

CRYSTAL CLEAR – OUR CALEDONIAN ADVENTURE

July 2006

Boat: Crystal Clear

Captain & Crew (in no particular order) – Ronnie and Fiona Simpson

Departure: Port Edgar

Destination: Moray Firth

Background

We bought Crystal Clear (Jaguar 25) in November 2005 from Al Terris and had spent the winter months, as most boat owners do, cleaning, painting and polishing. There were a few cosmetic changes to the interior of the boat and with a new spray hood, sail cover and dodgers she was looking good for the start of the much anticipated new season. The first couple of months were spent getting to know the boat and with a lot of much needed tuition and guidance from Al, we were as ready as we could be to set off for our two week trip to the Moray Firth and back, or at least that was the initial plan.

The following is an account of our trip, a journey, that many have done before and many will do after us, but for Fiona and I, it was an exciting, exhilarating and at times daunting adventure that will live on in our memory forever. We set out as inexperienced novices and returned proud of our boat and proud of what we had achieved. We also had a third member of crew, Al Terris. Al our mentor, has become a dear and much loved friend but unfortunately was shore based at home in Limekilns. Al was only a phone call away and we spoke almost daily on the telephone, his advice and encouragement was much appreciated throughout our journey.

The Plan

To set off from Port Edgar the weekend of the 15th July using the ebb tide to help us on our way up the Fife coast towards Anstruther with the final destination being the Moray Firth, possibly Portmahomack and no further! The few days prior to departure had been spent studying weather reports, plotting waypoints and preparing contingency plans.

Departure: Saturday 15th July - DAY 1

By the time we had packed, secured the house, provisioned the boat, checked fuel oil and water for the third time, we were already several hours behind schedule. However, we had both agreed that the most important aspect of the trip was that there was no definitive plan, we would simply go where we fancied, weather conditions permitting and take as much time as required to get there. This was intended to be a holiday, a time for relaxation, which was just as well, because at 12.30 on Saturday, I cast off the lines from the berth in Port Edgar ready to start our epic journey only to realise she was stuck fast on the mud. Nothing else for it but to wait for the tide to turn and contemplate why we pay so much to Port Edgar to be stuck on the bottom

Eventually we were afloat and off we went under motor, beneath the familiar landmarks of the spectacular Forth road and rail bridges, past Hound Point heading eastwards towards the mouth of the Forth Estuary. Inchcolm Abbey looked magnificent bathed in sunshine with day trippers sprawled out over the grassy slopes.

The battleship 'Inchmickery' looked less intimidating than usual, past the eerie and desolate Inchkeith and on towards Kirkcaldy bay. It was warm and sunny just as predicted, an area of high pressure had settled over Scotland and the forecast was for settled weather for the next few days with a gentle southerly breeze, perfect conditions to meander up the East coast. Auto helm was quickly engaged, (nicknamed Van Auto by Al) the Fife coast looked resplendent in the glorious sunshine, Crystal Clear's hull was cutting through the water with that customary whooshing sound, the company exquisite, a glass of wine in hand, life does not get much better.

Due to our delayed departure we decided to anchor for the night in Largo Bay, there was no wind and we had motored for about 5 hours, so it was time for a bit of peace and quiet, then something to eat and drink. We sat in the cockpit and enjoyed the evening sunshine, starting to unwind and relax, appreciating the contrast from the sometimes hectic and humdrum of working life.

Total Distance Covered: 22 nm

Sunday 16th July – DAY 2

We slept that night with the hatch open and woke to a beautiful blue sky and mirror like sea, not a breath of wind and the unexpected sight of two dolphins searching for their breakfast close to the shore.

We motored out of the bay heading for Fife Ness, past Elie and Anstruther, May Island on the starboard side and further in the distance the Bass Rock. Safely round Fife Ness avoiding the rocks the breeze picked up from the south. I pulled out the Jib and stopped the engine and set a course for Arbroath sitting back for a gentle sail over St Andrews Bay. We later found out that gentle sail and St Andrews bay are rarely used in the same sentence.

