

# Caledonian Cruising

*by Paul & Bryn Beaurain*



All photos courtesy  
of Paul Beaurain

Storm Breaker at Fort Augustus



In she goes...

**Scotland Cruise – in Redbay RIB *Storm Breaker*.  
Cushendall - Cape Wrath - Orkneys - Caledonian  
Canal - Cushendall.**

**From 1<sup>st</sup> April 2009, planned to take 9 or 10 days.**

With our Redbay Stormforce 8.4m diesel RIB we had always planned to do some long distance cruises. An opportunity presented itself by utilising *Storm Breaker* while she was in storage at the Redbay yard (Cushendall, Northern Ireland), at the opposite end of the country from our normal 'down south' location.

This cruise was going to be interesting in that the first week in April is early for a trip like this, weather and all, and secondly, there was just us, the one boat.

#### **Day One Wednesday 1st April**

Bryn, my 13 year old son, and I flew to Northern Ireland to collect the boat. Things got off to a slow start with Eddy's taxi breaking down and a recovery truck completion of the journey!! It **was** good to arrive and meet again with the Redbay team.

Tom (Redbay Boats' owner) is always enthusiastic about seeing one of his boats being 'pushed a little'. So thanks, Tom, for your enthusiasm and encouragement for this trip.



**Supper overlooking Loch Inchard**



**Bryn**

Stores and supplies were all packed aboard and we were in the water for 15.00. We wanted to be off at about this time as the tide in the North Channel (and right up to Oban) had just turned to the North. Having a sailing background, I always look for a favourable tide! We had a very slight Southerly tail wind. We had initially planned for Oban: how easy going was it going to be?

We split this leg into sections, first targeting Gigha Island then on past Crinan/Corryveckan. All went well, and with the tide with us, we rushed through the Sound of Luing (awesome rocks here) and on into the Firth of Lorne. With a southerly 4, we made good progress and Tobermory became our destination. We arrived just ahead of dusk and moored to the pontoon by the new Harbour Office facility (Jim the HM making us very welcome). We moored up in good company with two P2000 Naval training patrol boats.

#### **Day Two Thursday 2nd April**

Dawn was calm and sunny; we fuelled up and visited the post office/general store. This was required not only for food but to post back car keys 'borrowed' from Redbay! We then left Tobermory to get as far North as we could get for that day.

Brilliant day - the sun was out and stayed out, wind



**Kinlochbervie**



## Sound of Sleat



increased during the day to force 6. Between the islands for our run up the Sound of Sleat, around Kyle of Lochalsh and on past Applecross (Monty Hall'scroft) then on up north this was fine. But as the lee of the land fell away, so the heavier seas built up, and it was heavy going from here on. We turned right into Loch Torriden and found a mooring buoy for lunch in a small idyllic bay. Once refreshed, we headed out and into bigger following seas. We stuffed once in a big way and, despite the cabin, we had water everywhere! After this, off Stoer Point, we had to run 30 degrees or so off the waves then 'tack' and run 30 degrees off the waves the other way, to effectively increase the wavelength, until we rounded and got some shelter. As the wind increased, we hid behind every headland and went between Handa Island and the mainland then made good progress into Kinlochbervie through some very rocky narrow transits. We arrived at 16.45, discussed fuelling and got fed from the ice plant where they feed ice and red diesel to the fishing boats.

The Harbour Master did say we were the first boat to visit this year! To date, this is the most beautiful harbour we have visited. We had a great meal at the Hotel and sat watching the sun set to the west over Loch Inchard.

## The Old Man of Hoy



## Day Three Friday 3rd April

Cape Wrath has a reputation, and we wanted to respect it. The problem was that the favourable tides were from 01.30 or 13.30 for five hours. So we got up at 3 am, left at half past, and ran out into still airs but some rolling swell. In the dark you see nothing; we had the plotter dimmed right down and the engine instrument lights off but even 10 knots seems fast. Slowly we built up our speed and ran comfortably at 20 knots. Steering by the chart plotter and compass is real hard work, so the moon added a welcome reference to steer by. We rounded the cape in the dark and the seas flattened out from here. We aimed to make a landfall at 'The Old Man of Hoy' rock on Hoy Island, Orkney.

