



## Autumn again...

Is it really a whole year since I sat down to write the last newsletter? Apparently it is, according to my computer. And how has the 2006 season been? In a word – fantastic!

This has been a very busy year – we started earlier at Easter, working through until the middle of September. Normally, we don't start sailing until May but with interest in an Easter cruise, it seemed silly not to seize this as an opportunity. However, the biggest difference was with the number of guests who joined us this year, with almost every cruise filled to capacity.

What was the difference? We don't honestly know, but considering the number of friendly faces (I don't think I'd get away with saying 'old'...) who reappeared this year, it would look as if we might just be doing something right.

January saw us having to vacate our winter berth at Banavie while that section of canal was drained for essential maintenance. Chalice tried out its skills as an ice-breaker as we gingerly cracked the sheet ice on our way to our new home in the basin at Corpach, scattering ducks as we edged along.

Although the day for the move was bright and sunny it was in the middle of a bitterly cold spell and everything seemed to be frozen. Even the ropes were frozen onto the deck bollards!

Hot soup seemed to thaw everyone when we eventually tied up in the basin at Corpach – not an ideal berth for the winter as we had to lie on the outside of another vessel, which made access difficult. I'm sure that it rains even more down there too....

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In March, we made the annual pilgrimage around to the Costa del Mallaig for the usual round of scraping, sanding and



painting. Anyone who has been in the wheelhouse with me as we sail into Loch Nevis has probably seen me flinch as we sail

past Mallaig. It's not the most endearing of places at the best of times, but life on the slipway in March is a treat that I could well live without!

It is quite bizarre living on board while the boat is held in a cradle with the bows up at an angle of around 15 degrees. You seem to be constantly running downhill to the galley or trudging uphill to the foredeck. Stairs just don't seem to 'work' and doors either flap open or slam shut. I'm sure that if we had some flashing lights and distorted mirrors we could open as a fairground attraction.

Anyway, after four frantic days, we enjoyed a calm sail back around to Oban, where we took up residence on our mooring in the harbour.

## Caledonian McPain (Part 2)



Those awfully nice people at Calmac eventually managed to stop working on their new bit of pier and we then were allowed to use it (as long as we didn't break it). In fairness – and this was largely down to the efforts of Piermaster Cate – I have to say that being able to use the new pier did actually make things easier for all concerned. Ease of access on and off Chalice largely depends upon the state of the tide, but the option of being able to use the concrete stairs certainly is a benefit. No doubt they'll use this as a reason to charge us more.....

Work is not finished with the pier yet and there are two new 'dolphins' – big metal piles – to be added effectively adding more berthing length (for ferries) to the pier. This could really add to our problems as it will effectively close the existing fuel berth which will in turn lose at least two mooring spaces on the old pier. However, we'll just have to wait and see. No wonder they lost £33 million last year.

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### First For...

We had a few notable 'firsts' again this year:

- Strong winds on the day of our first trip meant that we didn't sail until the following morning, spending a night alongside in Oban. This turned out to be a good plan as the following day dawned brighter and calm – a far better start to the cruise.

- We spent a beautifully calm night in Loch Kerry (Wester Ross) before heading out to the Shiant Islands the following morning.

- Easterly winds in early May opened an opportunity for us to explore Loch Moidart, where we spent a night at anchor. Guests went ashore to walk on the island of Shona and then we landed on the beach below Tioram Castle.

- Stormy weather in the Minch saw us spending two nights in (almost) the same place. We left East Loch Tarbet to head for Dunvegan (Skye) to be met by a very angry looking sea as we left the Kyles of Scalpay. Discretion being the better part of valour, we turned around and headed straight back into the shelter of Loch Ceann Dibig, where books, magazines, Scrabble and Jane's cakes become the order of the day. The following day dawned bright and calm, and we sailed off as if nothing had happened – and with no green faces!

## The Monarchs

We've anchored off the Monach Islands a couple of times when we've been en route to or from St Kilda. However, apart from one night at anchor in the 'south harbour' we've never been able to land. Well, that had to be remedied.

