

Dons Sottise Summer Cruise July 2015 to Northern Ireland

We are indeed spoiled for choice on the West Coast for cruising destinations as scholars of Yachting Monthly read enviously about our beautiful islands and anchorages. The best in the UK is on our doorstep and many other visiting flags from Europe and beyond seem to agree.

So when the wishful conversations on pontoons in the summer with summer visitors begin, they tend to go: Inner Hebrides; done that. Outer Hebrides; done that. Corryvreckan; pussycat. You can see the green-eyed monster in the back of a mariner's eyes when we get down to the throw-away details.

Yes, my recommendation for Scalpay harbour would be the patch of mud in 8 metres just east of the rock to avoid as you tootle in at night after crossing the Minch and lurching on the Shiants. Knowing full well the charter boat has to be back in Dunstaffnage by Saturday. Cruel Sea or what?

So we need something new to boast about on behalf of the LYC Burgee in 2015. What about another continent? Well, Iceland sounds a worthy aspiration but is frankly easier by Easyjet on the Tuesday flight from Edinburgh.

Well what about another country with a distinct culture and a troubled past with cultural tasting notes of Caledonia. More of "Bella" Caledonia later! So the answer has to be Northern Ireland. Now the observant among you will have noticed West Coast marinas full of Bangor boats as the summer migration begins. Are we missing something or is this counter-intuitive?

So a meticulous plan evolves which includes a crew change in Belfast by air with flights from Birmingham and Glasgow on the middle Saturday of 2 weeks.

We assemble on the appointed Saturday for departure and note the Gael 8 on Loch Linnhe from the comfort of the living room window. So we lose 2 days before we even set off with the clock ticking!

A few hasty calculations about the tide at Pladda on a Monday and "going South", just like Shkelton really.

A sunny sail down the Sound of Luig and then the Sound of Jura with the tides in harmony takes us to **Craighouse on Jura**. The moorings are always a challenge with no pick-up buoys, but this is such a minor whinge given the tranquil bay and sunset. The shore party had to visit the pub to pay the mooring dues while I cooked the "tea".

Indeed, an opportunity to introduce you to our "dramatis personae" for 2015. We have Dr Iain from Appin our expert on Community Cooperatives, local history and West Coast islands. We have Dr Clive our aquaculture academic and expert on "Bella Caledonia". We have Peter my brother-in-law who is in charge of security for BP in Aberdeen and myself, sometime healer of the local parish.

So the political theme for the week started in Craighouse with the red wine and Bruichladdich 10! 2 fiercely for "Bella Caledonia" and 2 "better together". It was really a post-match analysis by this date, but the debate was vigorous and fun between friends who could say what they really thought!

We set off from Craighouse for Rathlin Northern Ireland on a cloudy, windy, cold day. The sea off Islay is lumpy and we are heading with the tide and against the wind to Rathlin. Miss Kubota our faithful and reliable marinated digger diesel just keeps plugging away into the gathering storm.

The visibility is poor and we can't see Texa island off Islay and we take a compass bearing aiming for the West end of Rathilin. We catch glimpses of Texa abeam in the gloom and note painfully slow progress making 3 knots at best in the force 6 in very large waves. We are counting every 7, secured with lifelines and steering up and down the big waves. Iain is manfully strapped to the helm as waves crash over the bow. Mal de Mere afflicts the healer over the starboard side. After several hours we are at the point of no return as Islay fades and was never really a feasible option in the sea. The speed picks up a bit on the GPS to 5 knots in the North Channel and Rathlin within sight.

We enter **Rathin Island** by the West channel going underneath the light house and famous Puffin colony. The bay in the lee becomes tranquil and we head for Church Bay and Drakes rock. The marina is quiet with ample space.

Rathin is an interesting island of 140 people, L shaped and stuck in the path of the North Channel between Scotland and Northern Ireland. It was said to be the centre of the ancient Scottish Kingdom of Dalriada. Robert the Bruce sought refuge on Rathlin in 1306 and was said to have had his encounter with the spider while waiting to reclaim his kingdom.

We have a walk on Rathlin before the pub supper. The island is bleak but the community are certainly trying hard. There is a farm and tractor in the field. The main attraction is the sea bird colony at the Northern end below the lighthouse. There is a new outdoor adult gym as gleaming testament to European funding. Also a wonderful interpretation board by RSPB where you turn a handle beneath bird pictures to generate the call sound. So we heard a corncrake on Rathlin which makes a change from Iona! Very eco clever!

