



feature

Canal Cruising

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T

he plan to tackle the Canal was hatched in my native Italy. In Milan's Navigli area – what remains of the waterways so dear to Leonardo da Vinci – when my friend Andrea suggested the voyage. I don't remember my exact reply, but it was along lines of "Let's go!"

We were four adventurers and our vessel – *Takatani* – a six-metre gaff yawl of the Eun Na Mara-type. A clinker mahogany plywood hull, she was designed by Iain Oughtred and built by the Venice-based Scottish shipwright Roland Poltock. She had belonged to a recently-deceased gentleman – Beppe De Stefano.

Beppe's son, Giacomo, was one of our four crew. Giacomo is an internationally-renowned environmentalist. He is particularly well-known for his 2012 eco-journey, when he rowed from London to Istanbul in *Clodia*, another Oughtred vessel, a voyage to raise awareness about the state of the planet's rivers and waterways (see sidebar).

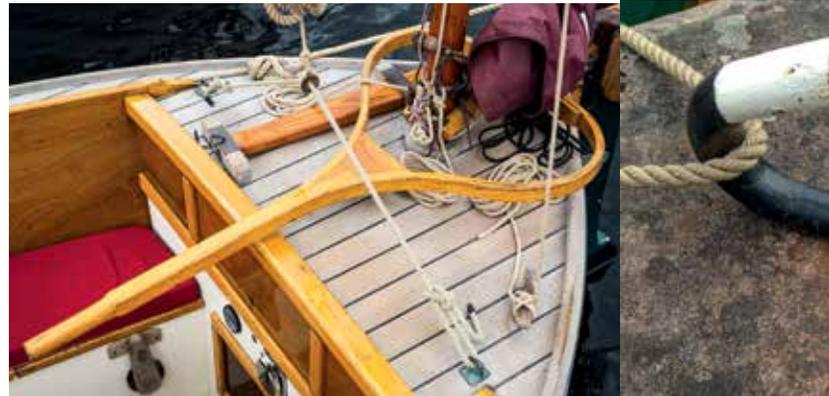
Our voyage began with a study of the characteristics of the canal and its meteorology. *Takatani* was lying in Venice at the time, some 2,500km from Fort William – the town at the south-western end of the Canal. Planning became a little more complicated when the expedition snowballed, both in terms of team members and number of craft involved.

Among them was the sailboat *Spindrift*, an Islander-type

Lochs & locks

Scotland's Caledonian Canal cuts through some of the country's most spectacular scenery and, like an smokey single malt, transitting the waterway is an experience to be sipped and savoured.





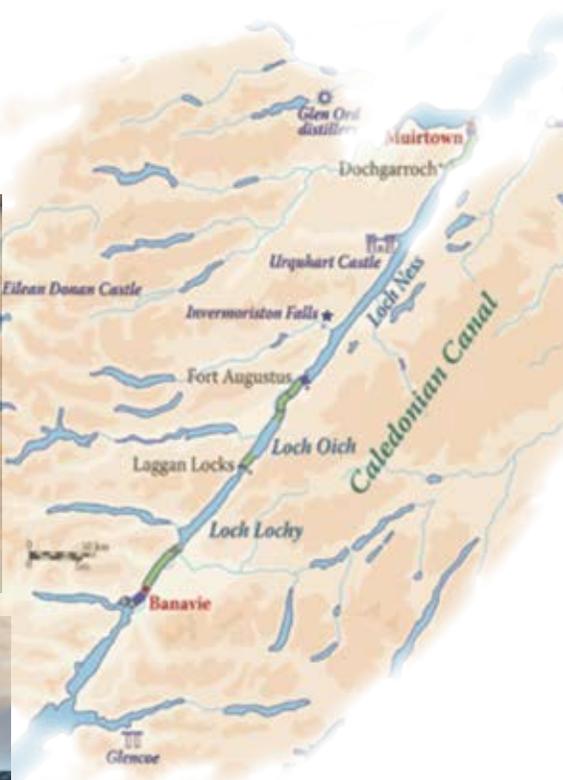
sloop designed by A. Sidney DeWolf Herreshoff, the son of the legendary 'Captain Nat'. She was towed on a trailer all the way from Ireland and her crew included a team of videographers.

THE CANAL

Conceived in the aftermath of the Jacobite Rebellion and implemented by the Scottish engineer Thomas Telford (1757-1834), the Caledonian Canal was completed in 1822. It was built to reduce the risk/distance associated with voyages around Northern Scotland, as well as give shelter to the British merchant navy. At the time the navy was being targeted by French privateers.

The 96km waterway traverses a number of natural lakes, interconnected by hand-dug canals. There are 29 locks along the





