

FREE DIGITAL MAGAZINE

Motorboat Owner

DECEMBER 2015

Affordable practical boating



MY BOAT

Coronet 270



CRUISING

Caledonian Canal

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Highland Fling

by Pam Born



When we retired last year, we drew up a 'bucket list' of the things that we wanted to do. One was to travel from one end of the Caledonian Canal to the other, by boat. So we did a bit of research and booked a week's charter with [Caley Cruisers](#) in Inverness in June.

We chose Caley Cruisers because we were impressed by the quality and style of the boats they offered. Most were Brooms or Haines, fitted out by Caley Cruisers, to their own specifications. We were also impressed by their website, giving detailed information about the cruising area and

what to expect along the way.

The quickest way to get to Inverness was to fly, so after a one and a half hour flight from Luton and a short taxi ride, we were at the boatyard early one Saturday morning in June. First there was the all-important and very thorough safety briefing to attend, after which, we were introduced to our boat, a Broom Ocean 38 called *Balmoral*. The boat was clean and comfortable, more akin to a private boat rather than a hire cruiser, and it had everything you could possibly need for our weeks stay, including bedding and a supply of lovely white towels. All we

“The Scottish highlands are very special to us and cruising the Caledonian Canal was an ambition that didn't disappoint”



needed was our provisions, which arrived shortly after courtesy of a Tesco van.

Day 1 – Inverness - Urquhart Harbour

Once the briefings were over, it was time to embark on our adventure. We left the base in Inverness in convoy with other fleet boats and cruised the short distance

along the canal to the first swing bridge, and then on to Dochgarroch Lock. At this point the Caley Cruiser staff, who were aboard boats with less experienced crews, waved us all goodbye on the lock side.

Some crews had decided to stay at Dochgarroch Lock for the night, and this is always advisable if the weather on Loch

Caledonian Canal

The Caledonian Canal lies within the Great Glen, a massive fault line resulting from a tectonic tear in the earth's crust over 300 million years ago, which virtually cuts Scotland into two parts. Running for approximately 60 miles, from Fort William on the west coast to Inverness on the east coast, the canal provides safe passage for vessels, avoiding the exposed waters of the northern coastline. With famous engineer Thomas Telford overseeing the construction, work began over 200 years ago and it took 21 years to complete. This massive feat of engineering, connects three huge, beautiful lochs, Loch Ness, Loch Oich and Lock Lochy, across some of the most dramatic and rugged scenery the UK has to offer.



There are 29 locks on the Canal. Above, the flight of five locks at Fort Augustus



Conditions changed dramatically on Loch Ness, and our charter boat handled it very well

Ness is inclement. As it was only mid-afternoon and the weather and conditions were good, we decided to push on into the open waters of Loch Ness and head for a little harbour in Urquhart Bay, just south of the village of Drumnadrochit. Urquhart Harbour is a delightfully tranquil and very sheltered basin where mooring fees are £10 per night and electric hook-up £4, paid for at a pay and display machine. All moorings in this harbour are stern-to, so it gave us a chance to practice our medi-mooring skills. The harbour is also home to a Fairline 40, aptly named *Nessie Hunter*, which runs regular trips out onto the loch to look for Nessie, and the Loch Ness research vessel, *Deepscan*. Although there is a taxi service from the harbour to the village and local restaurants such as Cobbs Restaurant at the Clansman Hotel, it had been an early start for us, and a very long and eventful day. We sat in the summer evening sunshine on the back of



Going up, the flight of five locks at Fort Augustus took us about an hour to traverse

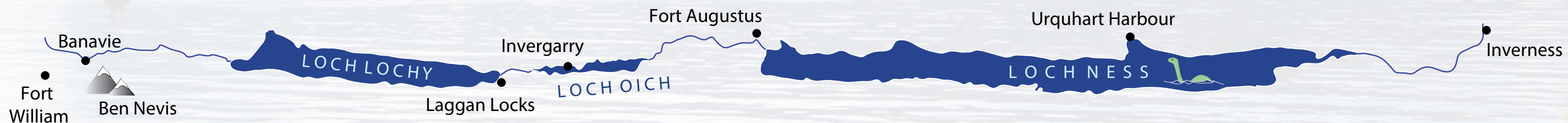
the boat, admiring the amazing scenery, delved into our Tesco supplies, and had an early night.