The wind started gusting a little stronger contrary to the forecast, the waves building a little higher and water surging out of the Tay, confused the already turbulent sea. A combination of all these conditions caused an extremely unpleasant motion of the boat. We tried mainsail only, jib only, engine only and several combinations in between to no real advantage. We tried to go with the waves and wind but this was taking us hopelessly off course and did not really have much of an effect, so in the end we decided on the jib alone, shut off the engine and headed straight for Arbroath harbour across the waves in an attempt to get there before the inner harbour gates closed. Fiona who until this point had been making her feelings known with non-verbal communication (boy, if looks could kill) decided the best course of action was to take control of the helm to provide her with a focus and distract her from the unpleasant sailing conditions. This she did with great aplomb and guided Crystal Clear towards Arbroath and through what seemed like a minefield of lobster pots on the approach to the harbour. We arrived safely with time to spare and all the more enriched for the experience. There was plenty room in the inner harbour and we soon

found an empty pontoon to berth the boat and looked forward to some more R&R before the next stage. Arbroath harbour provides ample facilities for the visiting cruiser, showers, shops, pubs and restaurants with great food. We quickly transformed from nervous sailors into casual tourists and wandered off to explore.

Distance covered: 33nm (Total 55nm)

Monday 17th - DAY 3

A restful night and relaxing morning had us thinking about the next stage, the forecast was extremely favourable for proceeding north but Fiona was still a bit wary setting out into the North Sea following our crossing of St Andrews Bay. I must admit that the prospect of returning across the bay was not one I was looking forward to. I had spoken to Al that very morning and he had encouraged us to move on as the weather forecast was to our advantage for the next few days, suggesting we could always return to Arbroath on the return journey. We found a local supermarket and stocked up on food and fuel with the intention of leaving when the harbour gates opened in the morning.

That afternoon, I boldly suggested leaving within the hour for an overnight sail to Peterhead. I reassured Fiona, that the weather conditions were perfect, and that I had phoned the coast guard who confirmed the overnight conditions to be “very settled for the next 24 hours”.

Departed Arbroath 1700 hrs

We paid the £15 fees to the harbour master, informed the coastguard and set off, sails up and doing a comfortable 5 knots. There was still warmth in the evening sun and a decent offshore breeze hitting us on the beam, with Fiona on the helm enjoying every minute, trying to coax Crystal Clear to move along a little faster. We sailed beautifully up the coast for about 2 hours making good progress and looking forward to the prospect of sailing through the night, obviously a little apprehensive but excited as well. Then as so often happens the wind changed suddenly with little warning, at first, into a headwind where it then died completely. No choice but to start the engine and motor, we eventually motored all the way to Peterhead.

Night Sail

We were 25 days past the Summer solstice and the night never gets as dark as you would imagine. There was a slight cloud covering which helped keep warmth to the night but obscured the moon and stars depriving us of light. In the middle of the night your imagination takes over, you visualise sea creatures emerging from the black sea, rocks appear and disappear where the charts tells you there are none and the sea birds rise from the darkness with terrifying shrieks. Yet despite this, there is an overwhelming serenity, lights twinkling on the shore like fairy lights at Christmas and the sound of the hull cutting through the water, with the familiar reassuring whooshing noise.

As the night went on I realised we had not set up a watch keeping routine, due to our lack of experience, we both stayed awake all night. I did not want to miss any of this magical experience and Fiona's fear of me falling asleep deprived her of much needed rest.

Navigating up the East Coast is generally straight forward, despite plotting several waypoints into the GPS we basically kept about 2 miles offshore and followed the coast line passing the harbours at Stonehaven and Aberdeen. At around 03.00 am the sky began to light up and eventually the sun began to rise. The sea was eerily calm and we maintained a steady 5 knots under motor. Fatigue was now becoming an issue for both of us so we disconnected 'Van Auto', in a bid to keep our concentration and focus on staying awake.

