

Sail Caledonia 2018

Sail Caledonia is a 'race by sail and oar across the Great Glen' and is fantastic fun.

The Caledonian canal starts on the Atlantic coast at Fort William and works its way across Scotland joining Loch Lochy, Loch Oich and Loch Ness until finally after 97Km it meets the North Sea. The scenery is breath taking the whole way.



Ben Nevis from Corpach basin, the start of the Caledonian canal

Last year we took the relatively easy option of camping ashore and having all our meals cooked for us, our camping kit and supplies were transported each day by minibus and we used my outboard to potter along between the racing stages. This year I was late applying, and all the camping places had gone, so the only way of joining was to sleep on my boat.

I originally bought my boat 'Peewit' with the intention of using her as a camp cruiser, so this was the ideal opportunity to make that a reality. I spent far too many hours researching boat tents on the internet and finally plumped for a simple over boom style, and after 3 or 4 weekends work with help from my Mother in law the tent was finished... it looked really good, I just hoped it would keep the Scottish rain and midges out.

On my first sail Caledonia I only had one set of oars, and they were too short... I had no idea how much rowing would be involved and how slow it would be with only one person powering a tubby sailing dinghy. This time I wanted more oar power, so I scoured the internet and found some old carbon fibre racing oars for £20ea, I bought them, repaired the blades and extended the handles, great we had the oars... now to fit in two rowing positions. I wasn't convinced there would be enough room but with some careful measuring and offering up of people I decided we could just about fit in. I then needed to work out where we were going to sit, I didn't want to make any permanent alterations to my boat, so I constructed a slot in double rowing seat bench type thing, which also made a convenient place to attach the bed boards. A whole winter of thinking, sewing and wood butchery and I was ready.

Now to find someone to join me... who did I know that would want to spend 24 hours a day for a week in a small boat with me... it wasn't a long list! I then remembered a very light winded sail from Lymington to Newtown creek with Simon Harrop, we seemed to get on well and we rowed most of the way, Simon happened to mention that he quite liked rowing... that was enough of a selection process, I asked him and he decided to join me.

I looked at the other entries and soon realised that we were not going to sail or row fast enough to be any kind of a serious contender for the race, so decided to take on the 'Highlander challenge'.

This, it turns out, is quite a thing.

The Highlander challenge involves carrying all your kit on the boat, including all your food (except evening meals which we had aboard Ros Crana the beautiful barge which acted as the organisers HQ, galley and accommodation for people with sufficient budget) And most importantly we were not allowed to use an outboard or accept a tow for the bits in between the races.

After an enormous drive we made it to Fort William and were ready to go.

Sail Caledonia consists of one or two races a day as you move along the Canal. Some only by rowing, some only by sailing but mostly you can do what you think will get you to the finish line the quickest, this is very tactical when there is a light head wind as rowing can often be faster than tacking to windward.

This year the forecast was for glorious sunshine and very light or non-existent headwinds... there was going to be a lot of rowing involved.



Peewit fully laden, in 'Expedition mode'

Saturday - Lochaber Yacht Club to Corpach

The first day involves launching all the boats and a short race up Loch Linnie to Corpach basin where the canal itself starts. The wind was very light at the start, so we decided to give the new oars a go. We started at the back but had the joy of rowing through a fleet of sailing boats all wishing that the wind was stronger... unfortunately the smugness faded as the breeze filled in and they all sailed past us... damn... time to hoist the sails.

Distance sailed 2.5 miles - Distance rowed 1.5 miles



Sunday - Corpach to Gairloch

I had to get up early to row the first canal leg to the bottom of Neptune's staircase, a flight of 8 locks. We ascended the locks whilst the crews drove cars and trailers to the other end of the canal and were shuttled back in a minibus to meet us at the top.



Along the way we met the crew of Maggie, a Drascombe Longboat, Alex and his two kids who were also taking on the Highlander challenge, after a bit of initial competitiveness we soon bonded in our joint quest, we decided ours was a far more noble endeavour than merely racing!

Then came the big rowing race, up to 12Km along the first stretch of the canal, it felt a long way... little were we to know what coming later in the week!

Distance sailed 0 miles – Distance rowed 7.5 miles

We had our first night on the boat, with a bit of shuffling about and rearranging it looked like things were going to be OK, there was plenty of space and it was a very comfortable night... in fact I loved it.

Monday - Gairloch to Loch Oich



It looked hopeful for a lovely sail when we woke on our boat and put the tent away but as we sailed out to the start line the wind died away... out with the oars. The start line is about 2 miles from the overnight spot, we only just made it to the start line in time, after a quick breather and we soon realised that there wasn't going to be enough wind to make it worth sailing so we just kept on rowing!

Distance sailed 1 mile - Distance rowed 9.5 miles

Tuesday - Loch Oich to Fort Augustus

Another successful night's sleep was followed by a quick breakfast and a short 1.5mile row to the end of Loch Oich... wind!!! Fantastic. It was a simple passage race up the loch.



The wind was blustery, and we never really settled into a groove, but it was wonderful to be sailing.

In the afternoon we rallied along the canal and through the lock a Kytra, some boats took the opportunity to get 'dressed all over'... a fancy dressed boat competition judged by the lock keepers at Fort Augustus.



The final event of the day was a speed pursuit rowing race, we were paired up with the French Multi mono that we had battled with on loch Lochy, we really wanted to beat them this time but they pulled away from us at the start, they just had too much man power but all the gauloise and camembert took their toll and we slowly reeled them in over took them.