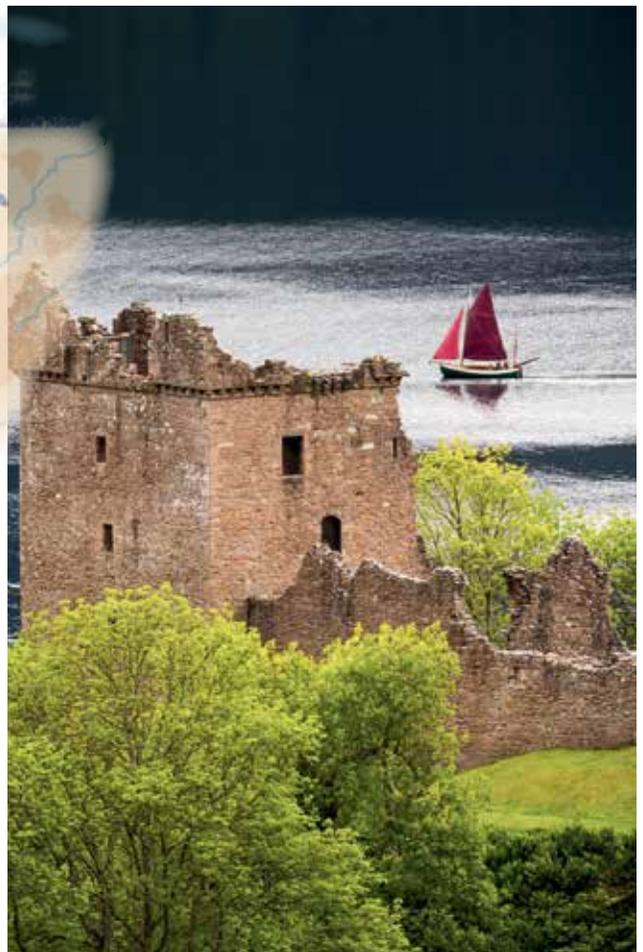
The 96km canal has 29 locks and offers spectacular scenery.

way, eight of which are concentrated in one 440m section at Banavie. Commonly known as ‘Neptune’s staircase,’ these locks lift the boats 19m above sea level, some two-thirds of the maximum height reached by the transitting boats. The locks begin near a swing bridge that regularly carries the historic Jacobite Train (the Hogwarts Express train seen in the *Harry Potter* movies).

For anyone unfamiliar with negotiating locks, the first one is pleasant, but the interplay with ropes eventually becomes a little tedious. Still, it’s advisable to stay alert as the fenders can easily roll up to the deck, leaving the hull vulnerable to scrapes and bumps. And other boats in the lock can be a threat – there are always charter vessels manned by crews with little or no boathandling experience.

The cruise along the canals and the placid waters of Loch Oich – the smallest and most charming of the lakes – is glorious, especially as *Takatani* is fitted with a 6kW inboard electric motor. The calm silence is breathtaking. The motor’s battery, incidentally, was easily recharged by a portable generator or by the shore-power infrastructure all along the canal.

Loch Lochy and Loch Ness are the two largest lakes – the latter home to the monster allegedly sighted in 1933. Both can be as



ABOVE The original cruise plan expanded by a few more vessels and a lot more crew.

LEFT Tranquil lochs, majestic scenery, fiery whiskey – what’s not to like?



LEFT
Takatani's
 interior is a
 little cramped,
 but the twin
 centreboards
 allow for a
 decent aisle.

BELOW
 Her silent, electric
 motor enhanced
 the beauty of the
 surroundings.

boisterous as the open sea, especially when a 25-knot breeze hurries into the valleys where the lakes stretch, developing considerable force and fetch.

TAKATANI

Small but more spacious than an average daysailer of the same size, *Takatani* proved to be an excellent and trustworthy traveling companion, perfectly at ease in the environment. She has a maximum beam of just over two metres (the length/beam ratio is exactly 3:1). Her beam also played to another characteristic adopted by Iain Oughtred: two centreboards instead of one – a bit like a bilge keeler.

This layout means the two centreboards are

under the two berths, thereby offering a decent centre walkway. The twin appendages also allow the boat to remain upright at low tide, the boards acting as supporting brackets.

Another of *Takatani's* peculiarities was her very shallow draft (45cm). This allowed us to enjoy the vegetation along the shores and blend more easily with locals and visitors, especially those captivated by our vessel's timeless beauty. A craft such as *Takatani* is fun to steer around the lakes of Scotland, although she struggles a little going upwind in a chop.

Her cockpit was spacious, sheltered and dry, even in bad weather. The same could not be said of the bilge – a tiny slit in the clinker-built planks



WHAT'S IN A NAME?

There are about 60 specimens of *Eun Na Mara* (it means 'sea bird' in Scottish Gaelic) in the world, half of which are concentrated in Australia and New Zealand, where this classic boat has proved so popular.

Eun Na Mara's construction plans (the boat is 6.06m long and has a maximum beam of 2.07m) can be purchased at www.oughtredboats.com.



was probably caused by a lack of moisture, a side-effect of being grounded for too long in the Venetian hinterland.

TAKE IT EASY

At the summer solstice in the high latitudes the sun rises at 4.30am and sets at 10.15pm. This brings long days with safe, bright sailing for most of the day. We completed the journey from Fort William to Inverness in just over four days.

In theory, the canal can be covered in two and a half days, but this would defeat the objective of the journey. The landscape is magnificent and you need time to savour the nature and the cosy pubs and inns scattered along the way.

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ACROSS EUROPE BY RIVER

In his 19-foot Ness yawl *Clodia*, Giacomo de Stefano took six months to travel 5,200km through 15 countries across Europe on a rowing adventure aimed at raising awareness about the importance of rivers – both to the environment and to human culture.

The journey underscored the importance of rivers in commerce and the exchange of ideas. Says Giacomo: "For centuries, rivers have been the principal thoroughfares for linking civilizations and of supplying water to human communities. It is no coincidence that almost all major cities have grown on the banks of a river. But today, most waterways are subject to the dumping of urban and industrial waste and sewage, bringing a slow death to river life."

Clodia was equipped with oars and a single sail.

To encourage sustainable and environment-friendly tourism, the Canal authorities let all boats stay on the waterway for up to seven days. After that it's compulsory to pay another transit fee, proportional to the length of the boat (around £17 per metre).

Fortunately, mass tourism is an unknown concept in these parts of Scotland. Visitors to the lochs and canals will enjoy a rustic beauty that's remained relatively unchanged for centuries. **B&Z**

The Oughtred-designed yawl *Clodia* joined the Caledonian traverse.