At 6.00 am we were approximately 6 miles from Peterhead according to the GPS, however, after checking the charts we both believed that Peterhead lay just past the next headland so we altered course accordingly and made for the harbour wall. It was soon apparent that the tiny harbour (Port Errol) we were approaching was not Peterhead, so a quick about turn and back to the accuracy of the GPS instead of relying on two sleep deprived and fatigued brains. Eventually, we made it into the sanctuary of Peterhead harbour, arriving 07:30 am and then into the marina, tucked neatly away in the left hand corner. Once the boat was secured we checked into the harbour master's office, Fiona managed to find the energy to shower, I stumbled into my bunk for a long and much needed undisturbed sleep. We would celebrate our achievement later that day.

Distance covered: 67 nm (Total 112nm)

Tuesday 18th - Day 4

We awoke early afternoon and after a shower and change of clothes we began to appreciate what we had just achieved and gain our bearings. Peterhead is a superb marina within a huge bustling harbour, the facilities are excellent and all for £12 per night. One slight disadvantage is that the location is a couple of miles from the town centre. We decided to eat out that night and have a restful afternoon taking in the sunshine stretched out in the cockpit with an ample supply of alcohol to hand. Fiona appearing a little wary, in case another overnight sail was suggested.

Under the bright sunshine of the Peterhead sky, a plot was brewing as the apprehension continued to build at the prospect of going back across St Andrews Bay. Our original plan was to sail up to the Moray Firth then back, but here we were 3 full days into a fourteen day break and within 20 miles of the Moray Firth.

Change of Plan

A trip back through the Caledonian Canal, down the west coast then through the Forth & Clyde canal.

There followed phone calls to Al for more advice and reassurance. Al had made that journey many times and immediately encouraged us to keep going but reminded us that time would now be a factor if we were to achieve our goal of returning to the Forth before our holiday ended. We spoke to other cruisers and sought as much

information as possible from those berthed around us. Time was going to be an issue but we were prepared to give it a try. We agreed that if we ran out of time, we would leave the boat and return at weekends to bring her home in stages. Possibly the final deciding factor was when the skipper of the boat berthed beside us described an encounter on his trip up from Aberdeen with three whales, a mother and two calves, swimming beside his boat for a couple of miles. The prospect of whales and St Andrews Bay meant only one way back for us, the Caledonian Canal.

We would now enjoy our meal out, provision the boat in the morning and set sail towards the Moray Firth. “The best laid schemes o mice and men...”

Wednesday 19th – DAY 5

We woke early, excited by the prospects of our new adventure, every day would present a fresh challenge, today would be no different! I opened the hatch to see ... nothing, thick fog all around. I spent the day inputting waypoints into the GPS and both agreed we were not prepared to move in the fog. Other boats were leaving, time was now an important factor but we did not have the experience or confidence to move.

Thursday 20th – DAY 6

Fog bound again, the frustrating part was the rest of the UK was baking in record temperatures and there seemed to be a patch of fog about 20 miles long settled over the Peterhead coast. So it was another day of being a tourist, and Peterhead is a far cry of being a Mecca for tourism. This once thriving fishing town seems to be dying on its feet, ‘for sale’ and ‘to let’ signs are prevalent throughout the town centre. Eventually, the fog started to lift and we made the decision to go late afternoon.

Departed Peterhead 1645 hrs

Less than a mile beyond the harbour wall, we encountered a thick bank of fog. With no breeze, we motored on into thickening fog relying on the GPS for guidance, continuing for 30 minutes with no sign of the fog lifting. A decision had to be made to either turn back or keep going in a situation we both felt uneasy with. It is a situation like this that you realise your hearing has become very acute! Jointly we decided to keep going and gradually as visibility improved, rounded Kinaird Head, we then became confident of reaching our planned destination, Rosehearty.

Arrived at Rosehearty 2200 hrs

We tied up against the wall of the picturesque harbour of Rosehearty and before the lines were secure the harbour master arrived with receipt book in hand, asking for £15 for the privilege. No facilities offered although wash facilities became apparent the following morning at a near by caravan site. Phoned both Al and Sam (Fiona’s Dad) to inform them of our safe arrival. A very peaceful and sheltered drying harbour although Crystal Clear barely touched the bottom at low water with her three-foot draft.