Day 2 – Urquhart - Invergarry

We awoke to heavy rain, but this soon gave way to bright sunshine. In tranquil conditions, we departed Urquhart Harbour to traverse the length of Loch Ness to Fort Augustus, rounding the headland where [Urquhart Castle](#) stands dominant over the eastern end of the Loch. We had been warned about the unpredictability of the weather conditions on Loch Ness, and soon, a short white-capped chop began, followed fairly swiftly by Force 5 conditions with 2–3ft

waves in the centre of the Loch. All due, we were told, to the ‘funnelling’ effect of the weather down the Loch. We were completely engulfed by sea mist and rain, with a further 12 miles to go to Fort Augustus. Balmoral handled the conditions beautifully and we felt no danger as we plodded on at 6 knots, ploughing through the waves, unfazed.

Astonishingly, as the Loch broadened and we approached Fort Augustus, the conditions changed dramatically. The wind died and we found ourselves, once again, in bright sunshine, perfect conditions for ascending the flight of five locks in the centre of the town. We hit Fort Augustus at just the right time. No sooner





There was a surprise at the pine fringed Kytra Lock. Gold stars were given to lifejacket wearers

had we moored up on the long waiting pontoon, the Lock Keeper came down to meet us to give us instructions and, before we knew it, we were entering the first chamber with friendly lock staff taking our lines. Two crew stayed ashore with bow and stern lines and as each chamber filled, boats had to be physically pulled through into the next chamber. The good waiting pontoons above the locks gave us an opportunity to have a quick look around the town and get some supplies of Highland Whisky.

We were back on the canal again with a further two locks to negotiate before we reached our intended destination of Invergarry, on Loch Oich. Linda, the jolly Lock Keeper at Kytra Lock, insisted on coming round to all the boats in the lock to give a gold star to everyone wearing

a lifejacket. We wore our gold stars with pride that afternoon.

Once through Cullochry Lock, and the Aberchalder Swing Bridge, we were at the highest point of the canal and once again in open waters. It was just a short distance along Loch Oich, with some careful navigation via buoys, to our destination, a small pontoon directly under the tall, eerie ruins of Invergarry Castle, in the grounds of the [Glengarry Castle Hotel](#). We shared this free mooring with another Caley Cruiser, a Broom Monarch. This is such a beautiful, peaceful spot, with high hills on the opposite bank extending up into the mist. Adjacent to our mooring pontoon was the sad and pitiful wreck of the ex-herring fishing vessel, *Eala Bhan*, which sunk here around five years ago. The grounds of the hotel are elegantly laid

out, with tiered terraces, a Lily pond and old stone pier. The hotel building itself is very imposing and would have been very grand in its day, with a coach house and stone bell tower. After first walking around the fenced off ruins of the castle, we ventured out of the grounds and crossed the bridge, over the fast flowing river, to the village. The [Glengarry Castle Hotel](#) comes highly recommended as an eatery but, sadly, it was fully booked. There is, however, another hotel, the [Invergarry Hotel](#), offering meals in the village, but it is quite a hike.

Day 3 – Invergarry - Banavie

It was a chilly start to the day so we fired up the diesel heating and listened to the Scottish news on the radio. Apparently there was a heatwave on the way. Our plan was to travel to the end of navigation (for hire cruisers), Banavie Locks, as quickly as possible. We could then take a leisurely cruise back to base, stopping at selected moorings on the way. To reach that goal we still had approximately 25 miles, several locks and swing bridges, and 5 hours of cruising to do. At the end of Loch Oich we passed through the Laggan Swing Bridge and entered the narrow pine tree-fringed section of canal, affectionately known as Laggan Avenue, at the end of which is Laggan Locks,



On a clear day the dramatic, snow-capped Ben Nevis mountain range is visible from the canal

where we descended into, Loch Lochy, our final Loch on the canal. Here we passed the 'Le Boat' hire fleet, which is based at Laggan Locks. The scenery had begun to change, the high rolling green hills gave way to more rugged snow-capped mountains and, once through Gairloch Locks and Moy Swing Bridge and onto the last section of the canal, we occasionally caught glimpses of the sea, many metres below us, in the distance.

