

The First Voyage of Lumina – post 16

Back on Dry Land

Through the Caledonian and Crinan canals to Ardrossan

After meeting Carol's son off the train in Inverness, he quickly remembered the process of going through the locks as we started on the Caledonian Canal. Locks are very simple things but it's so important that everything is done in exactly the right order or it all goes horribly wrong. The Caledonian canal is relatively easy as all the locks and bridges are manned so all you have to worry about is your boat. Yes, simple but there is lots of fun to be had watching the inept in locks. There are two main process involved, going up and down. For now you can just learn about the boat handling as I know some of you are getting a bit long in the tooth and too much information at once will require a damp towel on the forehead.



Going up in the Caledonian Canal, shore crew positioning the boat perfectly!

So, Going Up. First you decide with the lock keeper which side you are going to tie up as this determines where your ropes and fenders will be. Usually they have a preferred side being the side with their hut, always good to start without making them run round to the other side to catch your ropes. You drive into the lock and your crew throw lines up to the lock keeper (when he is ready for them!). The skipper will hopefully have manoeuvred the boat so they don't have to be thrown too far. The crew will have neat coils that throw easily, they will never pick up a birds nest of rope and hopefully throw it in the right direction knowing it will only land in the water. Usually the lock keeper will want the stern line first as this can then be used to stop the boat going too far forward. He will put the rope through a ring or

hook and give the other end back down to the crew member on the boat. They must then put it round a cleat on the boat so that they can control the tension – it's no good just holding on to it or you might end up being dragged in to the water. All this time the skipper is trying to control the boat and stop it ending up diagonally across the lock.

Once the boat is secured, the gates will be shut behind you and then you find out if you have annoyed the lock keeper as he then opens the sluices to fill the chamber. The water comes in from the canal above at the front of the lock. If he likes you then he will start slowly so there is not too much turbulence, and then open them more when the chamber is fuller and the turbulence is not so much of a problem. If however you have already tested his patience by getting set up on the wrong side or throwing your ropes in the water, or just arriving when he wanted his lunch break then you might find the sluices opened fully at the start and you then have to control the boat in the maelstrom he has created for your enjoyment.



Having fun in the sea lock at Crinan

You will note that I have always referred to lock keepers as he, but of course there are lady lock keepers as well and you can replace as necessary, however unless there is more than one they are never referred to as “they”. Interestingly where there are several operatives, perhaps at flights of locks and there is a girl there, she was always the one in charge...

As the lock fills, of course the ropes securing the boat become slack and it will start wandering around. This is where the crew show their skill, particularly at the bow. Here there is the river of water piling out of the sluices trying to push the boat backwards. If the bow is allowed to wander out then the current will catch it and before long it will be swept into the middle of the lock. All this is easy when you are the only boat in the lock but sometimes there will be up to six, this is where it becomes a good spectator sport as in the Caledonian canal there is a good mix of cruiser hire boats with people who may not have ever driven a boat before and large yachts on passage like us.

So that's going up locks, well not quite, as just to make it more interesting, sometimes at Sea Locks, which are often deeper to allow for the tide, the lock keeper will throw lines down to you. On the staircase locks once you have gone up the first lock, the crew get off with the rope which is secured at the boat end. They then walk with the boat from lock to lock until you are at the top. This makes boat handling easier and allows them to chat with the assembled crowd and explain a hundred times how the lock works, where we have been etc. It's ok until they get to engrossed in conversation and then boats in the chamber start having their own conversation as they wander about. Usually there is a fair bit of shouting as the skipper or lock keeper try to get attention over the noise of the rushing water. Dogs are also fun as they can't understand why one minute their master may be at their level on the side of the lock and a few minutes later they are high above them.



The Vic 32 at fort Augustus, one of the last puffers and I think currently the only one still working

You carry on going up till you get to the top, in the case of the Caledonian canal, from the Inverness end there are a couple of flights of several "staircase locks" where one goes straight into the next and a few single locks and swing bridges. The summit is actually Loch Oich which was a couple of small locks with a marsh in between before they built the canal and put in a dam to join the two pieces of water together. Now water that flows down the river Garry can either flow towards the Atlantic or the North Sea.

The procedure for going down is almost the opposite, but as you might imagine there are pitfalls here as well. Whilst there is no problem caused by the turbulent water entering the lock as the draining water goes out from underneath causing very little movement, the main thing the crew has to watch for is that as the boat goes down, the lines have to be lengthened rather than shortened. The classic situation is where there is a delay in starting

to go down and the boat gets secured. This could be for instance whilst other boats come into the lock. Then once the gates behind are closed the sluices are opened and the water starts going down. If the lines are not loosened quick enough they become so tight you can't do anything and there is often then a lot of shouting to the lock keeper to stop, if they can't hear you then this is quickly followed by more shouting for a knife before the cleat is ripped off the boat.



Looking down from the top of Neptunes Staircase

At the Fort William seaward end is the famous Neptunes Staircase and boats traversing are a good tourist attraction, as they are at Fort Augustus. At the bottom of Neptunes Staircase is both a road and rail bridge. Sometimes you have to wait for a train which in our case was the Famous Harry Potter train, although the day we were there was pulled by a heritage diesel with lots of passengers looking up the terms of travel to disappointingly find that Hogwarts used diesel when the steam train was broken.

