

CHICO 28th June - 2nd July 2018

Our third visit to Chico started with high expectations weather-wise - the previous 2 trips had been dogged by cloud, wind and rain - which, although it is impossible to lessen the experience on board this wonderful ship, had resulted in return visits to known destinations.

However 2018 was to be different. The sun shone and water sparkled as we arrived on the new pontoon in Oban Bay. Walking down with our luggage, Oban had more of a feel of the Mediterranean than Scotland's west coast. Large luxurious vessels of every shape and size were tied up alongside, provisioning up for trips and awaiting guests. Chico almost looked dwarfed alongside the large STA ship docked beside her.

We met Gus as he walked back from Tescos - vital supplies in hand - and made our way to Chico. The welcome was warm as always and as we handed our bags up the now familiar boarding ladder it felt like being home again. After a brief tour of the engine room for Thomas and a cup of tea and slice of superb carrot and banana cake, dripping with butter icing, the engines were started and we slipped the morning ropes and set off south from Oban Bay.



The trip out of the bay at Chico's cruising speed of around 7 knots allows plenty of time to admire the view, and the elegant large houses perching high above the sound looked positively majestic in the summer sun.

Heading south, the seas opened up and we set course on what, for all of us, was a new route - veering west at Fladda light to head down towards the Garvellachs - a group of uninhabited islands between Jura and Mull. En route we had distant glimpses of Minky whales and the odd puffin floating alongside. We made steady progress and anchored in a small bay tucked behind 2 rocky islands with the Atlantic open to the south. There was one other yacht anchored to the north, and the owners canoed out from the landing as we settled down. By now it was early evening but Gus suggested a shore party before dinner, so we all set off in the dinghy for a wonderful enclosed landing station just below the ruined monastery.



Stepping ashore, the first thing that grabbed us was how peaceful and fertile the small island was. A short walk from the shore we entered a fenced enclosure around a ruined monastery, corn drying kiln and various small buildings. To the south, the grave of St Columba's mother stood out on a low hill and we made our way up to this slab carved with a simple cross, then continued beyond to reach the trig point on the top of the island. The cliff dropped away sheer below on the west side, with dramatic views along the Garvellachs to the north and over to Mull to the west. The amount of woodland on the north island struck us, as did the size of the corn kiln - some lazy beds were visible on the eastern side on what was once an important island community. A detour to the north of the main compound led to the remains of the dramatic beehive cairns - apparently the best examples in the UK outside Ireland.



A wave to Chico saw Gus leaping back into the dinghy and motoring over to pick us up - by now the other yacht

had upped anchor and was heading off through the Grey Dogs on a falling tide. We clambered back on board Chico and did a quick change for dinner, enjoying pre-dinner drinks on the aft deck followed by superb dinner of fish pie, poached peaches in raspberry coulis and then cheese. As we dined another yacht crept in to the bay and dropped anchor to the north of us. We all descended to bed after a perfect evening as the sun set above the island and the Atlantic swell rocked Chico gently.



We woke to another perfect morning - the advance party (Julia and Rob) were on deck early watching the morning get underway, plying those below with welcome early morning tea. After a hearty breakfast, Gus upped anchor and Chico slid quietly out of the bay by the southernmost chan-



nel, watched by a Peregrine who was sunning himself on top of the crags. Gus set course for Loch Tarbert on the west coast of Jura - the 'dream' destination from the very first voyage in 2016, but weather had never allowed it - however this morning was perfect and we all sat on deck and enjoyed the views as we crossed to Jura then followed the coast south, enjoying fabulous views of the raised beaches, caves and stacks.

We entered the outer loch and dropped anchor for lunch in a small bay on the north shore. As we motored in a sea eagle sat keeping watch on a rocky island. After a marvelous lunch of celery soup and smoked fish salad we were taken ashore to explore some of the island. Richard climbed on to the ridge, but beaten by





the heat, we retreated to the shore, and after exploring the caves to the west enjoyed a paddle in the warm water until Gus appeared in the dinghy to whisk us back out to Chico.

