

# WHERE THE WIND TAKES US

PHOTOGRAPHY: JIM MANTHORPE

**JIM MANTHORPE** STEPS ABOARD THE *EDA FRANDSEN*, A LOVINGLY-RESTORED DANISH GAFF CUTTER, FOR AN EXCITING SAIL THROUGH THE HEBRIDES – ONE OF THE FINEST CRUISING GROUNDS IN EUROPE



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Plain sailing (clockwise from below): leaning over the bow while crossing the MInch; Jamie high in the rigging; *Eda* at anchor off Ceann Iar, one of the Monach islands





THE CREW of the big white yacht probably didn't know what had hit them. Well, it was a grapefruit. A minute earlier we had placed it in the catapult and shot it 100 feet across the Minch landing a direct hit on the vessel that was overtaking us. This was not piracy on a Somali scale, it was more Swallows and Amazons. The 'enemy' saw the funny side and returned fire with nothing more than friendly waves. The sleek yacht slipped past leaving *Eda Frandsen* in its

groan as she rides each wave. You travel the way sailors used to, close to the wind and sea, unreliant on modern gadgetry. On *Eda* you have to get stuck in and know your halyards from your sheets. You have to work to get her moving. It's a steep learning curve but one man on board can, quite literally, show you the ropes. Jamie Robinson, the skipper, is one member of the family that lovingly restored *Eda* and a man who has probably spent more time afloat than on land. Complete with sailor's beard, and more than a few sea shanties in his repertoire, he and Penny, his wife, have sailing in their blood and spend most of the summer living on board *Eda*, guiding guests around their patch.

And what a patch it is. Based in Knoydart, near Mallaig, *Eda* covers what Jamie describes as "the finest unspoilt cruising ground in Europe". And it's hard to argue. A look at the charts shows a maze of sea lochs and sounds and hundreds of islands with romantic names. Some such as Skye, Mull and Harris are familiar, while others – Mingulay, Berneray, the Shiantis – are less so. I've explored the islands from Barra to Lewis with the help of a CalMac ferry but, trust me, it's much more fun on *Eda*.

#### SLIPPING AWAY

We slip out of Loch Nevis on the first day of our week's sailing. As a family friend, I'm lucky enough to have been invited on the Robinson family holiday, the one week of the summer when they take *Eda* out for their own pleasure; a busman's holiday for Jamie and Penny.

"So where are we going?" I ask Jamie. "Where the

“THE CHARTS SHOW A MAZE OF SEA LOCHS, SOUNDS AND ISLANDS WITH ROMANTIC NAMES”

wake, and was soon well out of grapefruit range.

*Eda Frandsen* is a 60-year-old gaff cutter, restored by the Robinson family from Knoydart over a five-year period in the 90s. They transformed the vessel from a decrepit Danish fishing boat into a beautiful live-aboard vessel now used for charter. In fact, they restored it twice. Days after it had been finished the first time it caught fire and they had to start again from scratch. The dedication has paid off.

This is no posh, modern yacht with chrome railings and buttons to press to draw in the sails like the flashy thing that just passed us. This is a traditional wooden craft where the sails are hoisted and lowered by hand and the timbers creak and





wind takes us," comes the reply. I get the feeling he's been asked this before. It's the question that all land lubbers ask. With *Eda*, the wind decides where you're going and on this day it was taking us to Canna.

"Will we see dolphins?" "Probably." I think he's been asked this one before, too. Despite living on the west coast I've only seen a few dolphins but have heard people returning from trips on *Eda* talking of 20 or 30 riding the bow waves. With a week of sailing ahead of us, my hopes are high.

It's a short hop to Canna from Knoydart and we anchor in the sheltered bay as sea mist creeps through the rigging. The dim red light from another boat rocks from side to side in the fog like a lazy firefly. I squeeze myself into the tiny sleeping compartment and the creaking boat rocks me to sleep.

The next day is breezier and Jamie announces that the wind will be taking us to Mingulay. It's a long haul across the Minch to this uninhabited island at the foot of the Outer Hebrides. As Jamie spins the wheel to catch the wind, the main sail cracks and fills, and *Eda* begins to move below the black cliffs of Canna.

"Minkes!" someone shouts and to our starboard we watch as three minke whales breach. They are probably the most common whale in the area but still a fine sight. Further on, we watch a gannet slice through a blue sky and then casually fold its wings, turn into a dive and plummet like a white dart into the water to spear a fish.

Life on board *Eda* is both relaxing and tiring. One minute you are lying on the deck with a book or leaning over the gunwale watching the spume lash against the bows when suddenly Jamie shouts

across the wind and tells everyone to grab a halyard or a sheet.

Manhandling a mainsail is no easy task, especially when it's billowing in the wind. At one point, two of us start hauling and then we have to "sweat" it, to get the sail as tight as we can and tie it off. I find myself on my back on the deck with my legs braced, like I've been shot. My crewmate pulls hard on the mainsheet to give us some slack and I haul it in. "Wee bit more!" shouts Jamie. We keep going until we hear "Okay, that'll do" and make it fast round the cleat. Then we all go back to what we were doing: reading a book, staring out to sea, day-dreaming.

