



# UNITED STATES LIGHTHOUSE SOCIETY

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## **Hebrides Discovery Journal Charter by the US Lighthouse Society**

June 15th 4,00 pm: Overcast, brooding, heavy grey skies, but not for one minute did the dark weather dampen the mood and excitement of this group of lighthouse enthusiasts as we set out from Oban aboard the m/s Hjalmar Bjorge. Quickly the sleek beautiful lines of “Lismore lighthouse” came into view. Later, as we approached Tobermory, “Rhuba na Gall lighthouse” could be clearly seen on the far headland, but that was part of tomorrow’s adventure. Our more immediate concern was the 48 hour weather forecast which wasn’t looking too good – what to do!

June 16th 7.00 am: We bundled up and headed ashore to catch the 07.20 am ferry to Kilchoan. Captain Mark was not comfortable with any anchorages near Ardnamurchan given the possibility of strong winds and heavy swells. So it was the ferry and a local lady; Helen Ferguson, to our rescue. She, her two daughters, and former lighthouse keeper Ian Duff drove us the seven miles from Kilchoan to Ardnamurchan lighthouse. They also organized our lighthouse tour; made coffee and got us back to the ferry in time for the 11.50 am sailing back to Tobermory. What wonderful Scottish hospitality. 12.30 pm: The winds were picking up and with Westerly Force 6 winds forecast it was decision time. The original plan took us northwest to the Isles of Canna, Hysker and then southwest across the Minch. Mark’s concern was that we could possibly become trapped for several days by bad weather on Canna. A decision was made to reverse our plans and first head north to the more protected waters east of Skye. As dolphins played across the bow we viewed lighthouses at Rhuba Na Gall, Ardnamurchan, Eilean Chathastail, and Sleat Point, before finally anchoring near Ornsay lighthouse. A lighthouse feast day.

June 17th 8.00 am: Mark moved the boat close in to Ornsay lighthouse. Blustery winds and drizzle made any lengthy Zodiac travel a little too challenging. Everyone went ashore to view the lighthouse, keeper’s cottages and old gardens. It looked like the cottages were being renovated as holiday lets. At low tide there would be access from a nearby road. By late morning the weather improved and we set off north through the Kyles, but only managed to get half way through before the ebb tide set in making for slow travel. 12.45 pm: Lunch was, at anchor, right in front of the magnificent Eilean Donnan castle. For much of the afternoon we explored every nook and cranny in the castle before sailing to Kyle of Localsh for the night. Michelle (Northern Lights – Office Manager) lives near the castle and she was to be our guide at Eilean Ban lighthouse early the next morning.

June 18th – 8.30 am: We walk to a small island lying between the Scottish mainland and the Isle of Skye. Eilean Ban lighthouse sits proudly on a rock guarding the narrow channel. Sadly it’s now overwhelmed by the high bridge to Skye which goes right over the top. The island was also home to Gavin Maxwell – author of “Ring of Bright Water.” We looked, but did not see any of the otters he so loved, but we were able to visit his rather luxurious home and climb the lighthouse. 11.00 am: We steam north, as rainy, grey weather closes in. Fortunately we were able to view, Eilean Beag, Rona, and Eilean

Troddy lighthouses. Then as we reached the north eastern tip of Skye, the clouds start to lift, revealing ever changing scenery of giant cliffs, deep valleys and amazing waterfalls. We voyaged further than originally expected, passing Watnish Point lighthouse and anchored for the night right in front of Dunvagen castle. What a beautiful, peaceful cove and anchorage lying hidden amongst such high wild cliffs

June 19th – 8.30 am: Zodiac ashore to the garden gate on the loch. The castle did not open until 10.00am but we could access the gardens early. Clan Macleod have owned the castle for 800 year and keep everything in first class condition. Before lunch we got underway to find Neist Point lighthouse peaking out from a swirling sea mist. Quite a few people had hiked over the cliffs to this northwest corner of Skye to photograph the marine life frequently found in the waters near this point. True to form no marine mammals showed up during our time there. By mid afternoon we had crossed the Minch and were anchored in the bay below Ushenish Lighthouse. A three mile round trip hike took us up a sloping trail to the lighthouse. Some cliff subsidence was observed at the top and it looked as if the Northern Lighthouse Board maybe getting ready to replace this beautiful old lighthouse.

June 20th – 7.30 am: Today there was a significant increase in sea bird life as we approached some of the more isolated islands. Big flocks of Gannets were seen dive bombing for fish and we come across a basking shark – almost 30' long. By early afternoon we reached magical Mingulay. The sun was trying to pierce through thin layers of mist, and within minutes of our arrival the mists cleared to bright blue skies. The sea was relatively calm, with almost no wave action – perfect for a Zodiac beach landing. Everywhere, we could see quilted patchworks of beautiful flowers, primroses, wild orchids, and yellow iris. After such a wet cold Spring the April and May flowers were in full bloom in late June. We scrambled up the cliff edge in search of Puffins hiding in rabbit burrows atop the cliff, but they were not happy with our arrival. Every few minutes they would sweep up over the cliff edge in squadrons of 50 or more and quickly fly away. Below we could see dozens of seals lazing on the beach – all packed tightly together. We traversed upwards across the mountain slope seeking the coll atop 300' cliffs on the west side of the island. Sea birds of every kind could be seen nesting in the cracks and crevices. Strong up-draughts made some bird landings noticeably precarious. Descending we passed through the remains of crofters long narrow fields and a deserted village. Remote islanders must have lived very tough lives a 100 years ago.

