

Scottish Islands Peaks Race 2017

It was a familiar occurrence. I was sitting in a pub with Graham Nash, one winter lunchtime, and after a couple of beers he casually asked if I fancied running something with him, in this case the Scottish Islands Peaks Race (SIPR). Having been burned several times before, I was naturally suspicious but still said yes as I thought it might convince him to have a third pint before returning to work. It didn't really matter either way, as I'd get injured (as I always do) sometime before the race, somebody else would take my spot and that would bring everything to a satisfying conclusion. For me at least. As it turns out Graham didn't have a third pint, and six months later I was still uninjured and it looked like I'd actually have to do the bloody race.

For complete SIPR newbies, the race is simple. First you find somebody with a boat, you then see if they can find two other sailors, then you find another runner, then you enter SIPR, then you turn up at Oban, a timer starts, the runners then run 4miles round Oban, you then sail to Mull, the runners run 23miles over Ben More, you then sail to Jura, then the runners run 16miles over the Paps of Jura, you then sail to Arran, then the runners run 19miles over Goatfell, then finally you sail to Troon where the race is over and the clock stops. Straightforward really. There's no stopping throughout, and when you arrive at any island you immediately (after a kit check) start running regardless of the time of day or night. The running part is around 60miles in total, sailing is a lot further and takes-up most of the time. A successful attempt relies on the boat having no problems, the sailors having no problems, the runners having no problems, the tides, for the weather to be good, not too good though, and you need so much luck it's amazing that anyone finishes at all. All things going well, you could finish in three days of continuous effort.

The team:

Graham and Olly had already secured a boat last year, and the team had successfully completed the race, but Olly couldn't do the race this year leaving a space available for somebody keen. That person was me. Crossing the start line is no guarantee that you'll finish, as experienced by our sailors on the two previous attempts they made before teaming-up with Graham and Olly. By adding me to an already successful team, there's definitely an implied "weakest link", which is definitely an unwanted pressure.

We met-up the rest of the team at Oban on the morning of the race. I'd met Ian and Woody before, having been on a shakedown sail a fortnight earlier. Woody was the skipper, or the owner of the boat at least, I'm not sure if the sailors really had specific roles. Ian is his pal, also a sailor and has his own boat on Loch Lomond somewhere. He was also the "designated rower" for the dinghy transfers between the boat and land. Bruce was the third member, I hadn't met him before, a farmer by trade but also a sailor and has his own boat...em...somewhere. I don't know much really, despite talking almost continually for three days, we were too busy dicking around, telling jokes, and being crude to talk about real things.

The final team member was the boat itself, the Sundance of Lorne, a 34ft boat that has sails and, like, floats and stuff. I don't know much about boats either. Here's a picture:



Figure 1 - The finest vessel in Oban Bay! Arrr!

On the mast you'll see our battle flag, prepared by Ian's kids. A fortnight before we'd been on a shakedown sail prior to the race. The reasons were twofold: make sure the boat is all ok after being out of the water over winter, and also to make sure the runners were ok on the boat. Woody and Ian had brought their kids along too and we'd sailed over to Mull in the finest weather Scotland can provide. Graham and I ran the Ben More route while the sailors sailed along the Sound Of Mull, meeting later in Tobermory to drink beer and eat seafood. The weekend was a glorious success, and even the kids had a great time. So much so that Ian had managed to persuade his tribe to produce a battle flag for the race, and what a good job they've done too! Their brief: "Ok kids, what's the scariest thing you know?" Donald Trump? Good answer!



Figure 2 - Drain the swamp!

As we know, an army marches on its stomach so the most important part of the team's preparation was the food, and we were definitely not without food. Woody had brought a cargo of offerings, including pre-prepared home-cooked meals for everyone for the entire weekend. Brilliant! Among the standard fare we had some delicacies too - Bruce had brought a haul of quality meat and eggs from his farm, Graham sourced a great range of exotic butters, and even managed to scrape together some excellent vintage cheese from somewhere. Nobody ate better than us!

