

All at sea

If you want to explore and photograph Scotland's Outer Hebrides, what better way to do it than by sailing from island to island on a 67ft ocean-going yacht? **Lee Frost** and a hardy bunch of photo enthusiasts did just that. Here's what happened



Well, shiver me timbers and kiss the gunner's daughter. This weather's enough to freeze the balls off a brass monkey. Time to splice the mainbrace, batten down the hatches and get three sheets to the wind...

It's amazing how many phrases there are in the English language with nautical origins. I should know. Having organised a sailing/photo tour off the North West of Scotland last year, I decided it was only fair that I at least appeared to be a bit of a salty old seadog to my crewmates, so I did a crash course in sailor speak. Within days I was so fluent I could have auditioned for the next *Pirates of the Caribbean* movie. Eat your heart out Johnny Depp!

This trip came about totally by chance

when I was contacted to see if I would be interested in taking a group of photographers out to the remote island of St Kilda. Having read much about St Kilda's fascinating history over the years (the island was evacuated for the last time in 1930), I was captivated by the whole idea, but I felt that other destinations would have to be included to make the trip more appealing. The uninhabited castaway island of Taransay was one suggestion – I know the island well from previous visits with my family – while the Shiant's, a group of three small deserted islands off the east coast of Harris, were also added to the list.

Having barely stepped on any water-borne craft bigger than a canoe in the past, this was a whole new experience for me, but I figured the trip would appeal to photographers with a similar spirit of adventure to my own, and a

keenness to visit more out of the way places, so dates were confirmed and I spread the word. Within days, all eight places had been snapped up. That was it, no going back...

Land Ho!

We finally set sail from Leverburgh Pier on the Isle of Harris on 7 September 7, 2008, aboard *Elinca*, a 67ft cutter skippered by Angus Smith. Sadly, St Kilda wouldn't be our destination. The tail end of a hurricane in the Caribbean had brought unexpected weather to the far North West of Scotland, and though it was like a millpond when we motored away from Harris on that first evening, further offshore it was a different story.

'I can probably get you to St Kilda,' Angus informed us. 'But it's a seven-hour sail each way, you wouldn't enjoy it, and it's highly ▶



◀ unlikely we'd be able to drop anchor once we got there. Force 8-9 – very uncomfortable.'

Disappointed, but accepting that we have no control over the weather – photographers know that more than most – we decided to head for Taransay instead. The forecast suggested the weather could get progressively worse through the week, but that first evening it was glorious, with broken clouds and warm sunlight, and our spirits were raised by the prospect of a day on Taransay. We'd have the place to ourselves – a whole Scottish island – and I knew some great spots to head for once we reached dry ground.

Doing that proved to be an adventure in itself – climbing down a steel rope ladder in choppy seas to a small rib (rigid inflatable boat) which Angus' son, Innes, would then steer across the waves to a safe landing spot. Initial nerves were soon gone as our experience and confidence grew, and by the end of the week we were leaping around like old hands.

From Taransay we sailed along the magnificent and rugged coastline of North Harris, catching glimpses of isolated communities such as Clasmol, Gobhaig and Huisinis before sailing between towering sea cliffs up Loch Reasort where sea eagles soar and killer whales take refuge. This is a harsh, desolate wilderness, but beautiful at the same time, and somehow different when viewed from the sea itself.

The island of Scarp was nearby so we decided to make landfall there. In 1881 the island's population was 213 but today its



deserted and ruined blackhouses litter the landscape. A few properties are still maintained as holiday homes, but there have been no permanent residents since 1971. Scarp is a quirky place. There's still an old red telephone box standing outside the former post office, with a sign hanging over it saying 'Telephone' – as though the islanders needed reminding what it was! Scarp will also be remembered for being the place where, in 1934, German inventor Gerhard Zucker

experimented with the idea of delivering mail to the island by rocket post. A film drama of the same name was shot on Taransay in 2001.

The highlight of our time on Scarp had to be a visit to the old schoolhouse. Closed since 1967, it's a sad reminder of the decline suffered by so many remote island communities, but at the same time a fascinating place to photograph. The wooden benches, carefully stacked after the final lesson on the final day, are still there, covered



in lurid green mould now. Windows are broken, floorboards rotten and paint peeling. We could have spent hours more, exploring its mysterious nooks and crannies, but with the weather closing in it was time to find a safe place to drop anchor for the night – otherwise we'd be spending it in the schoolhouse, a prospect that didn't have wide appeal!

