

## **'Pierrette' in the northern Isles. summer 1995**

In 1994 Pierrette sailed south to Spain. I thought to counterbalance this soft living in 1995 by going north, perhaps to explore Shetland and Orkney. I think it was my son John who pointed out that to include the Faroe islands would make it into a nice round about route - so that was decided upon. In the event John chartered A yacht in the Mediterranean!

Early June saw Pierrette sailing north up the Sound of Mull from our winter base at Kilmelford. It was fine (ie. it was not raining), but it was grey, and it was cold. We always seem to regard June as a summer month. Two summers that I have sailed north of Britain suggest treating that rule with caution. Long hours of daylight there will certainly be, but mellow warmth of summer - forget it.

We anchored under Ardtornish' castle by Loch Aline. We headed through the Small Isles and spent a night in Canna Harbour. Across the Minches we came to Tarbert on Lewis, and then spent a day exploring Loch Seaforth which penetrates miles from the sea. We visited the Shiant Islands - a place I had for long wanted to see - but there was a bit too much swell to land. Then on up the east coast of Lewis to Stornoway, for the first weekend and to meet up with Colin who had travelled up from London. It was enjoyable sailing despite the fact that the winds came mostly from the north (of course!) and that the same winds were so cold we were mostly wearing enough layers to look like Michelin Men.

On Sunday it was still blowing 5 or 6 from the north - not encouraging with the next leg some 200 miles due north - so we spent the day visiting the standing stones and Callinish and failing to find a good eating place in the evening. Generally though I like Stornoway and the harbour is much improved for yachts with the addition of a few mooring pontoons.

Railing against the wind produced a change on Monday - it went away altogether. In fact the sun shone on a calm sea as we motored up to the Butt of Lewis, and then on northwards into the wide open spaces of the north Atlantic. A lifeboat went past towing a fishing boat. We saw some dolphins. We did some cooking. Of such little incidents is life punctuated on passage. The lonely island of North Rona came up, and dropped astern. The sky hazed over, but most notably it got gloomy rather than dark. By morning the gloom was down to sea level, a fine rain fell and a light to moderate breeze from the north west gave us intermittent sailing. As the second hundred miles ticked up the grey turned to fog, and thoughts of seeing distant islands on the horizon gave way to thoughts of thanks heavens (or the U.S.military) for GPS! In the event we first saw Suduroy, the most southerly of the Faroes, with tired eyes straining through the fog at a distance of fully 50 metres at about three o'clock in the morning

We spent a week in the Faroes. They are well worth the visit, and quite unlike anywhere else. Imagine Scandinavian looking houses, complete with turf roofs and painted bright reds and greens. Imagine cliffs plunging from over 2000ft straight into the sea (the highest sea cliffs in the world are in the Faroes). Imagine tides that make the Lune estuary look like a mill pond. The local tidal atlas looks and reads

r

n

like a horror comic. Imagine beer at £3 for a half pint glass. Conjure up that picture when next you listen to the man saying "Faroes, south east Iceland ...." - In future I always shall. We did not have bad weather, though nothing like the heat wave developing in Britain. A couple of summer gales swept the islands during the week, and we had one breathtaking day up the cliffs on the west coast in perfect sunshine. We visited Torshavn (the capital) Klaksvig and Tranisvaag - which means we

visited every town, met some nice people, lost track of the passage of days because there is no night - and finally sailed away on 21st June with a brisk SW wind bound for Shetland.

For a change this had all the makings of a perfect passage. The wind was on the quarter, and sailing just about within the realm of comfortable. The evening sun shone on the steely blue north Atlantic and we sailed into the non-night in good heart. It couldn't last, and during the next morning the wisps in the sky turned into hazy sheets, and then into grey blankets, and then got lower and lower. When Foula and the other islands showed up the tops were wreathed in cloud and fog was imminent. But the wind held, and we were in the port at Scalloway early the second morning.

There is no comparison between Faroe and Shetland. The Faroes belong to Scandinavia; the Shetland Islands are the far, far north of Britain. Buildings are grey and stone, the hills are northern moors. We had a taste - no more - of the brilliant British summer here. Visiting a former teaching colleague north of Lerwick in his idyllic croft cottage up above the brilliant blue sea it all felt like heaven. But then Roger talked of the short winter days and the winter gales - they have records of winds over 180 knots hereabouts. Again we spent about a week exploring as far north as Mid Yell - you could easily fill a month here. Then a longer hop of forty miles or so south to Fair Isle, where four yachts from four nations filled the tiny harbour. Unfortunately the clouds hung low over the island, though that could not spoil the fascination of the the bird life, not the least being physically assaulted by the great skuas.

A further passage next day to the Orkney Islands heralded a rather more sedate week. Margaret, my wife, arrived with Maggie and Nadine one of the hardy sailors, ~ explored a number of the outer islands, as well as the 'mainland' by car, and conceived a much greater liking for the islands. Mostly they are not wild but prosperously agricultural. People live a very different life, often isolate in their small island communities and the younger ones taking the ferry to Kirkwall for a Saturday night out. Tides run fast and seas kick up swiftly amongst the islands, but at other times there could be blue-green over the white sand bottom. We were pinned into Pierowall harbour on Westray for three days by a stiff southwester - and will long remember the delicious and gigantic crabs (~1 each) from the crab processing factory just along the quay.

Early July saw a new crew again, and a roistering sail across the entrance to Pentland Firth in a force 6 from the east down to Wick. Then on down the east coast to Helmsdale, and th to Inverness. There was no more exciting mile of sailing during the whole cruise than sailing under the road suspension bridge at Inverness - a spring tide roaring out against us, a stiff east wind pushing us to eight, then nine,

then ten knots, so that we crept under the bridge at walking pace despite the foaming bow wave and the boat quivering with tension.

After the excitement and the winds of the east coast the Caledonian canal was bound to feel a bit tame. However, I think it is a beautiful canal, with a interesting combination of cuts, locks and free sailing down the lochs. The only time we were able to set a spinnaker during the whole cruise was for the 23 miles down Loch Ness. A gentle following breeze, warm sunshine, crew sunbathing on deck with drinks and soft music - we really felt we were returning from the barren north even if we were still north of Fort William.

Corpach is the end of the canal, and barely a days sailing from our mooring at Kilmelford - the adventure seemed more or less over. Sadly the only damage of the entire cruise was still to come. Motoring fast in deep water to beat a foul tide through the narrows at Onich we felt a bump under the boat. Investigation next morning under the boat revealed the skin off one side of the rudder missing. We could still steer, but it was with caution and timidity that we thus covered the last few of our 1200 miles.

It was a good cruise with little real bad weather, some remarkable scenery and some excellent sailing. It was, as many people have commented, the summer for going north - though not because of the baking heat Britain was experiencing. For the most part that did not extend that far north. We tend to think of the waters north of Britain as wild and hostile. Often they are not, and when you remember the everlasting day light in mid-summer, of the relatively short hops up to Shetland, and the fact that it is only 160 miles from Lerwick to Bergen - then you realise that these waters have marvellous potential for the longer cruise

Alan Welbank