Back on board, the anchor was raised with the usual calm style, and we set off for the channel leading to the more sheltered eastern part of the loch, motoring through the narrows before dropping anchor at the far eastern end just by the opening to the narrow gorge-like channel to the inner loch - the extreme east end of the loch. Having anchored - Gus suggested a dinghy expedition to the inner loch before dinner on the last of the ingoing tide. All eagerly accepted and left Sue preparing dinner as we donned lifejackets

for the trip. It was an extraordinarily beautiful passage, low cliffs along the north side, passing a lone yacht anchored in deepish water on the first bend then following a series of leading marks, set by Blondie Hassler (founder of the OSTAR race and owner of junked-rigged Folkboat "Jester") in the 1970s. The marks provided a perfect route through the winding channel - eventually



opening out in the expansive inner loch. This mostly dries at low tide, but the 'pool' provides sheltered anchorage for boats serving the lodge on the south shore of the outer loch. The odd dinghy was moored or on shore, but apart from them there was very little sign of life - though the end of the track from the public road could be seen heading west from a little boathouse. After some exploration we set back off out of the channel, the outboard puttering quietly, and going for a closer look of the moored boat (Stray - a dismantled Colvic Atlanta) on the way out. As we left her the engine let out a rather odd splutter - 'have you enough fuel' enquired Rob. 'Plenty' came the assured reply from Gus - but a quick shake of the can revealed the truth! With the tide still running strongly inwards a quick relay of rowers managed to beat the tide flow and we eventually arrive back at Chico at 7.30pm to be greeted by Sue 'did the engine break down or something?...'. A quick change again for dinner, then back on to the aft deck for drinks followed by another superb meal of lamb tagine and cous-cous, followed by a delicious orange and almond cake with marscapone and marmalade cream. Sue and Gus told the story of their encounter with a large adder when they had gone ashore at lunchtime - something we had not thought about as we wandered through the bracken!

The night was much calmer, with no Atlantic swell to rock the boat and a coolish breeze through the open portholes and all slept well and awoke to yet another perfect morning. In the evening another motor boat had slipped in to the loch and anchored on the north shore by a small bothy. Inspection through the binoculars suggests a 1960s classic, but the lettering on her cabin side proved just too small to read from the distance. After another hearty breakfast, Gus lifted the anchor and the engines whirred into action, obligingly steaming over towards the motor boat gently to allow the



curious members of the party a chance to read the lettering - the words 'Royal Cruiser 34' became clear - a Swedish classic built by Storebro in the late 1960s/70s. A quick wave to the inhabitants and Chico slipped out of the narrow channel into the outer bay - nerve wrackingly narrow for a 70' boat!

The weather was fine, but wind picked up as we exited the loch and turned to port down the Sound of

Islay. Having been on Islay researching the book, we spotted the familiar landmarks of Ruaval Lighthouse, Bunnahabhainn Distillery, the new distillery under construction at Ardnahoe, Caol Ila, then on past Port Askaig with the lifeboat at anchor, Dunlossit House, and on down the sound. We anchored for lunch just off Brosdale Island - a small island enjoyed by seabirds and seals by the eastern tip of Jura - and, wind now dropped, enjoyed a wonderful lunch of tomato soup followed by frittata accompanied by an avocado salad - interrupted only by the putter of a creel boat as it passed to stern - 'nice to 'ave money...' was heard as the fishermen waved grudgingly in Chico's direction... Calmac's Finlaggan appeared steaming fast towards Port Askaig and the table was quickly cleared in fear of her infamous wash sending things flying - but when it eventually arrived it was thankfully little more than a gentle wave - the force of the swell having lessened as it travelled towards us.

Feeling replete once again the anchor was raised, and we backed out of the bay leaving the seals, basking in the sun, to their peace. Gus set course to cruise gently up the east coast and inshore of the Small Isles off Craighouse. The village - dominated by the Isle of Jura Distillery - looked larger than I had imagined. A thin line of houses stretching out along the bay. Once past the village, Gus changed course and steered across towards Loch Keil in Kintyre.



