

An Sulaire – Barra to Tiree, 1998

The delivery crew to Iona put Tiree on the map for An Sulaire. Calum Macleod had skippered and regaled us with stories of the welcome they got there. Wherever you're going to next, he said, put Tiree top of the list.

I got in touch with the Tiree Regatta committee and asked them to send a letter to the trust requesting our attendance at the next regatta. This duly arrived and at our next committee meeting it was unanimously agreed that we should visit Tiree.

With the help of our increasing number of skippers An Sulaire was moved down the coast. I picked her up in Loch Carnan for the Uist sailing club race to Barra. Angus Brendan MacNeil was to organise a crew for Tiree. He already had Alan Maclean from Mull and Elizabeth MacInnes from Barra.

Unfortunately, two of the crew backed out at the last minute. This then required a bit of inventiveness and persuasion as we tried to coerce, should I mean entice, folk at short notice to join us. A modern-day Press Gang.

It did not present too much of a problem. First up was David a fireman from Glasgow on holiday. Where next David? Oh Oban, and then on to Glasgow. You mean to tell me you are going to Oban from Barra passing Tiree and not even stopping? When have you to be back in Glasgow? I've another week. No excuse your coming to Tiree with us. He was delighted, he always wanted to visit Tiree. One down one to go.

Next up was a young woman, Melissa Macleod, from New Zealand who had just cycled from the Butt of Lewis to Barra. Her ancestors had originally come from the islands. Where next? Oban. You mean to tell me you have cycled through all these islands and you are going to sail past Tiree and not visit it. Well how do I get to Oban? Instead of the ferry from Barra to Oban you take the ferry from Tiree to Oban. How about the bike? Plenty room. Crew sorted:

Kenneth Morrison, Stornoway, Skipper
Angus Brendan Macneil, Barra
Elizabeth MacInnes, Barra
Alan Maclean, Mull
David Wilson, Glasgow
Melissa Macleod, New Zealand

Winds force 4s and 5s South Westerly's made easy passage to Gunna Sound between Tiree and Coll. However, after tacking through the sound and pointing towards Scarinish. A few tacks would be required to get into Scarinish harbour. A slight error left the traveller up the mast. No sooner had I thought about how to get it back down than Winker was up the mast and had us hooked on again.

As we approached Scarinish Bay, Winker had pointed out the markers to me, ain't it good to have local knowledge. I looked ahead at the pier and the sound of the pipes came drifting out. I realised we had an audience of some sixty folk on the pier. Right everyone, here is the plan. I primed everyone to their positions and said I would keep the sail up as long as possible. We would get in without even using the oars but would have them ready, the starboard oar get ready to ship. Now everyone be sure of your role and position, we cannot mess up now.

There was a fishing boat tied to the outside of the pier and I said we would aim to tie up alongside it. Everyone ready, we executed the manoeuvre, dropping the sail at the last minute, perfection, and kissed the fishing boat. Without even having to use the oars, and the pipes played on.

Ropes made fast, everyone ashore. You first Coinneach. No, the skipper will be the last to leave. Not this time they insisted and up I went to the fondness welcome I have ever received. All along the quay they stood and welcomed us one by one by introduction with a hug a kiss and a shake, welcome to Tiree. On to Lachie's van, the side door slid open to reveal a gantry of welcome.

Around the beautiful horseshoe bay to the hotel. Further celebrations and I went searching to ensure that the crew were being catered for. Could I not find the girl from New Zealand?! After a while I found her outside by the beach with tears streaming down her cheeks. What's the matter I asked. No matter where I've been in the world, I've never had a welcome like that. I gave her a big hug and said neither have I.

We said our goodbyes the next day as they headed off on the ferry to Oban. Winker had organised himself a lift on a rib and was off with the blink of an eye, is that how he got his nickname, hmm? There is something about a ship leaving I cannot explain. I am transfixed, waving until it is almost out of sight. I suppose it comes from my mother as we would wave our cousins away on the Loch Seaforth. She would not stop waving and her sisters and cousins on board neither, until they could not see. I am sure if she could have climbed a high hill she would have kept on waving.

As they left, we welcomed aboard Angus Brendan's cousins from Cape Breton. We took part in the local regatta and won the race. More importantly we got everyone involved and made sure that as many people as possible enjoyed An Sulaire's visit to Tiree.

As I stood talking to Murdo from Tolsta, my mother's village, Angus Brendan strolled over and I introduced him. Och, what is it with you Leodachs? Wherever you go you land up talking to one another.

In fact, there were three seamen marooned on a desert island. They were caught by a tribe of cannibals. First night one of them was hauled up before the chief. Who are you and where are you from? asked the chief. Joe Brown from London, England was the reply. Huh, into the pot, eat the meat and the bones for the dogs.

This continued the next night. Who are you and where are you from? Patrick O'Brian from Dublin, Ireland. Huh, into the pot, eat the meat and the bones for the dogs.

The third seaman was hauled up the next night. Who are you and where you from? Murdo Macleod from Tolsta, Eilean Leodous. Och, dah mah na ha shu, replied the chief. We must have a cheildh. All goes to show, wherever you go you will always meet a Leodoch.

Lachie Brown mentioned that he had to visit the Isle of Coll. I suggested that if he found a crew we would go there the next day and so we did. Up by Gunna Sound where we tried a spot of fishing and into Arinagour. The crew left to get refreshment in the local inn, and I went with Lachie to do some visiting. First, we went to see Chrissie and she had the most wonderful vegetable plot I had ever seen. She seemed to be able to grow everything. Now I understood one of the reasons for Lachie's visit. He was having a raid and he filled a basket.

Donald Mackenzie popped over and while yarning with him it turned out he was caught with my father at St Valery and was alongside him as a POW in the north of Poland.

They told us that come the winter there would only be six people left living on Coll and they were the last two locals, both in their eighties. Chrissie felt that soon she might have to move to Tiree.