



CRUISING THE CALEDONIAN CANAL

...A long awaited ambition that finally came true. First, a few weeks of preparation, like downloading the Caledonian Canal Guide; and buying extra kit like a meths heater and new batteries for the radio; wiring up a tri navigation light, fitting a wind indicator and some excellent LED swivel remote controlled lights (from Costco). The trailer needed a good overhaul before leaving: three new tyres, new wheel bearings on three of the hubs (more about the trailer later... and believe me there is more).

The journey was leisurely: leaving about 16:30 on Wednesday the 27th of April and staying overnight in Annandale Services. The next morning we set off early with the plan being to arrive in Inverness for about 12:00. Then the story of the trailer began. A few miles on from our overnight stop and we got a puncture, fortunately with services only a mile away. Having no spare (oops so much for preparation), I took the wheel to the nearest garage, in Abington, who could do little with it as the hub was knackered and they had no tubes. Not deterred they fitted a 12" tube into a 10" wheel and away we went, arriving at Inverness at 16:55. Unable to find BWB offices even with GPS I phoned and the kind lady Ailsa said she would wait for us. When we got there flustered and late, she would not give us a license without insurance and details of craft including mast size. I suggested we come back tomorrow, allowing me time to figure how to get what she wanted; 5 minutes after she left I realised I could download the docs onto the iPad as "insuremyboat" put all your details onto your own home page. We went to a nearby campsite for the night; and the next morning, fully equipped, we were given our keys, a paper version of the route and our license for 8 days (£74). Off we went to Calley Marina where they offered to launch our boat. with the skill and precision of captain Mark, all for £10.21 (and no charge to store the trailer as the yard was not full).

Having packed the dogs and all their food and equipment on board, we finally set sail at 14:30, leaving most of *our* food behind (another oops). As an Irish man once said to me giving directions: "if I was going there, I wouldn't be starting from here"; in this case that was very true as we faced a head wind all the way to Fort William. Fortunately the 4hp Suzuki motor that I have had problems with since getting it with the boat did a sterling job (the only thing I didn't touch, hmhhh a lesson there).

Shortly arriving at our first locks, Maggie feeling very nervous, nerves were soon calmed by the overwhelmingly helpful lock keepers. Everything they say about these guys is true. They make everything look easy and calm the most traumatic occasions.

We made our first stop part way down Loch Ness at Foyers, tying up alongside the pier, to give what were old dogs and not sea dogs a well earned walk, as this was the first time they had experienced such a thing. Elvis, now 14, would never previously even walk on a pontoon let alone get on a boat. And Chloe the over-active collie found jumping on and off onto shore fun.

The forecast for the whole trip was rain, showers and overcast with odd sunny breaks. By evening it was getting cold and although we managed a good tasty snack from what had brought with us in the cool bag, plus the inevitable first glass of wine, we still needed the recently purchased heater to do its job and it did. The night was rough at first with strong winds, which calmed to a beautiful early morning sunrise (picture at the beginning). After a cup of tea, oat bars, dog walk and a look around Foyers (that has little to offer apart from an old Aluminium factory), we hoisted sails as the wind was up and off we went. No sooner had we rounded the headland and hit the main loch, than the boat was thrown from side to side. Quickly reefing and locking the dogs below, we giped and everything was thrown about including myself and Maggie (dogs? what dogs, they were the last thing on my mind) as the wind came from all directions. Sails down, motor on and back to the pontoon, and another longer walk around Foyers, with still nothing more to see. Maggie having her worse nightmare almost come true and two well-shaken dogs and completely stirred (not a new drink), I convinced all that we could continue under motor. It will still be rough but at least we will get to our next stop, with the promise of food, showers and toilets, before the weather really gets bad. All but Elvis accepted the offer: unfortunately for him he could be man handled onto the boat and locked below again. We set off once more, this time under engine power. The scenery was stunning even with the black clouds to aft and rolling mist, and lots of spray off bow. The day grew warmer and the wind subsided, with the sun taking off the many layers of cloud that hovered above us. Sails went up and progress was made (not); tacking back and forth across the loch enjoying the same tacking point over and over again (I learn fast). On went the engine, and finally towards 19:00 we approached the end of Loch Ness and Fort Augustus, with restaurants, showers, super markets and lovely walks, capped with a beautiful sunset. Everyone was happy, even Elvis.