Distance covered 22nm (Total 134nm)

Friday 21st – DAY 7

Departed Rosehearty 0900 hrs

We woke early to another sunny, calm and peaceful morning which gave us the opportunity to take pictures and prepare for our onwards journey. On exiting the harbour, we turned to port heading for Lossiemouth Harbour. Even at 9am, the sun was incredibly hot and it promised to be another fantastic day. The downside was 2 knots of head wind, which meant motoring at four knots against a calm sea. The Moray Firth is renowned for its pods of dolphins so 'Van Auto' was engaged while 'the crew' went on dolphin watch, and were not disappointed. An earlier radio report had stated that due to the exceptional warm weather, the UK had many significant sightings of dolphins and whales. Perhaps the highlight of the whole adventure was the approach to Lossiemouth Harbour where Captain and crew (its difficult to know who is who) were at odds with which line to follow into the harbour. A friendly discussion was rudely interrupted by the arrival of two beautiful large dolphins on either side of Crystal Clear. The dolphins seemed to dive under the boat and nudge the rudder in the direction of the harbour entrance and remained alongside, while taking turns to leap high out of the water. A mad rush for the camera ensued however, the resulting picture did not capture the uplifting experience as witnessed at the time. Berthed easily at Lossiemouth with assistance from a helpful harbour master, £12 per night.

A nice meal out in the 1869 upstairs restaurant followed by a good nights sleep prepared us for our journey ahead the following day to Inverness. Lossiemouth harbour facilities were adequate but not picturesque and reflected a slightly neglected industrial/fishing port, vying to encourage leisure craft.

Distance covered: 38.5 nm (Total: 172.5nm)

Saturday 22nd – DAY 8

Departed Lossiemouth 1115 hrs

At last a decent breeze with the prospect of a good full days sailing. Sea, lumpy on departure under both main and jib, keeping the Halliman Sceries well to port a course was set for 3 miles north of Nairn. Wind speed variable, 2-12 knots east to northeast with Fiona at the helm. Sailed all the way to Inverness Firth averaging 3.5 knots. The best days sailing so far and it felt good to have the engine off and make decent progress under sail. We spotted a large noisy seal colony on White Ness Sands as we entered the South Channel at Riff Bank. Al had advised not to enter Inverness Firth against the tide and our entrance was timed to perfection. Prior to Chanonry Point we took our sails down and reverted to the motor. We were enthralled by the arrival of several dolphins surrounding the boat and they provided us with a personal show worthy of Sea World. As we passed Chanonry Point, a large dark fin surfaced about 30 metres in front of the boat and from its size (checked from the internet at home) would appear to resemble a killer whale, which are occasional visitors to this area. It was now early evening and a haar was enveloping the firth, so we followed the buoyed channel towards the Kessock Bridge. The well lit channel into the River Ness was easy to find and Longman Yacht Haven only a few hundred metres further, the

last available berth was ours and the Clachnaharry Sea Lock (entrance to the Caledonian Canal) just a short hop away.

Whenever you pull into a new harbour or marina there are always other cruisers eager to share their experiences and exchange information, Inverness was no exception. We berthed beside a beautiful boat crewed by two gentlemen who had navigated the canal many times and provided us with all the information we required.

Distance covered 36nm (Total:208.5nm)

Sunday 23rd – DAY 9

Departed Inverness 1100 hrs

The harbour master interrupted our breakfast to collect the £12 fee, there are no facilities at Longman Yacht Haven, and the town centre a good distance away. It is situated at the entrance of a busy working harbour, active throughout the night, which was not conducive to a restful sleep. The harbour master advised delaying our departure until 11.00 a.m. to allow for a higher tide and stated “there is a nasty sandbank to the west of the river mouth (the Ness) which has caught out more than a few over the years, so you wouldn’t want an introduction to the coastguard and the lifeboat crew”.