June 21st – 8.00 am: In minutes we rounded the headland and there was Berneray and Barra Head lighthouse. The lighthouse stood atop a 500' cliff making it the highest lighthouse in the UK. We had planned to land at the small rocky jetty and climb the hill, but the landing area was awash with waves, rolling in from the west. No landing today. Bernaray was the southern most point of our original planned travels, However, we were well ahead of schedule, which created some interesting opportunities. Top of almost everyone's wish list was Skerryvore lighthouse, and Mark agreed to head towards Tiree with a view to trying to get there tomorrow. After having finished crossing some of the most confused seas of our voyage Mark began to feel maybe we could get there today. Talk about an excited bunch and it was not just the passengers doing a happy dance.



Molly, our wonderful Irish cook was bouncing around on the foredeck as the lighthouse came into view. Her whole family, parents and grandparents, had grown up in and around lighthouses and Skerryvore was top of her “must see” list. Hours later we entered the calmer waters of Tiree, landing at Scarinish. We headed for the local pub and enquired about how to get to the shore station and museum in Hynish Bay the next morning. Their advice – simply leave a phone message

tonight for the bus.

June 22nd- 8.30 am: I start to worry a little more about transportation and our destinations as we are in un-researched territory. However, our mini- bus arrived right on time, and what a delight Hynish, shore station for Skerryvore, turned out to be. The property and exhibits were in great condition. Mark knows his guests and their interests well – I should stop worrying about route changes. Molly joined us for an hour, but she had to get back early to go grocery shopping. No early bus back, so she hitched and was picked up by someone who knew her, having been a passenger aboard the m/s Hjalmar Bjorge a year earlier ! What an amazingly small world. Mark had even more surprises in store for us that afternoon as we headed for Staffa and Fingals Cave. Then in the evening we anchored in a lovely bay on Ulva. Mark donned his diving gear and returned shortly with large scallops for everyone – absolutely delicious.

June 23rd – 8.00 am: When we started our journey I did not imagine we would be visiting Iona. Fortunately we arrived early morning and had chance to explore the monastery, at our own pace, in relative peace. The historical commentary and music provided on head sets was exceptional. As we left around noon, a large cruise ship pulled into view. I cannot imagine touring such a special revered place with several thousand new friends. I love smaller boats with a great crew and just 12 interesting passengers. Erraid Island, is where Robert Louis Stevenson set the shipwreck scene in his book “Kidnapped.” It’s not far from Iona and is the location of the lighthouse shore station and quarry for Dubh Artach lighthouse. A Dutch Foundation has more recently taken over the renovation of the cottages formerly used by lighthouse keeper’s families. People are again living here year round, and are encouraged to take in paying guests for only GBP50 per week. In return guests are asked to assist with the gardens and renovation work. This system appears to be working well. We hiked past the labyrinth, and climbed the hill to the old lighthouse signal station which served both Skerryvore and Dubh Artach lighthouses. On the horizon we could see Dubh Artach lighthouse for the first time. Later in one of the old barns we even found the old semaphore flags from the signal station.



June 24th – 7.30 am. Several days before Mark had agreed to go to Skerryvore but clearly said. “Don’t ask me to go Dubh Artach.” Yet, as I sat quietly in the pilot house, he was clearly punching into the GPS a way point for Dubh Artach . What a wonderful surprise for the group. Skerryvore was bigger, and marginally protected from massive seas by the reef. Dubh Artach was located on a single large rock where things could get very nasty. Dark smudge marks could be seen going all of the way up to the top of the west side, where seaweed and rocks had been hurled upwards in storm after storm. Huge cliffs and high waterfalls guarded the south eastern shore of Mull as we sailed into Loch Buie. With rain threatening we quickly hiked towards the ruins of Moy Castle. Regrettably all locked up, but what a fantastic setting. With our visit time running short and rain settling in we set out to find the prehistoric stones. We did find an old stone circle within a copse of old trees,

but did we really find the right ruins? Shortly after departing Mark pointed to the nest of a white tailed Eagle in trees clinging to the cliff side. Inside the nest we could see one chick and a mother circling nearby. Regrettably it was time for us to head north and anchor much closer to Oban.

On the morning of 25th June our Hebrides boating adventure came to an end. Thank you so much Mark, Anna, Molly, Michelle and special crew member Seven. This truly was a journey of a lifetime. We loved every moment of it. Christopher Brookes

Trail notice: We later travelled on to Stornoway and the lighthouses of Lewis and Harris. Note: There is now a much improved, all weather, crushed rock, trail covering 95% of the direct route from Scalpay to Eilean Glas lighthouse. No more peat bogs and wet feet.