Under the gaze of the dramatic Ben Nevis range of mountains, we tied up on the pontoons above the Banavie Locks, nicknamed Neptune's Staircase. Beyond lay the entrance to Loch Linnie. Here, as with many of the other locks along the canal, there are excellent shower, toilet,





Clouds covered the summit of the snow-capped Ben Nevis, as we departed the pontoons at Banavie

and refuse disposal facilities, all of which are completely free to use. No sooner had we tied up, we were off to explore the area, first descending the mighty Neptune's Staircase and then catching a taxi into Fort William. We struck lucky with the taxi driver. Originally from Essex, she had settled in Fort William many decades ago. She gave us a tour of the area (including showing us the distillery) and offered to pick us up for our return trip. Loch Linnie is a sea loch, which means that they have a strong fishing tradition here, making it an excellent place to sample fresh



Fort William is a short taxi ride from Banavie

seafood. We chose the warm and friendly restaurant, 'The Tavern', in the High Street for an early dinner and ate a lovely, hearty meal in true Scottish style, including a smoked fish, potato and leek thick broth called 'Cullen Skink', which was very tasty. We picked up supplies from Tesco and caught the taxi back to Banavie.

Day 4 – Banavie - Laggan Locks

We awoke to the sound of engines and discovered that there was a fleet of vessels embarking on a decent down Neptune's Staircase to Corpach Sea Lock and Loch Linnie below. One of these boats was a Princess 54 called *Snow Tiger* and we spoke to the owners as they negotiated the first of the eight locks. They were fulfilling one of the items from their 'bucket list' by circumnavigating Britain. They had started out from the Solent last year and wintered on the east coast, continuing up the North Sea to the Moray Firth and Inverness, before entering the Caledonian Canal. Their next port of call was Oban,

but ultimately they wanted to reach the Scilly Isles before heading back to their base in Southampton. They introduced us to the star of the boat, their lovely Dalmatian 'Bertie', who actually gave us a smile. We wished them a safe journey as we waved goodbye.

Today was turnaround day for us. Meandering our way back along the narrow canal stretch, we caught a momentary glimpse of the summit of snow-capped Ben Nevis before the low-lying cloud and mist covered it again. At Moy Swing Bridge, the lovely Irish bridge man opened one side of the bridge for us and then, to our surprise, clambered into a dinghy, rowed across the canal and manually opened the other side, before waving us through. Surely he doesn't have to do this all the time we thought, so by way of a thank you, we gave him some refreshments in a plastic bag held out on an extended boat hook as we passed through.

We started our ascent again as we negotiated Gairloch Locks. These are very deep locks, and too high to lasso the bollards on top of the lockside, so ropes were passed



The Laggan Locks moorings are very picturesque

down by the attendants. There are excellent moorings and facilities on the upstream side of this lock, perfect for an overnight stay, but we needed to go a bit further and had already decided to try for a mooring at Laggan Locks where we had spotted a very unusual floating pub, called [The Eagle Barge Inn](#).

The sun had broken through the cloud and it had actually turned a lot warmer, so we had a lovely passage across Loch Lochy, arriving at Laggan Locks shortly after 3pm. This picturesque spot has good pontoon moorings and facilities but the breeze funnels up Loch Lochy between the steep green



hills either side, so we moored bow into the wind, just a short distance from the barge. It was time to explore and the hillside looked lush and inviting, like a mowed lawn. In reality it was a different story with waist high dense ferns, nettles and a slope that was a lot steeper than it seemed from the boat.

That evening we ate hearty pub grub in the cosy bar area of the Tardis-like belly of [The Eagle Barge](#). It was obviously a very popular haunt for locals and boaters alike. Some fellow visiting boaters had the foresight to book ahead and were tucking into a huge platter of seafood in the restaurant. It looked fabulous.

It was at dusk, when I went for a walk to the shower block, that I spotted something. As I crossed the upstream lock gates and looked downstream, I saw the sleek, silvery silhouette of an otter hopping across the gates. It was obviously a regular occurrence for him as he appeared to know where he was going. I had never seen otters in the wild before and this was a magical moment that I will hold in my memory forever.