The pub and supper are fine with the walls covered in wreck memorabilia and photos to interest the divers and spook the yotties.

Free marina showers refresh the crew.

Regular readers will know that Dons Sottisse has a marina score card developed for the Mallaig tourist board in an effort to "encourage" them.

Space on pontoons – tick

Greeting from locals – tick

Finding man to pay - tick

Water hose – Rathin loses a point here

Low cost – tick (must be an EU subsidy in Rathlin.)

So 4 Mallaig Stars for Rathlin Marina where our Westward haven would only score one for a water hose. Having said this, Mallaig is reputed to be near completion of glamorous shore facilities in 2016.

We slip ropes in the morning to head south down the Antrim coast. The tides around Rathlin have a reputation to rival Corryvreckan. We retraced our steps back round the top under the light house and sea bird sanctuary. There was no wind and a calm sea under motor. This was to avoid MacDonnell's race at the southern end. We motored through standing waves and very troubled waters in a calm sea, so obviously had got this calculation wrong! The race moves around and all was explained later in Belfast at the Titanic exhibition by a topography map which shows a gigantic rock hole of the South East tip of the land. The next bit of information, being wise after the event, was the admiralty detailed tidal stream atlas purchased in Bangor which shows how the MacDonnell race

shifts with HW Dover. Shifty Mr MacDonnell gets a page to himself and I would not attempt Rathlin again without the advice of Her Majesties RN Hydrographer!

We arrive at **Glen Arm** after passing the salmon farm outside the entrance. There is a tight turn once inside the old sea wall to gain the marina pontoons on starboard. The marina manager welcomes us with directions to our berth and help with lines. You don't get this star treatment in Ma...g!

The old harbour wall is fabulous with a nesting colony of guillemots nipping in and out of burrows shrouded by greenery. The nesting birds are completely un-phased by our presence 5 metres away and well worth the trip to Glen Arm.



The harbour walls Glen Arm

Glen Arm has recently upgraded the marina shore facilities and put a huge effort into flowers and tubs around the village.

According to Dr Clive, our on board salmon farming consultant, the fish farm in the bay is reputed to be run by "Basil" (John Russel) from Fort William who used to work for Marine Harvest. Yes, the marina manager knows John Russell well and directs us to the farm office up the street.

We later find the farm office and speak to his secretary. John is away on holiday, but somehow a "Basil" slips out and the game is afoot. Yes, she says with a twinkle. If he does something naughty, she calls him "Basil" like his primary school teacher. His "Basil" school nick name has indeed followed him from Fort William to Glen Arm.

Special Branch may give you a new identity in Scotland as an escapee from “The troubles”, but if you are coming from the Fort to Northern Ireland Basil Brush just follows you!

We continue our stroll through the quaint village Glen Arm to the old castle tea room for a Devon Tea in Northern Ireland, such is their cultural diversity. We were rather hoping for an Antrim Tea with an explanation of the finer points between Cornish, Devon and Antrim given the rolling hills full of dairy herds! An ancient Priory and a river walk make an attractive vista.

The Union Jacks and the Red Hand of Ulster flutter from lampposts. The red hand of Ulster is a grim story of two Scots brothers aspiring to take over Ulster centuries ago. One brother was so desperate to win, he cut off his hand and through it forward to win the prize. So we can understand where the troubled genes come from!

Outside the Lodge there is a plaque to a man in 1992 who was putting up flags who was “taken out” by the other side in a raid into the Loyalist stronghold. The plaque is high up on a lamp post defended by a barbed wire crown of thorns.



We counted 5 churches for as many hundred people with the hard line DUP end having the most money as judged by the new tarmac in the car park and church building maintenance comparisons.

However, the new heroes of Glen Arm in 2015 are 6 pensioners who have taken to uplifting the whole place with flower beds and tubs everywhere.

We proceed to the High Street and which of the two pubs to choose.

It is pretty deserted but the chatty barmaid tells us of her life and family in Glen Arm.

Back to the boat, as no meals can be found in Glen Arm, for yet another big debate. We rant about independence, nuclear weapons, Iraq, USA, geopolitics, GM crops, tree hugging and the meaning of civilisation. Maybe it is some secret ingredient in Northern Irish beer as the lines are drawn and positions defended. I will never, never, neverseemed to echo the Orange Lodge in our rhetorical debates within the cabin! All good fun and no quarter given fuelled by red wine, port and

a dram until well after midnight. We did however note that the neat couple next door in a tickety boo Halberg Rassey had taken the opportunity to slip their moorings before we surfaced!

