



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.

Sun 1 Jul | A fond farewell Chris, Helen and Tony said good-bye to guide Kenny Taylor and his party of birdwatchers from Heatherlea today. Despite not reaching St Kilda the group had an extremely enjoyable eight nights onboard. They presented Chris and the crew with individual thank-you cards, a bottle of whisky for Chris and generous tips for Helen and Tony (never expected but always enormously appreciated).

Mon 2 Jul | Fingers crossed! A text from Big John, skippering Hjalmar Bjorge, this week. He was leaving last night's anchorage in Loch Eport and was heading out to see if conditions were suitable for a crossing to St Kilda. We can but wait for an update! In terms of sunshine and dry weather we have enjoyed a good summer so far. However it has been much windier than most previous years and this, of course, is the weather that dictates what can and cannot be achieved.

Tue 3 Jul | Kilda crossing When Big John pointed Hjalmar Bjorge at St Kilda yesterday there was a small swell, of about a metre in height, and winds of perhaps Force 4 from the east. This gradually increased as the journey progressed and the last hour of the crossing was quite unpleasant, with a two to three metre swell and squally blows of Force 6 or 7. Having gone so far, and knowing it would be sheltered in Village Bay, John pressed on. All but four guests were seasick and were very glad indeed when the anchor went down and the engine stopped! There was a brief sighting of an unidentified whale on the journey out to St Kilda, about 25 miles west of North Uist.

The trepidation in waiting for the forecast, the skipper's decision, setting off and wondering if the crossing will be successful was captured in verse by guest Sally Lee who wrote this poem yesterday (in Ayrshire dialect) called "St Kilda Voyage":

St Kilda is oor aim this day
40 miles west they say.
Oor hopes are high, oor spirits soar
The wind dis blow, the rain dis pour
'Tis John's decision, will we go.
Perhaps tae Tobermory, Oh No!
The sail tae Hirta's up an' doon
The boat also went roon and roon.
Ma freens wir a' feelin' poor
Tae bed they went fir a cure.
Then oot the mist the isles appear
Am choked, in ma ee's a tear.
St Kilda's reached we're feelin' better
A dream's fulfilled thanks tae oor skipper.

The archipelago is beset with low cloud which doesn't look like it is going to shift so John is planning a tour of the others islands and stacks today. This circumnavigation is normally undertaken as the boat is preparing to leave (probably tomorrow given the forecast) but John figures the cloud may be worse by then.

Wed 4 Jul | Sharks spotted Another text from Big John...after two nights at St Kilda he headed back in and aimed for Mingulay. Unfortunately it was too rough for the usual beach landing so he went instead to Vatersay where six basking shark were seen en route. Ten guests got off the boat after dinner and had an evening stroll on the island.

Happy 70th birthday to guest Jim celebrating aboard Hjalmar Bjorge today - cruising away from St Kilda on the morning of this big birthday must have been satisfying as this trip was his fourth attempt to reach the islands (first with us!). Guest Sally Lee also expressed her delight in seeing St Kilda in a second poem called "St Kilda Farewell":

Fareweel tae St Kilda that nane can compare
 Tae the mountains and cliffs sae stark an' bare
 Tae a way o' life that's forever lost
 `Twill ne'er be again `tis just the ghosts
 The street sae haunting of a life lang gone
 They left it behind for a bright new morn
 An' so am leavin' this wondrous place
 I'll ne'er again look on its dear face
 Ma pictures an' memories are always there
 But am feeling sad as the isles disappear
 Fareweel tae the isles where my dreams cam' true
 Fareweel for ever I'll ne'er forget you.

Below, a couple of photos from Dorothy, which reflect the weather conditions at St Kilda - yeuch. The one on the left should perhaps be called, "It's Not All Sunshine In Scotland You Know!" and the one on the right shows our guests with skipper Big John in the village on Hirta - damp but happy to be there. Photos: Dorothy Milne



Mark and Hannah met briefly with Rob, from Elizabeth G, in Oban today. He was back in the UK for a few days during a break from his Norway charters which are going well. Everyone who has been onboard has been impressed with the boat and cooking not to mention the stunning scenery. Rob's charters are all for divers this year, as this is an established market, but he is keen to offer some cruises for non-divers when he returns in 2009. In particular there seems to be scope for decent daily walks in remote and beautiful surroundings, along the coast, not far north of Bergen.

