



This newsletter has been designed to enable you to get an idea of what kind of experience you will have should you join us on one of our cruises.

Tue 1 Aug | Where whales? Woeful weather winds up whale watchers! Hans Hansson guests have had some amazing whale sightings during the previous month but today was not one of those days! Some time was spent this morning whale watching - or to be more accurate, whale searching - in Skjalfanda Bay. Conditions were very poor however, and any whales out there (and most likely they were there - it's usually a great place to see them) were not seen by crew or guests. On the bright side all aboard were once again entertained by a particularly large pod of 25 or so white-beaked dolphins.



Pressing on Hans Hansson crossed the Arctic Circle en route to Raufarhofn in the early afternoon and Chris, our guide, almost fulfilled his ambition to swim at 66 deg N when a large rogue swell hit the beam and caught him unawares!!! Photo: Gordon Fitton

Raufarhofn, the most northerly port in Iceland, is tiny but engaging. There's something for everyone here and the crew jump off in search of...a telephone (Jan), ice-cream (John) and some cute Icelandic ponies (Lou). Meanwhile the bird watchers see lots of breeding waders and at least three pairs of ptarmigan with broods of up to ten chicks. Tomorrow a long passage, around 120 miles, to Seydisfjordur. Photo: Chris Fitton



Thu 3 Aug | A classic ending A busy day in the town of Seydisfjordur where Hans Hansson is now berthed. The ferry from the Faroes arrived offloading a large group of Japanese tourists who were met by a large Japanese film crew shooting a travel documentary on Iceland. Meanwhile a team from EMI records was erecting a stage in front of the Blue Church for an evening concert by Sigur Rós which would be recorded for their album. What do you mean you've never heard of Sigur Rós? Described by Wikipedia as "an Icelandic post-rock band with melodic, classical and minimalist elements" you'll probably have heard some of their music which

has featured in "24", the BBC's "Planet Earth" trailers, "Vanilla Sky" (a Tom Cruise film) and the FA Cup Final to name but a few! The crew report that the concert was terrific and provided a fitting end to this adventurous cruise around the coast of Iceland. Photos: Gordon Fitton



Rob, aboard Elizabeth G, called up Chris on Chalice as he passed at a distance earlier today. Rob had divers in on a reef just off the Morvern shore. Chris mentioned there was an eagle's eyrie about ten minutes sail from where Rob was located and gave him some coordinates. Rob was very pleased as he said one the divers onboard was desperate to see a sea eagle. Chatting over the VHF Chris heard Rob exclaim, "What's that?! It's huge!!" He then heard Rob knocking on the wheelhouse window and shouting to the divers. It was indeed the eyrie's occupant! The sea eagle made a couple of low passes below the cloud-base to check out Elizabeth G and delighting everyone onboard.

Fri 4 Aug | Four finish Friday All four boats finished their current charters today, three in Oban and one in Iceland. Hans Hansson waved good-bye to guests in Seydisfjordur who will fly into Reykjavik and onto Keflavik for their return journey to the UK. Hjalmar Borge has been at sea this week with sea-kayakers. This was a returning group who had previously constructed a frame to hold ten kayaks safely on the top of the vessel. Paddling was performed in various locations from Loch Nevis to Rona, some short trips and some long ones during the week.

Chris aboard Chalice ended his duties as committee vessel for West Highland Yachting week today. Fairly short, local trips are taken during the week and there is an opportunity to bird and whale watch if conditions are right. Chris reports that adult guillemots are back out at sea, in coastal waters, with their chicks. Our understanding is that it is the male bird that goes off with the single chick to teach it how to be a grown up guillemot. When the sea surface gets a bit choppy and the little chick constantly loses sight of the adult bird you can hear its frantic "peep-peep-peep" call as it shouts out to dad. Photo: Chris Jackson



Elizabeth G had intended to travel to St Kilda with divers this week but the weather was pretty ropey. In fact Rob set off from the Outer Hebrides but his guests asked him to turn around as the journey was somewhat lumpy. They might have got to St Kilda but then it would have been virtually impossible to dive so all agreed to go elsewhere and get the dives in instead. Sightings for the week included eight basking sharks, a big minke whale at Scalpay and a sunfish off Eigg, about 3 feet in diameter and the sea eagle seen yesterday.

