

and green navigation marks, which appear to move in relation to each other and to the land, keeps you alert. It's more of a cruise than a sail but, conditions permitting, there could be some sailing on the larger lochs – we managed to hoist the staysail on Loch Ness.

As we cruised up the loch, the ghostly shape of Urquhart Castle appeared from the mist and cloud swirling around the hills. The castle is steeped in blood – repeatedly attacked, seized and reclaimed. It figured prominently in the struggle for independence and came under the control of Robert the Bruce after he became King of Scots. In the 15th and 16th centuries, the castle and glen were frequently raided from the west by the ambitious MacDonald Lords of the Isles.

As for life on board, quarters are basic but comfortable. The Lizzie May can sleep seven, eight at a severe pinch but there were just six of us on this trip, including our skipper. She's a beautiful boat, from the name carved into the stern to the intricate scroll work on the bow and many people along our route paused to take photographs of her. Below decks the cabin is a miracle of planning, with every inch of space used.

The polished timbers give a cosy feel and there's even a tiny solid fuel heater with a surround of Delft tiles depicting sea monsters. It's amazing what can be conjured up on the small gimbal mounted stove and we ate well.

My crewmates included a French language teacher, a retired telecoms engineer, a hairdresser and an industrial chemist. Most had done a fair bit of sailing but were not so familiar with taking a large boat through even larger locks.

This is not a trip to lie back with a drink in your hand – there's plenty of work for everyone and you soon

find a role you're comfortable with. You need to be fairly robust however – if you don't get the drill on the second time of asking you may receive very loud and public advice on your shortcomings!

It's a bit like a game of cricket crossed with a motivation awayday – long periods of relative calm broken by sudden bursts of frenetic activity, when mooring or negotiating a lock.

There are not too many attractions at the overnight stops but the point of a trip like this is to live aboard and to get to know your crewmates. There's certainly not much privacy below decks although showers are available ashore.

Fort Augustus does offer a chance to visit pubs and even do a little shopping. The splendid Bothy restaurant and bar is recommended and That Cute Little Highland Shop is good for arts, crafts and gifts. There was plenty of wildlife too on this trip.

We spotted porpoise on the way to Corpach and the trip list included eider ducks, gannets, guillemots, grey seals, goosanders, oystercatchers and a red kite.

At Inverness you can walk along the canal from Seaport marina to the final sea lock and imagine continuing the voyage out into Beaulieu Firth and the North Sea, perhaps heading for a Baltic port.

We settled for a few pints at the Clachnaharry Inn before returning to the Lizzie May. If I woke with a sore head the next morning it wouldn't be the boat's timbers that did the damage this time.

Lizzie May's season starts in April. As well as the Caledonian Cruise the programme includes trips to the Inner Hebrides, sealoch exploration and taster weekends. The Caledonia Cruise is available 26-29 June and 3-5 July, two day, £280 (per person), three day, £420pp; www.sail-lizziemay.com



The Corran lighthouse, left, on board the Lizzie May, inset above

Land of the poets

In the Lake District, **David Robinson** discovers St Bega and understands the magic that so inspired Tennyson

Unlike a load of places I could mention in Scotland, the Lake District has always been good at niche marketing. Go to a sweetshop in Keswick and they won't just sell you Belgian chocolates, but bars with a wrapping based on the local Ordnance Survey map. Go to the tourist information office and they won't just sell you the OS map, but laminated cards with about 20 different local walks on them. And whether you want a guide for the best places for disabled people to stay or which inns allow you to bring your dog, it's all there too.

Not that marketing always tells the whole story. At the Sun Inn in Bassenthwaite the other day, I ordered a pint of Bassenthwaite Beauty. It seemed the right thing to do: supporting the local brewery and all that. "Where's it made?" I asked. "That?" said the barmaid. "That's from Wolverhampton."

In Bassenthwaite, the local saint is Bega. There are all kinds of legends about her, some of which may be down to medieval marketing. Apparently, she fled from Northern

Ireland because her father wanted to marry her off to a Viking warlord. She landed on the Cumbrian coast, and made her way inland, wanting to found a convent. It was winter, and God told her to build on the only place that didn't have any snow. Some say this was in the 7th century, others the end of the 9th, and today's medievalists reckon that there might not have been an actual St Bega at all, but some kind of local cult based on a bracelet ("beag" in Old English) instead.

Why am I telling you all this? Because there is a small church named after St Bega by Bassenthwaite Lake, and its setting is so magical that you'd almost believe anything about it. Was it the only place with no snow when an Irish nun walked over the Honister Pass around 890AD? I don't know, but I do know that the young Melvyn Bragg would row across the lake to it because this small 10th century lakeside church surrounded by nothing but fields seemed at once holy and mysterious: indeed, he wrote about it in his novel *Credo*.

Over a century earlier, it had cast a similar spell over the young Alfred



PHOTOGRAPH: THINKSTOCK

Tennyson. In 1835, a few years after finishing Cambridge, he visited a fellow student who lived at Mireside, a country house overlooking St Bega's church and Bassenthwaite Lake. While he was there, he wrote a few poems.

The following week, he was out rowing on Lake Windermere when he told another friend about the poems he'd written. "Resting on our oars and looking on the lake unruffled and clear, he quoted from the lines he had lately read to us from the *Morte d'Arthur* and of the lonely Lady of the Lake and Excalibur." When he'd finished, he turned to his friend, Edward FitzGerald (Read *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*? That was him). "Not bad, that, Fitz, is it?" he said.