Glen Arm to Bangor with a reasonable day flipping between sails and motor as we headed South about 25 miles. The pleasant coastline of rural Antrim punctuated by industrial Larne, Carrickfergus and Belfast Lough.

Bangor Marina is big but very civilised. The Victorian seaside town of Bangor has been refreshed substantially by the marina and the obvious money in boats, services and infrastructure. The facilities are excellent and the welcome helpful.

I had lived briefly in Bangor aged 13 so took a taxi to find my old home and re traced my childhood bike journeys in 1965 to Donachadee ,the picturesque harbour down the coast from Bangor .The South Bay Bangor also figured in my bike exploring memories. The marina had changed things, but not much else! The Lodge, flags and banners seemed entrenched in both towns as almost a cultural parody despite the internationalism of the marina in their midst.



Welcome to Bangor!

Bangor to Belfast involves a leisurely start for the tide and waiting to refuel while the Sea Cadet launch takes much longer than expected because of some pump problem. We are forced to circle for ages at the harbour entrance beyond our agreed time, getting to know each barnacle by name on the harbour piles and dodging in coming boats.

We have a sunny sail off Bangor and proceed to enter the port channel taking note of buoyage and ferries. The channel narrows and we go past oil rigs, container port and ferry terminal. I had phoned to book the berth and “just turn up” was the only instruction. We motor on starboard past the ferry unloading and have kept a watch to stern for others.

We arrive in the inner sanctum of **Belfast docks** in the marina and the attendant sternly directs us to a berth. He had been given a row by the Port authority as we had not radioed in advance of passage

through the ferry section. Much hilarity from the “crew” as I had been on the helm for the faux pas. It sounds like politics between the new marina and the harbour authority establishing their authority. I have just rechecked the marina website and still no passage instructions!

We berthed up and the attendant softens. The en-suite shore facilities are luxurious and the payment system is like a car park machine.

The marina really is in the centre of Belfast with a large docklands development project to provide a new tourist focus for a troubled city.

The fabulous Titanic exhibition is the main focus with penthouse flats and a large leisure centre beside us. There is sculpture and cityscape design in evidence. The Titanic quarter “deli” seems like the answer to a mermaids prayer for victualling sailors, but turns out to be a grotty Mace with fine lines in sugar, trans fats and alcohol. It’s not exactly the Kelvinbridge deli mile!

We head for the pubs of Belfast within walking distance over a new footbridge and find McHugh’s “the oldest pub in Belfast” with live music.

The Belfast tourist trail on a yot!

So we had arrived in style “on a yot” right into the heart of the city dodging the ferries and the harbour politics. This was super Saturday and the choice was a “Toy train” being towed past the Mace Deli or an open top bus to dodge the bullets on the Falls Road.

The open top bus tour was an international gathering of gaupers at others misfortune. We start at the “New Belfast” on the dockside with the Titanic exhibition and the “Game of Thrones” studio before heading out of town to Stormont. We come up the hill past the academic freedoms of Queens University and the narrators tone then begins to tackle “the troubles”. We head for the Falls Road and the Loyalist flags begin with Union Jacks and the Red Hand of Ulster. We pass the Glasgow Rangers Ulster club, but this is Govan on “Jack enhancing substances”. The Orange Lodge Halls take the King Billy bit very seriously with pictorial representation of a battle long ago we must never forget. We pass the infamous Crumlin Road jail, bombproof police stations and courts.

The “Peace Wall” is an embarrassing long metal barricade in the UK which has design inspiration from Gaza and a gate closed at night and during the weekends to keep the sides apart.

We then drive down the Republican Falls road resplendent with Eire flags and the famous murals. The wall art is prolific with Bobby Sands the hunger striker taking pride of place in the republican story.



Republican iconography Belfast

So it is all a bit difficult in Belfast. The taxi drivers want to move on and desperately seek reassurance that “things have improved”. The troubles tourist trail is now a life blood of the Belfast economy and there is now a danger that it stops the next generations moving on and becomes a Disneyfied caricature. The open top bus certainly feels like a safari park gauping at the exotic species roaming their fenced dens.

Only in Belfast could you turn the design disaster of the unsinkable liner with not enough lifeboats into a heroic statement. The Titanic exhibition is however the best tourist attraction in Belfast and a triumph of design and explanation. The building is a huge metal star shape to echo the White Star Shipping line and floor by floor we are taken through the history of shipbuilding in Belfast and the specifics of the Titanic.