We approached the anchorage around 5 - greeted this time by a swimmer cooling off in the loch, treading water by a couple of mooring buoys. By now it had become very warm and the breeze had mostly dropped. Gus offered a shore trip and we all leapt at it, planning a split visit - Julia and I doing the short road walk round to the old slipway at the end of the road then climbing to Keils Chapel, Rob and Richard climbing up to the chapel then doing the 3 mile road walk round to the far side on the bay to be picked up from the shore of little Danna island. We arrived back on board in time to have a welcome shower before changing for dinner and, once again, enjoying drink and dinner on the aft deck - this time accompanied by a young swimmer who circled Chico as we dined on baked salmon with asparagus and new potatoes, followed by passion fruit and banana cream pudding then cheese. Exhausted we all crept below and slept soundly once again.

We awoke to yet another perfect morning - and





- after yet another hearty breakfast, the anchor was quietly raised and we set off back out of the loch and turned south, passing between Danna Island and the McCormack Isles, then heading north up Loch Sween. Again, much of this was familiar to some of us from the shore, so it was fun to pick out the coast of Danna Island, Zoe Ritchie the weaver's house, and Taynish peninsula with its round shore house. A Rival 36 lay peacefully at anchor in the little bay here, and we motored on past, eventually seeing the hidden village of Tayvallich appear through the narrow entrance to the west. Despite the popularity of this as a mooring, we saw few boats as we motored on to our lunch stop - a wonderful little mooring tucked in amongst the most southerly of the Fairy Isles at the head of Loch Sween. This was a tight spot to get Chico in to, with a yacht already moored in the favoured spot, but Gus, with his customary calm, manoeuvred her brilliantly into what looked like an impossible anchorage for a boat of Chico's size.



The day by now was calm and sunny again, and a pre-lunch excursion around the islands was suggested. As Rob and I had visited from the shore previously, we knew of 2 forest roads that lead up to the beaver home of Loch Collie Bharr, and Gus was interested to locate them for future reference. As we set off, the moored yacht hailed us 'we have a swimmer out, please look out. Do you know where



the Osprey nest is?' - a 'yes' from Rob.. 'She's a lovely boat - where have you sailed from' - 'Loch Keil' replied Gus before upping the revs and setting off for the northerly islands, slipping past a seal and pup, and steering well clear of the swimmer who was on rocks photographing other seals. As we motored slowly north, an Osprey flew up from a tree. Gus immediately killed the engine and we drifted quietly for a while watching the bird from a distance as it circled above the nest, calling to the chick which dutifully laid low, keeping out of sight as instructed. Gus pulled the start cord and we moved quietly away to leave them in peace - we glided slowly back towards Chico, passing the seal

and pup, now in the water, and going in to the southern bay. Here Rob pointed out masses of black brittle 'stars' - a delicate starfish which enjoys shallow muddy water. As we gazed into the water then ran along the rocky shore below a majestic Scots Pine, a slight crackling noise alerted me and a quick glance saw a black mink moving along the shore. We followed it as it moved along the shoreline in a typical stop-start movement, then lost it for a while only to see it again as a weird 'decapitated' head emerging from a pile of weed on the shore. We continued motoring slowly to the very innermost bay, over thong weed reminiscent of Miss Havesham's bedroom as Julia commented - weird, white fluffy weeds in the warm, shallow water. As we entered the bay, passing a swimming crab, the shoreline causeway came into view - the forest road to Loch Collie Bharr was found!

Back on Chico, Sue had prepared a magnificent lunch of aparagus tart and a Greek salad, followed by tea and cake. As we ate a 42' Halberg Rassay with blue ensign fluttering, confidently motored in behind us and anchored just astern. 'We're off in half an hour' called Gus 'so are we' came the reply 'just a quick lunch-stop'. With that we all finished lunch then, with the wind now conveniently holding Chico with her bow facing out of the anchorage, Gus lifted the anchor and we pulled slowly out of the Fairy Isles - waving to the remaining anchored boats.