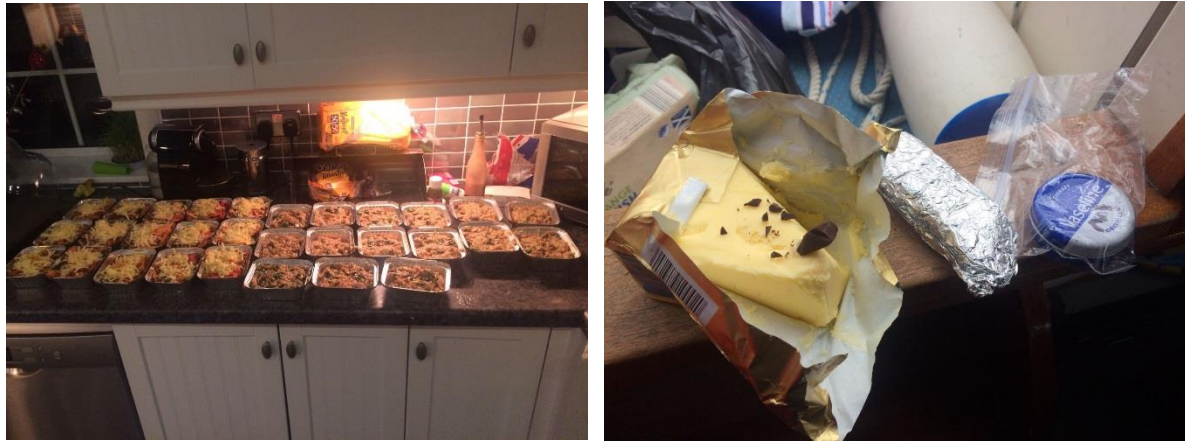


Figure 3 Food!

The race:

In Oban, as the race drew near, the boat was pretty much ready. Well, almost. In the hour before the race Woody and Ian were trying to fit new winches, requiring Ian to climb into the bowels of the boat with a spanner. Possibly a little late. The runners, Graham and I, were slightly better but Graham's waterproof jacket had a zip malfunction at the kit check and he couldn't extract it from the pocket, requiring a Swiss army knife to cut it out. This was actually quite fortunate, if that had happened on the hill he could've been in real trouble – trying to rip it out would probably have ripped a hole in the jacket too. So, I guess with some last minute modifications, to the boat and to the runners...we were ready!

Oban...On your marks!

The race starts at noon, and the very first task is to run a 4mile route over some hilly tracks behind Oban, just to split the teams up a bit. Graham had warned me earlier not to hammer the run as there's a 24mile slog to do later that day. Also, this run doesn't count towards the cumulative run time, it is just part of the sailing time which is measured in hours and days. Sprinting for 4miles will have little impact on your 50hour+ expected sail time, so from the start we forced ourselves into a jog. If nothing else, it was scenic, and towards the end of the run we pestered John Coyle into some sprinting towards the finish.



Figure 4 - Rise and shine, 29!

The first dinghy transfer was a success, clinical in its operation, and we were heading out into Oban bay to fight our way past the other boats and back onto Sundance. We bounded back onto the boat and quickly hauled the dinghy onto the back of the deck. I was quite grateful to see the winches were now attached, ready for their maiden voyage, in fact we were all ready, adrenaline levels were soaring, pumped, the race was on!

To Mull!

Just kidding! We were going nowhere! The wind obviously didn't hear the starting gun. We were all out in the bay, bobbing around, no wind to fill any sail. Nobody was moving much so any of the speedy running beforehand seemed pretty fruitless by then. However, for any boats equipped with oars there was at least an opportunity to get out of the bay. Woody's boat didn't come with oars, but just before the race he temporarily installed a fine pair of rowlocks and suitable oars, possibly the best in the race, and we could at least move somewhere. We managed to establish a fine position leaving the bay, just ahead of the main pack, but still behind a few fast vessels that could move in light wind.



