

The First Voyage of Lumina – post 15

Sailing home from Svalbard

From Alesund to Shetland and onward to Scotland

We left Alesund on a lovely warm evening after an appointment at the police station to get passports stamped so we could leave Schengen. This time they were very keen that we would not be in Norway for long after being stamped and we had to give them a departure time after which they gave us an appointment half an hour before. Quite the opposite of when we arrived. On the way back to the harbour we picked up fish and chips from a kiosk claiming, as there seems to be in most towns, to sell the best fish and chips *in the world!*

Back on the boat we slipped the lines and headed out into the evening light. It took a few hours to navigate out through the islands and it was only now that the plethora of lights and lighthouses on various rocks come into their own. On the electronic chart they are a nuisance as for some reason they do not change their size when you zoom in and out making the chart very difficult to use at certain zooms. Anyway, for once I could appreciate all the different light sectors which help you work out your position, a feature that is not used so much on UK lights. This is where the light shines in different colours at different angles and very precisely too – you can see the colour change as you move across its beam.



Goodbye Alesund

It was quite dark as we headed out to sea but with a light wind we were full of hope for a quick crossing to Shetland. However, during the night and the next day both the direction and strength did not come up to expectations. Firstly, it was really a bit light and secondly, it ended up being about 30 degrees off what all the weather forecasts were predicting. This meant that we started off motor sailing with the engine just ticking over to keep the

momentum going in the heavy swell. By lunchtime on the second day we were tacking, after passing the last oil rig. This is a pretty unproductive way of getting to your destination and with progress in that direction of only about 3kn we decided to abort going to Lerwick and divert to Balta Sound on Unst, the most northerly of the Shetland Isles. Thus, we took the sails down and motored for the last six hours directly into the wind.



A comfortable view of the North Sea from our inside steering position

As we came into Balta Sound another yacht was also closing on the same destination, they were a yacht club boat from Germany on a training run. At one point during the day, they had been within a mile of us just before we turned to motor into the wind. They were a better boat for sailing and were making impressive speeds, albeit not always gaining much ground, but I guess it was all good experience for them.

On reaching the pier we were greeted by some locals who had turned out in their truck to come and see the new arrivals, the German yacht rafted up to the side of us and we retired to bed, glad not to be spending another night fighting against the wind. It is not often that it turns out to be coming from exactly the direction that you want to go but that was how it ended up, and with Shetland being relatively small, there was not possibility of diverting somewhere else to get a better angle on the wind.

We had filled in the on line form for UK border force the previous evening and there was some discussions on the German boat about it because Balta Sound is a pretty out of the way place and they should really be arriving through an approved Port of Entry. By 9am the harbour master was on the scene discussing with them what should be done, should he prevent them from leaving until Border Force had come or not. It was probably the most exciting thing that had happened there for ages. Then my phone rang and it was the lady from Border Force, probably the same one we had met previously in Lerwick, thanking me for filling in the form correctly. Of course, I thanked her knowing that the efficient Carol had actually done it, and she asked me about the other boat. Anyway, as they were right next to us I passed my phone over and the major issue seemed to be solved very quickly, they would head to Lerwick and passports would be stamped there.

We had a side trip to make before we continued down the coast and out came the bikes for the two or three miles to the Unst Boat Museum. For such an out of the way place it was a

great little museum with quite a few examples of local boats all pulled up on a shore, all within a modern building. Apart from the boats there was lots of history about the herring fishery that once employed hundreds of people fishing and processing the fish on the shore in Balta Sound. Today there are a few foundations of the huts that the girls lived in who gutted the fish but little else. Balta was also one of the places where the famous “Shetland Bus” returned to from Norway in the War. This was a clandestine network of fishing boats that delivered resistance fighters, British soldiers and others from some of the little harbours in Norway that we had visited. There was even a record of a rowing boat that made the crossing in 13 days!



After coffee and cake at the adjacent “most northerly tea room” we headed back to the boat and a great sail down to Lerwick, arriving in the evening. We seem to have been collecting a lot of the “Most Northerly” businesses on this trip. Of course, Svalbard is perfect for that because it is simply so far North but its nice to find one closer to home, although by the time the tourist has been on at least three ferries to get to Unst they are already a pretty selective bunch.

We had a day in Lerwick regrouping, enjoying the novelty of going shopping and knowing you could buy the things you wanted rather than the problem of deciphering foreign to try and make sure you are buying milk rather than liquid yogurt etc. In the evening we visited the boating club only to discover that apart from one local we were the only ones in the bar. However, we did our best to try and pay the barman’s wages by having a couple of what seemed extremely reasonably priced pints each.



When we arrived in Lerwick the previous evening all the pontoon spaces were taken so we tied up to the wall and used the trusty fender board to stop our fenders disappearing between the large tyres that protected the quay wall. On paying our dues at the harbour office next morning we were told that we could use the pontoon reserved for cruise ship tenders until early the following day, so we moved the boat into a vacant space as we intended to be off at first light anyway.

Whilst we were in the bar, the Hebridean Princess crept in and berthed close to us. This is a quite famous boutique cruise ship often seen round the Hebrides, once a Caledonian Macbraine ferry it was rebuilt in the 1990s and was even hired by the queen for her yearly cruise after the Britannia was decommissioned.

However, this was not the reason why the pontoon was needed as there was a real monster coming in and we passed her in the morning as we headed south. She is too large for the town quay and has to anchor and ferry several thousand passengers ashore. One can only wonder at the different experiences the two ships give their passengers.

Wanting to make up some time we sailed directly from Shetland to Inverness, taking a day and a half. Initially the winds were light and unhelpful but as we passed John O Groats a westerly gave us the perfect sailing angle to head down the coast of Sutherland to Inverness. On the whole, shipping was light with the only interest being a cable being laid from Shetland to the mainland. This will enable Shetland wind farms to export electricity to the grid. There was a cable laying ship travelling at 0.2kn down near Orkney and along the route

were placed about 15 guard ships to make sure that no trawlers pulled up the cable before it is buried. The guard ships are usually old trawlers and they stay in one place and keep an eye on what is passing, calling anyone on radio who might be a threat to the expensive cable, especially fishing boats! Seeing these guard ships at regular intervals reminded me of the first transatlantic air flight when they had warships stationed along the route shining their searchlights to guide the aircraft. It must be a pretty boring job, just staying in one place maybe for a month or two, keeping an eye. They are also to be found where they are building wind farms and I suspect it is a fairly good number for a trawler at the end of its life.

Down at Inverness we anchored outside the canal lock to wait for the first opening in the morning, then went into the basin at Inverness to wait for Carol's son Sam to come up on the train for his "holiday" on Lumina.



Lumina in the sea lock at Inverness

So now its down through the Caledonian Canal, out at Fort William, down the coast to Oban then through the Crinan canal to the Clyde where we will be hauled out for the winter at Ardrossan. This means that we can get home a little earlier and saves the journey down the Irish sea which we seem to have done so many times.