



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.

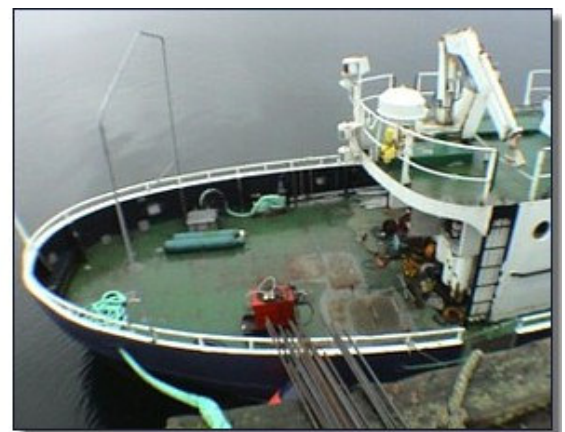
Mon 2 Jan | Lizzy lopped off With new stabilisers in place, the work on Elizabeth G's extension has started. The vessel is based at Barcaldine where Rob and Chris Ireland (who created the new superstructure on Hjalmar Bjorge) are undertaking the work. The photo right shows the boat protected by a tarpaulin whilst chopping and welding takes place; removing some bits and adding others. Come back and visit the news pages on a regular basis to see the progress aboard. Photo: Rob Barlow



Tue 3 Jan | Heather's heights We got a postcard today from Heather Irvine in New Zealand describing a bungee jump she did last year and a 15,000 ft skydive just last week! Heather said the skydive was the most "awesome" thing she'd ever done, adding she could do it everyday. As she has promised to come back and cook for us later this year we hope she doesn't fall too deeply in love with NZ.

Wed 4 Jan | Smashing Chalice ...but you knew that anyway didn't you?! Chalice moved today down Neptune's Staircase from Banavie to Corpach whilst remedial work is carried out in the top stretch of the canal. She was the first vessel to move in the Canal this year! It was extremely cold. Chris had to scrape ice from from the inside of the wheelhouse windows and the ropes were frozen stiff onto the deck bollards. Topping both Hjalmar Bjorge's and Elizabeth G's ice-class capabilities, Chalice became an ice-breaker in the freezing canal scattering ducks over the surface as she smashed her way through the ice.

Thu 12 Jan | Bare bottomed Rob and Chris are cracking on (sorry, that was a tasteless choice of words considering the headline), I mean, working very hard on Elizabeth G's superstructure. Before anything significant can be added, all the unnecessary bits and pieces have to be removed first...a hatch cover, winch and seats to name but a few (right). Photo: Rob Barlow



Thu 19 Jan | Ahoy Fowey! Hannah and Mark today returned from a 1500 mile round trip to Fowey (pronounced "Foy") in Cornwall via Norwich (don't ask!). We went to see 24m ex-Norwegian Rescue Ship "Hans Hansson" owned by Gordon Fitton. Mark has always admired the Hans Hansson and a few years ago we both travelled to St Malo to discuss purchasing her from Gordon. This didn't happen but we were thrilled when Gordon recently approached us asking if we'd be interested in selling charters aboard the vessel. You bet! This exciting opportunity means we will be able to repeat Mark's adventure to the Faroes and Iceland plus consider destinations such as Orkney and the Shetlands and perhaps south to the coast of Northern Ireland. Hans Hansson is currently undergoing a

massive conversion and refit and will be ready for charter in mid-May 2006. In the meantime Hannah, Mark and Gordon are putting together some itineraries which should be finalised by the end of January. Hans Hansson will soon have pages of her own on our website so keep checking back for links. Photo: Hannah Thompson



Sat 21 Jan | Flannans fame Did you buy the Times today? Did you see Ben MacIntyre's article about his trip to the Flannan Islands aboard Elizabeth G in the magazine? It had front cover billing! Ben travelled to the Flannans, with wife Kate, and a small party of other guests in June 2005. It was a mad four day dash which also took in St Kilda. We're delighted to have helped Ben visit the scene of his Flannan Isles mystery obsession and of course very excited to see four pages of coverage in a quality publication. I must see if I can scrounge a copy of the fabulous photo of Elizabeth G, taken by Kate, at the Flannans with extra added puffins...