Perfect storm

Just as predicted, the weather did worsen towards the end of the trip, and though it hampered our photography to an extent, it

also made the sailing experience all the more enjoyable and unforgettable.

Our first taste of this came when we headed out to sea under sail. One minute we were wondering if there was enough wind to actually move us, the next we were flying along at such an acute angle that the handrail on the far side of the deck was underwater and anyone on deck and not clipped on would be joining it. We're not talking about a racing dingy here, but 40-tonnes of steel!

'Och, that's nothing,' says Angus, 'I've had it over so far the sails have been skimming

the sea.' No need for a demonstration of that one – we'll take his word for it!

That night, with more bad weather expected, we dropped anchor in the bay off Uidhe on Taransay, normally a sheltered spot. The evening went smoothly enough – we enjoyed another hearty supper, freshly-cooked by Angus and Innes, and retired to our bunks fed and watered ready for the final day. By midnight a storm had picked-up, but lying in my bunk being rocked to-and-fro by the motion of the sea and listening to a gale howling outside was ▶

strangely comforting. But the night wasn't over. Conditions worsened as the hours passed and eventually got so bad that Angus decided we had to make a run for it. We were dragging the anchor, and the rib we'd been towing behind us to save time with transfers from boat to land had been torn from its ropes and disappeared into the night (it was recovered several days later on Taransay). The engine was started, and our slow journey across the sound to Scarista on Harris began.

Three hours and 40 litres of diesel later we made it, calm prevailed and as night turned into day we emerged from our bunks to the welcome smell of bacon and coffee.

Had that really just happened, or was it all a dream? I honestly wasn't sure as I rubbed sleep from my eyes and glanced around the galley at eight dazed-looking photographers. Then I reached for the milk, tipped the plastic carton and nothing happened. Had I forgotten to remove the screw cap in my sleepy state? Was the seal still over the top of the neck? Lifting the carton to eye level, I squinted to see inside and realised what the problem was. Despite being in a fridge all night, the milk was no longer liquid, but a semi-solid jelly, slopping around like a badly made pannacotta. The motion of the boat had been so severe during the storm that the milk had turned to yoghurt!

Sitting back and sipping a mug of steaming black coffee, I reflected on the night we'd just gone through and realised why sailors love to be at sea, facing the worst that mother nature can throw at them. Angus and Innes were in their element fighting the elements. It's what they live for – a brief window in time when they can put all those years of experience into practice.

I've had some amazing photographic adventures over the years, but this one sits right up there with the best. It was exciting, unpredictable, extreme and unforgettable. In fact, I don't mind admitting that life hasn't been the same since I came home. It's not that I've been gripped by a sudden urge to buy a big yacht, or go and live on a deserted island. No, it's far more serious than that. For some reason, I've gone right off Mulla Light!

● *Think you're brave enough? Good, because Lee will be repeating this adventure from 3-10 June. The cost is £1,300 each and includes two nights on Harris prior to the five-night sailing trip. Destinations include St Kilda, Taransay, Scarp and Ensay.*

● *For more information email info@photoadventures.co.uk*



Beyond the blue horizon

- Our vessel for the trip was *Elinca*, a 67ft steel cutter originally built to take part in the BT Global Challenge round-the-world race – which she completed twice.
- Skipper Angus Smith, a native of the Isle of Lewis, purchased *Elinca* in 2006 so that he could run charter trips around the Hebrides, the Faroe Islands and Iceland. Prior to that, he spent 15 years working as a professional skipper, delivering super yachts all over the world and covering 150,000 nautical miles.
- For our trip, Angus was joined by his son, Innes – another expert mariner, despite being only 21 years young. Between the two of them they made every day an unforgettable experience, not only getting us to land with (mostly) dry feet, serving up fantastic food and keeping us entertained, but sharing their knowledge and passion for all things Hebridean.
- To find out more about *Elinca* go to www.beyondthebluehorizon.co.uk

