

HOMEWATERS OFF-PISTE IN THE OUTER HEBRIDES

*Jonty Pearce sails in company to explore the little known havens
and inlets on Scotland's west coast*

Words and photos Jonty Pearce



The VHF crackled into life. The cruise commodore announced: 'The conditions are perfect. Let's stop for lunch at Hyskeir.' We promptly concurred; I had never been to Hyskeir Lighthouse but knew that its anchorage was revered by the Penguin Cruising Club. I reached for the pilot book, eagerly telling the crew

that after automation of the lighthouse the island group was deserted. 'And we'll be able to moor up at the quay and go ashore,' I enthused, instilling an anticipation we duly discovered wouldn't be fulfilled. 'It's so remote there'll be nobody there'.

Our cruise's three boats altered course towards the white pillar on the horizon, and I read up on the anchorage and approach. To quote from my somewhat out-of-date edition of the Clyde Cruising Club's pilot, 'Hyskeir (Oigh Sgeir) is a group of low islets five miles southwest of Canna with a white lighthouse 39m high. It is rarely visited by yachts as it offers only temporary anchorage in very settled weather when there is no swell.' We were motoring through a flat sea – not a breath of wind or swell – ideal. I read further: 'Pass one cable west of the north end of Hyskeir and steer 170°.'

The usual approach was from the north. But then I read 'Many rocks lie off the south end of the channel, so that an approach from that end should not be attempted.' This was a red rag to the Jonty bull. We had full paper and electronic navigation resources including Bob Bradfield's invaluable Antares Charts to support our pilotage through the rock-strewn gap of the tricky south channel, and the conditions were as benign as they could ever be.

I informed the other two yachts of our intentions but they, perhaps sensibly, declined to join us and opted for the customary northern approach. As we cautiously closed from the south we entered Antares Chart coverage on my tablet and from then on our progress was simple. Once in the narrows we saw that, perhaps inevitably given the perfect day, not one but two trip boats were moored alongside the quay steps and we saw several people wandering around the lighthouse. My promise of landing on a deserted island was trashed; we motored past and turned the corner into the anchorage to drop the hook ready for the others to raft up.

The Penguin Cruising Club chartered three yachts from Alba Sailing in Dunstaffnage to celebrate its 50th Anniversary. It was to be a fortnight's cruise



with a crew changeover at Ullapool; the cruise commodore for the first week elected to go north via many traditional Penguin Club boltholes on the Outer Hebrides chain. Our first night had been spent at Tobermory before continuing to Hyskeir for lunch; once rested we motored on through the glorious windless weather to our overnight stop at Eriskay's Acairseid Mhor.

EXPLORING UNFAMILIAR WATERS

After wriggling out of Eriskay's dog-leg entrance we tried to deviate from the usual beaten track and intersperse well-known havens with little-known ones. The fine weather had broken overnight and the grey morning provided just enough wind to raise full sail for a 3-knot drift northwards; hardly what we had hoped for. Passing the Sound of Eriskay, we reminisced about the wreck of the SS *Politician* and its 'rescued' cargo of America-bound whisky. Next we crept past Loch Boisdale before picking Outer Loch Eynort as a sensible place for a midday anchorage. As we rounded the corner, sharp eyes picked out a group of around

15 Risso's dolphins splashing around inshore of us. Camera shutters clicked as we admired them at a safe distance before moving on to anchor and raft up in Ceardal Bay where we compared photographs and identified our sighting. Enthralled and entranced by this rare encounter, lunch passed swiftly before we separated to start the passage up towards the classic anchorage of Wizard Pool off Loch Skipport. An initially encouraging wind died away, so after some sailing through the grey drizzle motoring was the order of the day.

The passage was uneventful until the commodore picked up a floating line amongst the fish farm cages at the entrance to Wizard Pool; we stood by at a safe distance to help but he managed to free himself without incident. Wizard Pool was busier than we were used to – historically our visits have tended to



TOP LEFT: A Force 4 northerly meant a cracking sail from Scadabay to Loch Finsbay, Isle of Harris

ABOVE: Pay close attention to charts when navigating Acairseid Fhalach on the western shore of Flodday Sound

LEFT: Rafted at Loch Eynort, South Uist for lunch

As it was peak season, we would have to go further to achieve our customary solitude



All pictures: Jonny Pearce

BELOW: Sheep being moved by RIB to good grazing on Eilean Mhuire, the most easterly of the Shiant Islands

be at Easter with the whole sea area as our empty playground – but there was ample room for all. Many of our traditional empty stamping grounds and private hidey-holes have become well known; such is progress, and the rest of the sailing world has clearly discovered these lovely waters.