Mon 7 Aug | In haste to Hirta Not to put too fine a point on it the weather this trip has been, so far, pants. The forecast is rubbish too. Last night Hjalmar Bjorge holed up at Taransay and departed at 0400 in fairly choppy seas heading for St Kilda. They arrived at 1100 and guests were put ashore on Hirta with a packed lunch to make the most of what would certainly be a quick visit. The base forecast was predicting Force 9 and 10 the next day so it would be impossible to stay longer. Hjalmar Bjorge departed that afternoon with a planned arrival back in Lochmaddy around midnight. Our guests were obviously a little disappointed that weather prevented them from enjoying a longer visit but were very appreciative that Mark had taken them at all under the circumstances. The trip also turned into a mission of mercy for Sarah, the wildlife warden, who has been based at St Kilda for four months. She was due to leave this week for a well deserved visit to Glasgow but it looked like this would have to be postponed. Hjalmar Bjorge to the rescue! Sarah hitched a ride to Lochmaddy where, by happy coincidence, she met someone she knew who was catching the ferry bound for Oban and was then driving onto Glasgow. Photo: Andrea Parratt



Chris (Chalice) and Rob (Elizabeth G) have both seen an individual sunfish, around the Small Isles, during their last few charters. Chris and his guests from Speyside Wildlife saw two today! Both at the top of the Sound of Mull, about three miles from Tobermory.

Wed 9 Aug | Fleet in Sleat That's a fast moving whale...not a whole load of boats. All aboard Elizabeth G spotted a minke whale in the Sound of Sleat today. It must have been if not fleet of foot, then fleet of fin, for it had disappeared by the time Hjalmar Bjorge turned up not much later. Rob's guests also saw four basking sharks off the north coast of Skye.

Thu 10 Aug | A St Kilda poem Penned by guest Sheena aboard Hjalmar Bjorge this week. Unfortunately weather conditions allowed only the briefest shore visit at St Kilda but, on the bright side, Sheena had plenty of time to write this verse about her bumpy week aboard...

Focus on St Kilda 5th - 11th August 2006

Chorus: *Speed, bonny boat, like a bird on the wing
Over the sea to Skye;
Carry the lads that are bound for St Kilda
Over the sea to Skye*

We all of us chose to sail with Northern Light
In the hope of seeing some sights.
We had in mind a gentle trip to St Kilda Isle
Where we would climb and walk and spend a while.
From Oban we set off to Tobermory Bay
Where at our own mooring we peacefully lay.
The growl of the engines made us wake
At 5 a.m., scarcely daybreak.
Some folks found the trip round The Point
Left their stomachs out of joint,
But all of that was made OK
When we went ashore at Canna's lovely bay.

Across the Minch and through The Sound...slip over the bar
At the western end. Then it's not too far
To drop into lee of Taransay for a wee look.
Another tranquil night, hanging on the hook.

Chorus

The Stornoway Coastguard's voice may be "pure liquid sex"
But she's forecasting nothing less than force six.
A bouncy day, so look out. You may feel ill,
But there's no doubt of our skipper's skill
In getting us where we want to be
In the lee of the small jetty, so slippery.
A welcome, some leaflets and some rules to keep.
"Don't sit, or stand, on the dykes"! and "Don't interfere with the sheep"!?

Conachair, Dun and the house of Calum Mor,
The Base, the Street and the Feather Store.
The church, the school room and bonxies loud;
And the Stacs that soar, where sea birds crowd;
And just to remind you of life's frailty,
A chopper evacuation of a casualty.

Then back over the whale's road we bound
Into Lochmaddy's harbour, safe and sound,
Between the headlands and rocks canine,
Avoiding the creel ropes set in line.

Chorus

Next morning by rising winds we're tossed
And find shelter on Talisker's pier at Carbost.
[Hamish MacLeod, that harbourmaster profiteer
Set his fees just a wee bit too dear.]
Down the coast to view Scavaig's seals
And into Soay Bay for one of those miraculously conjured meals.
Ashore to see where basking sharks bit the dust
And to consult the estate agent....That's a must.
As winds rise to a genuine gale,
Mark gives Rob a hail.
Rob says, "Inverie's shite!"
So now where do we spend the night?