Eleven o’clock departure it was. It gave us time for a taxi journey to the local Tesco to re-provision the depleted wine and food supply. We duly departed avoiding the sandbank and nervously approached the sea lock. We had never negotiated a lock before so naturally we were a bit apprehensive. I had, as advised by our neighbours at Longman, prepared long, bow and stern lines and had strategically positioned every available fender round the boat. The lock gates opened to release the two boats temporarily detained within its walls and we were encouraged forward by a wave from the lock keeper. He caught and secured the lines before closing the gates behind us, slowly he opened the sluice gates to release thousands of gallons of fresh canal water into our enclosed chamber. The strength and sound of the water was quite intimidating. Holding the boat against the lock walls took far more effort than we had anticipated but it would be a procedure that became only too familiar to us over the coming days. Before Crystal Clear could be berthed safely back at Port Edgar we would have to negotiate a further 82 locks and require at least 28 bridges to be moved.

Once we had reached the level of the canal we were invited into the lock keepers office to complete the necessary paperwork for our journey through the Caledonian, Crinan and Forth & Clyde canals. We were pleasantly surprised when we bought a three week licence costing **ONLY** £152 . This allowed us to use any marina or pontoon facility within these waterways, water and electricity inclusive. We also had access to the ample shower and toilet facilities, more importantly British Waterway staff would operate the locks through the Caledonian and Forth & Clyde canals at no extra cost.

It was late afternoon before we entered Loch Ness and a 30 knot wind was blowing right on the nose, the loch was lumpy and the wind was cool. After the calmness of the canal this felt like the north Atlantic in a gale. The prospects of 22 miles of this

did nothing for crew morale, spirits were low it was time for some inspirational motivation from the captain. There is a beautiful hotel (Craigdarroch) near Foyers, which is about half way down the loch on the west bank, where Fiona and I had stayed previously. It is a quiet, comfortable hotel with four poster beds, log fires and spectacular views over the loch. So to avoid any pending mutiny, a night in the hotel was arranged, as no matter how comfortable your boats is, the allure of a bed that doesn't move and a long hot soak can be irresistible at times.

Distance covered 14 nm. (Total 222.5 nm)

Monday 24th - DAY 10

Departed Foyers Pier 1000 hrs

Wined, dined and rested we were ready to leave around 10.00 am. The steep hills that line Loch Ness, funnel the wind from the predominant southwest or the northeast, that day it was coming from the southwest. An attempt to sail against a fairly stiff breeze was abandoned in favour of the engine. Motored for two hours to Fort Augustus only to find the next lock opening at 15.30, time to be a tourist again. We eventually negotiated five locks raising us 40 feet with a large audience of tourists, enjoying the spectacle. The friendly and helpful lock keepers operate between 0800 and 1800 so our progress was restricted. We made the pontoon at Cullochry just before 1800 and were advised by the lock keeper to tie up for the night. A beautiful setting for the night but our first encounter with the dreaded midge marred an otherwise perfect location. We had only covered about 15.5 nm that day and now the Forth estuary was becoming an impossibly distant target.

Distance covered: 15.5 nm. (Total 237 nm)

Tuesday 25th - DAY 11

Departed Cullochry: 0800 hrs

The lock keeper arrived in the morning just before eight, and we eagerly waited to be released through the lock and the swing bridge. We were on our way hopeful of completing the remaining 20 or so miles of the canal that day. Time was very much against us which was a great pity, because we had reached the highest and possibly most scenic point of the canal, Loch Oich (106 feet above sea level). Another hot and sunny day, the loch breathtakingly beautiful, we motored, disturbing the perfectly still water, our wake breaking against the distant wooded shore. All too quickly the buoyed channel led us out of Loch Oich. We looked back with envy at the boats anchored in the mirror like loch, whose crew had more time to enjoy the tranquillity and magnificence of this area. A pledge was made to return another time but for now we had to move on toward Loch Lochy, Neptune's staircase and eventually through the Corpach sea lock.

