Ocean Youth Trust Scotland - Young Leaders Development Programme

Alastair Khaliq, August 2018

At the start of this year I, along with 10 others, was selected to take part in Ocean Youth Trust Scotland's 'Young Leaders Development Programme'. This is a year long programme which involves researching different leadership styles, completing the RYA 'essential navigation and seamanship' course and fundraising a minimum of £600. Once all of this was completed we set sail from Oban on a two-week voyage aboard Alba Venturer- OYT's 70ft Oyster Ketch- hoping to make it to St. Kilda if the weather would let us.

The first two days of the voyage were not nice weather-wise, but after this there was a short 2-day weather window of light winds before more heavy wind came in. We decided to make the most of the weather window and sailed 75nm from Oban to Vatersay hoping to leave for St. Kilda as soon as the wind calmed down. Day 2 was still not nice, so we sailed around the corner to Castle Bay on Barra where we practised sail hoists and drops to get ready for the long trip ahead of us. The wind did not start to die down until day 3, so we spent most of the day practising sail changes and reefs and did a bit of the RYA first aid course before setting sail at 1900, heading through the Sound of Barra and out into the Atlantic. We had a steady force five from the south west all night, and rotated between two watches doing 3 hours on, 3 hours off all until 0800 the next morning when we sailed into Village Bay on Hirta, the biggest island of St. Kilda, and dropped the anchor in the well sheltered bay. We had a quick two-hour nap before going ashore.

The team peer over the cliffs on St Kilda, Village Bay in the background

The island was much busier than I expected, with a large working military base, four tourist boats full of people and a few other smaller yachts. We were greeted by the island warden who told us a little about the island before letting us wander around. We climbed up one of the hills to have lunch at the top of a 200m tall cliff before exploring the islands derelict village, evacuated in 1930. The island was inhabited for over 2000 years, but the population never rose above 200 people, so the village was very small. Before heading back to Venturer for dinner, a few of the crazier crew (including me) went for a swim off the beach in the freezing cold Atlantic waters.

Alba Venturer off Stack Lee, Boreray (the small island near St Kilda)

After much debate about our route back, we went to bed early as we planned to leave at 0600 to sail round the Butt of Lewis and into Stornoway via Boreray and the Flannan Isles. We sailed between Stack Lee and Boreray, home to 25% of the world's population of gannets. Then we headed north to the Flannan Isles in very light winds where we were entertained by a large pod of Orcas swimming in front of the bow, then round the Butt of Lewis later that evening where the boat was followed by two minkie whales and a pod of dolphins, and into Stornoway at 0230 the next morning. The next two days were spent in Stornoway while some bad weather passed over us and we were lucky enough to get a private tour of Stornoway coastguard. We even watched them deal with a pan-pan before we had to leave because it became more serious. We spent the rest of our time exploring Lewis before leaving to spend a very windy night at the Shiant isles. It was so windy that we had to stay up all night on anchor watch doing 2-hour watches to ensure we didn't drag.

Alba Venturer approaching the Skye Bridge

The team!

The return trip took us from the Shiant Isles to Loch Torridon, then Loch Carron, under the Skye bridge to Loch Nevis, then round Ardnamurchan to Tobermory and back to Oban. In total, we sailed 558.2 nautical miles in two weeks

It was such a great experience with absolutely amazing people, and I would definitely recommend it to any of the younger cadets in years to come.

Finally, thank you very much to everyone who donated towards the programme. In total I raised just over £1,000 for OYT Scotland – a great charity.