We rationalised that, as it was peak season, we would have to go further off-piste to achieve our customary solitude. Our commodore led us safely out of Wizard Pool to sail in a gentle easterly Force 2; at least the rain had stopped. The wide entrance to Loch Carnan and the islands of Wiay and Ronay slipped past before we turned into Flodday Sound, tucked neatly in behind Floddaymore. This whole area is a maze of inlets, islands, and potential anchorages but our objective was the tiny horseshoe of Acairseid Fhalach on the western shore of Flodday Sound.

CHOOSING A TRICKY EXIT

The narrow passage is well-guarded by vertical cliffs and leads into a perfectly protected pool for one yacht. Our two companions rafted up inside, but it was a bit tight for three and I fancied later attempting the exit through Poll nan Gall north of Floddaybeg. We anchored just short of its narrow strait. This northern channel into Poll nan Gall and Flodday Sound is described as being rock-strewn and narrow; however, by using Antares Charts, careful passage by yachts is considered possible. After weighing anchor we nosed our way very slowly through; the challenging encroaching reef was passed narrowly to port and we motored clear to





This whole area is a maze of inlets, islands, and potential anchorages

ABOVE: Scadabay on South Harris. Mrs MacLeod's old house – where she served high tea to royalty and sailors – can be seen behind the boat

RIGHT: Loch Scadabay, Harris, has a narrow entrance

BELOW: Garbh Eilean and Eilean An Tighe, Shiant Islands, are ideal for a lunch stop



rendezvous with the others who had re-used the southern channel. We needed to top up our tanks so called into Lochmaddy Marina. Water and showers were on hand, with a leg-stretching walk up to the village shop and fuel pump to bring back a couple of cans of diesel; one of the skippers was concerned about his range. The sun had come out again, and, after basking in its warmth we slipped our lines and enjoyed a brisk sail in a steady northerly Force 4.

I was below in the galley roasting a leg of lamb at a good 30° angle of heel but managed not to drop it in the bilges. It was invigorating to be sailing again, and two of us had an unofficial race; despite diesel concerns the third boat had unaccountably motored and dropped way behind. Finding good shelter in an unmarked anchorage below Trollaman Island further on in Cheese Bay, we feasted on roast lamb. It was stupendous, even if I say it myself.

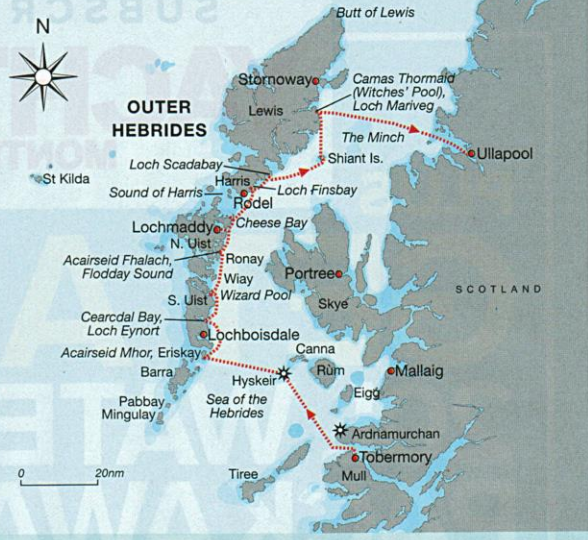
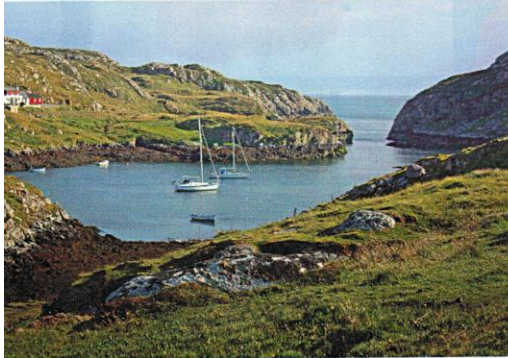
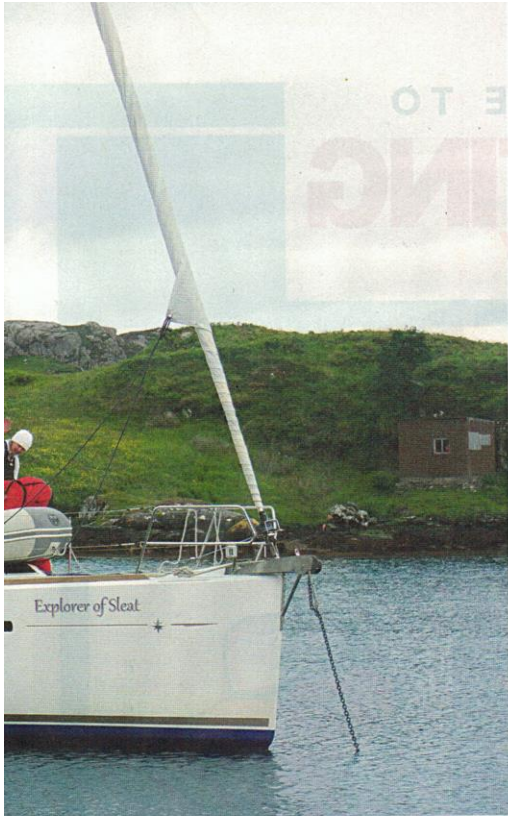
Scadabay has long been a Penguin Club favourite. With the wind still a northerly Force 4 a cracking sail took us past the Sound of Harris and Rodel; our Sun Odyssey 43 Deck Saloon had not been the fleet leader in gentler zephyrs