On the July 'Not St Kilda' cruise, we sailed through the Sound of Harris to Taransay (after visiting Rona and the Shiants....) and then down to the Monarchs. The weather was stunning – beautiful sunshine and a temperature of 24 degrees – and we anchored in the 'north harbour' then invaded the Monarchs. Without going into detail and to make you just a touch jealous if you haven't been there, here are some words that I would use in a longer description of our visit: wild, remote, unspoiled, 80+ seals, long sandy beaches, glorious sunset, dunes, nesting fulmar.....

Yes, the Monach Isles are worth a visit. BUT (and it's a big 'but') they're very exposed to Atlantic weather so they're not a location that anyone could *promise* to take you to. However, it's always worth the effort.

We were able to pay an impromptu visit to an exhibition held by wildlife artist Bruce Pearson when en route to St Kilda in August. Bruce had been invited to exhibit at the An Talla Dearg art gallery at Isle Ornsay, Skye, and as we just happened to be passing by we called in and paid him a visit.

He had an impressive array of work ranging from a huge painting of otters swimming underwater to a stunning picture of a black-throated diver.

Bruce joined us early in the season last year for a cruise where guests were able to test their painting and drawing skills under his watchful eye. This holiday is not designed for 'artists' but anyone who enjoys a bit of sketching or painting, or would simply like to 'have a go'. At the end of the week the consensus of opinion was, "more!", so Bruce



is joining us again next year in July – but this year he'll be painting too!

At the time of writing there are only six places left, so if you fancy joining us for this one, don't leave it too long!

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Travel writer James Fair joined us on a St Kilda cruise that turned into a 'not St Kilda' cruise. So, there we were, out on the briny with the man from BBC Wildlife Magazine who wanted to write about a journey to St Kilda – and we didn't go there. This was the trip mentioned earlier when we ran away and hid for a day while the sea boiled. However, James knew what is involved in such a journey and wrote a very

favourable piece in the magazine, saying he'd be back on board like a shot if gets the chance. He also made the point that although we *didn't* get to St Kilda, he still had a great time and we saw plenty of wildlife.

So James, wotcha doing next May.....?

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You're probably aware that there's nothing new about sailing around the Hebrides and attempting to get to places that would have many people classify you as 'totally bonkers'. Many of you will have read about Johnson and Boswell or Dean Munro's exploits, and of course the area was a 'must see' for the Victorians. But there are other intrepid travellers from the last century who seldom get a mention.

If you're looking for an interesting book to read as you while away the winter evenings in front of the fire, you might like to see if you can get hold of a copy of 'Island Going' by Robert Atkinson. It's a story of two friends who set about going to places like Handa Island, North Rona, Sula Sgier and St Kilda back in the 1930's, on a quest to find and study Leach's Petrels.

They visit St Kilda in the 1930's after the evacuation but at a time when a few of the islanders still returned in the summer months. The efforts that they went to in travelling up from the south of England in cars that were either borrowed or falling to bits in the days before traffic jams (or the road to Mallaig) were invented, emphasises the passion that they had for their quest. I found a copy of the book in WH Smith's for £4.95 – money well spent. If you can't get a copy mine will be in the Chalice library next year.



**N**ot going to St Kilda seems to have caught a lot of people's attention, with both of our 'Not St Kilda' trips filling pretty quickly this year.

The idea behind these cruises are that we head out for eight nights – in the general direction of the Outer Hebrides – but with the specific intention of NOT going to St Kilda. We've noticed that quite a lot of people are a little apprehensive about the sea crossing to and from Hirta (and let's face it, it *is* a long way) so we've removed the anxiety factor. It also means that some of the time that is usually spent travelling can be spent exploring other islands – in other words, more time ashore.

Ideally, we'd like to travel around the north of Skye and possibly visit the Shiants before passing through the Sound of Harris and on to places like Taransay, Scarp, Loch Resort, the beach at Northton (hopefully a 'first' for next season) and the Monachs. We'd then head south for Vatersay and Mingulay before returning across the Minch. Obviously we can't fit *everything* in, and if we do get the opportunity to go somewhere new, then of course we'll use it.