Eigg pier, courtesy of Calmac
Provides the fixed point we lack.
We step ashore and give the island a lap,
But on return, there's a whole new meaning to "Mind the Gap!"
Some think the access is just too rank
So Mark commandeers Calmac's gangplank.

Chorus

We got off lightly round Ardnamurchan.
With those winds we could have been lurchin'

....and retchin'....and not very well.
Compared with what had gone before, there was hardly a swell.

Now we're nearing the end of our trip.
We've had a wonderful time aboard this ship.
Heather cleans and serves and shins up the piers with the amazing Izzy.
Just watching them makes me tired...and dizzy!
Mark provides, for every place, a story.
Just don't whistle on the bridge, or say "Balamory"!

This crew has skill, ability and charm;
Provides adventure without fear of harm.
Thank you for making this trip, I'm sure we all agree,
One to remember for many a year.
Thanks Mark for seizing the chance
To take us the extra mile
.....to St Kilda's Isle.

Mon 14 Aug | "Ooh" out of Oban That's the noise made by delighted guests who joined Chalice today and experienced three bow-riding bottle-nosed dolphins just a couple of hours after departing Oban whilst cruising up the Sound of Mull. Not a bad start to a cruise.

Wed 16 Aug | Lumpy bumpy Hans Hansson waved good-bye to Iceland this morning as she left the port of Seydisfjordur with reasonable weather forecast for Icelandic and Faroese waters. About 100 miles out the boat was met with strong NE winds and high seas which slowed them down considerably and they only reached Torshavn on the Faroe Islands this morning at 0400. Gordon and John were the last men standing. Not much fun for anyone onboard but that's the risk with an adventurous sea passage like this. Sadly no reports of anything interesting at sea (cetaceans or birds) to relieve the monotony.

Sat 19 Aug | St Kilda storms... and for once we're not referring to weather!!! Chalice has spent the last couple of days at St Kilda in absolutely glorious weather. The visit included a tour of all the islands and stacks in fantastic conditions. The "storms" are storm petrels - crossing from St Kilda to the Monach Islands and onto Vatersay today Chris and his guests were seeing a storm petrel near the boat, one, on average, every five minutes. And, no, it wasn't the same one!!! Eagles were seen at Taransay before the crossing to St Kilda and the cruise has also been notable for seeing lots and lots of seals.

Sun 20 Aug | Double dolphins Hjalmar Bjorge spent over 30 minutes with some old friends this morning. Almost every time our vessels have passed through the Sound of Barra this year we have encountered the same small group of bottle-nosed dolphins. Previously there were five adults and one calf but the group has doubled to 11 or 12 individuals including three calves...two bigger ones of about 4 feet in length and one tiny one about 2 feet in length (we are calling the baby "Cyd" after our first ship's dog!). Hjalmar Bjorge left Tobermory at 0400 this morning and about an hour later a minke whale was spotted by Mark and Bobbie - the only guest up and about. Well done that woman...although I think I'd have made like the other 11 guests and stayed in bed... Photo: Dawn Menzies



Mon 21 Aug | Flannans floaters A madly busy day today for Hjalmar Bjorge guests beginning with an 0600 start at St Kilda and a tour round the islands and stacks. Next a cruise up to the Flannan Islands, which due to weather conditions, had to be admired from the boat only as landing was not possible. Floating around at the Flannans were some basking sharks which was an unexpected bonus. Then back in to the Outer Hebrides for a visit to Scarp and finally the vessel anchored at Taransay for the night. A bit of a whistle stop tour of some of the remotest destinations in the Western Isles!

Thu 24 Aug | Cetaceans seen More basking sharks for Hjalmar Bjorge guests, a minke whale in the Sound of Harris and a great sighting of two juvenile sea eagles in Loch Spelve today. A week of wonderful weather and delightful destinations including St Kilda, the Flannans, Scarp, Taransay, the Shiant, Canna, Isay and Mull.

Fri 25 Aug | John jumps ship ...but only off one and onto another! Guest John travelled from Northern Ireland, last Saturday, to join a cruise on Hjalmar Bjorge that finished today. He enjoyed his week aboard so much that, having checked there was a space, he booked immediately with Chalice and sets off tomorrow for a second week at sea. There can't be much better recommendation than that!!!