Figure 5 - Oban Bay, making sure Graham and Bruce are doing it right.

The wind picked-up heading over to the Sound Of Mull, so the entire fleet started moving well. Our boat is a class 3 cruiser, meaning it has a disadvantage to many other boats but we still fared well. Once into the Sound proper the wind slowly dropped, and we were left rowing once more. Wind would pick-up at various points, pushing some boats ahead including ours, or just left us sitting in the warm sun. Edging slowly towards the bay, in fits and bursts, we arrived just before 7pm.



Figure 6 - Our race starts now!

Mull - Ben More (23.5miles, 3,681ft climb):

I'd say that the Mull run was the hardest of the three island runs. Some say Jura is the toughest, but I reckon Mull has the edge due to the punishing road section and the somewhat awkward terrain. Not bad terrain, just awkward to move across smoothly, so to me it's the most draining of the three. As mentioned, Graham and I decided to recce the route beforehand to avoid any navigational cock-ups, which I'd heartily recommend to anyone looking to do the race. From a map overview you'd think that the route was fairly straightforward, but things can go horribly wrong on Mull and it's very easy to add an extra 20mins on various points on your run by taking a bad line, and the recce reduces your chances a good bit. "Reduces", just to be clear. Also, it means you can just get your head down, and avoids guessing and then second-guessing yourself as you trudge over another rocky lump covered in bog sog. The recce paid dividends, our run was smooth, efficient, as rehearsed. Steady pace along the road to Knock, onto the landrover tracks, fill-up of water at a stream crossing before the long climb to a small cairn. I'd love to give you a detailed route description, but most of the points on the route have Gaelic names, and I just can't be bothered transcribing the long strings of randomly-placed consonants.



Figure 7 - It's just a hill, really

Most runners contour round the preceding lump before Ben More, which is the line we took too, contouring into the coire and then leading to a nice scramble up to the summit. The sun was setting as we hit the col and started the scramble. It was stunning, just....stunning! It's so rare to be on a hillside in Scotland with no wind, just warm air and clear views, watching the sun set as you climb. I remember at the time that I thought that things don't get any better than this (spoiler alert - I was right!). Other teams started to appear around us, each being pulled and pushed off the optimum scrambling line by alluring trods that don't really go anywhere. Onto the summit, we hit the checkpoint, then off again. We hit a good line down the screes to the next checkpoint, a quick refill of our water bottles, then up into the coire and across to the checkpoint at another col, and finally picking a line back to the land rover tracks towards Knock. The land rover track is the start of the end, but the end is still some distance away back along the tarmac to Salen bay. The sun had set, and it was getting very dark indeed. Despite coming along the road earlier, it feels longer in the return direction. It feels tough. Long, straight roads, with a surprising amount of uphill too. Tiredness is setting in. Were the hills there before? Is it even the same road? Who is the hairy guy running next to me? Why does he keep trying to talk to me? Why am I here? All these questions, and many more, start entering your mind towards the end of the Mull run. The one recurring most is simply, "why is this nonsense not over yet?"

Feeling rubbery, we arrived back at Salen bay where Ian was waiting in the dinghy. Lots of familiar faces greet us, all happy to see us and spreading great cheer. It's a bit of a blur to be honest, I was utterly wrecked. I can barely remember getting on my gear for the boat. Lots of people. Noises. People speaking. Not really hearing. Getting over the rocks to the dinghy was a wobbly experience, and trying to balance in the dinghy proved difficult. It was so good to get back onto the boat and get changed. Woody had prepared meals for us for after the runs which was heating in the oven as we arrived, options of mushroom risotto or sausage pasta. Awesome! Warm and fed, things started to return to normal, and in my mind things started to look more positive. The tough one is done. Jura next!