They all visited Mirehouse, all these eminent Victorians: Tennyson of course (he came back on honeymoon in 1850), Coleridge, Wordsworth, Carlyle, Froude, Southey.

There was something about the place – "manor from heaven" Bragg calls it – that drew them there, and indeed it has only been sold once since it was built in 1666. And there's something about St Bega's church in the fields too: whatever about the person who founded it, whether she was a saint or not, the building itself has an aura of calmness and peace about it that register even on agnostic antennae.

So no, I don't find it remotely implausible that it was here that Tennyson imagined Mallory's

wounded king dying under a winter moon and tingling stars as Sir Belvedere finally, at the third attempt, threw the most beautiful sword in the world into a lake (this lake?) before sending Guinevere off to live in a convent (this church?).

All of this is just over a couple of meadows from the excellent Ravenstone Lodge, on the lower slopes of "one of the finest mountains of the earth" as Carlyle called Skiddaw.

A privately owned nine-roomed hotel, it has fantastic views, excellent food in both restaurant and coach house bistro, and is way better value than I've ever come across in the more crowded central Lakes and it's less than three hours from Edinburgh.



Clockwise from main: view of Bassenthwaite Lake; St Bega's Church; a bedroom at Ravenstone Lodge

And if you think all of this is too English, then let me remind you of one important detail. In Mallory's Arthurian tales – published by Caxton back in 1485 – who was appointed king after King Arthur's death? Constantine, son of King Carados of Scotland. So get down the M6, turn right at Carlisle, head down the A591 and make the most of it. This land is our land too.

Rooms at Ravenstone Lodge range from £65 per night for a standard double (based on two people sharing) midweek in November and December to a rack rate of £100 and from £100-£140 for a luxury double. Further information on 017687 76629, enquiries@ravenstonelodge.co.uk and www.ravenstonelodge.co.uk

BARGAIN BREAKS

The best deals

WINTER DISCOUNTS

Until 3 March next year, Ibis Budget is offering reductions of up to 30 per cent on stays at 23 of its UK hotels, which include locations in Sheffield and London. For example, rooms at the Manchester Salford Quays and Manchester Centre Pollard Street will start from just £26 after discount. See www.ibis.com

AFFORDABLE ANDORRA

Prices start from £595 for a seven night skiing holiday including half-board accommodation in Andorra at the Hotel

Himalaia Soldeu, return flights from London to Barcelona, return transfers, and a six-day Grandvalira lift pass on various dates this month with the Andorra Traveller. Connections from Scotland not included. Call 0800 5422 946 or see www.andorratraveller.com

SPRING INTO SPAIN

Plan a spring break in Barcelona, with three nights' B&B at the four star Eurohotel Diagonal Port in the Poble Nou area close to the beach, and flights from Glasgow on 13 March, 2015, all from £209pp based on three adults sharing. Call 0800 408 5594 or see www.jet2holidays.com

48 HOURS IN

Agios Nikolaos, Crete

SATURDAY, 10PM Check in at the Minos Beach Art Hotel (www.minosbeach.com). A double sea view room at this village-style resort with works of art in the ground costs from €366 per night, and you'll find a bottle of wine and fruit in your room. **SUNDAY, 10AM** Visit ancient Lato (about five miles west of "Ag Nik"; odysseus.culture.gr) where walls of titanic stone blocks surround what's left of a 7th-3rd century BC city. Worth the trip just for the view of the Gulf of Mirabello. **MIDDAY** From Lato, walk to Kritsa, one

of Crete's prettier villages (whitewashed cottages and bougainvillea). Konaki (Odos 25 Martiou) has generous meze sharing platters from €20 for two. **2PM** Take a look at the unique frescoes in the 13th century Panagia Kera Church, just outside Kritsa. **3PM** Spend the rest of the afternoon lazing on the private beach at the hotel – or, if you're feeling energetic, hire a dinghy or go windsurfing from the onsite Pelagos Dive Centre. **MONDAY, 10AM** Take a day cruise (€35) from the hotel to ghostly Spinalonga, a 16th century island fortress which was later used as a leper colony, with stops for swimming, snorkelling and a seafood lunch (not included in price). **8PM** Dine at La Bouillabaisse, the Minos

Beach's waterside gourmet restaurant. The menu is modern Mediterranean (from around €60). **10:30PM** Stroll into Agios Nikolaos for a nightcap at Migomis (www.migomis.com), overlooking Ag Nik's lovely inner lagoon. **TUESDAY, 10AM** Spend the morning on the beach or by the pool. **MIDDAY** After checking out, drive to Heraklion for lunch at Loukoulos (Korai 5; www.loukoulos-restaurant.gr); from around €50) highly rated for its contemporary take on traditional Cretan cooking. **2PM** Visit Heraklion's Archaeological

The Spinalonga fortress, below



Museum. Highlights include frescoes, gold necklaces, figurines of deities and the enigmatic Phaestos Disc. **5PM** Relax at Pagopeion (Plateia Agios Titos) the flash café in Heraklion's former city ice factory before heading for the airport and your evening flight home.

ROBIN GAULDIE

Agios Nikolaos is about one hour's drive east of Heraklion airport. Easyjet (www.easyjet.com) flies to Heraklion from Edinburgh; return fares from around £200. Hertz (www.hertz.co.uk) has cars from £30 per day. www.aghiosnikolaos.gr