



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.

Thu 1 Jan | Happy New Year Wishing all our previous and prospective guests a Happy New Year. We hope that 2009 brings you health, wealth and happiness to spare.

Mon 5 Jan | An end to doom and gloom? The last few months have been quiet ones in terms of enquiries and bookings. It's hard to know how much the actual "credit crunch" is affecting people as opposed to the media whipping everyone up into a frenzy of gloom.

The good news is that, as hoped and anticipated, now that Christmas and New Year are out of the way, people seem to be thinking about their holidays again. We were very busy today taking calls and provisional bookings and long may it last! The places that remain are beginning to fill so if you'd like to join us this year check out our availability.

Wed 7 Jan | St Kilda calendar Many thanks to Hugh Barton, from the St Kilda Club Shop, who sent us a 2009 calendar featuring old black and white images from the islands. Sorry, they are almost sold out now and Hugh is working on next year's which will be another monochrome offering. Photo: front of the 2009 St Kilda calendar

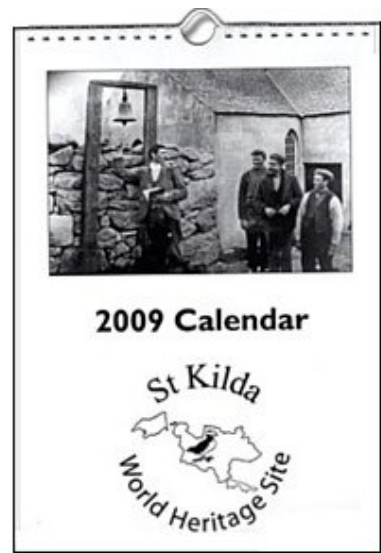
Thu 8 Jan | The GAMA Award Fancy a month in the remote Outer Hebrides?

The GAMA Award - supported by The Gatliff Hebridean Hostels Trust (<http://www.gatliff.org.uk>), The Angus Macleod Archive (<http://www.angusmacleodarchive.org.uk>) and The Islands Book Trust (<http://www.theislandsbooktrust.com>) - has been set up to encourage a student or researcher to undertake informed or academic work about an appropriate area of the Western Isles. This could be anything to do with history, geography, language, literature, social history, music or even environmental issues, for example.

The successful applicant will be expected to produce a written report and summary of the research undertaken suitable for publication and distribution at the end of the assignment. Funding, travel expenses and accommodation are provided. To find out more about The GAMA Award visit <http://www.gama.gatliff.co.uk/>.

Mon 12 Jan | Better below-stairs bathroom Mark is doing some work on Hjalmar Bjorge to improve the shower room downstairs in the guest accommodation. He has stripped out the shower and toilet and will rearrange the position of the toilet and sink, to provide more space and ease of use, and also intends to replace some panels.

Tue 20 Jan | Work in the wheelhouse Mark has been busy in the wheelhouse of Hjalmar Bjorge. He has removed some old redundant electrical systems and is relocating some of the existing ones. He is planning to replace the wall and ceiling panels and hopes to establish a skipper's berth in the wheelhouse. There isn't masses of space to achieve



this but it's a useful addition aboard a small ship that sometimes has to anchor in windy locations necessitating the skipper getting up regularly throughout the night to check the boat is still in the same position.

Having also later removed an internal wall Mark observed, "It's all very messy," so I'll post a couple of photos when things are less chaotic!

Wed 4 Feb | Children writing about the sea Thanks to our friend Lucy (mother of four boys) for sending through an email detailing some comments made by children asked to write about the sea. We thought some of them might amuse you (and it's a slow time of year for news!):

- 1) This is a picture of an octopus. It has eight testicles. (Kelly, age 6)
- 2) If you are surrounded by sea you are an island. If you don't have sea round you, you are incontinent. (Wayne, age 7)
- 3) Sharks are ugly and mean and have big teeth, just like Emily Richardson and she's not my friend no more. (Kylie, age 6)
- 4) My dad goes out in his boat, and comes back with the crabs. (Emily, age 5)
- 5) When ships had sails, they used to use the trade winds to cross the sea. Sometimes when the wind didn't blow, the sailors would whistle to make the wind come. My brother said they would be better off eating baked beans. (William, age 7)
- 6) Some fish are dangerous. Jellyfish can sting. Electric eels can give you a shock. They live in caves under the sea where I think they have to plug themselves into chargers. (Christopher, age 7)

Thu 5 Feb | Oban Inn over? News that will upset our diving guests more than our cruise guests I suspect. The Oban Inn changed hands in December and has subsequently closed. We are unsure if the closure is permanent or temporary. On the corner of Stafford Street and the Esplanade the Oban Inn is (was) the place most divers met before boarding any of the charter boats in town and I'm sure it will be missed by many.

