

"West about" Kirkwall to Stromness and return

These notes are only for guidance about tide times. We accept no responsibility for navigation, avoidance of hazards, weather, or your seamanship.

It is 36 nm from Kirkwall to Stromness which looks like a 7+ hour passage at 5 knots but it can easily be done in under 5 hours if the tide is used well. Conversely it can take all day if you get the tides wrong! Skippers should also consider the direction of wind as a fresh westerly or north westerly in conjunction with spring tides can make for a bumpy ride. That being said, if you plan your passage so as to avoid wind against tide it should be a straightforward, enjoyable, fast trip. There are 2 tide "gates" to bear in mind; the first is the exit of Eynhallow Sound at the isle of Eynhallow itself, which is around 12 nm north west from Kirkwall. A severe tide race (known in Orkney as a "rost", and pronounced "roost") can be generated during the ebb. The second is the entrance to Hoy Sound, known as Hoy Mouth which once again can generate a severe race on the ebb tide. Both of these tide races usually only appear during ebb tides. The tide streams in Orkney generally turn in line with Dover tide times.

A latest departure from Kirkwall at 3 hours after HW Dover should carry you swiftly on the ebb to Eynhallow with an hour or so of ebb still remaining - but with the mid tide roost subsiding - sufficient to give fair tide westwards after Eynhallow to the Brough of Birsay headland before the east-going flood begins. If you are early or the roost is still too big (you will be able to see it with binoculars after you come round the point of Aikerness into Evie bay) you can wait. A strong ebb can pull you very quickly towards the roost so if you decide to wait you can anchor near Evie Jetty on sand in 3 - 4 metres (a good spot for lunch with lovely views of Rousay and the Orkney mainland. You could choose to leave Kirkwall at the top of the tide with a deliberate plan to have a long lunch break at Evie. You could also take the dinghy ashore here to visit the stone age "Broch of Gurness" at Aikerness point.)

It is quite possible to skirt the edge of the Eynhallow roost. I always take the southern channel leaving the isle to starboard and prefer the mainland side of this channel but be aware of Burgar Reef which extends out from that shore just NW of the roost. This tactic will let you pass through the edge of the roost with less motion but I usually have the engine running in gear in case the tide tries to take control. Please be aware, this roost can be dangerous if the tide is ebbing strongly and/or the wind is against it, so if in doubt wait for slack when the roost will vanish! If conditions are benign, i.e. neap tides and light SE winds there will be little roost.

After Eynhallow it is onwards to the west and the Brough of Birsay which you should reach with the last of the ebb giving fair tide. It's then turn south and head for Hoy Mouth (11 nm). As you approach Hoy Mouth you will come to the EMEC wave energy testing area at Bilia Croo. This restricted area is defined by cardinals so you can either sail around the west side or there is a marked channel inshore near the cliffs. I usually go inshore and pass between the EMEC east cardinal and to the west of the starboard lateral buoy which marks the "Oyster" wave machine

site near the shore. You then need to stand on south to avoid Braga Skerry and the Kirk Rocks before turning east into Hoy Sound by which time the tide should be nearing mid flood into Scapa Flow and give a fast ride up Hoy Sound to Stromness. Don't miss the flood tide here or you may be waiting some time for the next one! The Hoy Sound race is generally not a difficulty with the flood tide.

"West about" Stromness to Kirkwall

The ebbing tide in Hoy Sound can produce large and sometimes dangerous overfalls particularly if wind against tide so depart Stromness with the last of the ebb, say 5 hours after HW Dover, which should mean any roost is subsiding but still allow sufficient west going tide to carry you past the Kirk rocks and Braga skerry before the flood begins. Keep to the north side of the sound - the breaking water at the Kirk rocks and the Braga should be clearly visible at this stage of the tide - do not try to pass inside!

The route is the reciprocal of "Kirkwall to Stromness" so pass inside or outside of the EMEC site as you prefer and head north to Brough of Birsay by which time the flood will be well established and will be fair for you all the way to Kirkwall. There is usually no difficulty at the Brough or at Eynhallow with a flooding tide in fair weather. Enjoy the ride up past Eynhallow - you will likely see 10 knots over the ground in flat water!