Distance sailed 3.5 miles Distance rowed 4 miles

Then it was down the flight of locks at Fort Augustus to face Loch Ness



Wednesday - Fort Augustus to Foyers.

Loch Ness is an extraordinary body of water at 23 miles long it is too big to see from one end to the other, it has a horizon!

More importantly it had wind! After a slightly wobbly night tucked in behind some other boats we rowed out to the start, set sail and were away. The wind steadily built during the morning and was touching a perfect force five by lunchtime, it was a 13 mile beat up the loch to Foyers, wonderful sailing... absolutely perfect.

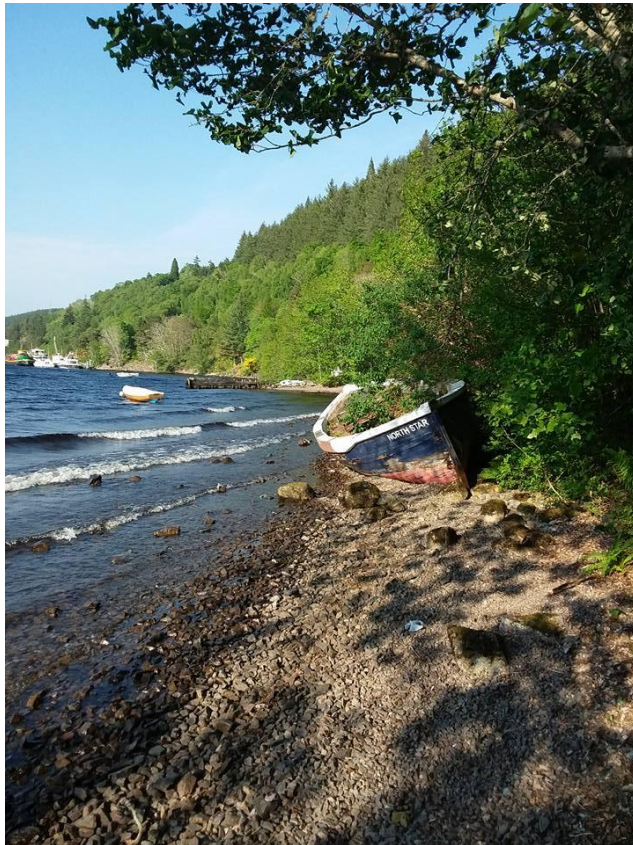
We overnighted up a small creek off the side of the Loch, this was the high point of the trip for me it was such a wonderful spot... so beautiful.

Distance sailed 13 miles distance rowed 0.5 miles





Ros Crana 'the mothership' on Loch ness



Wreck at Foyers... how we were soon to feel!

Thursday - Foyers to Dochgarroch

The race was due to start at Urquhart castle at 11am so we needed an early start. Accompanied by Alex and his family we set off up Lock Ness in a misty F2.



We were the only boats on the Loch and it was magical. But true to form, the gentle wind petered out so if we were to stand a chance of getting to the start on time we had to crack out the oars again, the start line was over 5 miles away.

We rowed in a leisurely fashion as we weren't racing and arrived at the start line with 10 minutes to spare, by this point the sun was out and the wind had died away completely, there was no point in setting the sails even though quite a lot of the fleet gave it a good try (mainly to avoid any more rowing!) but we just cracked right on... we were getting used to it now.

The race was 9 miles down the loch with a bit of a loop at the end. We started well, got away from all the boats that were trying to sail, and scooted off down the loch with only the more specialist rowing boats in front of us. Craic (last years winner) decided to row and sail, they kept a reasonable distance behind us gaining when there was some breeze and falling back again when it died. The thing with rowing is you can see exactly what's happening behind you... real motivation to keep going! We knew that if the wind picked up at all Craic would sail straight past us so we just rowed and rowed and rowed! We crossed the line in front... first in class and third overall... knackered but happy.

We then relaxed in the sun while the race finished before rowing to Dochgarroch.

Distance sailed 0.5 miles – Distance rowed 16.5 miles

Friday - Dochgarroch to North Kessock

We had to get up early in order to row to Inverness. We set off alone in beautiful sunshine and had a wonderful gentle row down the canal, by this time through much gentler countryside with the banks lined with gorse. We all congregated at Clachnaharry before locking out for the final time into the Beaulay Firth, that was it we had made it back to salt water, but now it was the North Sea we had travelled from one ocean to another... wonderful.

The wind picked up to a lovely F3 for the final race which was a straightforward round the cans job. Apart from a bit of argy bargy around one of the marks it went as expected.

Miles sailed 4 - Miles rowed 5



That's it we'd finished, the culmination of 6 months of planning, 24 miles of sailing and 45 miles of rowing. I was truly exhausted, nearly half a stone lighter, elated and a little emotional.

All that was left to do was recover the boats. While we were waiting our turn to land we were visited by an enormous dolphin who popped up almost close enough to touch, a magical end to an incredible week.

That evening was the award ceremony, we received our Highland Quaich trophy, something that I'm surprisingly proud of.



Simon was fantastic company and was very patient with my terrible rowing style. We met some excellent people and shared some wonderful experiences, sleeping on a small boat is one of life's simple pleasures and I found rowing to be surprisingly enjoyable.

The event is beautifully organised and very well run and I would love to go back again but would need to find a different way to experience it, a different boat maybe...