From Fort William we had a night in Oban to collect even more crew – Andy and Caroline, and Ben who did the Caledonian canal with us on the way up. We lavished a couple of “Grand Platters” on them from the famous Oban seafood shack in the harbour and motored on down the Crinan and the entrance to the Crinan canal. We tried mackerel fishing several times but only caught small ones, which apparently was all everyone was catching in the Firth of Lorne. The wind was against us but with motoring we managed to catch the tide into the Sound of Jura. In these parts it is essential to get the tide right as it is unviable to go against it.

On the way we learnt that the canal was actually closed due to the bridge at the Clyde end failing, however it was agreed that we could go into the entrance of the canal and wait to

see if all it needed was tap from a hammer in the right place or we would need to do the long passage down past Jura and Islay and round the Mull of Kintyre. We had booked the boat lift at Ardrossan in a couple of days' time so would need to decide the next morning if we were to do the long trip round.

The poor old Crinan Canal is really in need of some TLC as we could not stay in the basin inside the sea lock due to it having a leak, indeed part of the seaward side had a big tarpaulin draped into the water which seemed to be stopping the water, but they were not letting anyone stay in the basin in case it emptied during the night unexpectedly. We therefore rafted up next to another boat above the first lock. Next morning the canal people were waiting for the engineers to arrive at the failed bridge, but assured us that it was not unusual and would probably get sorted today. On that basis, together with another boat we started our journey down the 8 miles of canal. Here, the bridges are manned but apart from the sea locks, you have to do the rest yourselves.



Sam opening the sluices on the Crinan canal

The other boat was single handed so he had hired a "pilot" who would meet him at the first lock. All went well until after we had passed the 5th lock and started down the other side. The other boat was in front of us and at one lock he gently crashed into the gate in front, having failed to put it into reverse to slow the boat. Then at another he went piling into the walkway across the top of the lock gate, the boat rearing up on it with a great crash of splintering wood and fibreglass. This time there was obvious damage to the boat and the walkway. The skipper claimed that he had it in reverse but I suspect his boat is one where the controls for the engine are not easily accessible and the stress of being single handed in the locks was proving a little stressful. Anyway the canal superintendent soon turned up and took his insurance details. We could not go any further due to a backlog of boats ahead of us filling most of the available mooring up places. Later on Ben's wife arrived to give him a lift

home and she drove him, Andy and myself to see how they were getting on with the bridge. We arrived just as they were testing it, although it did seem to need a guy with a spanner to do something underneath at the same time as the bridge operator set it to move.

Anyway, relieved that we would make it out tomorrow, Ben went off home and we retired to the pub for beer in the sun. In the morning we got paired up with a different boat and moved down to join the back of the queue and only had to wait about an hour to get let out into Loch Fyne and onward to the Clyde. It was completely still and sunny, as we motored on we could see a commotion ahead, with many seabirds and Gannets diving, dolphins and porpoises circling – obviously a good place to fish. Indeed it was and the mackerel were a good size on this side of the Mull of Kintyre.

After a fine sail down the east coast of Arran we pulled into the bay at Brodick and picked up a mooring buoy. Unfortunately, despite the wind dropping somewhat, the swell proved rather troublesome and I suspect the tide must circulate in the bay a little causing us to be beam on to the swell at times. It was a bit of a skippers error, I had intended to go further on to Lamlash where would have had shelter from Holy Island, but never having been into Bodrick and as the evening was drawing near I went for the shorter option to allow our guests to stop an hour earlier. After dinner we watched the film about the yacht Drum on youtube. This was the Duran Duran yacht that raced round the world, skippered by a young Skip Novak. We had the full movie experience with the rocking of our boat.

Next morning saw us motoring over to Ardrossan, where Andy and Caroline caught the train up to Oban to retrieve their car and we had the boat lifted out, washed off and put in the boatyard. The rest of the day was spend sorting out what needed to come home, from what we could fit in Andys boot, and doing some minimal winterisation jobs, most of which will be left till we return with the van in about a month.

So that is it,. We have been to a place I have looked at and read about for many a year. We have travelled almost 5000 miles, been almost as close to the North Pole as you can go in a normal boat, seen glaciers, icebergs, weird wildlife and lots of history. I feel we have had a true adventure in a fantastic boat that has kept us safe and comfortable.

If you are into numbers:

Total Voyage 4944 nautical miles

Nights anchored: 52

On mooring: 2

In harbour 56

At sea on passage 10

Engine hours 659

Litres of Diesel 1400

No of tins of peaches 60 (but 12 left!)

Furthest North 80 degrees – about 600 miles from North Pole

To put it into perspective, here in Newent we are at 52 degrees North and the Arctic Circle which you might think is a long way away is at 66 degrees so it was only about the half way point to our furthest north!



Lifted out at Ardrossan waiting to be pressure washed. The anti fouling paint had done a good job with very little growth on the hull.

So where next? they ask. Indeed, watch this space...

Thanks for reading and special thanks to all those who sent me little comments it was great to have you on board.

Cheers

Tim and Carol