Moody 35 Centre Cockpit Dons Sottise Belfast Marina

The marine oceanography graphics explain the MacDonells tidal race off Rathlin with a fabulous contour map with a big underwater rock cauldron to create the moving whirlpool. A bit like the Corryvreckan pinnacle to ably explained at the 2015 LYC fitting out supper.

The big question for me was whether this was going to be better than the Titanic exhibition in Inverness beside the Muirton Basin. The Inverness Titanic is an absolute classic of naïve eccentricity by one man and his obsession. His 60 foot model with a tea room and random collection of fishing boats and models is like a Turner prize exhibition. It is indeed the complete antithesis to Disney and corporate visitor attractions. Spectacular though the Belfast Titanic exhibition is I still prefer the naivety, eccentricity and honesty of Inverness Titanic exhibition, but then I like Damien Hurst!



You can tell Peter used to chase the drug dealers of Grampian with those shades!

A wet Sunday in Belfast after the crew change by Flybe! We opt to visit the Ulster museum and botanic gardens which are conventional but excellent. It has had a recent makeover and update behind an old façade which works well. The story of “The troubles” is well set out with photographs and a time line. It treads the political sensitivities with mastery in a non-judgmental manner and you just make up your own mind. There are conventional rooms on traditional museum topics.

There is a stunning new gallery of commissioned portraits on the troubles by one artist in 2014. The subject of 17 paintings are ordinary people affected by the troubles in some way. People injured for life or bereaved tell their story through their faces and the artists skill to capture their emptiness and grief – stunning in a calm, big room.

A wet Monday – more bad weather forecast and what to do about the planned trip to Strangford Lough.

The difficulty would be a Northerly and an exit from the Strangford narrows into the North Chanel into “challenging seas”. So we could wing it down from Belfast but would end up storm bound inside with the wind against tides. The tides at the entrance are notorious at 7 knots, so you press the button to go and there is no turning back in the standing waves. Fine if you are Hamish with a spinnaker up to “stabilize the boat”, but we had neither the sail nor Hamish on board!

So what do woosy sailors opt for in these circumstances – an Ulsterbus!

We made passage to **Newton Ards** bus terminal and changed for Portaferry. All very civilized with a sense of the “real Northern Ireland” in the journey. The scenery is very rural and agricultural. The small towns fly their orange lodge flags in no surrender defiance. Strangford Lough upper reaches are best seen from the bus window, having looked at the detailed chart! There are expansive mud flats with a navigable mid channel which is littered with rocky islands you can see on a good day and more below the water! Ideal in a kayak but not if you worry about keel bolts!

The saltmarsh is a bird sanctuary for migrating geese and local waders.

Portaferry is an ancient village with a long history of seafaring documented in the visitors centre with friendly ladies to help. The feminine café with cakes has an entertaining collection of “wisdom signs” with observations on the human condition, and the role of men in particular. I was not quite sure that “the chaps” would get away with that in a public space in PC 2016 Scotland if the roles were reversed and it seemed naively quaint!



Woosey sailors admiring the flowers! Note the storm yonder

We next join the ferry on foot for the entertaining ferry glide at 45 degrees across the narrows to Strangford. There are a few yacht pontoons in the harbour and we observe a craft doing the “cork out of a bottle” job as it enters the narrows on an ebb tide of 7 knots.



Portaferry

In mid channel of the Stranford narrows sits the tidal power generation installation <http://www.seageneration.co.uk> run by Seimens since 2008 and generating 1.2 megawatts with turbines which rise, fall and twist around a central tower with the tide. Clearly this would be quite a challenge in the Corryvreckan!



Strangford narrows and tidal turbine mid channel

Strangford on the other side has characterful cottages and colourful characters. We emerged from inspecting the castle and were accosted by a helpful local with a fag on the lower lip and a hint of Guinness aftershave. He pulled out tourist brochures from his pocket and advises us to take the “squeeze gut path” up past Mrs Moriatis house to gain views of the village and Carlingford Lough. Well worth the advice and chat!

We visit the Cuan Hotel for lunch and sample the chowder with relish. Well, actually, the special ingredient was Pernod and smoked salmon on top!

Back over the narrows by ferry glide and we amble back around Portaferry while awaiting the charabanc. There is a marine lab outpost from Queens University looking a bit tired which has presumably lost out to the scale of Dunstaffnage.

We arrive back in Belfast again having passed the flags of Newton Ards and the rolling farm lands of County Down. Don't go to Belfast expecting the Finnieston foodie choice, let alone a curry house! We did well finding anything other than a pub supper!