Sun 29 Jan | Big birdwatch Did you take part in the RSPB's "Big Garden Birdwatch" this weekend? We are continually delighted by the antic of small birds on our feeders on the balcony at the front of the house. We mainly see tits and finches but have spotted robins out there too. The little birds have recently been joined by a blackbird who feeds on the seed that has dropped to the ground. RSPB asked that you spend one hour counting the birds in your garden or local park, and record the highest number of each bird species seen at any one time, the best time being the morning when the birds are out and about feeding after a cold winter night. The balcony is on front of a wall of glass which is fabulous for watching birds feed but you have to be very careful not to make sudden movements inside the house or they see you immediately and fly off...

Wed 1 Feb | Hans Hansson We have added a couple of pages to the site introducing new vessel Hans Hansson. The refit is still ongoing so the boat is not yet finished but you can read about her history, see a few photographs of work in progress and read her technical specification (if you're into that sort of thing!). We are busy finalising itineraries with Gordon, the owner of Hans Hansson, and will have details here soon.

Tue 7 Feb | Proof of a roof Work aboard Elizabeth G is progressing well despite the revolting weather today. We shouldn't complain as January has been amazingly dry...no rain for weeks. The photo, below left, shows the metal skeleton of the new saloon roof which has also been extended to cover the deck walkways. The top of this structure becomes the new large upper deck (slightly optimistically referred to as the "sundeck"). The picture, below right, shows the completion of the next stage which is the deck plate having been welded in place. Photos: Rob Barlow



Wed 15 Feb | Whales revenge Every year thousands of whales are slaughtered in the name of so-called "scientific research". Whales Revenge is an ambitious campaign from Australia aiming to gather 1 million signatures in an online petition to stop whaling. This will be presented to the International Whaling Commission. Visit the website and sign the petition at <http://www.whalesrevenge.com/>. You can also play "Whales Revenge" which is an arcade game with you as a whale trying to avoid harpoons and blow the whaling ships out of the water at the same time! Thanks to Alan for sending us the link.

Tue 21 Feb | Arctic adventures We are delighted to list new itineraries for 2006 for new vessel Hans Hansson. If you haven't yet booked a holiday this year take a look at what we have on offer. As well as some spaces left on our west coast of Scotland cruises (including St Kilda) we can now take you to the Orkney islands, Shetland islands, the Faroes, Iceland and Norway. Hans Hansson will be undertaking coastal voyages round the northern shores of Iceland, from Keflavik to Seydisfjordur and will be travelling virtually the entire length of Norway's coast from Bergen, north to Lodingen, beyond the Arctic circle and right by the Lofoten islands. We are especially pleased to have extended our season into November by introducing some "Killer whales, eagles and Northern Lights" weekends based in the famous Tysfjord well known for huge pods of orca - up to 600 in one place at one time!!!

Thu 2 Mar | It's Oban again Some of you will know that we had hoped to set up our own point of embarkation this year in a tranquil setting north of Oban. Unfortunately due to circumstances entirely outwith our control this will not be possible. So, once again, we'll be starting our Hebridean cruises from Oban. The downside is that there are no guarantees of where we will be waiting for you when you arrive as pier space is extremely limited. The upside is that Oban is easy to reach by road, rail and plane plus there's plenty of choice if you decide to stay an extra night before or after your cruise. We are in the process of contacting everyone who has booked with us this year, to update them, so if you haven't already been sent a map of Oban town centre you'll receive one soon.

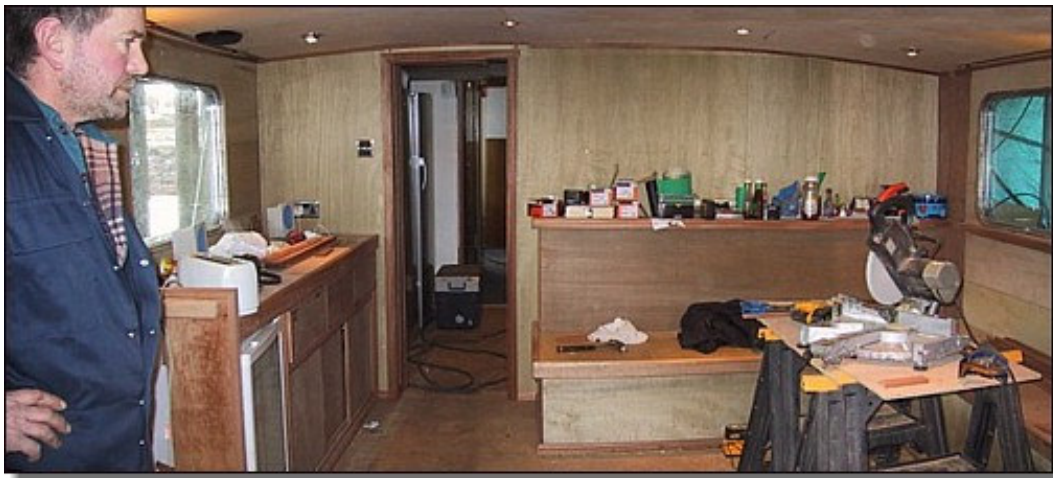
Wed 8 Mar | Elizabeth G update Work is progressing fast aboard Elizabeth G now that the season is approaching. The new deck-level saloon is pretty much lined out, with the four large (double-glazed) marine-glass windows in place and the bench seating completed. The servery has been built to house a little glass-fronted fridge for your drinks! This is all inside the newly built saloon which, before work began, was just open deck. At the rear of the saloon Rob has designed a small compressor room / drying area.