Mon 9 Feb | Monday morning, back to work Mark nipped down to Kerrera this morning just to check all was okay with Zuza as we are expecting her owner Charlie to arrive soon. As anticipated, all was well, she is quite safe tucked up on the hard-standing at Oban Yachts. Photo: Zuza on Kerrera by Mark Henrys



Tue 10 Feb | Creaking canal The Corpach Basin is frozen over, no surprise for fresh, stagnant water in these temperatures. The canal has been drained beyond Corpach Double Lock (below right) so no water is moving through just now.

Mark observed that the ice is making creaking noises when the boats move - very Shackletonesque. Over the page: (left) Hjalmar Bjorge in the frozen basin at Corpach (right) the drained canal at the top of the Corpach Double Lock by Hannah Thompson



And for anyone who doubts Mark has a big job recreating the wheelhouse interior that he removed recently, here a couple of photos! Below: current chaos in the wheelhouse of Hjalmar Bjorge by Hannah Thompson



Mon 16 Feb | Dead humpback in Channel One news item that caught my eye today reported a dead humpback whale netted by a French fisherman in the Channel. The fisherman managed to tow the whale's body ashore travelling at a speed of only one knot in a boat only two metres longer than the animal.

French conservationists were very excited by the find as sightings of humpbacks are extremely rare in this part of the world, less than 10 in the last 200 years according to the Cotentin Whale Studies Group in Normandy. Experts were due to inspect the whale, an emaciated adolescent weighing in at a measly eight tonnes, later today, to determine whether it was killed by pollution or natural causes. Photo: the sad-looking corpse of a humpback whale in Omonville-la-Rogue, NW France (c) Yahoo news



Tue 17 Feb | Winter wonderland Over the page a great photo from Tim, skipper of Zuza. He was enjoying a day on the snowy Nevis Range, just north of Fort William, with panoramic views. Somewhere in the photo Mark is working in the wheelhouse of Hjalmar Bjorge.

Sat 21 Feb | A little place I know... War correspondent Martyn Lewis, in an interview published in the Times today, says, "One of the most brilliant places in the world is the island of St Kilda, beyond the Outer Hebrides. It was abandoned in 1849, and about 150 people lived there." His information is not entirely accurate but he is right, it is a "brilliant" place.



Above: Overlooking Loch Eil from the Nevis Range by Tim Wear

Mon 23 Feb | Snow good for wildlife A major snowfall (of over $\frac{3}{4}$ of a metre) in the Cairngorms, which has created a huge amount of dead wood, is being billed as an advantage for wildlife. Dead limbs that fall to the forest floor are gradually recycled back into the woodland ecosystem and at the same time provide niches for countless numbers of invertebrates, fungi, lichens, birds and even small mammals.

Fri 27 Feb | Heather has French snow too! While Tim, skipper of Zuza, has been enjoying the Scottish snow, Heather, the mate/cook aboard Zuza, is doing the same somewhat further afield. Here's a photo of fabulous French snow where she is currently working. Heather says the snow is spectacularly deep right now with a temperature of around -8 which gives great skiing but sometimes it gets up to a balmy 24 degrees in the afternoon sun. Right: Deep snow in France by Heather McNeill



Heather added, in her email, that she discovered the true meaning of "credit crunch" last week when she fell over in freezing conditions...and snapped her credit card in half!

Sun 1 Mar | From Corpach to Kathmandu Last May and June Zuza guest Barbara spent evenings quietly knitting away in the corner of the yacht's saloon. Having joined us for two consecutive trips she got quite a lot done. The sweaters were destined for a school's charity in Nepal that Barbara is involved with and we were delighted to receive a photo of her handiwork, below. Some of these sweaters were created in the Hebrides.