As with any cruise, where we eventually end up will be governed by the weather.

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**S**o what's in store for Chalice this winter? Well, quite a lot actually. I'm a great believer in the fact that everything can always be improved, and I'd like to think that we're able to act on any constructive comments that we get over the season. And we've been listening:

A team of joiners start work on November 27<sup>th</sup> for a week and although there is some work to be done externally, every cabin is going to be getting a visit, with access to bunks being at the top of the list. We'll also be adding a bit more storage in the way of shelves next to bunks and so on.

While they're doing that (apparently everything I've asked for is "easy"...!) I'm going to be concentrating on fitting new

toilets. Yes the days of 'press button 1, press button 2 and count to six – or is it seven.....' are over and we're going for a new one-button-wonderflush model. I doubt that they're impervious to getting blocked, but they should be quieter and from my point of view, there can be no chance of them not flushing properly. Ah, the joys of boat ownership.

Next to 'get it' is the heating system. This tends to work rather too well and there's no way of heating the water without having at least four radiators running. So we're changing over to an electronically controlled system that will automatically ignite when needed without me having to resort to firelighters and singed eyebrows.

## 2006 Sightings



We've been very lucky again this year, with good and varied sighting of a host of wildlife. In general, sightings of whales were down, however we've enjoyed splendid encounters with common and bottlenose dolphins, basking sharks, seals and seabirds. We've certainly seen more otters this year and even had a close encounter with two sunfish – only two miles from Tobermory!

Sea eagles have been breeding around the Sound of Mull too and on several occasions we've seen the adult birds and also a chick, which seems to have taken up residence at a very convenient viewpoint.....

This is all good news for all of these creatures as we only see them as they follow their food supplies. Hopefully this year has just been a 'blip' in whale sightings and the minke will be back in greater numbers next season.

## 2007 Cruise Dates

Here are our cruise dates for 2007. More details are available on the website. Bookings for all cruises highlighted in **this colour** will be handled by Hannah at Northern Light Charters, who are our booking agents. For cruises highlighted in **this colour**, please contact us directly.

<b>5<sup>th</sup> April - Easter around Mull (4 nights)</b>	<b>£ 550</b>
<b>19<sup>th</sup> April – Scenic Seabirds (4 nights)</b>	<b>£ 550</b>
<b>26<sup>th</sup> April – Lochs and Bens (4 nights)</b>	<b>£ 550</b>
<b>2<sup>nd</sup> May – St Kilda (8 nights) (only two shared spaces left)</b>	<b>£ 1100</b>
<b>21<sup>st</sup> May – Inner Hebrides (6 nights)</b>	<b>£ 960</b>
<b>1<sup>st</sup> June – Photography with Chris Gomersall (7 nights)</b>	<b>£ 1049</b>
<b>7<sup>th</sup> July – Drawing and Painting with Bruce Pearson (7 nights)</b>	<b>£ 1150</b>
<b>18<sup>th</sup> July – Not St Kilda No1 (8 nights)</b>	<b>£ 1100</b>
<b>12<sup>th</sup> August – St Kilda (8 nights)</b>	<b>£ 1100</b>
<b>25<sup>th</sup> August – Not St Kilda No2 (8 nights)</b>	<b>£ 1100</b>
<b>6<sup>th</sup> September – Inner Hebrides (6 nights)</b>	<b>£ 825</b>
<b>20<sup>th</sup> September – Last days of Summer (4 nights)</b>	<b>£ 550</b>



We are running other cruises as well as those listed above, but these are private charters for other organisations and individuals. Again, full details are given on the website.

AS you can see from the first St Kilda trip, bookings are coming in quite quickly already, so if you're thinking about joining us next year, please don't leave it too late to book.

*(Oh, and this is us on the mooring in Tobermory, with our very own dolphin display team!)*

## CONTACTS

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All images used in the newsletter were taken by Chris in 2006. Mounted prints of any of these images are available.