Fri 6 Jul | Focus finishes Friday Big John brought Hjalmar Bjorge back into Oban today after delivering a Focus on St Kilda Expedition with 12 guests aboard. Two nights, and part of three days, were spent at the islands. Everyone had a long day at sea yesterday as the boat crossed from Vatersay to Lochaline via Coll and a shore visit in Tobermory. Three common dolphins were seen as well as more basking shark in Gunna Sound between Coll and Tiree.

The photo, right, of Hjalmar Bjorge team: skipper John, cook Ylva and crew Lindsay is actually from a trip earlier in the season. I just received it from photographer Leslie today and, as these guys were the ones looking after everyone aboard this week, thought it appropriate to upload now. Photo: Leslie Prosser



Sat 7 Jul | Berthed in Bergen Rob starts his dive charters again in Bergen today having had a few days back in the UK earlier in the week. Norwegian skipper Willy, who did a stint aboard Hans Hansson last year, went to meet Rob and to see Elizabeth G in Bergen today. Photo: Willy Verwoerd



Despite finishing a cruise yesterday Hjalmar Bjorge had to stay in Oban last night as, by the time we said good-bye to all our guests, it was not possible to get the boat up to Corpach and into the Sea Lock. British Waterways staff operate the lock until about 1730 each weekday evening which normally gives us time to complete the three hour journey from Oban to Corpach. Yesterday, however, the tides were all wrong and to get into the Lock, to sit safely on the canal for a week off, Hjalmar Bjorge would have needed to leave Oban no later than midday. Running a boat charter business is not quite the watery equivalent of a land-based tourism provider as the tides are always an additional consideration.

Mark and Big John stayed onboard last night and left Oban at 0415 this morning (not entirely through choice it must be added) as the large vessel they were tied up to was departing at this time and they had to be up and about to move Hjalmar Bjorge anyway. An uneventful journey, no doubt aided and abetted by lots of black coffee, saw the vessel tied up on the Caledonian Canal until next Saturday.

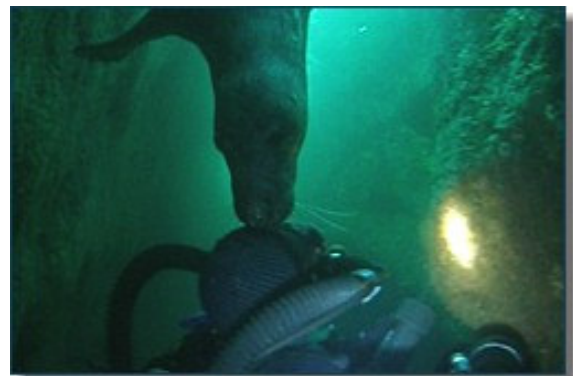
Mon 9 Jul | Evening eagles Chris boarded guests on Chalice in Oban yesterday and headed to peaceful Loch Sunart for the evening and overnight anchorage. Two white-tailed sea eagles were seen in the Loch on that first night. Today he cruised up to Canna and put everyone ashore for a walk where eight basking sharks were seen from the cliffs!

Wed 11 Jul | Several sightings More news from Chalice, our only boat at sea in UK waters this week! Monday night was spent at Canna with a windy start to Tuesday. Chris snuck Chalice in under the cliffs there so everyone could watch the seabirds. They were also rewarded with a flypast from a golden eagle before the vessel set off for Loch Scavaig. Lots of seals and a basking shark were seen, then last night was spent in Loch Slapin in the shade of the Cuillins on the south side of Skye. This morning Chris pointed Chalice at Loch Nevis where guests enjoyed two common dolphins bowriding and then saw a huge basking shark south of Arisaig. Later in the day the birdwatchers onboard appreciated red throated divers in Loch Moidart.

Thu 12 Jul | Corncrake calling Chalice guests heard, but unsurprisingly did not see, a corncrake calling on Lunga today and yet another basking shark was spotted...

Fri 13 Jul | No news... is good news! Nothing broke, nothing went wrong, nobody got sea-sick and nothing dreadful happened! Hooray (not that we are superstitious...).

Mon 16 Jul | Excitable seals Hjalmar Bjorge is off the west coast of Lewis today having left Oban on Saturday with a party of divers onboard. This afternoon two basking sharks were seen on the way to Gasker Rock where Mark dropped the divers in. One of the sharks had white fin tips which is probably due to scarring. Gasker is a tiny uninhabited island which, like its nearby sister Scarp, is part of the Harris group of islands. It is well known for its grey seal colonies and today they were extremely interested in German divers Ekki and Mike - perhaps because they dive on rebreathers that don't exude any bubbles. Below are four images from a video Ekki made of a seal approaching the camera lens before it zooms off to plant a big kiss on the top of Mike's head! Photos: Ekki Schepanski



Thu 19 Jul | West side whales Divers onboard Hjalmar Bjorge saw three minke whales today. One was spotted off Neist Point, Skye, and then two others were seen on the west side of Rum. The boat is aiming for Tobermory this evening and will disembark guests tomorrow in Oban. They came from far and wide this week...two from Germany and two from Switzerland, with the rest from the UK.