Distance covered 23 nm. (Total 260 nm)

Neptune's staircase is a flight of 8 spectacular locks that leads down to the Corpach basin, we opted to go out through the sea lock and tie up at the pontoon in Loch Linnhe. This gave us the option of staying the night or moving on whenever it suited. As we had not planned to go this far originally, we had no charts for the west coast, so I set off to find the nearest chandlery. To my horror, I discovered that the nearest Chandler was located at Oban some 60 miles away by road or two hours by rail. Frantic phone calls to Al for help or inspiration followed by frantic phone calls to Sam and Mae (Fiona's mum and dad) led to a number of much appreciated but fruitless suggestions.

I left Fiona talking on the phone and set off in search of rail timetables. The first person I approached for information, was a German gentleman who spoke reasonably good English. A visitor himself, he was no help with regard to the train timetables. During the conversation he informed me that he had arrived from Oban with the intention of going through the canal and then home to Germany. I explained our plight and offered to borrow or buy his charts to cover our passage to Oban. He required to consult with his crew prior to making any decision to give up his charts and I returned to Crystal Clear to nervously await their decision. Within the hour the charts were brought to the boat and exchanged for £20 and a three quarter bottle of twelve year old malt. What a bargain and what a relief! Now we could relax in the late summer sun watching some local boys fishing for mackerel from the pier. Fiona, who had never fished before persuaded one of the boys to teach her. The very first cast produced a fine catch, I captured the historic event on camera and the fish was added to the haul, to be sold to the local Chinese restaurant for 30 pence per fish.

As darkness descended over Corpach and Fort William we reflected on our hectic passage through the canal. We both agreed that we should have taken more time to enjoy the spectacular scenery and visit some of the many villages along the way. The weather had been unbelievably warm and dry, the people we met, particularly the canal staff, were all helpful and friendly.

Late that night I used these precious charts to plot a course for Oban, we would have to leave early to time the tide through the Corran narrows. Tomorrow we would experience sailing on the west coast, and if the guide books are to be believed, offers some of the most spectacular sailing in the whole world.

Wednesday 26th - DAY 12

Departed Corpach 0700 hrs

Our early start rewarded us with another beautiful, cloudless, sunny morning. Our course took us past Fort William as we headed down Loch Linnhe towards the Corran Narrows. Al warned us not to attempt the Narrows against the tide, but we timed our departure to ensure the tide was with us and we also managed to avoid the busy Corran Ferry. Loch Linnhe opened up as we passed through the Narrows with Ballachulish bay and Loch Leven on the port side. Loch Linnhe is what you would imagine west coast sailing to be like, for those who have experienced it no description is necessary and for those who have not, no description is adequate to portray its beauty. The beautiful weather meant no wind and we yet again relied on the motor.

The scenery and isolation we experienced resembled what we can only describe as an undiscovered alien world. Large rocks and small islands protruded from the still, dark waters, circled with mist despite the high temperatures of the morning. We left Shuna Island to port, heading south towards the Lynn of Lorn. Lismore Island to our starboard and Mull dead ahead, we continued towards Oban.

Almost a mile from Oban bay a decent breeze blew up, too late to assist us on our approach to Kerrera and we motored round into Oban Yacht Haven directly opposite Oban. We easily found an empty berth with breathtaking views across the bay. Tourists once more we boarded the courtesy ferry that runs every two hours between Kerrera and Oban.. A visit to the local chandlery to buy the necessary charts, some retail therapy for those in need and we rounded off the hot afternoon in an Irish pub for much needed refreshment.

Distance covered 27 nm (Total 287 nm)

Thursday 27th - DAY 13

Departed Kerrera 1100 hrs

We departed Oban Yacht Haven late in the morning, there had been a great debate with a neighbouring skipper regarding tidal streams in the area we were heading towards. The area was the legendary Gulf of Corryvreckan where if legends are to be believed, boats are sucked under by the giant whirlpool to the haunting sound of the pipes. Al had already warned us not to attempt the Sound of Luing or Dorus Mor against the tide and contrary to his advice, I made the decision to leave at 1100 hrs and take our chance against the tide. Time for us was already a serious concern and the correct time to enter would be after 1800hrs, however, I thought the Crinan Canal would close the sea locks at 1800hrs, so foolishly pressed on regardless.