We depart Belfast Marina after gaining permission on channel 12 from the Port Authority and proceed down the long channel to sea past the “ Douglas Performer” Ro Ro and Dolphin drilling platforms.



Christine's nephew Norman from Stornoway drives this around the world searching for black stuff and it's not pudding he is looking for!



What a performer eh?

We toyed briefly with grand plans for Camletown or Lamlash and Crinan but we needed to gain Craobh in time to meet the engineer Mike Brown for anchor windlass repairs and opted for Glen Arm to Gigha as the planned route across the North Channel.

We set sail briefly in the bay with Northerly air streams to make our way back up the coast with a following tide to Glen Arm again as our departure point for the North Channel. I cooked the food while the new crew headed for the pub and guided tour with Iain.

Glen Arm to Gigha across the North Channel with a following tide but a Northerly wind produced a big sea again and slow progress at times. The Mull of Kintyre, Rathlin and Islay all held their positions as hours passed but eventually Gigha came into sight and we approached via the South Channel.

The buoys in Gigha don't have pickups and provide marine entertainment making fast with a lazy line as security. No time to go ashore, so we resolve to send a cheque and a polite stop to include a stop.

A sunny North Westerly produced the best sailing conditions for the whole trip up the Sound of Jura. We make a passing nod to Corryvreckan and resist her whiley mermaid ways to draw us in. A splendid close haul tacking up the Sound of Jura just kept giving, with splendid views of the Paps of Jura and guillemot families bobbing in the waves.

We leave Luig and Shuna to port and enter Craobh Marina. The old style pontoons are narrow for manoeuvring which makes for entertainment for the smug spectators no longer on the stage. We were particularly taken by the racy little number with an all ladies crew gaining prime position for West Highland Week.

Craobh always has the complete range of gin palaces and yots to give marks for artistic expression and technical merit. One of my favourites is the wooden classic 1960s English speedboat which featured in the old Bond film shot around Craobh. A Martini, shaken and not stirred, is available for the craft, engines and film.

Mike Brown the engineer meets us as arranged to fit the new anchor windlass which is beyond my paygrade in DIY skills competency assessments. We revise the anchor system; surely you remember the Lismore Light 2014 exposition on yot bow roller anchor systems? The CQR monster is excluded again after a jamming session and we are back with Brucey. Yes I am pleased to report that Brucey is now back on the prow with new self-confidence and a swivel joint.

The CQR awaits being melted down to become a new aircraft carrier in donation to the Scottish Government Jocks Navy fund.

The weather is back to wet and miserable in the Scottish sailing summer, so I blame Westminster elites for this action up Scotland and we opt for Pladda over Cuan. We gain Pladda light and turn East towards Culliport on Luig to inspect the new visitor moorings laid on by the Luig community cooperative and visitors centre. Our recce showed the entrance is tight between reefs so not recommended in low visibility or bad weather, but an excellent safe stop while waiting for a tide South in future.

The initial plan to give Brucey an outing in Puilidorrhan was abandoned in low visibility wet weather in favour of Kerrara. Only a mooring was available as every macho yottie on the West Coast was heading for a woosey berth and AC support. We therefore amused ourselves on the mooring with the famous Briffa game. A pencil, paper and bullish self-confidence under challenge are all that is required.

The next morning was sunny and brisk which was great for the Firth of Lorne and a dodge into Port Ramsay to test Brucey the anchor in the famous black gloop. Lunch, launch and retrieval with the new windlass goes wonderfully for 10 meters, then clunk as the new motor trips out. All available dodges and fuses were tried including the famous hammer on the anchor solenoid trick. We had to admit defeat and haul the chain. We suspect the deck switch needs replaced next!

A short hop back to Lettershuna and the end of another epic cruise. We would all recommend Northern Ireland and inner city Belfast as the counter intuitive sailing destination for a West Coast boat.

I felt the trip had many important lessons for Scotland today with Belfast clearly culturally and economically decades behind Glasgow. The flags are clearly the problem and not the solution. The flags divide communities and intimidate visitors. Their cultural identity is locked forever in history and grievance. Eventually in a perverse way it becomes Disneyed into a pastiche which perpetuates itself. The all controlling, one party state of Ulster Unionism festered a republican boil from 1920 until 1970 until it exploded with "the troubles". It is living political history 20 miles across the water from Scotland and well worth visit to make up your own mind!



Jim Douglas LYC and Dons Sottise 2015