



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.

Sat 3 Jun | A St Kilda first... for Hannah that is. After 10½ years of arranging other people's visits to St Kilda I am prepared to admit that this was my first visit, returning to Oban today aboard Hjalmar Borge. A cruise of breath-taking destinations included not only Hirta at St Kilda but a journey round the other islands and stacks ("awesome"), the deserted Monach islands ("brilliant ratching beaches"), Mingulay ("pea urchins on the beach...how exciting!") and a lovely quiet anchorage at Vatersay where the peace was only occasionally broken by Sue, updating us all, as



she spied on a couple in a tent, with her brand new binoculars. Poor them...I bet they hadn't expected an audience in such a remote spot but, on the bright side, at least the new bins were put to good use. Countless birds, white-beaked dolphins, two juvenile minke whales in Village Bay and a "mystery whale", possibly a humpback, were seen. Thanks to all onboard for their great company - Mark, Izzy and Nara and guests Pauline & Richard, David & Irene, Paul & Caryl, Frank and Eddie and especially Phil & Sue for assuming I would be travelling with them when they booked early last year. If Sue hadn't been so presumptuous I probably would have stayed at home. Luckily the other guests took some great photos because I decided I would take some "real" photos instead of digital only to find my camera batteries had expired from old age. Duh! So thanks to Caryl for the above photo...proof that I made it! Photo: Caryl Schecter

Hans Hansson collected guests in Stromness today for our first ever Orkney cruise. The first night of this new adventure was spent at Lyness where crew John and Jan both said they could have struck lucky in the pub! We are awaiting confirmation of this bold claim from independent witnesses...

Mon 5 Jun | Orkney orcas Yesterday Hans Hansson had good weather for visits to the uninhabited islands of Swona and Stroma (the latter strictly speaking not in Orkney, being part of Caithness) before heading north to anchor for the night in Copinsay, where guests had an evening walk. This morning the vessel did a close pass around the cliffs of Horse of Copinsay to photograph the numerous bird colonies and then headed north to have a look at Auskerry. En route they encountered a pod of seven or eight orca, including two babies, heading south. The boat turned and cruised with them for about 40 minutes. Needless to say all onboard were over the moon. Jan won the prize for most enthusiasm by leaping up and down and clapping on the boat deck to the accompaniment of camera shutters! Literally hundreds of photos were taken. The one above was taken by Big John, the mate/engineer, and clearly shows one of the calves behind the adult. After waving au revoir to the whales Hans Hansson turned north again and, after a walk around Auskerry, the rib



was launched off the east coast of Stronsay so guests could have a close look at the Vat of Kirbuster, an impressive natural arch in the cliffs, claimed to be the finest example in Orkney. We'll hopefully have some comparisons by the end of the cruise! On to anchor in Millbay with a walk round the village of Whitehall, once home to one of the largest fleets of herring boats in Scotland. Following an evening steam up to Sanday the boat anchored in Otterwick Bay for dinner with a rather nice sunset for afters. Photo: John Maughan

Sun 11 Jun | Gannet gazing Hjalmar Bjorge guests today had a strange, oddly unsettling encounter, with a gannet, near Canna. As the divers were in the water and the boat slowly moving a gannet appeared to "bow ride" over the front of the boat, facing into the wind. It was so close that those onboard could have touched its wings. The gannet occasionally circled the boat, appearing to have a good look at everything, before settling back into position over the bow. It stayed for ages and the experience was very surreal indeed.

After the boat and gannet departed company Mark took Hjalmar Bjorge up the outside of Skye heading for the Outer Hebrides. Two dolphins joined the boat, bow-riding for almost an hour as the vessel headed north.

Wed 14 Jun | Whale tales A few cetaceans have been seen today and last night. Hjalmar Bjorge was berthed at Uig on Skye and saw a basking shark last night and two minke whales today. Chris, aboard Chalice with guests last week, reported that they had seen a group of about 25 basking sharks. Not bad going as basking sharks are often in the news allegedly on the brink of extinction.