Inside what was originally the small saloon a large new silver fridge and freezer have been added and opposite this the galley is taking shape around a brand new range cooker. If you've been onboard before you'll recognise the large sink that was in the downstairs galley. The original galley no longer exists of course and has been turned into a sixth twin berth cabin (right). Opposite here, in what was the small dining area, a toilet and shower / toilet are being added. Rob and his team have also upgraded the existing cabins with new seats and cupboards. Photo: Rob Barlow

Fri 10 Mar | And we're off... None of us can quite believe it's been almost three months since any of the boats were on charter. Hjalmar Bjorge finished her last trip of 2005 on 18 December and is starting her first trip of 2006 today. Earlier this week the canal basin at Corpach, where Hjalmar Bjorge



has spent the last three months, was covered in a layer of thick ice but luckily it thawed out in good time for an 0830 departure this morning! The boat is now on the Railway Pier in Oban, wedged between some fishing boats and a structure that will eventually become the second linkspan for the ferry. Below: Rob in the new saloon aboard Elizabeth G (possibly wondering where the deck went...) Photo: Hannah Thompson



Tue 14 Mar | Pair of porpoises It's still rather early for regular cetacean sightings but, after Hjalmar Bjorge had said good-bye to our snow-tinged divers in Oban, Mark spotted a tiny porpoise in Oban harbour. Another porpoise was seen during the weekend as well. Nothing much else of interest to report during a weekend that was wet, windy and snowy!

Fri 31 Mar | Slip trips Chalice came off the slip early this morning at Mallaig and Hjalmar Bjorge went up in the early evening. This is the time of year that the skippers - with helpers - get all the external maintenance work done, such as antifouling and painting the super- structure...when weather permits. Otherwise there's usually stuff to do inside. Over the winter months, including five days on the slip, Chris has got all of Chalice's topsides and hull repainted, a new stern fairlead and top rail have been fitted, modifications made to the bow fairlead, a new water inlet and sea cocks for the for'ard bathroom, and replacement anodes on the keel, new doors fitted to the galley, saloon and wheelhouse, new carpets laid in the main saloon and the refrigeration system replaced! Chris is now having a kip before his first ever Easter cruise which has been well received by our guests. Photo (top): Hannah Thompson (bottom) Chris Jackson



Hjalmar Bjorge travelled to Tobermory yesterday and on to Mallaig today. Chalice passed Tobermory going south as we were leaving our mooring to head north. Neither our journey or that of Chris and Paul aboard Chalice was hugely exciting although there was quite a lot of bird activity with razorbills, shearwaters and guillemots zooming around, a lone gannet and Chris had several sightings of porpoise. Some people had muttered about gales at the end of the week which thankfully proved an inaccurate forecast and, in fact, Chalice arrived in Oban this afternoon in flat calm conditions and glorious sunshine. An omen for the coming months? Let's hope so!

Thu 6 Apr | East coast bird flu It was confirmed today that a dead swan in Fife was found to have the H5N1 avian flu virus. We don't anticipate this development will have any effect on our business whatsoever. It is extremely difficult for humans to contract "bird flu" and no-one has ever caught it from a wild bird. People who have succumbed to bird flu have mainly been chicken farmers who work very closely with poultry. So please don't be concerned by any media speculation of a "bird flu pandemic" - the virus cannot spread from human to human - and certainly don't let this latest development prevent you from looking forward to your wildlife cruise this year.