Jura (53miles from Mull):

Well, not really Jura next, *sailing* to Jura was next. I think it's fair to say that lady luck did not smile on our sailors during the race. The lack of wind that I was so grateful for on the summit of Ben More was a curse for the sail round to Jura. We came out of Salen Bay with practically no wind, forcing the oars back out for a while in an attempt to make good progress towards the tidal gate* at the Sound of Luining. We were not moving and time was draining away, but there's little that can be done. The night was cool and clear, the water flat, it was completely silent except for the sound of our oars in the water. Despite the obvious problems this brings to a race situation, it was nice just to be there, bobbing along in the dark. Calm. When the oars moved through the water, little phosphorescent sparks of green light would spin-off in the eddies. I'd never seen anything like that before, it was very hypnotic just to watch them light-up and reel away with every stroke. It was a surreal end to a surreal day. I managed to haul myself into a sleeping bag, take a double-dose of seasickness tablets in case it got choppy, and conked-out for the night. Well, for a few hours at least, that's as good as it gets for me!

* A tidal gate is a restricted passage where you can only sail through when your boat and the tide are moving in the same direction. If your boat can move faster than the tide at that section, then there's not a problem. If it can't, well, you have to wait until the tide changes. The tide changes every 6 hours, so it can be a real kick to the crotch if you just miss that gate – you either have to drop anchor for 6 hours, or go another way.



Figure 8 - To the Paps (upper right of photo)!

Day 2 started pretty well! We had missed the tidal gate, bah! However, loads of other folk had too, yay! That meant that even if they sped-off into the distance then they're just sitting waiting for us (and the tide) to arrive. Yes! Things were looking up! However, ol' lady luck was still just playing with us though, just teasing us, and as we approached the gate she decided to kill the wind for our boat. Just for us though, cos she thinks it'd be a laugh. I hate her. The boats ahead and those closer to land managed to catch the wind, while we bobbed along, eating bacon & egg rolls, and talking about an inquisitive binman that Graham met once. Finally Craighouse appeared, hurrah! Ian, our dinghy chauffeur for all the islands, got us quickly to shore and into the kit check. Lots of familiar faces again, great stuff!

Jura – Paps Of Jura (15.5miles 4,900ft ascent):

As with Mull, we'd reccied Jura a month or so before. We'd taken the passenger ferry over, with tents and a carry-out, and then stayed the night on the Jura hotel lawn. Truth be told, after we finished the carry-out we also spent a good bit of time at the bar too. The next day, cursed with a completely unexpected headache and chronic dehydration, we reccied the route round the Paps, in particular the approach to the first Pap. Our chosen route looked good! In an amazing stroke of luck, we bumped into a local hillrunner that showed us how he would run the remaining route. Excellent! We chatted and trotted along, getting a heads-up on some of the possibilities, which was ace! All the ascents are just the same as we expected, but we could really save time on the descents. Confidence was high!

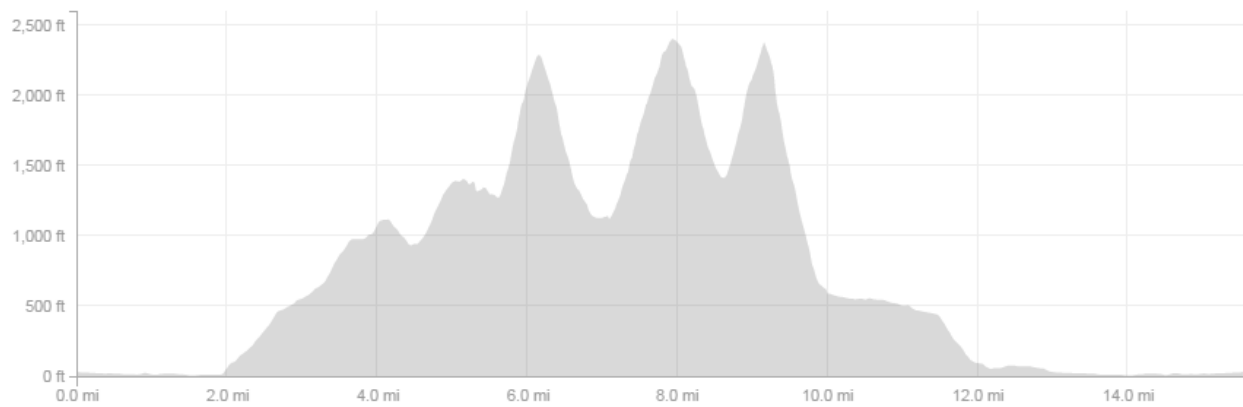


Figure 9 - Total Recall



Figure 10 - Jura recce, lots of headaches!

