Cruise report: Ruach explores the Caledonian Canal, July 2024.

Vessel: Ruach, a Hunter Horizon 23 sailing yacht. Persons on board: Dave Hewitt and Kathy Hewitt.

Passage planning.

The objective of the cruise was to spend 7 days in the canal to explore it, hopefully reaching Fort William and returning. The available time for this trip did not allow for going out to sea at the Western end.

Normal passage planning applies to the sea journey from Avoch to the canal sea loch and the return trip of the same, where tidal access to the harbour, tidal streams under the Kessock Bridge, and opening times of the sea lock are the main constraints.

Once in the canal, it is operational times of the locks and bridges and passage time through them that dictates progress, and that is less easy to predict, and the weather conditions on the passage of Loch Ness and Loch Lochy. We hoped to sail as much of the 2 lochs as weather would allow.

The week planned for this trip was booked months in advance so we did not have the luxury of choosing a good weather window or favourable tide times.

The total journey was an expected 130 miles, and fuel consumption was an unknown. We had never motored long distances before so we took as much fuel as we could carry. 12 litres in the outboard motors own tank, and five 5L cans stored in various external lockers (one even in the anchor locker) The only refuelling options are a convenient petrol station close to the canal in Fort Augustus, and a choice of 2 at Fort William but a longer walk from the canal. We took a fold up trolley for this purpose.

Not going out to sea at the Western end meant we could do the whole trip on a 7 day transit licence.

Day 1: Monday 15th July.

Morning high tide was around 7AM Afternoon high tide would be too late to enter the canal before the sea lock closed. So an early start was needed. We travelled to Avoch the evening before, unloaded all our gear and provisions and spent the first night on board. Alarm set at 5AM, swift breakfast and we departed Avoch harbour at 6AM into a Misty Moray firth with a light wind from the south.

Departing Avoch

We had a gentle beam reach sail and by the time we reached Kilmuir the mist was lifting a bit

Kessock Bridge through the mist

Because sailing was slow in the light wind we started the motor and motorsailed the rest of the way. We passed under the bridge just before 8AM nearly an hour after high water so pushing against the start of the ebbing tide. Made contact with the sea loch on VHF and they had one lot of boats coming down the sea loch and could take us in at 8:30 which they did.

Sea Lock

We had already bought the canal licence on line and we were the only boat entering at this time so passage through the sea lock, the railway bridge and Works lock was swift. We just missed a road bridge opening and the Muirtown flight so had an hour to wait before entering the Muirtown flight at 10:20. We shared the locking with another yacht, and HMS Magpie. A survey vessel.

Muirtown flight

We completed the locks and bridges and stopped for lunch on the pontoons above Dochgarroch lock at 13:30 At 14:30 we were out onto Loch Ness. We had a favourable east wind for a very pleasant sail.

It had been our original plan to stop the first night in Urquahart bay, but the favourable wind, and less favourable forecast for the next day meant we decided to carry on. The chart plotter estimated another 4 hours to complete our passage as we passed Urquahart bay and it proved pretty accurate.

Sailing Loch Ness

As we got closer to fort Augustus, the wind eased, speed dropped and light rain started. We hung on for a while but then started the motor and motor sailed out of the rain where we found more wind for a while, but again nearing Fort Augustus, the wind died and we motored the last few miles, and were tied up on the pontoons at 19:15. Then straight out to the Lock Inn for a meal and a pint.

Returning to the boat later, the east wind had picked up again and waves were rolling in from the loch into the canal channel and the pontoons close to the loch were very bouncy. So we moved to a vacant space further up the canal channel where it was more comfortable for the night.

Day 2: Tuesday 16th July

Early morning the loch keeper came around so see which boats wanted to go where and we were offered a space in the first upward locking of the Fort Augustus flight at 9:20 which we accepted. It is a 2.5 hour turnaround so next available after that would be about mid day. We then stopped on the waiting pontoons above the flight for breakfast. This time we shared the locking with the steel barge Ross Cana.

Fort Augustus locks

After breakfast we continued through the canal passing through Loch Oich, then the very pretty Lagan Avenue (on the summit level of the canal) before descending Laggan Locks on the last locking of the day and spent the night on the transit pontoon on the eastern end of Loch Lochy. No food available here (the Eagle Barge restaurant does not open on Tuesdays) so we self catered on board.

Laggan Avenue

Day 3: Wednesday 17th July

We had hoped to sail Loch Lochy, but rounding the headland onto the main body of the Loch, it soon became clear the forecast 8 knots of wind was in fact a measured 20 knots on the nose. We did briefly try with reef 2 in the main, but it was too much for us, so we abandoned that and motored all the way.

Loch Lochy

Entering Gairlochy lock and then onward through the canal to Banavie arriving at about 4PM. One thing the canal skippers guide does not mention (but the lock keeper did) was the Moy swing bridge closes at 16:00 and there are no facilities on the small waiting jetty if you miss the bridge.