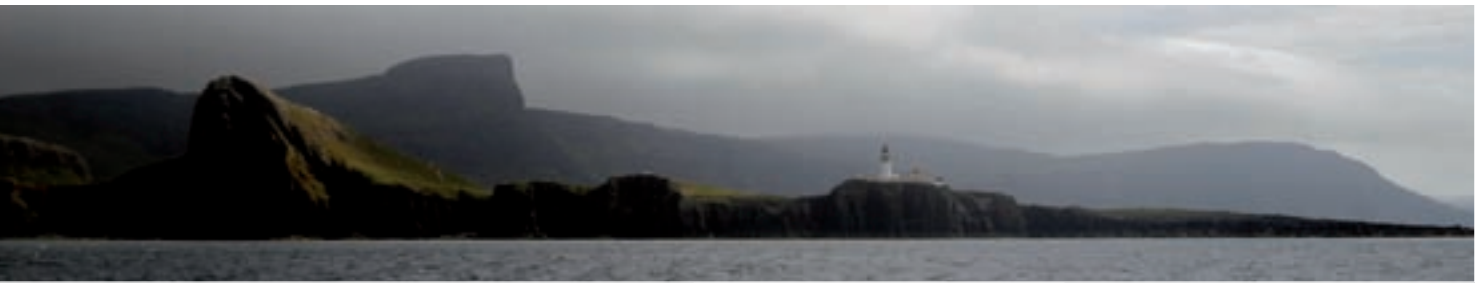
#### LAND AHOY

Half way across the Minch, we are so far from land that none can be seen at all. I imagine ourselves to be drifting in the middle of the ocean. We aren't, of course, but it feels like it and when someone with a pair of binoculars shouts that they can see land I feel like Christopher Columbus on his way across the Atlantic wondering what he might find. We hadn't discovered America, but Mingulay – a rather different kind of place.

At first, it is just a little grey smear on the horizon, but as we draw closer, it becomes a towering and savage island. There's little shelter for visiting craft on Mingulay. We anchor in the only bay on its eastern shore where a long grassy slope slips down to white sand and crashing surf. Beyond the dunes the land rises up on all sides to immense cliffs that fall away into a deep sea. The whole island

Life aboard (clockwise from opposite left): *Eda* at full tilt; rush hour at Mingulay; one of *Eda*'s ornate carvings; sailing across a benign Minch; jellyfish; puffins at the nest





**D** is tilted to one side, with the eastern edge dipping gently into the sea and the western edge rearing upwards.

The island is deserted but immediately upon landing we can see that hadn't always been the case. The ruins of a village, now engulfed by shifting sands, are the legacy of a time when Mingulay was home to a thriving community. The island was inhabited for around 2,000 years but the population dwindled through the 19th century as families were attracted to an easier life elsewhere. In 1912, the last six families left Mingulay leaving the stone houses to the sand and wind and the land to the puffins and rabbits.

That it was ever populated at all seems incredible; Mingulay is an inhospitable place even on a good day. It's a tiny island on the edge of the Atlantic with barely any shelter and no natural harbour. The residents were frequently cut off for weeks at a time by storms. It is often compared to Hirta in the St Kilda archipelago, the most remote of the British Isles, but some say life was tougher on Mingulay because of the lack of an easy place to land a boat.

We are lucky; the sea is relatively calm and the surf lifts us gently onto the hard sand. Puffins buzz overhead as if powered by clockwork. We sit on the grassy slope and watch them flying to and from their burrows, painted bills full of sand eels.

But it is the seabirds on the cliffs on the far side of the island that I most want to see, so I set off up the slope to where it ends abruptly, the wind rushing up and over the top of the precipice. All around, kittiwakes and fulmars scream in the abyss, diving and spinning around. The cliffs and sea stacks here are over 200 metres high in places, among the highest in the UK, and populated by a vertical avian city.

As I walk along the clifftop, bonxies – great skuas – dive at me, trying to take a piece of my scalp and then, as I reach the great natural arch of Gunamul, comes the highlight of the day: just five metres away, perched on the edge of the cliff, asleep, is a young golden eagle. I watch it for five minutes before it turns its head, sees me and lifts itself over the edge, wheeling away higher and higher.

#### HEADING NORTH

From Mingulay, *Eda* took us north. We spent a night in the natural harbour at Hellisay, and then had a frightening passage through the mouth of the harbour which was barely wider than the hull of the boat. Penny guided her expertly while Jamie stood ten metres above us at the top of the rigging calling out whenever he saw a submerged rock in the shallow water. Somehow, we zig-zagged our way past the obstacles and came out unscathed to the edge of the Atlantic Ocean where the wind was tearing white horses from the waves. We made good speed up to the Monach Islands and then on to the Sound of Harris where we anchored.

It was our last night and we still hadn't seen any dolphins.



Instead, the second largest fish in the world came to check us out; a shark's fin was heading towards us but this was no great white, this was a basking shark, a harmless beast, nine metres long. The fin dipped below the surface and we watched it drift slowly beneath us, its gaping mouth catching everything in its path. And then it was gone and *Eda* swayed gently on the waves as we sipped G&Ts whilst listening to some fiddle and guitar and a couple of sea shanties from Jamie.

A week on *Eda* feels like a long time, in a good way. It was quiet on board as we sailed down the Minch past Neist Point; nobody wanted the trip to end. When we saw the jagged ridge of the Cuillin Hills we knew we were almost home but there was time for one last fanfare.

"Dolphins!" someone shouted and in the distance we could see maybe a dozen leaping over the waves. Suddenly they turned towards us and as they came closer we saw more. Twenty? Thirty? Soon there must have been fifty common dolphins, some with calves, riding our bow waves, leaping through the spume. They had showed up just in time. ■

Time out (clockwise from top): sailing past Neist Point on Skye; a blur of dolphins – at last; relaxing at anchor in the harbour at Hellisay; G&Ts all round

#### ESSENTIALS

Charters on the *Eda Frandsen* run from April to September and cost around £800 per berth for a six-day cruise and £1,100 per berth for a nine-night cruise. Three-night trips are also negotiable. Bedding and oilskins are provided and the food is delicious. Destinations are dependent on the weather but are likely to be around the Inner or Outer Hebrides and possibly as far as St Kilda. [www.eda-frandsen.co.uk](http://www.eda-frandsen.co.uk)