Day 5 – Laggan Locks - Fort Augustus

We left Laggan Locks at 8.30am and entered the tree-fringed Laggan Avenue and on into Loch Oich. Our first stop was for breakfast at the Well of Seven Heads mooring, where a monument on the loch side, erected 150 years ago, commemorates a particularly bloody massacre and is so-called because on a mound close by, at least seven headless bodies were found buried. Just across the busy A82 road here, is the most amazing Lochside Larder café where we purchased the tastiest and largest scotch eggs we had



The pontoon mooring at the Well of Seven Heads was stunning and had a cafe across the road

ever seen.

True to the forecast, the weather had changed and we were bathed in sunshine all day. We were now seeing Loch Oich in very different conditions to what we had witnessed a couple of days previously. It was beautiful, with many tiny, lush-green islands, between which we were guided by navigation marks. We dropped the canopy for the first time to catch the breeze in the sweltering heat, arriving at Fort Augustus at 12.20. We were not called into the locks until around 4pm and, as a consequence, didn't reach our mooring for the night, the pontoons at the bottom of the lock flight, until after 5pm. We weren't sure why there had been such a hold up, we were just thankful we hadn't left getting through the locks until the next day.

We still found time to explore the busy and historic town of Fort Augustus,



At the locks along the way we met some lovely people. For many it was their first boating experience

which has a great selection of pubs and restaurants, a large supermarket, a Benedictine Abbey and a Caledonian Canal Museum. The downstream lock moorings have laundry, shower and toilet facilities and the path leads on to the end of the entrance channel, where you have the most amazing views right down Loch Ness. Moored just a few boats down from us was another Caley Cruiser boat which had a family of three generations on board, on their first boating holiday. The grandad turned out to be a bubble blowing enthusiast and treated us to a wonderful display of huge bubbles on the bank as we sat in the warm evening sunshine on the back of the boat.

Day 6 – Fort Augustus -Urquhart

Our plan for today was to travel back along Loch Ness to Urquhart Harbour and explore the village of Drumnadrochit. We also needed the boat in a position where, whatever the weather, we would be able to easily get back to the Caley Cruiser base, ready for our early flight back to Luton

on Saturday. As we left Fort Augustus at 9.40am, following the first boats out of the flight of locks, it was murky, muggy and slightly overcast, and we couldn't help wondering what Nessie had in store for us today. We all agreed that we loved Loch Ness, as the scenery was not only stunning, it was so wild and unpredictable. When it is calm, the way the wind and reflections play on the water is incredible. With 'windslicks' and changes in colour, it is easy to see how these can be mistaken for 'Nessie'. Today, the weather was perfect



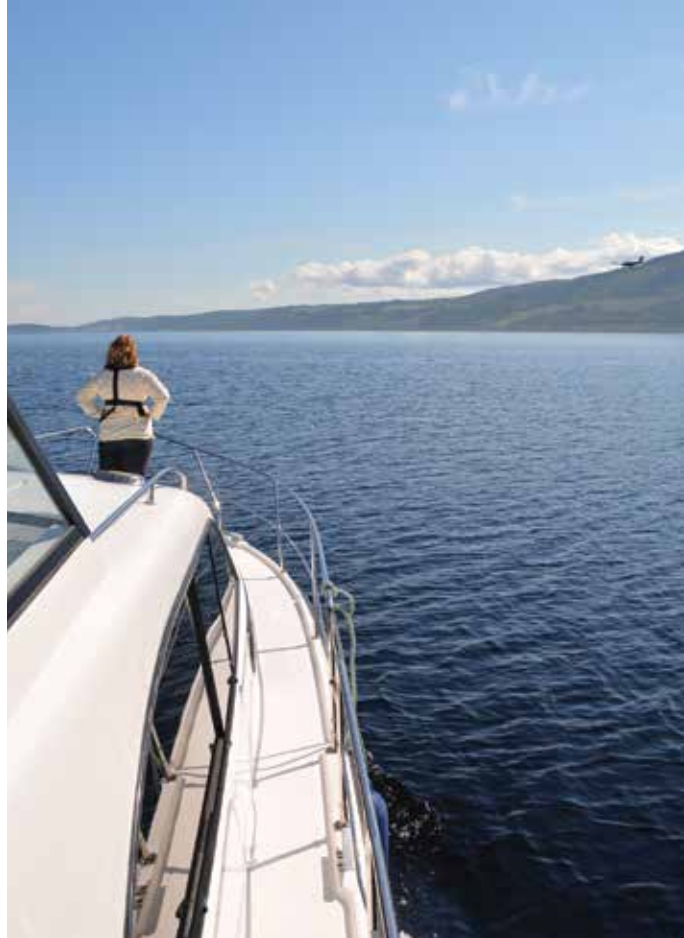
The 'bubble man' attempts to blow his biggest bubble on the bankside at Fort Augustus

