



SHIP SHAPE

PHOTOGRAPHY: IDA MASPERO; ST HILDA SEA ADVENTURES; MICHAEL MARSHALL

SETTING OFF FROM THE FIRTH OF CLYDE, A GATEWAY FOR EXPLORING THE NOOKS AND CRANNIES OF THE ARGYLL COAST, **IDA MASPERO** AND FAMILY ENJOY A RELAXING – AND EDUCATIONAL – CRUISE ON THE ELEGANT ST HILDA

A WIND-STILL, BLUE-SKIED (but somewhat nippy) late-summer's afternoon finds us scooting up the kyle – or narrow channel – between the mainland and the Isle of Bute aboard a tiny inflatable dinghy. Wedged side by side and clad in buoyancy aids, we're heading for a cluster of rocky islets where common seals are basking. The tide is low and around us the shallow water is crystal clear. As we approach, taking photos, one or two adult seals lift their heads, glancing quizzically at us, and my one-year-old son squeals with delight.

Just a couple of hundred yards away the St Hilda, an elegant Scottish-built ketch and our home for two days, lies anchored in the lee of the mainland by a little inlet where otters are often spotted in the early mornings. Though none put in an appearance this time, our bright and early fishing efforts with rods and hand-lines were well rewarded: there will be fresh mackerel on the menu tonight.

But first, the rest of the sunny afternoon is ours to enjoy. In the inflatable dinghy, we continue beyond the Burnt Isles to seek out the Maids of Bute, two curious, brightly-painted standing stones perched on the northwest tip of Bute. We nudge our way into An Cala, a small natural harbour sheltered by a wooded islet and overlooked by stone-built private jetties. Tranquil An Cala, a popular lunchtime anchorage for cruising yachts, lies at the entrance to Loch Riddon, a quiet sea loch with little human habitation on its shores. Along with neighbouring Loch Striven, it is another favourite overnight anchorage for St Hilda, where those on board can marvel at the isolation and beauty of south Argyll's hilly shores.

MICRO SAFARI

But this evening, we will remain anchored within the sheltered waters of the Kyles. After our dinghy excursion, and while the others take time out to sun themselves on St Hilda's deck, I set off with owner and skipper Michael on a hunt for wildlife of a microscopic kind – plankton, the building blocks of the marine food chain. We hop aboard the inflatable dinghy with Michael's specially-designed plankton-collecting kit: a fine, funnel-shaped net attached to a long line. As we putter along, towing the net at a steady speed, I have a chance to get to know our personable host a little better.



All aboard (clockwise from opposite top): the St Hilda in full sail; common seals; anchored in Loch Striven; St Hilda's rigging

Knowledgeable and enthusiastic about all things marine and nautical, Michael seems to have had several previous lives, returning time and again

to his first love, the sea. He started off as a young merchant seaman with a large shipping company, then studied medicine and worked as a scientist, before later specialising in marine research where his interest in plankton developed.

After a stint in publishing he bought St Hilda seven years ago and set about carefully renovating her, taking care to keep her original features. Down below in the engine room, the beautifully maintained original Kelvin engine, a beast of a thing compared to the inboards of modern cruising yachts, is Michael's pride and joy. A traditional 54-foot wooden ketch, the St Hilda was built in 1973 in the St Monans boatyard in Fife as a cadet training vessel for a nautical college. Before setting up his holiday charter business three years ago, Michael had put her to work as a research vessel, hiring her out to Strathclyde University's marine renewable energy research team for survey trips around the west coast.

Though Michael has left behind the world of science, he now shares his keen interest in plankton with his guests. After trawling the net for 10 minutes or so, we reel in the line, carefully unscrew the chamber at the tip of the net and empty the reddish-brown sludge into a sample jar. Then, in the early evening, as our freshly-caught mackerel is baking in



D the oven and with sun-downer drinks in hand, we examine the stuff under two light microscopes Michael carries on board. By attaching a special camera to the microscope, the samples are displayed on a laptop screen so that everyone can see.

At 100 times magnification, the brown sludge is transformed into a menagerie of bizarre, alien-looking life-forms. Zoo-plankton – miniature animals – wriggle insanely and appear to bounce from end to end. Some are miniature crustaceans, others more worm- or insect-like. The phytoplankton meanwhile includes algae and the elegant, symmetrical shapes of diatoms – single-celled organisms that are neither plant nor animal. It’s a glimpse into the microscopic world of the most basic yet crucial marine life.