Sat 26 Aug | Sound sightings Chalice, Hjalmar Bjorge and Elizabeth G all set off from Oban on charters this afternoon. Chris was only about one hour out of Oban, not far into the Sound of Mull, when he texted to say there were "bottle-nosed dolphins with calves on the bow". The phone buzzed a few hours later with the message "two sea eagles" so a great start to his wildlife cruise.

Mon 28 Aug | Feeding frenzy Guests aboard Hjalmar Bjorge today witnessed the amazing sight of dolphins and gannets feeding, the shoal of fish clearly moving in the same direction as, and, at the same speed as the vessel, thus an encounter of about 30 minutes was enjoyed about three miles from Eriskay. There were 40 to 50 common dolphins in the pod, ziz-zagging ahead of the boat with about a dozen, at any one time, bow-riding and leaping clear of the water beside the ship. The sea surface was also punctured by gannets darting past the dolphins as they too fed on the fish. The encounter took place under perfect blue skies although there were strong winds.

Tue 29 Aug | Isleornsay otter Seen by guests aboard Chalice as well as golden eagles this morning. Chris also reports spectacular storm light and rainbows in Loch Hourn. Conditions are not ideal with strong winds and some lumpy seas. Consequently some of Chris' guests were a fetching shade of green yesterday but all faring better today with the vessel heading for Canna!

Wed 30 Aug | Diving dash Despite less than ideal conditions Rob got his guests over to St Kilda for a brief visit. The journey out there yesterday was pretty rough and they had to return this afternoon but in between the 12 divers aboard Elizabeth G got in three very good dives. One minke whale was seen en route.

The last couple of days have rewarded with a varied selection of sightings for our guests. Yesterday passengers on Hjalmar Bjorge saw basking sharks near Mingulay and Barra then met two dozen very playful common dolphins about four miles off Gunna Sound who bow-rode the boat for about an hour. Today they saw more dolphins (and a tiny weeny basking shark) whilst on anchor at Inch Kenneth. The dolphins came over to see the boat and further investigated the dinghy when it was on the move and loaded up with passengers. Chalice guests headed over to Coll today with a good list of sightings under their belts...sea eagle, basking sharks, lots of buzzards and plenty of porpoise.

Thu 31 Aug | Gone on Gometra ...or "Five Go AWOL on a Small Scottish Island". This is one of those stories where everything could have gone horribly wrong but thankfully didn't.

Yesterday afternoon seven guests were put ashore from Hjalmar Bjorge on the small island of Gometra (west coast of Mull) for a walk. Two appeared as expected around 7.00pm but of the other five there was no sign. Mark gave them some time to get back to the rendezvous point but when they were still nowhere to be seen by about 9.00pm he made his way to the shepherd's house on the adjoining island of Ulva where Iain and his wife kindly deployed quad bikes and sheepdogs and a circuit was made of both Ulva and Gometra. The missing guests could not be found which left Mark with no choice but to call the Coastguard. The errant explorers were found by Coastguard helicopter, using heat-seeking equipment, holed up - they assumed for the night - in a cave on Gometra. They were deposited at Connel airfield, north of Oban, to be met in the wee small hours by blue flashing police cars who escorted them to Oban station and onto a hotel for the night.

A very early start this morning enabled Mark to get the party back onboard. They explained that they had not been concerned for themselves, as they knew they were fine; they had just overstretched themselves and realising they wouldn't make it back to the boat before darkness began to fall, had taken shelter in the cave where they were quite happy to stay until morning when they planned to return the vessel in daylight. The photo shows Bob, Steve, Valerie, Norman and Pat with the supplies they shared out in the cave - two bananas, an apple, a satsuma, some mints and two bottles of water! Photo: Hannah Thompson



Valerie said she knew Mark would be worried about them but they had no way of contacting him to tell him they were okay. This story highlights how important planning and preparation are when you are walking in remote areas with no mobile or radio (VHF) signal. We are sure lessons will be learned from the experience. Thanks to Clyde and Stornoway Coastguard, Iain & Rhona Munro, Oban police and moral support from Tobermory lifeboat which did not need to be launched.