The next morning greeted us with everything the weather forecast had not promised: warm sun, cool breeze and clear days that lasted the rest of the trip. Off we went again with my trustee crew Maggie and the two dogs becoming more adept and confident as the weather improved. Negotiating the next set of 4 locks, we entered Loch Oich and what a stunning loch it was: narrow channels, compared to Loch Ness, beautiful scenery

on all sides. Unfortunately it is the smallest loch and we crossed quite quickly. Pressing on to our next overnight stop we arrived at Loch Lochie in time for tea. In the morning we set off again, negotiating the locks down towards the sea. As we sat moored briefly for a picnic lunch, we watched 6 Norwegians slumming it as they passed on their new 57ft Oceanis. (I think it was new, as had I been quick enough I could have taken a picture of us in the reflection of the paint work, given that I could find the camera through the bright light reflecting from its steelwork and the disturbance caused by their national flag that would have done as an all-over cover for Tessa.)

The weather improved and the views got better and better, as we approached Fort William with snow covered Ben Nevis. As we left Loch Lochy we paused to take a last look at the lochs and take some dinner. The idea of dinner was for us but a native swan had other ideas. When I refused to supply all of the remaining bread she decided she would eat the boat, doing more damage than any pontoon or lock wall to the rubbing strake. As the journey drew to an end (or so I thought), we moored at the top of Neptune's staircase waiting for the journey down and out to sea in the morning. We thought we had arrived late for last lock, but no, the bridge at the bottom was stuck and would not be repaired 'til morning. Leaving Maggie, Tessa and dogs, I got off to Inverness by bus, which was only a 1¾-hour journey. Returning back with the campervan and trailer, we decided to sleep in the camper overnight while waiting for the bridge to be repaired.

Once the bridge was repaired the next bit proved tricky, as I had to move trailer and vehicle, walk a mile back to Tessa and with the help of Maggie other boaters and lock people we descended Neptune's staircase: all 8 locks. Then I took the crew, camper and trailer to a private slipway across Loch Linea. This was owned by the small boat owners association who charge a £20 membership for the year. I put the trailer in place and had to walk a further 3 miles back to Tessa, to find lock keepers on lunch. High tide was at 14:50, which I would have made had the lock keepers let me go first but the bigger boats have a priority (and more money), so by the time I got to the trailer the tide had turned; but no problem with only an hour and a half spent in the water up to my waste in a splashing very cold and now fast moving sea I managed to get the boat on the trailer, after which two very strong Scots joined us to pull the trailer up the slip. Quickly realising their strength was not enough, it was left to Maggie and me to get the boat into a position where we could strap ropes to the camper and pull it up the slip. Mast down, fully packed in less than an hour: job done and off for our final overnight stay away from home (or so we thought), in the peaceful Glen Nevis campsite.

I could write double again regarding the journey home but in brief, remember the trailer I said I would tell you about? Some people take between 4 and 8 hours to travel from Scotland; ok, we were towing a boat and in a camper van, but 5 days? First, passing through Glencoe we realized that the boat had slipped backwards on the trailer. Then, we literally lost a wheel; nuts came loose, wheel was found across the road in the heather. That was fixed at the roadside. Then in Dumbarton we lost a wheel again this time bearings shot, which also punctured other wheel and wrecked hub. Breakdown would only take us to garage in Helensburgh. Many shaking heads, choice language, disgusted looks. We were helpfully directed to a campsite for the night. In the morning: 3 new tyres, 1 secondhand wheel, new bearings, one new sub axle and hub and £400 less.

That afternoon we were on our way. Fifty miles covered, another flat tyre, pumped it up and arrived at Gretna Green services on 3 inflated tyres and one flat. We stayed the night and drove to Carlisle the next morning, leaving the boat in the car park. Another bank holiday we struggled to find anyone who could repair the flat. Finally I found a garage that fitted a new tube but said it may not last as the wheel itself was rotten. He gave me a spare tube and suggested a new wheel if I could find one. I found a trailer shop and purchased a centre-based wheel which would do in absolute emergency. We made it all the way to Liverpool at 40mph, only to get a puncture just as we left the motorway. Changed wheel for the new incompatible one and limped to get the other repaired at garage and arrived back at DSC some 7 punctures, 6 wheel bearings 3 new hubs, one sub axle and hub 4 new tyres, one new wheel, two secondhand wheel hubs and £750 less.

[I'd like to say that this was a wonderful and memorable adventure, and Roy as usual was the man you would want in a crisis; and the dogs thoroughly enjoyed themselves! -- Maggie]

Pictures can be seen on <http://gallery.me.com/sheriff/100203>