as we meandered down the centre of the loch under ever brightening, brilliant blue skies and the wind behind us. We pulled into Urquhart Harbour just after midday with plenty of time for our walk.

It's about a mile and half walk to the village of Drumnadrochit from Urquhart Harbour. The scenery is stunning, but the walk is along a very fast road. It was well worth the hike though, the village is quaint with a small grocery store, as well as some very interesting individual shops and bars. Notably, [Fiddlers Highland Restaurant](#) and Malt Whisky Bar, boasts a selection of over 600 malts. Drumnadrochit is also home to the [Loch Ness Centre and Exhibition](#). We spent a couple of hours here, learning about the history and geography, facts and figures and, of course, the legends attached to what is, undoubtedly, the most famous Loch in the world. Measuring 22 miles in length, with an area of 21.75 sq.miles, it has enough water to immerse the entire population of the world, three times over. In 1987 'Operation Deepscan', using a fleet of 20 Princess 32 motorboats, courtesy of Caley Cruisers, performed a massive sonar sweep of the Loch, in a search for 'Nessie'.

Day 7 – Urquhart - Inverness

We awoke to a very still morning with the



Our passage back east through Loch Ness was spectacular and we were bathed in sunshine

water glistening in the sunshine. On the opposite bank, a mist hung eerily over the loch. The bubbleman was casting bubbles across the harbour and the ducks came quacking for food at the first signs of life onboard. It was an idyllic start to our last day.

We left our mooring hoping that we could secure a temporary mooring on the [Urquhart Castle](#) pontoon and were not disappointed, the pontoon was empty. This pontoon is very popular but is only



The medieval ruins of Urquhart Castle stand dominant at the eastern end of Loch Ness

available to leisure boats at certain times of the day, due to trip boat use. This famous medieval castle was the site of much action and bloodshed over the centuries, the latest of which, in 1692 left it in ruins. It is now owned and run by the Scottish National Trust and has magnificent views across the loch.

It was beautiful back out on the loch, but a lunch at the highly recommended [Oakwood Restaurant](#) beckoned and, no sooner had we exited our final lock (Dochgarroch), we were sitting down to a fantastic feast at this very friendly, quirky venue. Our menu choices consisted of fresh langoustines, scallops and a rich beef

dish of braised Aberdeen Angus steak. It was absolutely gorgeous.

Arriving back at the Caley Cruiser base at 4pm, gave us a chance to get the boat checked-in and refuelled, we had used 113 litres of diesel. In the evening, having already seen the western exit of the Caledonian Canal at Fort William, we were anxious to see where it starts on the east coast, and walked along the final stretch of the canal to the, delightfully named, Clacknaharry Sea Lock. We enjoyed supper in the Clacknaharry Inn, overlooking the glistening waters of Beaulie Firth, which leads out into the Moray Firth and the North Sea.

Our journey was complete. We had travelled the length of this breathtaking waterway, and the next day travelled back home in the pouring rain. We really had enjoyed the best of the weather for our very memorable trip. We'll be back.



At the Oakwood Restaurant at Dochgarroch we feasted on delicious langoustines and scallops

LOGBOOK

*'Balmoral' Broom Ocean 38 hull
Single Volvo 150hp shaftdrive diesel engine*

Fuel used: 113 litres (25 gallons)
Engine Hours: 24.5 hours (1 gallon per hour)



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