Sat 8 Apr | Audacious otter Hannah travelled up to Mallaig today with ships dogs Daisy & Seven to see how Mark, Gog, Liz and Nicola were getting on with painting Hjalmar Bjorge on the slip. They have struggled with snow showers most days but were manfully (and womanfully) getting on with the task in freezing conditions as weather permitted. (The sunny photo below was taken on the day they left. Obviously). On Saturday evening Mark and Hannah took Daisy and Seven for a walk round Mallaig which included a stroll along the fish pier. Imagine our surprise when the dogs started yelping and pulling on their leads at the sight of a crouched furry creature beside a stack of fish boxes. We thought at first it was a cat but it turned out to be an otter who, having established the dogs were under control, ambled down the pier towards us. It showed absolutely no fear and came to within about two feet of Daisy. It seemed in no hurry and sniffed about before disappearing under a lorry. We concluded the otter must make a regular habit of scavenging for fish on the pier and was fearless in the face of people and dogs making horrible murderous noises. So, if you ever find yourself in Mallaig, take your camera down to the fish pier late in the evening and you might get a great photo.

Thu 13 Apr | All at sea This Easter weekend sees Chalice, the newly extended and converted Elizabeth G (right) and Hjalmar Bjorge all out for the weekend. Chris aboard Chalice is delivering our first ever Easter cruise with hopes for calm seas, clear weather and some wildlife sightings. Elizabeth G and Hjalmar Bjorge are running dive charters. Photo: Gordon Julier



Mon 17 Apr | Easter eagles Chalice's first Easter cruise finished today as the boat berthed back in Oban with Elizabeth G and Hjalmar Bjorge. The "Easter Extravaganza" cruise proved an enjoyable experience for those onboard, many of whom were visiting Scotland for the first time. On embarkation day (Thursday) one of Chris' guests was due to arrive late as his flight from Bristol was fog-bound. The weather wasn't exactly calm and clear on Thursday so a decision was made to stay in Oban overnight and depart the next morning instead. It turned out to be a good decision as Friday's weather was much improved. Chalice headed up to Ardtornish bay where guests had a late breakfast and saw their first sea eagle perched on a rock. Tobermory was the next port of call where everyone went ashore for a wander round town and the pleasant walk from Tob to Aros Park. That evening the chosen anchorage was Loch Drumbuie (which Chalice had to herself) with a second sighting of an eagle, this time a golden eagle, up on a rocky outcrop overlooking the entrance to the loch.



Saturday saw the boat head for Staffa (seals close by, right) followed by Gometra harbour. Guests went ashore and returned with a good

stag's skull with six-point antlers (less good for the stag!!!) and another single antler which they'd found on the walk. Chris banished the mementoes to the foredeck for the rest of the trip!

Sunday was bright but windy so Chalice nosed out to test the waters through the Sound of Iona and past the Torran Rocks on the south side of Mull. Having successfully navigated those waters – which can be treacherous at times – it was full steam (diesel?!) ahead with the wind behind the boat all the way to Loch Spelve with time for a decent walk. Or not. Despite giving a lone, unsecured lobster pot a wide berth it was fatally attracted to Chalice's propeller and stabiliser fin forcing Chris to slow right down to prevent potential damage. He nudged the boat toward the head of the loch and chucked the anchor in. Onboard entertainment was then duly provided by Chris who had to scour Chalice for his long lost diving equipment, dust it down, blow the moths out of the pockets, and fling himself overboard to untangle the line. No damage done to the boat and, most importantly, all the guests were very amused indeed. Nothing is more important to us than customer satisfaction so Chris can feel very pleased with himself for making it such a personal priority. Well done!

Mon 24 Apr | Hear ye! Hear ye! The Highland News Group published a feature in this week's paper dedicated to the Highland Tourism Awards - "The Pride of Highland Tourism". The 12 page insert featured a write up of last year's Winners and Highly Commended entrants and, as winners of the Green Highland Award, we appeared on page six under the headline "Sea experiences are swell." Our write-up explained how we aim to promote an awareness of the Hebridean environment and it's wildlife by, not only showing guests the area, but offering informed, yet informal, education and information where appropriate. It also listed some of the measures we have taken to reduce our impact upon the environment such as printing brochures on recycled paper; using a Calorifier and engine heat recovery system to provide "free" hot water; and using seawater, or fresh water produced by an onboard desalination plant, in the toilets.

Fri 28 Apr | Otters for brekkie Well obviously we didn't eat any otters for breakfast but guests aboard this weekend's "Scenic Seabirds" cruise on Hjalmar Bjorge enjoyed views of otters as they had breakfast in Loch Drumbuie (Loch na Drumbuidhe) this morning. To complete the scene there were golden eagles overhead. Not a bad start to the cruise!