The weather followed the pattern of the previous days, no wind, clear blue skies and glorious sunshine. The engine was driving the boat again, the scenery superb and Van Auto was doing the serious work while the crew were on look out for the occasional Cal Mac Ferry. We headed south, with Seil off the port beam and before long we had entered the Sound of Luing. The heat was blistering hot from the relentless sun and the water was as flat as the proverbial pancake but it was far from calm. The Atlantic Ocean was pushing water through the Gulf of Corryvreckan with an irresistible force, masses of the water being forced into Sound of Luing against the bow of Crystal Clear. Trying to steer the boat was like trying to steer a speeding car on black ice. The helm was unresponsive and the boat slithered through the water like some demon serpent. The speed through the water was showing a healthy 5.2 knots but the GPS gave our true speed as one knot, we were fighting at least four knots of tide and struggling.

We tucked close into the west shore in an attempt to ease our struggle, a little relief was found and our true speed nearly doubled. Scarba was on our starboard side as we crept slowly through the remaining two miles of the Sound of Luing keeping a close eye on the time. More in hope than expectation we set a course three miles to the South East for Dorus Mor, a small stretch of water between Craignish Point on the

mainland and the island of Garbh Reisa. The Gulf of Coryvreckan was now clearly visible on the starboard side and the tidal currents were as confused as the bewildered skipper. Water was flowing in every direction, helping us one minute then against us the next, it was a real struggle keeping the boat on course and we were extremely grateful for the calm weather conditions, otherwise we would have been way out of our comfort zone. We had both, main engine and outboard motor running as we approached Dorus Mor. The GPS was indicating a speed over the ground of nearly 7 knots, the tide was with us, and the entrance to Crinan in sight. A powerful motorboat passed us keeping tight into the port side at Craignish Point, we did not want to risk being so close to the rocks so kept some hundred metres off. At this time the outboard ran out of fuel and Crystal Clear was stuck in the swirling current of Dorus Mor, engine pushing forward at 5 knots and tide pushing back at 5 knots, stalemate.

In my panic to refuel and restart the outboard motor I flooded the engine and it stubbornly refused to start. We would edge forward a little, only for the swirling water to push us back again. For thirty minutes we fought a losing battle with the currents of Dorus Mor, before Fiona started wafting the tiller from side to side, using the rudder like a paddle managed to gain us enough forward momentum to pass through into Loch Craignish. The time was 17.30 hrs with the Crinan sea lock some thirty minutes away. I called the lock keeper on the VHF (Ch74) to inform them of our hope to enter the canal that evening, the crackling reply informing us the last locking to be 19.30hrs. The wonderful feeling of relief was quickly overshadowed by the fact that poor planning and forward thinking had placed us in a potentially dangerous situation.

We thankfully entered the Crinan Canal and made our way to Bellanoch Marina to tie up for the night. The calm evening and wooded area surrounding the marina of still water was the perfect setting for the swarming midge. Our only defence was a few mosquito coils and our alcohol burning stove which seemed to keep the majority of them away. We relaxed in the cockpit and reflected on the events of the day. A day in which we had experienced the ferocious power of the sea and we both agreed that these waters were no place for the inexperienced and any return would be treated with the utmost respect.

Arrived Bellanoch 19.00

Distance covered 25nm (Total Distance 312 nm)

Friday 28th - DAY 14

Departed Crinan 08.00

We set off in the drier drizzle more akin to the West Coast of Scotland than the weather of the previous fortnight. Visibility was poor due to the clinging mist and full foul weather gear was required against the damp conditions. The locks in the Crinan canal unlike the Caledonian have no helpful staff to catch and tether your lines, and there is no one to open and close the lock gates or operate the sluices. This is very much a D.I.Y. canal and make no mistake about it, it is hard work from start to finish. The first lock we attempted in the company of two other boats, Fiona took the boat in and attempted to hold both bow and stern lines, while I caught and secured the lines then operated the lock. Unfortunately Fiona did not have the physical strength to hold

both lines against the strong flow of water as it poured into the lock chamber so we swapped roles for the remaining 12 locks. This meant Fiona opening and closing the lock gates and operating the sluices that control the flow of water into the lock chamber. This was arduous work hampered by the swarms of midges thriving in the still, damp conditions.