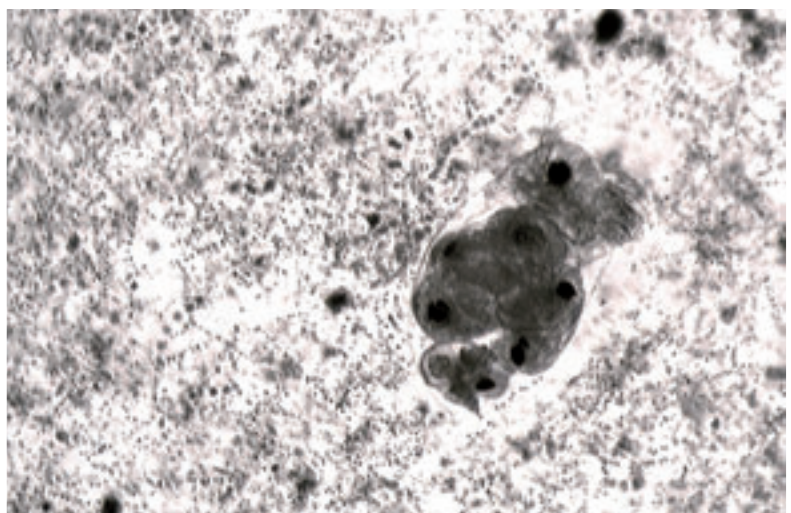


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Of course, St Hilda’s voyages also offer scope for observing wildlife on a much larger scale. Besides seals and otters in the sheltered waters of the Kyles, sea life including basking sharks, dolphins, porpoises, various seabirds and the odd minke whale are all spotted from St Hilda’s decks, especially on longer cruises down to the Isle of Arran.

Sea life of the edible kind makes an appearance too; depending on the effort put in by guests, freshly caught fish and lobster are prepared by Michael’s Swiss wife Colette, who conjures up delicious meals from a small but well-equipped galley. Alas, the lobster pots we had baited and dropped earlier in the day produced nothing, but Colette’s spicy tomato salsa stuffing for the mackerel makes the meal memorable all the same.

Micro-world (from top): trawling for plankton; checking the catch; life under the microscope





D ANCHORS AWEIGH

The couple's offering blends an old-world nautical charm with warm hospitality, wildlife encounters and educational activities to create a real family-friendly atmosphere. A break on board is ideal for groups or families with slightly older kids who are eager for a sea-faring adventure straight from the storybooks.

The St Hilda herself certainly looks the real deal. Brass fittings and instruments, plus a cosy wood-panelled saloon deck give the Bermuda-rigged wooden ketch a



wonderfully traditional feel. Life below is comfortable by yachting standards – the six-berth guest cabin in the bow of the boat is spacious, but the bunks are narrow enough to remind you in the middle of the night that you're afloat. Negotiating the narrow stairs down and using the head (marine toilet which pumps instead of flushing) are further reminders that this is a working sailboat and not a luxury cruiser.

As it happens, we are not quite the novices for whom a trip on board St Hilda would be an ideal first taste of sailing, but our time on St Hilda was a very different experience to chartering a modern yacht. Taking in the scenery from the deck, having the time to fish, putter around, explore in the tender ... it is pure relaxation. Just perfect for when you have a one-year-old in tow.

During the two days we joined St Hilda, conditions did not allow us to set sail – ideally done on a longer cruise – so we steamed our way from base at Holy Loch Marine to the Kyles of Bute and back. However, on longer trips – weather permitting and provided there are enough willing and able-bodied folk on board – St Hilda's three sails are set, to the delight of guests. Those who wish to can learn the ropes with Michael as tutor, coming to grips with the basics of navigation, sail handling and, of course, taking the wheel.

As home of the UK's once-great ship-yards and now a submarine base, the Firth of Clyde is steeped in nautical history, and its spectacular landscapes make for dramatic sailing. Dipping a toe into this watery world aboard St Hilda is certainly a very appealing way to explore it. ■

Catch of the day (clockwise from above): one for the pot; enjoying the fishing; learning the ropes

ESSENTIALS

St Hilda is available for whole boat charter for two to ten nights, accommodating groups of up to six people. Booking the whole boat means you decide the itinerary. Prices from £1,300 for the whole boat, including crew, training, snacks, meals, wine with dinner and trips ashore (minimum two nights).

Alternatively, join St Hilda on her flexible itinerary. Groups of four or more can choose the date they sail and the number

of nights on board, assuming availability; couples and single travellers are then free to join the cruise. Prices from £90 per person per night all inclusive (minimum two nights).

St Hilda will be participating in the Tall Ships Race in Greenock and the Clyde in July. Limited spaces are still available on this cruise.

www.sthildaseaadventures.co.uk