Previous page: Sweaters knitted by Barbara for a children's charity in Kathmandu, some of which were created onboard Zuza. Photo from Barbara Holl.

Wed 4 Mar | Picture for publication We are pleased to have been asked for a photo by BBC Books which is preparing a volume to accompany the series "Coast". The photo in question is of Mingulay by regular guest Ronnie Cramond, right. Ronnie kindly gave his permission for the image to be used and a small fee will be due to him. Last September Dorling Kindersley asked for some photos of the Monach Isles and luckily Zuza was out there at the time with talented photographers on board. Likewise, the use of their images, for an RSPB book, will generate small fees for the photographers. Above: Mingulay, with Hjalmar Borge on anchor, by Ronnie Cramond



Thu 5 Mar | Not all doom and gloom Many of us are feeling down in the dumps right now due to the economy or the weather but there is always an upside to these things. Apparently the Nevis Range is having one of its best seasons yet, with good snow on the tops, and plenty of visiting skiers.

One of our regular guests, from America, also pointed out today that, due to the strength of the dollar and weakness of sterling, his holiday with us this year is costing him approximately 25% less than it did last year. So he's happy!

Wed 18 Mar | Progress and paint Mark has been working really hard on the wheelhouse of Hjalmar Borge which is a job that "grewed like Topsy". Compared to the photos of 10 March real progress can now be seen with the majority of wood panelling in place. It's much more spacious than it was previously and the large seating area will double as a skipper's bunk. Below: excellent progress made in the wheelhouse of Hjalmar Borge. Photos by Hannah Thompson



Anna, who will be doing some crewing for us this year, was on hand for a week or so to paint cabins. What a find for us! In a previous life she actually worked as a painter and decorator.

Fri 20 Mar | Sun for the start of the season You know it's the start of the cruising season - albeit early - when "Hebridean Princess" pitches up once again. Today, as I was driving to Fort William, I saw her in Loch Linnhe on the second cruise of her 2009 season. HP always starts earlier than most other other boats. It was a(nother) really beautiful day today and I managed to snap the setting sun over the Loch on my way back home.

Below (left) Hebridean Princess on Loch Linnhe in the morning and (right) sunset over Loch Linnhe in the evening, both by Hannah Thompson



Mon 23 Mar | Update on Canada's seal hunt Sadly the annual seal pup cull in Canada started today and the government is permitting 280,000 animals to be killed this year. The fight against the cull continues though. The European Commission has put forward a proposal to ban the import and trade in seal products in the European Union, a move many believe is a historic step towards ending commercial seal slaughters around the world. The Commission has, however, included a loophole in the proposal that would allow countries to bypass the ban. The good news is that the proposal is now before the European Parliament where this loophole can be removed. Read more and sign a petition in support of an unconditional ban https://community.hsus.org/campaign/care2_EU_seals_petition2.

Canadian Senator Mac Harb is also proposing an end to the annual seal pup cull and his Bill is seeking signatures of support - the target is 250,000. If you'd like to support the Senator's proposal click <http://www.thepetitionsite.com/takeaction/877541637?z00m=19752395> to read more and sign up.

Thu 26 Mar | Every cloud... We've got two consecutive weeks dive charter running in June this summer which both quickly filled to capacity. I recently got an email from a guest who had somehow booked herself and her partner onto the second week, when she had meant to book the first week! She was upset that they wouldn't be able to join us, since all the places were taken, and let's not even make mention of the hopping mad boyfriend!

I sent out an email to see if I could resell the two places and return the guests' deposit payment. Lo and behold, two of the divers from the first week, travelling from Germany, responded and asked if they could swap to the later week! Brilliant result all round.

Tue 31 Mar | St Kilda Club News from the National Trust for Scotland's Spring magazine that the kitchen in Cottage No 1 on Hirta has been completely refurbished to bring it into line with environmental health requirements for professional catering. Much of the cost was met by The St Kilda Club. Until recently Club membership was restricted to people who had set foot on the archipelago but they are now welcoming those who simply have an interest in the islands, even if they have not visited. If you haven't been and would like to go then have a look at our current availability.

The St Kilda Club, which produces an annual journal, has a new secretary - David Ackroyd in Newark, Notts. You can contact him on 01522 778259 or email davidmackroyd@tiscali.co.uk if you're interested in joining this band of enthusiasts.

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