Back to race day, we breezed through kit check and made our way along the road. I had a bit of a sore back from rowing the previous night, but otherwise felt ok! It's a bit of a slog to get to the first pap. There's lots of track and boggy track, and plain bog. We didn't see a single soul until the first pap proper, once we started on the steep climb to the summit. We met the three all-rounders of Jasmin, Jon and Liz (hullo!). Then we met a few more pair teams – for some reason all the pairs looked the same: a significantly taller one, and a shorter one, neither having the same accent. Weird. Maybe it was just the same pair over and over? No matter, we neared the top the cloud obscured the summits, and we had to throw on our jackets as some rain swept through. Right, the descent! This was where we could really make a difference! Oh yes! But...oh no! We started down the hill, trying to remember what the local guy told us, and just couldn't remember! It was all so unfamiliar! We clumsily descended over rocks, and eventually had to re-climb some of the hill. Re-bloody-climb! Unbelievable! I thought that the next one would be better, it must be.

It wasn't. The climb was fairly standard, but on the way down we completely missed where we were supposed to be going. Aaaargh! The misty summit didn't help, and everything that was supposed to be

straightforward...wasn't. Looking back to our recce, I now realise that we were listening to the local runner, but ultimately not really taking-in the surroundings. We didn't have to learn for ourselves, so his words and the terrain didn't really stick. I thought that the next one would be better, it must be.

It wasn't. It really wasn't. Let's just not talk about it.

The run-in along the road was probably the best section of our run. We met Andy Spenceley at the bridge, who said there were runners just ahead so we pushed-on as best we could and managed to catch a couple of teams. It was a great confidence boost. Into the finish, again lots of people and support from the excellent marshals. They offered me a beer, but I refused on the grounds that I had to remain focused for the race at hand. Our sailors had committed themselves to the race, and are remaining dry for the duration, it seemed only right that I do the same. Solidarity, that's what it's called. Teamwork. They then offered the beer to Graham...and he downed-it in a single slug without a hint of hesitation. The swine!

Back on the boat, we had another great scoff of food. More pasta and risotto, and then a cup of tea to wash it down. The wind was a bit better on the second night, meaning that there'd be a bit more movement of the boat. That's great if you want to get to the finish, but the "movement" also includes a lot of lateral and rotational movement as the boat rocks around. On the previous night Graham slept on a different bunk area, one that didn't have any guard rails to stop him falling out. It didn't matter then, as the sea was calm, but he couldn't do that again if the seas were rough. That meant one thing: we had to share the double-bunk area that I slept on. We had a head-to-foot sleeping arrangement, a "69" if you will, and I thought it best to take another double-dose of anti-seasickness tablets just to get me off to sleep. I didn't want to be awake for any of that night. For info, when a yacht is under sail, it sits at an angle, being pushed over by the wind. The more wind, the more of an angle. If you change direction, such as when you tack, the wind come from the other side and the boat tilts the opposite way, quite sharply too. You see? Not great. We needed to tack quite a few times in the night, it seems. I know this because the sharp changes in boat angle resulted in either Graham landing on top of me, or me landing on top of him. Our shiny sleeping bags didn't help matters, and we basically slid around all night, alternating between being crusher and crushed, abuser and abused. That night certainly took our relationship to a different level. We've not talked about it since. Not once.