but, with a peak measured speed of 8.3kts, left the others well behind before tacking into Loch Finsbay for lunch. Being the first to arrive our duty was to be the anchor boat for the raft; the three boats swung and weaved but we did not drag despite some brisk gusts. By necessity we were left last and trailed the fleet in the easing wind up the coast of South Harris.

A LOCH FIT FOR VIKINGS

The perfectly hidden circular Loch Scadabay is on the Isle of Lewis, lying south of East Loch Tarbert. It defies discovery unless you know where it is; surely it must have been a favoured Viking hideout as the cliffs only part to reveal the narrow entrance channel at the right angle of approach. In years past the redoubtable Mrs MacLeod used to treat visiting yachts (including those skippered by royalty) to a full high tea before selling them her quality tweed; I still have one of her indestructible pairs of socks. Sadly, she died in 2018 so when we negotiated the narrow cleft to gain the inner pool there was no cheery wave from her house. The depth can hardly be described as ample in Scadabay; a 1.7m entrance bar restricts low tide access but the pool has good holding in soft mud that allows a deep keel to sink in slightly at low tide.

After a peaceful night we emerged to yet another grey and windless day, so the engine disturbed the



TIPS FOR SAILING IN THE OUTER HEBRIDES

The excellent Antares Charts (see www.antarescharts.co.uk) offer high definition and accurate large-scale charting of a wealth of channels and anchorages in north-western Scotland. They can be presented (complete with your GPS position) on a tablet. I am a believer in keeping paper charts available, and it is wise to keep all charts and pilot books up to date.

Over the past 20 years there have been many changes to the Hebrides area with new marinas, fish farm alterations, and moorings that have taken over marked anchorages. Beware local oddities such as magnetic anomalies (Compass Hill on Canna is an example) and remember that electronic vector charts can miss rocky hazards when under-zoomed.

Always read and heed the pilot books and the small print on charts. The Hebrides boast a relative lack of navigational marks associated with an apparent excess of unmarked rocks. Overfalls can be hazardous in the wrong combination of conditions, and snagging of the propeller on unmarked or abandoned fishing gear is a risk. Strong tides must be allowed for, and it is wise to consider other issues such as the uneven bottom of the Sea of the Hebrides between Canna and Barra. Almost double the wave height can be encountered here in any given wind speed compared to the waters of the Minch.

The remoteness of the Outer Hebrides necessitates self-reliance, and it is essential to carry adequate reserves of water, fuel and food. Itineraries may be influenced by visits to top up these supplies. Forecasts, whether by Navtex, VHF, or electronic sources are invaluable; the Outer Hebrides are no place for those who can't deal with unexpected adverse conditions. Make sure your havens of refuge are well researched and that your boat carries suitably strong ground tackle, a reliable engine, and an efficient and properly functioning reefing system.

USEFUL PUBLICATIONS

- Outer Hebrides* by Clyde Cruising Club and Edward Mason, 2nd edition (Imray, £32.50)
- Ardnamurchan to Cape Wrath* by Clyde Cruising Club/Edward Mason, 2nd edition (Imray, £32.50)



JONTY PEARCE

Jonty Pearce is a lifelong cruising yachtsman and retired GP. He keeps his Southerly 105 ketch *Aurial* in Milford Haven and regularly sails with his wife, Carol. The couple also enjoy chartering with the Penguin Cruising Club (www.penguin.org.uk). Jonty started sailing dinghies at the age of 10 and holds the RYA Yachtmaster Offshore qualification.

peace all the way to the Shiant Islands. Rounding the southern tip of Eilean An Tighe and passing its bird-strewn steep eastern cliffs we came across a troupe of local shepherds offloading sheep from their fishing boat into a RIB before transferring them to the shingle beach for shearing. We enjoyed the spectacle before splitting the boat raft and departing northwards towards Loch Mariveg, passing near the tunnel guarded by The Blue Man of the Minch, a rock formation on the adjacent cliff that resembles a face. Low tide meant we had to dodge the rock in the narrows of the entrance to face the labyrinth of Loch Mariveg's antechambers. After some wriggling around we found space in Camas Thormaid.

Our cruise was drawing to a close and it was time to head to Ullapool to change crew. The weather on the crossing was grey and windless; we amused ourselves by dolphin watching and, as water was no longer an issue, the joy of hot showers. Despite the dearth of actual sailing we had visited many little-frequented Penguin Club haunts and had avoided any rocks!