Sat 21 Jul | Skye sailings Chalice is out on a Not St Kilda Hebridean cruise which started last Wednesday. Chris' guests have had golden eagles at Canna and in Loch Scavaig, Skye. Last night was spent in the peaceful anchorage of Loch na Dal on the south east of Skye. Today Chalice travelled under the Skye Bridge heading for Rona and a minke whale was seen by the Crowlin Islands, a group of uninhabited islands between Skye and the mainland Applecross peninsula.

Sun 22 Jul | St Kilda cetaceans Big John is skippering Hjalmar Bjorge again this week. The boat left Oban yesterday with a full complement of passengers and crew and we welcomed back Norman and Valerie for the second time this year. This time they brought birder son Magnus and his friend Peter, all the way from the Netherlands. Last night was spent in Tobermory from where John left very early this morning. He headed to the Sound of Barra where four bottle-nosed dolphins spotted the boat from about a mile away and zoomed over to bow-ride.

A basking shark was seen and, once through the Sound of Barra, en route to St Kilda, guest Angela's birthday wish came true as about 40 common dolphins came to bow-ride and made her special day even better! Johanna photographed Norman photographing the dolphins, right. Photo: Johanna Eggar



Below, left, no, they're not all throwing up, they're looking at dolphins over the bow, and, right, keen bird-watchers Magnus and Peter on deck as Hjalmar Borge approaches St Kilda. Photos: Valerie Robb



Cook Ylva and crew Lindsay made Angela an amazing St Kilda birthday cake replete with icing-shaped puffins and Soay sheep (which were slightly pink in colour leading to a debate about whether they were, in fact, a rare breed of lesser-spotted Soay pig!). The creation (which Angela reckoned was nearly as big as its namesake) is shown below left complete with smiley icing octopus. On the right is an icing Hjalmar Borge by a marzipanned beach at Village Bay with some icing basking sharks and, um, possibly a dolphin?! Photos: Johanna Eggar



John took the real Hjalmar Borge around the stacks at St Kilda that first evening just in case the weather worsened during their visit and about 2130 he took Magnus and Peter ashore for their first night on Hirta. As keen bird-watchers they had pre-arranged this with the National Trust for Scotland. They were aiming to record bird noise so didn't take camping gear with them, instead choosing to work through the night, using the recording equipment they had brought with them.

Mon 23 Jul | Massive minke Chalice was at the Shiant Islands yesterday where there was almost nuffin but puffins...tons of the colourful characters. Chris' guests saw a huge minke whale off Harris last night and then had a dolphin escort back across the Minch this morning. They are now busily engaged in the search for Arctic and great skuas (Bonxies).

Norman found one in the Great Glen at St Kilda, right, which "bonked" him on the head as they frequently do! Norman and our other guests were put on Hirta by Big John after he had collected Magnus and Peter off the island this morning in time for breakfast aboard Hjalmar Bjorge. Having spent the night ashore they then went to bed while everyone else set off with packed lunches. The NTS warden met our guests, as usual, to welcome them to St Kilda although our guests were a little distracted during her introduction, as was she, by bottle-nosed dolphins in Village Bay! With a second night possible at St Kilda Big John took Magnus and Peter back over to Hirta around 2130 for another night on the island. Photo: Valerie Robb



Tues 24 Jul | Laughing Leachs Magnus and Peter were returned safely to Hjalmar Bjorge this morning after spending their second night on Hirta. Their visit has been a great success as they managed to record the bird species they were aiming for - storm petrels, Leach's petrels and puffins in their burrows. Leach's petrels sound very strange indeed. The text books describe their calls (which act as a homing signal to their mates) as "demoniacal laughter" although a recent St Kilda warden thought "a goblin on acid" was more accurate. The noise, according to author Mark Cocker, is a bizarre, bubbling sound mixed with a cacophony of purring notes and squeals punctuated with a squeaky giggle. Marcus said his favourite description was "fairies being sick"...