Arran (67mile sail from Jura)

Day 3 started pretty well. The skies were overcast and the wind blew, perfect weather for sailing! Additionally, it seems that we'd taken-on a stowaway overnight as well - Donald Trump! The poor fella obviously had enough of the whole presidential thing and decided to be part of our crew instead. He must've seen our battleflag and decided that this is the crew to be part of. He seems very different in person.



Figure 11 - Worst. Trade. Deal. Ever. Sad.

The crux of this leg of the sail is getting round the Mull of Kintyre. The tide is again a factor in this, and again we were unlucky not to make it round before the tide turned. We still tried to get round though, the wind wasn't really in our favour and we had to tack all the way against the tide. Each tack produced less and less distance gain, until we were basically sailing between the same points. It was no use, we needed the tide to change, so we took the decision to head for shelter and try again later. Please note, when I say "we" I really mean "the sailors", as my only contribution to the sailing was staring directly at the horizon and trying not to be sick (looking at the horizon helps avoid seasickness, apparently). We took a waypoint, and motored to nearby a' Gha'sh Bay for shelter. In the rules of the race you can do this, as long as you tell the race team (which we did by phone), return to the exact waypoint, and continue from that point without motor as before. Fearless Friend had the same idea and anchored nearby. We had a few hours to wait, so Graham fished, we cooked some burgers and talked of horrendous scree-like diseases. I popped back to bed, alone this time. It was a nice wee rest for the entire crew even if it did cost us some time.



Figure 12 Diminishing returns

On waking, we'd made it further round the Mull of Kintyre. The tide was working for us, and the wind was shoving the boat along at a good pace. Hurrah! We were going to get to Arran at around 7pm, assuming we got there in one piece. The rough sea meant that seasickness became a problem, and I spent the journey keeping above deck and looking far into the horizon. Somebody has to watch for icebergs, I guess. From the Mull of Kintyre you can see Ireland quite clearly most days, and even then on that misty day you could see much of the coastline. Woody pointed-out a few landmarks in the mist, saying that on a clear day we would've enjoyed views all the way south to the Conne-Loingeas lighthouse, but not today. In an instant, Graham went white and promptly spewed over the side of the boat. On one hand, I was concerned, but on the other I was glad it wasn't me. Then Bruce the sailor threw his head over the side and spewed too. Oh dear. I started to get worried that this is all part of a domino effect, and I'd be spewing next too. Thankfully Woody and Ian tried to take my mind off it by talking extensively about the "domino effect", pointing at the spew, whilst staring directly at me. I kept it together. Both recovered quickly and we made landfall at 8pm.

Arran – Goatfell (19miles, 4,300ft climb)

Arran is the least technical of the runs. Well, it requires the least navigation, the summit of Goatfell is very rocky and requires a good deal of attention when descending. Slips are common on the Goatfell race, and it's not hard to find photos of runners with bloody knees, elbows, and faces. Landing at 8pm meant that yet again we'd be running at dusk and finishing in the dark. On Mull and Jura we managed to get the hill work done before darkness fell properly, so we didn't need to rely on headtorches for the tricky stuff. On Arran, we both wanted to get Goatfell finished before dark, and so started as quickly as our tired legs could muster. The initial lumps and bumps over the tracks to Brodick slowed us a fair bit, but picked-up again as we darted along the road and started the ascent. We ran all the way to the footbridge and beyond, only walking when we had to. We passed a couple of other teams on the way up, and on the final clamber over rocks we passed another team going down. It was getting dark, and the descent was going to be very unenjoyable indeed.