Our course was directly into the dawn and soon we were treated to a spectacular sunrise. We made the Old Man rock just as the sun was up. Problem now in leaving at 3am and not 1am was that the tide was wrong in the Sound of Hoy: it had turned and was against us. We had huge standing waves and as the depth dropped from 60 metres to 8 metres they were breaking. We slowed to 10 knots and got through into Scapa Flow. We arrived at Stromness Marina at 07.30, signed in and used the great facilities (all new), showers etc. Within one hour the





whole place was fogbound for what turned out to be the whole day! So the early start didn't seem so bad at this point!

After freshening up and a tidy of the boat, we had breakfast at *Julia's* and then did some shopping and had a look around. The fog had come down, to stay... We did the Museum at Lyness, taking first a taxi to Houton then the inter-island ferry. The Museum helped us learn more about Scapa Flow and the Orkneys' role during two World Wars – fascinating to learn of the scuttling of the German Fleet (after WW1) and the sinking of the Royal Oak (WW2).

Looking at the forecast before leaving Redbay, we had seen big winds coming in for Orkney. Initially, we thought we had until Sunday noon before they hit, but each time we looked, the arrival was to be sooner. It meant we had to keep moving or possibly wait a week in Orkney! So we had a window until what was now noon Saturday before we had NW7 winds – they were forecast to arrive that suddenly.

### Day Four Saturday 4th April

Again the Pentland Firth tides needed to be got right –



Stromness



Off Wick

as they run at up to 8 knots! We were up again early to catch the East then SE tidal flow. The fog at Stromness was thicker than ever.

We left at 03.30 and followed a preset route. I have never seen such poor visibility. We saw only three lights – and one of those was on the pontoon we left! We ran out and had a few genuine scares and false alarm scares also. We ran at 17 knots, just on the plane. The Raymarine plotter was showing a combined screen of chart (with Radar overlay) and 'roadway' showing our route to next destination and cross track error. The radar has various settings: we didn't want it finding land miles off, we wanted it to survey the critical 2 Nm around us. We had three radar contacts: the first two came together and one was directly in our path. One difficulty in fog and dark is being able to steer a steady enough course such that the radar angles to targets remained constant for assessment. The third contact came also with an overlaid AIS marker, so determining the other vessel's speed and course was straightforward. In some ways, the slower we went the harder it became...

We had two narrow sections, one of which is also the main shipping channel, between Flotta Island and an



Fort Augustus



## Clachnaharry Sea Lock & Kessock Bridge



## Fort Augustus

isolated danger beacon. The channel width was 0.8 Nm. We were towards the edge of the channel and still couldn't see Roan Head light on Flotta.

Duncansby Head was not seen: despite there being little wind, the waves were big and irregular (more tidal confusion) and, with fog and darkness, very disorienting. After two hours I could take no more so planned to bale out at Wick. Bryn was flagging so I got his sleeping bag out and he was soon gone. I stopped for 15 minutes to allow me to recover my senses; at this point, while drifting, we were doing 4.1 knots in the right direction!

Dawn came but the fog remained. A small, regular wave pattern was developing so I could steer to this, just checking the compass/plotter from time to time. Which would be more risky: entering an unfamiliar port in very thick fog or staying out on a virtually empty ocean? With dawn and some coffee inside, and Bryn still asleep, I chose to run on for Helmsdale, during which the sea flattened out completely and the visibility slowly improved. I could now see a chance to get right down to Inverness before the winds reached the forecast 6-7 possibly 8 in the East (from midday). I was very conscious that any part of this leg not done today would therefore be extremely hard work the following day. Timing was looking good also for the Caledonia sea lock at Clachnaharry.

