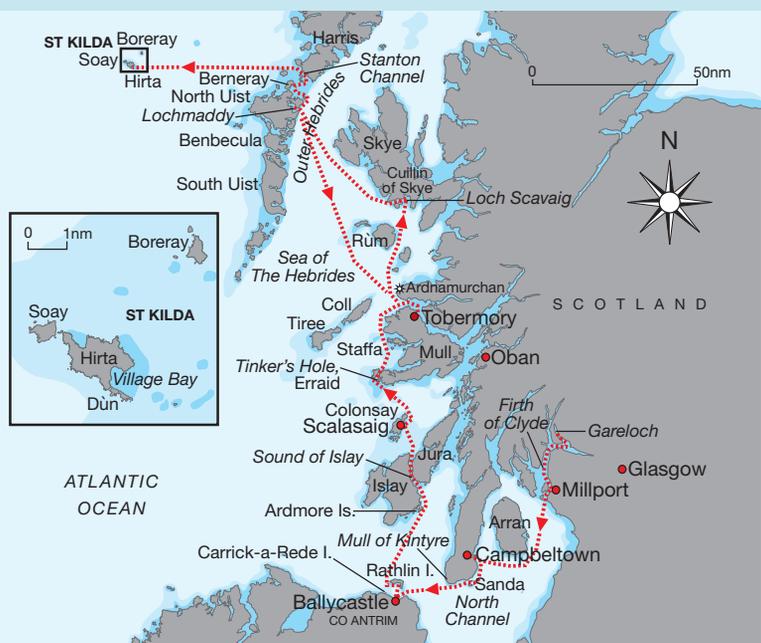
It is advisable to contact the National Trust for Scotland (www.nts.org.uk/visit/places/st-kilda) in advance; the St Kilda warden also very kindly provided us with live weather information in the day or two before our departure from Lochmaddy. The only real anchorage is in Village Bay, but it is seriously exposed to swell, and may be untenable in any significant wind from the east-south. There is an alternative possibility in Glen Bay, on the northwest side, but the seabed there shelves steeply and can make finding reliable holding a challenge. It is not uncommon for yachts to battle out to St. Kilda, only to find that they are unable to anchor, or land, and have little option but to turn around. We carried two anchors, but used only one, finding the holding on the hard sand in Village Bay good. When wind and tide are opposed, rip tides can form.

Assuming you manage to anchor, and to land, and there is good visibility, the clifftop views and wildlife are spectacular and the remote drama of the landscape will stay long in the memory.

It is thought St Kilda was inhabited for at least 4,000 years until its final evacuation in 1930. The community's way of life, and its dependency on the annual arrival of the seabirds, was harsh and unforgiving. A museum in one of the remaining croft houses and the church provide some history of the islanders. In addition, the cemetery, the hundreds of cleits (small stone shelters used to store food), the numerous wild Soay sheep left behind by the islanders, and even the haunting cries of the thousands of seabirds all bear witness to a way of life lost forever.

USEFUL PUBLICATIONS

Clyde Cruising Club Sailing Directions Outer Hebrides, edited by Edward Mason, 2nd edition (Imray, £32.50)
Imray charts C66, C80. Admiralty chart 2721



BEN KEMP

Ben learned to sail as a boy, crewing a Scorpion dinghy at his local sailing club on the River Weaver in Cheshire, and with the Sea Scouts. He raced 420s at St. Andrews University, before taking up cruising with his family, initially on a 23ft Hunter Duette. Ben and his partner Alison have been the proud owners of their Nicholson 32 *Blue Venturer* since 2016 and are members of the Nicholson 32 Association.

