

The Magic in the Names

Doubtfully, the four of us look down at the multi-coloured coils of rope affectionately known as the snake pit; then up at the ninety foot mast towering above our heads. Heather, having already unleashed the ties securing the main sail to the boom says, "Right, who's going first?" We alternately haul and winch the sail into position and five breathless minutes later are, unbelievably, almost ready.



Oban quayside was where the six of us, two crew and four passengers, complete strangers, met. That was two days ago. Two breakfasts, several gin and tonics and a couple of crosswords later the ice is well and truly broken and together we are sailing through one of the most remote landscapes Britain has to offer, the Western Isles.

For me the magic lies in the names. Eriskay, Vatersay, Mingulay slip off the tongue just like the sea sluicing the shore line. As the sun sets red behind the islands' rocky silhouette we learn about the Vatersay raiders; men who, by force, took the land they needed to keep their families alive when refused the right to buy. These islands are steeped in tales of defiance and survival against all the odds.

Our days are jigsaws shaped by the weather and fitted together by Tim and Heather. Tim checks the coastguard forecast and decides that we will spend today sailing as far as North Uist. This will put us within easy reach of the Shiant Islands tomorrow when the weather will be better for landing. No-one demurs.

When we motor into Loch Eport on North Uist the clouds glower grey and brooding. Tim ferries us ashore in the dinghy and we clamber through heather and gorse up the nearest summit. The lochans gleam eerily in the mist making it hard to distinguish loch from sea but the following morning as we set off all that remains of the cloud is a white tablecloth draped elegantly over the summit in a surround of unspoilt blue.

The Shiant Isles were home to thousands of sea birds up until last week. Now most have left except for some guillemots, puffins and razorbills on the water. However disappointment turns to excitement as a sea eagle, mobbed by ravens, breaks the sky line, banks and rolls away. We watch the aerobatic display in awe. As we motor away a pod of dolphins gently rises and slips below the surface. We slow down but they remain aloof, unlike the pod who, earlier in the week, jostled each other to bowride as we sailed.

Then it's back to the snake pit and the mast. The boom is adjusted and with a thousand snaps and rattles once again we haul the sails aloft, a little more confidently this time. Suddenly they are taut and still. The engine dies away; we lean into the wind and the only sound is the rise and fall of the swell as we sail for our next anchorage.

Margaret Simpson
August 2009