The return run down Loch Sween allowed time for snoozes and showers, then time to settle down for a long run up to a night stop in Loch Spelve on Mull. Gus steered over towards Jura to take a direct route north and we slipped up the shore, passing the house at Barnhill where George Orwell wrote 1984. The house was more substantial than any of us had thought and stood proudly on a sheltered knoll above the sea. A lone Arctic Skua passed by, pursued by gulls and disappeared behind us in the shimmering light.

The north end of Jura was new to us all, and looked pleasantly wooded as the tide stream pulling us towards the Gulf of Corryvreckan increased the speed over ground to a heady 11.2 knots. Gus steered a course close to the mouth of the gulf, and as it opened up the awesome sight of the towering cliffs of Scarba to the north side and the sun playing on the water as it swept towards the standing wave of the whirlpool made a breathtaking sight. A small motor boat wallowed in the wash to our

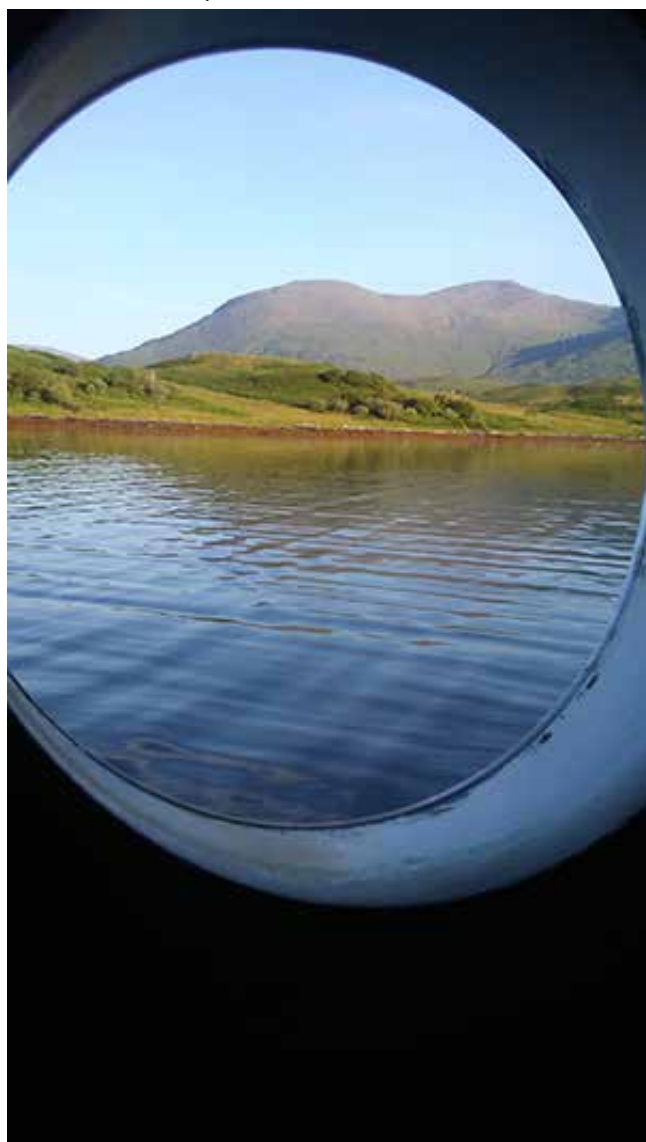


left as it passed and our speed slowed to under 7 knots as the tide stream on the north side fought against us. Chico ploughed steadily onward and as we cleared the tide stream into the gulf our speed picked up again, aided by the flood tide up towards Fladda. By now the sun was blinding as it reflected off the turbulent surface of the water approaching the Fladda light. Luing was now off to our starboard, brilliant green interspersed with the yellow of newly cut hay fields and the famous cattle paddling on the shore - a stark contrast to the rockiness of Scarba to our port. As we were swept on, Scarba gave way to Lunga, with its small cottages then Ruadh Fiolla with its cluster of buildings to the west, and Cullipol on Luing appeared to the right as we sped past the picturesque lighthouse on Fladda and out into more open sea.