Fri 16 Jun | Wild wild west And it certainly was. Rob left Oban aboard Elizabeth G on Saturday 10 June with guests hoping to visit St Kilda. The forecast was appalling. By Tuesday he had left West Loch Tarbet and gone into Leverburgh to avoid "screaming" wind conditions. The wind dropped off by Tuesday evening and the vessel made her way over to St Kilda on Wednesday. Despite the kinder wind there was a lot of swell and it wasn't a particularly comfortable journey. Elizabeth G was the only charter boat to get out to St Kilda this week (even Hjalmar Bjorge with divers aboard decided conditions were too rough to dive.) The ranger said he hadn't seen any charter boats for about a week and Hugh, who runs the NTS shop on St Kilda, and was there as part of a work party, said conditions in Village Bay the previous day were as bad as he'd ever seen them.

All the guests (bar one with a dicky leg) were pleased to get ashore for a walk. Three intrepid individuals - Robin, Hugh and Denbeigh - had pre-arranged with the National Trust for Scotland to spend a night camping on the Cambir where they hoped to undertake a little non-invasive archaeology and see the sun set and rise over Soay. Rob picked the three of them up about 7.00 am on Thursday morning where they declared they had been "absolutely freezing." Okay, so Denbeigh may not have said "absolutely" freezing...he was certainly jolly cold even though he'd had five layers of clothing on (including a fleece), a waterproof jacket, a sleeping bag and was inside a waterproof bivouac. There was a lot of surge on Thursday but Rob managed to take everyone for a tour of the islands and stacks where one of the highlights was watching the gannets fishing by plunging into the sea.

Rob's guests were all delighted that he had managed to get them to St Kilda in such ropey conditions but there was



payback. Leaving on Thursday at midday, in a big swell, Force 6, with extremely rough waters through the Sound of Harris, required a non-stop journey back to Tobermory arriving at 2.00 am on Friday morning. The photo, above right, shows bow riding dolphins on the outward journey. Photo: Richard Goodson

Sat 17 Jun | Tobermory trio It's raining. Obviously. So all hail to Big John for getting in the dinghy and taking this lovely photo of our three Rescue Ships in Tobermory harbour this very evening. Left: Rob's "Elizabeth G", centre: Gordon's "Hans Hansson" and right: our "Hjalmar Bjorge". Photo: John Maughan



Mon 19 Jun | Help stop whaling Yesterday a huge blow was dealt to the conservation of whales as pro-whaling nations re-took control of the International Whaling Commission (IWC). For the first time in decades, Japan and its pro-whaling allies now hold the majority of votes at the International Whaling Commission, the international body that regulates whaling. This happened because they won a vote to overturn the ban on commercial whaling by arguing that whales are out-competing humans for fish and that conservation groups are a threat to governments. With pro-whaling nations now holding the majority of votes, the IWC will quickly be driven to abandon important conservation and welfare measures.

The vote was close, with 33 votes in favour and 32 against. All member states of the European Union opposed the statement except Denmark which voted in favour. Denmark's vote tipped the majority in favour of the whalers. This is a wake up call for the world to take back the IWC and protect whales before it is too late!

You can help the world's whales at this crucial time just by sending an email. Send a protest e-mail to the Prime Minister of Denmark calling on him to retract his country's vote. This can be done from the Whale & Dolphin Conservation Society's website at <http://uk.wdcs.org/go/N060619whaling1> and will only take a few minutes. Act now... Denmark can only retract their vote before the end of the week when the current meeting of the IWC closes.

Tue 20 Jun | Sea spectacle Chalice finished a cruise today which experienced lots of interesting sightings. Dense fog obscured the view round Canna but, even so, a couple of basking sharks and a minke whale were seen in the gloom. Then, suddenly, Chalice cleared the fog bank into splendid summer sunshine...ahead, the Cuillins and a mirror flat sea. Within a couple of minutes a big shark fin was spotted and everyone saw two basking sharks, about 200 metres apart, slowly feeding in the current. Chris stopped the engine and with the boat drifting silently one of the sharks made several close passes, at one point swimming under the vessel. Chris swears it was the biggest he'd seen...about seven metres long with a girth of one metre.