Hjalmar Bjorge left St Kilda around 0930 and a minke whale was spotted some six miles into the journey to the Monach Islands where the boat arrived at about 1300. Guests went ashore for a few hours. It was a beautiful, hot, sunny day and some of the party - led by Valerie - decided to go swimming off the beach. Pictured before their dip are L-R, Valerie, Johanna, Debbie, Norman and Frances. Upon departing the Monachs four basking sharks were seen. Dinner was taken on the move through the Sound of Harris and the boat finished for the day at Lochmaddy around 2100. Photo: Johanna Egar



Now then, after a whole day walking yesterday, and a decent swim this afternoon, one might think that most 80 year olds would be thinking about retiring to bed shortly after 2100. Not Valerie! She managed to finagle Lindsay's regular evening fiddle playing into a full blown ceilidh on top of Hjalmar Bjorge!!! Big John said he witnessed some Eightsome Reels and the Gay Gordons and then retired to bed as it was all too exhausting.

Wed 25 Jul | Sneaky seal stealer Nobody stole a seal that is, but a seal at Canna swam under Hjalmar Bjorge a few times pinching the few organic kitchen scraps that had been put over the side. I guess they are used to bits of fish being chucked off fishing boats but this one didn't seem averse to Ylva's gourmet cooking instead! The journey from Lochmaddy this morning over to Canna was a little rough for the first couple of hours and guests were pleased to land around 1500 and go ashore for a four hour walk...some saw eagles which are commonly seen at Canna. All aboard also said good-bye to 13 year Kathryn, who lives on Canna. She had travelled down to Oban last Saturday to join us as crew for the cruise out to St Kilda.

Thu 26 Jul | Man overboard! Entirely deliberately I hasten to add and not just man, but woman and boy too! This ridiculous behaviour (imho) was part of an evening's silliness aboard Hjalmar Bjorge, anchored at Lochaline tonight. And it all started so sensibly. Lindsay played the fiddle and Big John sang (he is in the Gaelic Choir after all). Then there were some party games which ended with "The Silly Cornflakes Box Game" - don't ask. I didn't like to. All I know is that guest Johanna won the game because she was very bendy!

At some stage Ylva, who swims every day from the boat, announced that she would be jumping off the top deck sometime soon at which point Charlie, aged 14, said he would jump too. Then Magnus and Peter and finally Lindsay said she'd also jump! Photo: Valerie Robb



Thinking back to Lindsay's reluctance to jump off the diving platform during her Sea Survival Course I can only assume she had drunk one or two sherries by this time. When she did launch herself, screaming, off the top of the boat, Ylva had disappeared and Lindsay felt she had to do it again to prove to Ylva (who also witnessed the Sea Survival scaredyness) she could do it!!! Photo: Johanna Egar



Fri 27 July | Sea eagles seen Hjalmar Bjorge left Lochaline at 0830 this morning to allow some time for eagle spotting en route to Oban. Sure enough, after departing the loch, a couple of sea eagles were seen on the Morvern coastline. The vessel arrived in Oban around 1100 before lunch and good-byes. Some wag said we should have called this week "The Harry Potter Cruise" as three copies of the new book were brought onboard last Saturday with all of them being read through the week!

Hjalmar Bjorge left Oban at 1330 to get to Corpach with the tide. Luckily Mark was at the wheel because Big John, and his son Joe, were required for emptying bins, sorting the recycling, dusting, polishing, cleaning mirrors, sinks and toilets and hoovering downstairs! Hannah made beds and by the time the boat got to Corpach Sea Lock all the guest cabins and bathrooms were sparkly clean and fresh ready for the next charter.

Chalice finished a Not St Kilda Cruise yesterday and guest Howard sent a photo (right) showing what the crew get up to when they are allowed to get off the boat...Helen (right) persuades guest Eileen to help her build a cairn on the south of Skye whilst other passengers relax watching minke whales from the cliffs! Photo: Howard Day



Mon 30 Jul | Run out of puff? Not likely! Not a story local to us but a heart-warming one all the same. Many of the daily papers reported today a story from Orkney about a puffin recaptured by ringers who was found to be at least 34 years old. This makes Percy, as he has been nicknamed, the oldest puffin in Britain and only a year short of being the oldest known puffin in the world - that honour goes to an Icelandic bird. Percy was first ringed on Sule Skerry (40 miles west of Orkney) in July 1975 when he was at least two years old. Last week he was recaptured in the same spot. Adrian Blackburn, of the Sule Skerry Ringing Group, said, "The fact that it's been caught on this island means it is probably attempting to raise a family, so it's showing no signs of slowing down."

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