We had a completely flat Moray Firth and saw seals and birdlife. We passed under the Kessock road bridge ahead of radioing Clachnaharry Sea Lock. These guys were very

## Corran Point, Loch Lynne



## Loch Ness

attentive and locked us in and we paid our dues of £135 for an 8.4m one way transit permit. As this was still close on 10 am, clearly there was surprise that we had come from Orkney!

After each lock or swing bridge, one lock keeper will radio the next; this was great in that they were always ready for us, but stopping seemed that it would disrupt their flow!

Once we were through the last lock or bridge onto Loch Ness, we stopped to eat and sleep. Then, late in the afternoon, we reviewed moving on and thought about where to stop that evening. The best place (and choice for pubs) was Fort Augustus at the far end of Loch Ness. By now, the wind was on the nose force 5 with surprising short steep seas (just like the Solent on a bad day), so we cruised the length of Loch Ness and moored at the bottom of the flight of locks at Fort Augustus, on an almost deserted pontoon, and enjoyed a superb evening at *The Bothy*, a local canal-side pub.

## Day Five Sunday 5th April

Having felt we may have rushed Loch Ness, after breakfast, we went back a mile or two in bright clear conditions to review the scenery fully for a final time.

We waited for a Severn class lifeboat to exit the flight and then it was our turn to ascend. It takes about 10 minutes per lock so this flight took 50 minutes. Once out of the top we had four miles and two single 'up' locks before reaching the highest point of the Caledonian

## Achamore House, Gigha



Canal at Loch Oich. Thereafter, it would be descent all the way back to sea level.

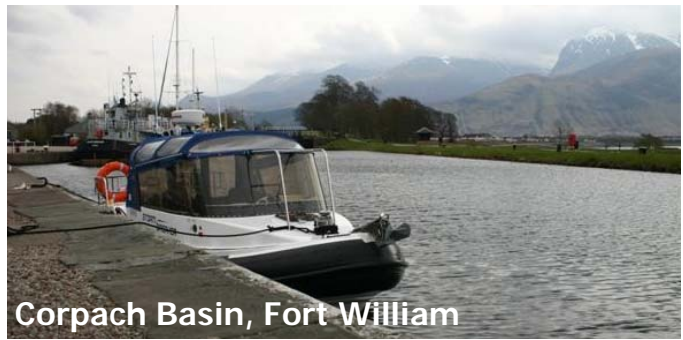
Lock Oich is narrow and shallow but well buoyed, and surprisingly well detailed on the chart plotter! So we pressed on to Laggan locks ahead of Loch Lochy. Laggan locks has an old barge which operates as the *Eagle* pub, with some great real ales – and ginger beer for Bryn.

Loch Lochy was reported to have 1m waves as the wind was close to a force 6 blowing directly down the loch towards us. It was one of those occasions where going faster made the ride smoother and hence we ran along at around 32 knots, bridging the troughs in the waves. Gairloch (at the far end of Loch Lochy) was very picturesque. We nearly stopped here to overnight, but at the highest point we were exposed to very strong winds and with nowhere close at hand to eat... so we moved on to just above the final flight of locks, 'Neptune's Staircase' at Corpach, eating at the *Moorings*.

### Day Six Monday 6th April

We had avoided big winds so far while at sea, but had to keep moving and had cut out our lay days... The problem now was a severe low off Ireland, giving strong S or SW winds forecast today for 6-7 just when we needed to go south once again.

After showers and breakfast, we descended into Corpach basin (very pleasant), fuelled up and purchased supplies from the village shop. Then, following a discussion with the lock keeper, we learnt we were not going to get to



Corpach Basin, Fort William



Squall in the North Channel

sea until 14.00 as the exit from the sea lock is tide dependent. We reviewed the forecast on their PC and had a coffee with them – all very civilised.

We decided that a sensible plan for today was to get as far South as comfortable: we could get to Oban or even further down to Craobh Haven. We had a smooth run down Loch Linnhe: through the narrows at Corran Point then we slipped between Lismore Island and the mainland into the Lynn of Lorn. We then had an exposed section to cross between Lismore Island and Oban, before slipping between Kerrera and the mainland down Kerrera sound. We worked around Seil Island into Easdale Bay and then through the Cuan Sound and on to Craobh Haven. A superb stop with the *Lord of the Isles* pub offering good food.