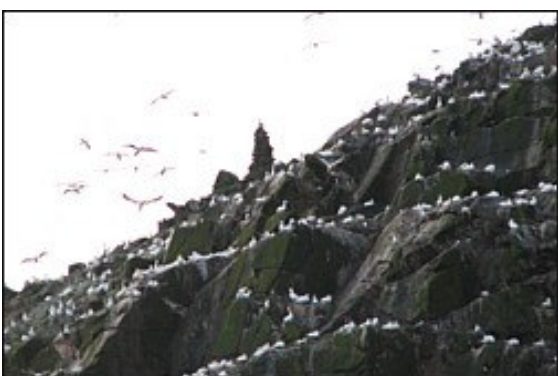
Turning away from the sharks someone spotted krill "fizzing" on the surface. It was everywhere, dense, and looked like red dye in the water. Suddenly off the bow of Chalice the water appeared to boil as hundreds of small fish broke the surface. This is usually a sign they are being pursued so everyone waited, and sure enough, there was a huge shoal of mackerel in clear water. They in turn were being chased by a minke whale! Just as crew and guests were appreciating this mix of marine life someone spotted a curious seal that had come to see what all the fuss was about. Add the gannets and terns diving and you can why the keen photographers were groping for their wide-angle lenses to try and fit the whole panorama in.

Other points of note include new anchorages recced at Loch Pooltiel, Borve Bay and Loch na Uamh with visits to the Shiantis and Crowlin islands, Plockton and Isleornsay. Chalice had both common and bottle-nosed dolphins bow-riding and a pomarine skua was seen off Ardnamurchan. Guests watched an otter playing on the beach at Scarp and two sea eagles near Loch Resort.

Sun 25 Jun | Albatross alert! Hans Hansson returned to Oban in the early hours after a mad dash to Sula Sgeir in search of the black-browed albatross, first seen last autumn, and last confirmed on the rock at the end of May. Stewart and his nine guests arrived by the early hours of Friday 23 and Hans Hansson departed Oban at 0420 heading north inside Skye. The first big excitement came with a sighting of a rare bridled tern, spotted at 1740 in the North Minch SW of Stornoway. Gordon turned the boat to follow it but it was impossible to see again in the heavy rain squall. Hans Hansson arrived at Sula Sgeir at 0200 on Saturday and circled the island waiting for enough light to approach more closely.



At 0400 they approached the SW tip of the island to try to locate the albatross, last reported to be nesting just west of the lighthouse. Within half an hour shouts from the top of the wheelhouse confirmed the sighting (I wonder if they said, "There's Albert!" Everyone knows albatrosses are all called Albert...aren't they?!). The next couple of hours were spent manoeuvring close to the rocky shoals off the west of the island to get the best angle for viewing the bird. Photo: (above left) Stewart Hinley (right) Gordon Fitton



Photos: John Maughan

At 0645 the ten guests were happy to depart so the vessel headed south for the Butt of Lewis. The weather was excellent so they returned to the exact spot where the bridled tern had been seen on the offchance it might still be about but no luck. A quick check on the Shiant islands (no joy there either) and through the Small Islands. Glorious weather.



Passing between Skye and Rum Hans Hansson was joined by a group of about eight or ten common dolphins who played around the boat for forty minutes or so before heading off to the west. The trip was rounded off by a spectacular sunset silhouetting the outer islands and colouring the Cullin Hills on Skye to the north. Passage through the Sound of Mull was completed in millpond conditions and Hans Hansson berthed in Oban in glorious sunshine at 0640 on Sunday morning with ten satisfied, if a little tired, guests aboard. Photos: John Maughan

Hjalmar Bjorge and Elizabeth G left Tobermory at about 4.30am today to travel out to St Kilda. About 6.00am, too early for most onboard to appreciate, common dolphin were seen in the Sea of the Hebrides. About four hours later, when everyone onboard was up, half a dozen bottle-nosed dolphin bow-rode Hjalmar Bjorge through the Sound of Barra. There were five adults and one calf and Elizabeth G, about half an hour behind Hjalmar Bjorge, were treated to bow-riding too!

