

My view

Carol Kubicki navigates the ferries during an Outer Hebrides trip



“Caledonian MacBrayne (CalMac) has been running ferries to Scotland’s western islands for as long as I can remember. Our island hopping would begin with the ferry from Ullapool to Harris and Lewis. We planned to travel north to south, with

two inter-island crossings, before sailing back to mainland Scotland from Barra.

As our departure approached, I read the news reports of CalMac disruptions.

Loading at Ullapool was slow as vehicles had to turn 180° inside the ship due to a technical fault preventing roll-on-roll-off. We were glad to be in our five-metre-long campervan as we watched a caravan being gingerly reversed on.

I relaxed and breathed easier as we rolled onto the harbour at Stornoway. We had arrived on the western edge of the UK and, as an island-hopping newbie, I naively assumed CalMac would now honour our bookings south. I remained chilled for the first half of our week exploring Lewis and Harris. Then, while learning about peat cutting at Geàrrannan Blackhouse Village, CalMac rang.

The adviser informed me that we were bumped from the Harris to Berneray ferry we expected to catch in four days’ time. The only alternative they offered was three weeks away, when we intended to be home! CalMac explained that a smaller ship would be operating the route and apparently it isn’t a first-booked-first-ferried system. Our options were to either sail back to the mainland and miss the remaining islands or try standby. We chose to optimistically try standby on the day and sensibly book a fallback sailing to Ullapool for the following day, in case standby failed.

CalMac’s standby policy isn’t motorhome friendly and effectively keeps us at the back of the queue. No matter if you arrive first, any car or commercial vehicle will



board before you and your ‘van. We fronted the queue when the early morning ferry to Berneray docked but we sadly watched it cast off without us. For over two hours we bought coffee, read books, birdwatched and waited. Vehicles arrived for check-in for the mid-morning ferry as it cruised into sight, navigating the choppy sea.

The crew assessed the queue with knowledgeable eyes and then we were on, loaded skilfully with our bumper just millimetres from the bow door. We sat in the van not daring to breathe lest someone realise they’d made a mistake, and we were in open water when we climbed up to the deck and hugged each other, grinning. The trip was back on!

I rang CalMac to cancel our backup sailing and learnt that the company’s refund system is more efficient than its ferries!

The CalMac app sends notifications of sailing disruptions. My morning routine now included checking these messages and this was where I read there could be problems with our booking for the short hop to Barra. CalMac was again swapping to a smaller vessel as the usual ferry required unplanned maintenance.

We were relieved to see the vessel we had booked manoeuvre to the slipway. The boat swap happened later in the day and no doubt unsettled the plans of others, but our own journey to Barra was on track.

We were braced for an early start for our final ferry; we had to check in around 6am. Enjoying the splendence of our last Hebridean sunset on Barra’s Atlantic coast, a message from CalMac pinged to my phone. No drama... check-in was now 15 minutes earlier!

Travelling through the Outer Hebrides was magical but despite, rather than because of, CalMac. Although all staff we dealt with were helpful and friendly, the ferries added that frisson of uncertainty to every leg of our trip through these amazing islands.”

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