### Day Seven Tuesday 7th April

We had an invitation to visit Gigha Island and meet the owner of Achamore House - a splendid B&B/country hotel. We had planned to stop the night here as the owner has a near identical 8.4m Redbay for 'Gigha Seatours' but Wednesday's forecast was even worse so stopping over on Gigha may not be an option.

With extreme frustration, I got the lady at Craobh Haven Marina (itself a very nice place) to eventually allow me to see her computer screen so I could get an up-to-date forecast. She only wanted to point me to a three day old forecast printed and stuck on the wall. The result (courtesy of [www.xcweather.co.uk](http://www.xcweather.co.uk)) was the possibility that winds would ease for three hours from 15.00 to



Ballycastle Marina



## Ben Nevis



19.00 before becoming even stronger with gale force 8 forecast overnight.

We made our way south hiding behind every small island, however, getting to Gigha was proving hard work. When conditions were particularly uncomfortable we stopped in a small anchorage on Eileen Mor (off Loch Sween). The anchorage faced north and we dropped the hook at 11 am and sat it out, rested and ate while listening to the winds ripping at the canopy and veering the boat on its anchor cable. By 3 pm the winds had eased so we poked our nose out and successfully made the final 15 Nm to Gigha, taking a full one hour.

Whilst on Gigha, within the beautiful fifty acres of ornamental gardens, we climbed to a view point with clear uninterrupted views of Northern Ireland and the sea/weather conditions could be seen: these conditions currently looked OK. So a very short visit (sorry Don) as we planned to make Ballycastle, Northern Ireland, on or about dusk.

Just as we left Gigha, having left our passage plan with the coastguard, the same coastguard issued an imminent gale warning for the Irish Sea and Malin: Gale 8 imminent! We got three quarters of the way across and then the squalls and high winds came in, but all was OK as we had got far enough that the last 10 Nm at 10 knots into increasing seas was acceptable. We slipped past Rathlin Island on East coast and into Ballycastle Marina.

The winds overnight were very strong. Yacht halyards frapped and the boat needed extra springs. The winds were due to back overnight to be a W7 for Wednesday. Well, after breakfast and a walk around the marina (six other Redbays at this one) the winds were lighter than forecast, so we headed out in the knowledge that there was only one headland to round and then we would gain shelter from the wind. The last leg was really perfect conditions; we added the final hour to the engine and tied up at the lifeboat slip back in Cushendall. Tom (from Redbay) brought the tractor down and hauled the boat out. We flushed the engine, cleaned her up, fuelled her up and put bags of dry unused clothing in to Redbay's store room.

We had had a cracking trip and really enjoyed ourselves.

## Points of interest about our boat *Storm Breaker*

We covered 650 Nm in eight days, averaging 18 knots and used an average of 22 L/hr of diesel.

The Yamaha ME432 (285 Hp) engine ran faultlessly and the TRP (twin rotating props) kept the boat straight and level.

Our Redbay 8.4 has the expedition layout, that is, a twin berth forecabin. It is tight but cosy in here and sleeping on board is very convenient and saves money! It is actually fun, and beats trying to find B&B accommodation at each stop over. It also gives the flexibility to arrive or leave at any time, or to have an afternoon kip!

We specified the boat with two Ullman Suspension jockey seats and behind these a pair of more conventional KAB suspension seats. Each type has its advantages but both are very welcome over those traditional fixed jockey seats.

We have a sea toilet (for the ladies) and an Eberspacher diesel cabin heater. With Scottish night time temperatures dropping, it made stopping on board as comfortable as possible. The heating was specified to allow the boating season to be extended at both ends. Over the winter we extended so far each end that the two actually joined up!

The boat performed very well, as did Raymarine plotter/radar/AIS.

No damage, no specific boat failures - no extra work upon getting back.

Ready now for the next cruise.....Northern Ireland back to Southampton.

## Route Planning the old-fashioned way!