Free of the Sound of Luing, the swell picked up and Chico started to roll gently as we headed towards the unforgiving eastern cliffs of Mull. Gus obligingly changed heading to avoid the swell while Sue put the kettle on and produced a cup of tea and mouthwatering choice of cakes. Refreshed, Gus altered course once again and Chico edged up the coast of Mull towards the mouth of Loch Spelve, visible ahead. As we got closer to shore, the waves died slightly but the stiff breeze continued and, as we reached the complex entrance to the loch, a small sailing boat - Calyce - was tacking up the channel in front of us. The entrance to Loch Spelve is challenging at any time, but under sail and against the wind provided an extra challenge. Gus held Chico back subtly, allowing the yacht to progress in a series of short tacks in a squally breeze as she negotiate the perch-marked rock in the channel. Initial annoyance at the yacht dissipated as she successfully made the passage and, on closer observation, revealed a solo sailor at the helm. We slipped by as he put in a long tack to the south and headed north into the sheltered part of the loch to find an anchorage in the lee of a low headland between two areas of mussel buoys - a major feature of Loch Spelve. Another yacht was tucked behind the rocky island to the east where Sulisker and Redshank had moored in previous years, but Gus edged expertly into a fine sheltered spot, to be joined later by Calyce, and a third yacht later to our north.

By now it was 7.30pm - the trip from the Fairy Isles has taken 5 hours and all ducked down below for a quick change before dinner. As we have now found to be customary on 'last nights' - Gus and Sue joined us in a pre-dinner drink (in the saloon for once, driven indoors by the cold breeze) then Sue returned to the galley to perform her magic yet again in the small space and delicious rib-eye steaks and potato and onion pie appeared, followed by a de-constructed cheesecake and the customary cheese board. With relaxation now at its peak - a bottle of Bunnahabhainn was produced for a night-cap and the convivial conversation around the dining table continued until well after usual turning-in time!

The morning brought a return to the calm, sunny weather - and slightly thick heads! We mustered on deck in the now customary fashion - bare feet on the warm teak, cloudless blue skies, and birds going about their business on land and sea. A fish farm boat steamed in to the bay lit by the morning sun, the sound of the crew's radio booming out the Osmond's 'Crazy Horses' in an incongruous manner





as it approached the mussel farm. Gus called us in for breakfast and we enjoyed another feast, then, one last look around the loch and Gus pulled up the anchor, washed off the mud for the last time on this trip and returned to the wheelhouse to gently ease Chico's engines into reverse and manoeuvre carefully out of the anchorage. This time there was nobody visible to wave us off from the neighbouring yachts - the crew presumably enjoying a lie in.

Slipping out of Loch Spelve, the breeze of the night before had gone and once again Loch Linnhe glistened in the sun. The shore of north east Mull slipped by and we set course to the north end of Kerrera. Now in busier waters - a number of yachts and workboats were visible. A creel boat from Loch Spelve steamed past to port; Isle of Mull headed towards Craignure; The Flying Dutchman passed to port on passage towards Mull; the elegant large fisheries protection ship, Minna, moored off Ganavan and a host of small yachts entering or leaving Oban Bay. Kerrera looked fertile and superb as we rounded the north end of the island - finally slipping into Oban Bay to complete our trip. We pulled up alongside the pontoon, watching Gus and Sue as they expertly hooked the mooring warps over the cleats from on deck in a simple but well-tested routine, in line with everything else they do on Chico. One last trip below decks to tidy our cabins and pack, then Thomas appeared with the trolley and we all walked up the gangway to the pontoon gate to say a fond farewell to Gus and Sue, with a tear in the eye, after a completely perfect summer expedition.