It took most of the day to toil through the canal, and it was 16.00hrs before we tied up in the Ardrishaig basin with only the sea lock between us and the salt water of Lower Loch Fyne. We had dinner in the conservatory of the Grey Gull hotel, which overlooks Loch Fyne as we considered our various options. We had taken all day to cover the 7 miles of the canal and reaching the Forth was no longer an option. We debated stopping at Inverkip, Largs or even Helensburgh but eventually we agreed to head for Bowling, the entrance to the Forth Clyde canal.

We would leave the boat there and return the following weekend to take her through the canal. However this was late Friday afternoon and Bowling was some 60 nautical miles away. We made the decision to keep going, first through the manned sea lock then south down Loch Fyne motoring again against the gentle southerly breeze. We seemed to be the only boat heading south as we passed numerous northbound vessels, probably week-enders heading for the canal. At the southern end of Loch Fyne with Bute off to port we turned north into the West Kyle of Bute. Darkness had descended by the time we picked up a mooring three hundred metres off Tighnabruaich.

Distance covered 27 nm (Total Distance 339 nm)

Arrived Tighnabruaich 2300 hrs

With the boat secure we settled down in the cockpit to enjoy the final night of our holiday on board Crystal Clear. There were many boats moored around, mostly unoccupied. On the shore house lights flickered on an off which proved the area was inhabited however, the overwhelming aspect of the night was the complete silence. We found ourselves whispering to avoid our voices being carried through the still night air. The morning light would unveil the stunning beauty of the area but for a while we experienced the overwhelming sound of silence. Despite our intended early departure we stayed up late enjoying the tranquillity as we recalled the highlights of the previous two weeks.

The coastguard broadcast on the VHF had predicted a southwesterly breeze, force 4/5 for the Firth of Clyde increasing force 6 in the afternoon. A few months ago we would have balked at such conditions, now we relished the prospect of a decent breeze to sail up the Clyde.

Saturday 29th - DAY 16

Departed Tighnabruaich 07.30

We slipped off the mooring early and pulled up the mainsail in anticipation of the predicted winds and headed down the east Kyle. The wind funnelled by the land and hit us on the bow and the engine pushed us on towards the Clyde. It was late morning before we passed Rothesay and the predicted force 4-5 southwesterly turned out to be force 3, northeasterly with enough of a breeze to have a nice sail towards Dunoon.

Our first experience of the Firth of Clyde presented us with a vast array of boating activity with sailing and motor cruisers in abundance. Large commercial vessels commandeered the main channel with car ferries crossing at regular intervals. On reaching Dunoon, we crossed over to the Cloch point and as the wind freshened from the east, the sails were brought in and the engine engaged. Fiona was born in Port Glasgow so this coastline with its familiar landmarks was of particular interest to her. Every inch of the coastline between Cloch point to beyond Port Glasgow did not escape her camera lens. The weather conditions worsened as we closely followed the buoyed channel past Dumbarton and on into Bowling. The lock keeper was waiting to catch our line on arrival and were soon through the lock and secured on an empty pontoon in Bowling basin.

Our Caledonian adventure of fifteen days and nearly 400 nautical miles was over. We had experienced the best weather for over 100 years but unfortunately for us, it was time to return to the normality of working life. We were fortunate enough to have the pleasure of Al's company between Bowling and Auchinstarry the following weekend. It would take us a further weekend to arrive back at Port Edgar following the completion of our journey through the Forth Clyde canal, but that's another story ...

Distance covered 34 nm (Total distance 373nm)