Moored at Banavie

We walked to the nearest shop for some provisions and then booked a table for a meal in the Moorings Hotel overlooking Neptunes Staircase.

Day 4 Thursday 18th July

We departed Banavie to start the return trip at 9AM, on the lock keepers advice the Moy bridge would be open by the time we got there (it opens at 9:30) This time we shared the first locking with another large steel barge, Fingal.

Gairlochy lock

We tied up breefly on the pontoon below Gairlochy lock, to tidy a few things before exiting back onto Loch Lochy at 11:00. This time the wind was kind and we had a gentle downind sail all the way, motorsailing to start, and turned the motor off as the wind increased. It remained dry until we reached the far end of the Loch and were taking the sails down.

Loch Lochy

We had lunch on the transit pontoon while the lock keeper had hers, then back through Laggan Avenue, through Loch Oich, onwards to Fort Augustus. We made such good progress that we arrived at Fort Augustus at 16:30. As we were tying up, the lock keeper offered us a place in the final locking down of the Fort Augustus flight, but we declined and spent the night above the flight, having been assured a place on the 8AM locking next day. This time choosing the Chinese restaurant for our evening meal.

Above Fort Augustus locks

Day 5 Friday July 19th

Down Fort Augustus flight on first locking at 8AM and straight out onto Loch Ness at 9:30. Very light wind and misty conditions but started sailing. The wind gradually strengthened and the mist started to lift for a while giving a pleasant down wind sail. But the wind continued strengthening with each Gybe becoming more violent, even with reef 2 in the main sail so we took the decision to drop the sails and motor the last 5 miles into Urquahart bay. We did record a new high speed for this boat of 7.2 knots.

Sailing on a misty Loch Ness

Entering Urquahart bay gave relief from the lumpy waters and we gently motored into Urquahart bay harbour where we paid our fee for the night and moored Ruach in a surprisingly empty harbour.

Urquahart bay harbour

Early that evening we were greeted to a Catalina fly by at low altitude directly over the harbour, twice. A bit of research afterwards revealed this is the only airworthy Catalina left in the UK that was making a 5 day tour to commemorate the 80th anniversary of 2 pilots being awarded the Victoria Cross. It was on it's way to Inverness airport that day. We think the fly by over Loch Ness RNLI station was a thank you, as that same aircraft got stranded on Loch Ness in late 2020 unable to start one of it's engines and the Loch Ness lifeboat towed the aircraft to a safe mooring and recovered the crew. The aircraft had to be craned out of the water in Urquahart bay for an engine swap before finally flying home 2 months later.

We walked into Drumnadrochit that evening for provisions and a meal at the Drumnadrochit hotel.

Day 6 Saturday July 20th

We left the harbour and back onto Loch Ness At 9:30 sails up for a pleasant sail in light winds and flat waters, but after an hour the light winds died so we had to motor sail the rest of the way to the end of Loch Ness and into the canal again. Lunch in the café above Dochgarroch lock, then down through the locks and bridges arriving in Seaport marina about 16:00 We walked to the Clachnaharry Inn for a meal and a pint.

Loch Ness

Seaport Marina

Day 7 Sunday July 21st

In the morning we talked to lock keepers to agree an exit time from the canal with our planned entry into Works Lock to start the process at 11AM. 10:45 the motor would not start, it would not turn over. Quickly diagnosed the problem as the Anderson connector feeding power to the motor was falling apart. A quick bodged fix with that essential boat kit, duct tape got us started and into the lock. We did not stop the motor then until we got back to Avoch, because if it did not start by electric start, the emergency pull cord starter is somewhat less convenient.

Out of the sea loch at 12:30. This is earlier than ideal and meant passing under the Kessock Bridge nearly 2 hours before high water, punching against a 2 knot incoming tidal flow. But the wind, already forecast to be brisk was strengthening all the time so we thought the earlier departure to miss the worse of the wind was worthwhile. Passed under the bridge okay and motor sailed with just the Jib deployed.

Heading home

As we approached Munlochy bay, we decided to party furl the jib, only to find the furling line had jumped off the drum. We diverted into Munlochy bay to get some shelter to go forward to clear the jam. Then furled the jib and motored the rest of the way back to Avoch.

Turning into the wind for the entrance channel into Avoch harbour was a very wild and uncomfortable approach, but safely through the harbour entrance and all was calm and safely back on our home berth by 1PM

At the start I mentioned fuel. It is hard to say just how much we sailed and how much we motored but an optimistic view is we sailed 40 of the 130 miles. Total fuel used was just 22 litres. Well less than we expected, and we did that just with the fuel we were carrying, with a healthy reserve still in the tanks when we reached Avoch, hence we never did need to refuel during the trip.