Tue 27 Jun | Whale rock Mark and Rob took divers from the same Bristol club out to St Kilda on Sunday but left today as a strong SE wind was due to blow up. The divers on Hjalmar Bjorge dived a new site on the way back - Whale Rock - halfway between St Kilda and the Isle of Harris. They also saw Risso's dolphins, white-beaked dolphins and basking sharks...everything in fact except whales! Photo: Cameron/Struan Smith



Wed 28 Jun | Ode to St Kilda Les & Kay's dive group, Leamington & Warwick BSAC, chartered Hjalmar Bjorge last week to go to St Kilda. The weather was pretty dreadful although they managed one night and two dives at Kilda. Les emailed us a poem today, written by Kay whilst onboard describing their holiday...

Can you picture the boat, with its hardworking crew?
With its cabins and galley and big tables too?
With its shiny steel cups and selection of brew
As it ploughs through the water that's more brown than it's blue

Well we went to St Kilda; It was all up and down
With its cliffs and its sheep; there's not much of a town
But we saw the old church and the room in the school
And a St Kilda wren and Soay sheep were quite cool

Then we dived in the ocean; saw the stars down below
In orange and yellow and red – quite a show
But it wasn't to last; with the wind and the rain
And we weren't quite sure when we'd dive again

Then Mark said, "There's an arch, you can all swim right through,"
We were pushed and were pulled by the waves – what a view!
Then it's back on the boat for some cake and some tea
And a delicious meal from our cook named Izzie

And we dozed in our bunks and we slept night and day
While we whiled the hours and more hours away
And the bad news kept coming of high winds and gales
And we saw some nice yachts with their old fashioned sails

And we thought of the St Kildans as they rowed 'tween the isles
And the birds and the feathers as we traversed the miles
To Harris down south where we walked round the isle
And that's when Mark told us, "We're heading for Kyle."

Adam with his computer showed film and some pics
With a bubbling background, it was just like the flicks
And we drank wine and whisky, beer and cider galore
Eating and drinking from the ship to the shore

'til we came to a standstill; no more heaving swell
and we went otter spotting which went down quite well
And we dived the Port Napier going down two by two
a sort of wet dirty dozen diving round her and through

The waves and the currents past the ropes and the guns
Then back up the shotline for more tea and buns
Where Heather is waiting; she helps with our fins
And cameras and reels and numerous things

Then we moved on to Eigg for a dive by a wall
"Please bring back some scallops," was Izzie's last call
So we looked all around us; there were none to be seen
'Cos we didn't dive deep where Phil and Gordon had been

Nige and Andy took photos of life in the sea
Of dog fish and jellies; creatures large and wee
Then Jules had a snoozem, and Helen a sleep
Before their next sojourn to visit the deep

Ruth finished her reading and curled up to rest
Then Les, Nick and Mike all joined the sleep fest
So here I am writing with so much to say
About how we all came to be here today

Despite adverse weather, we've had a good time
And this is the end of my St Kilda rhyme...

Fri 30 Jun | Dolphin-tastic! How else to describe the goings on witnessed by Chalice guests in Tobermory harbour today? As Chalice moored up in the harbour another boat called him up to say there were a couple of dolphins off the starboard bow. The 12 guests and crew duly gathered at the pointy end to have a look...and what an amazing show they put on! The two of them were spy-hopping (poking their heads up out of the water to check out their surroundings), tail-slapping and jumping up out of the water to look at the people peering at them. They also appeared to be "wrestling"...or some such strenuous activity... Chris reports they stayed in the harbour until it was getting dark (very late just now) and everyone aboard was understandably delighted with the display. A perfect almost-end to an excellent trip. The only missing sighting on the wish list so far is eagles but as Chris is heading to Loch Spelve tomorrow it's very likely some will be seen there. Loch Spelve and Loch Buie usually deliver white-tailed sea eagles and golden eagles. Photo: Chris Jackson