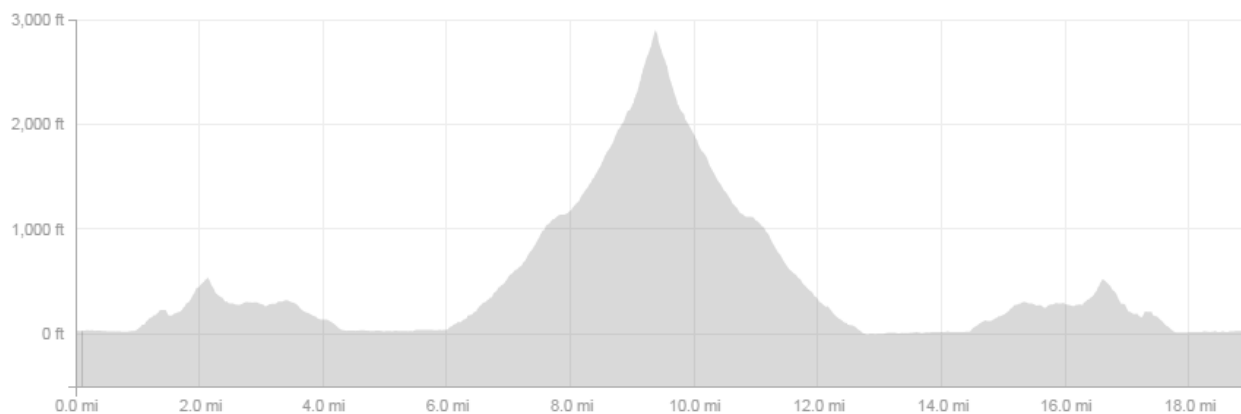


Figure 13- Pointy

My slow descending simply got worse as the light dropped, until I was practically walking – headtorches aren't great in the half-light, I find, so I didn't think it'd be that much use. The team that were just ahead of us at the summit had long disappeared into the distance. Back at the footbridge, Graham had refilled our bottles and I got the headtorch out for the final section of downhill through the woods. More dancing around, tip-toing, just waiting for that shriek of pain that says: "Congratulations, it's a beautiful broken ankle!" Alas it didn't come, and we pushed hard across the golf course and back onto the farmland before Lamlash. We finally caught the team that were just ahead at the summit, and they kindly helped us with our navigation back (thank you, Fearless Friend!).

It was a great relief to have finished all the runs! Only the final sail to go, and for me I took great comfort in the fact that I couldn't feck it all up. It'd been a constant worry since I signed up to the race with Graham, that I was the only element in the team that had changed since their successful race last year. The final sail was interesting, as we looked back we could see all the teams that we passed getting into their boats and...not moving. It was like Oban bay all over again. They weren't catching us, they were just sitting there. It seems that ol' lady luck finally took some pity on us for that final stretch, and kept us going with a breeze all night to Troon. Those behind us were not so lucky. Despite getting into our dinghies at the same time at Lamlash, Fearless Friend missed that final gust of wind, setting them back a couple of hours along with the other teams that we met on Goatfell.

All that was left was to jog up the pontoon in Troon Harbour and register our completion! It was 5am on Monday morning, nothing was open, and so we retired to the boat to drink some Almagrac before the train back to Glasgow. Donald was glad to be back ashore, and we sent him on his way to make Troon great again!



Figure 14 – I love Troon. Believe me. Me and Troon are the BEST.

On re-reading this, I see that I've not really said anything about the race, or how we fared against other teams, or any battles we had on the way. I don't think SIPR is really about that, as the number of variables are so great that there's no meaningful way to compare. We passed many people on the run, many boats passed us on the water, and vice versa. All I know is that we made it round in one piece. Long before the race people kept saying the phrase, "it's not a race - it's an adventure!" I now realise how true that is! On returning to work on the Tuesday, it felt like I'd been away for months. So much had happened! Due to this race, I've seen corners of Scotland I would never normally visit. Not only during the race, too, as I've had some fantastic weekends reccying, along with a phenomenal shakedown sail. The whole thing was just...a great adventure!

Massive thanks to Graham for inviting me on this, and to the sailors who took great care of us over the three days. I apologise for not doing enough round the boat (I think I managed to do the dishes a couple of times), but I feel that my main contribution was to *not* catastrophically spew myself inside out and scupper the race for us all. Oh, and we didn't hit a single iceberg. Hopefully that was enough!



Figure 15 - The Sundance Kids