

**Western Isles Of Scotland  
Europe's Last Great Wilderness**

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Europe's last great wilderness lay way below me as I flew over them some years ago in a military plane en route to Canada. The islands lay there silent, mysterious spread eagled across a shimmering water, barely touched by man. It was a powerful beckoning to return.

This is a landscape that is dramatic, rugged, weather-beaten. It is stuck out on the northwest fringe of Europe – next stop The New World. This is a land where the elements play an important part in everyday life: where the shipping forecast is more than simply a detail in the daily routine. It is life. The winds, the seas, pounding Atlantic surfs, the skies, the sun whip in and out all day; teasing, playing on the senses.

One moment the sky is bright, crystalline clear beating down a sunlight draping the landscape in all the colours of a pallet. The lochs can turn into liquid gold in the sunset. The next moment, the skies create their own drama, massive clouds swirling in from the Atlantic bringing with them wind and horizontal rain. You rejoice in the violence of both.

In truth the landscape's raw shape has been fashioned over thousands of years of geological shifts, scouring glaciers leaving a powerful dignity and a message that nature will always have the last word.

It is a drama that never seems to end as it covers a coastline of 7,000 miles, 790 islands, of which only 130 are populated. And they number but hundreds here, dozens there, barely double figures beyond.

The one element that draws the visitor back and back must be the sense of freedom, the silence save for nature, the space, the emptiness – in short the time to breathe, think, reflect and ponder. The choices to walk in total privacy are a richness we dare not think of. On beaches alone there are more pure deserted coves than the Mediterranean.

The journey of discovery is certainly touched by fragility of life. Gaelic once so threatened has seen a new emergence. You will find the road signs are in both Gaelic and English. Depopulation has been a factor for generations but today the arrival of settlers from outside has stemmed the tide.

### **Economy**

The traditional Highland industries of farming, crafting, fishing and whisky distilling are not sufficient in themselves. They are now supplemented by forestry, fish farming – and tourism. The standards of hospitality have changed in keeping with modern needs be they a bed and breakfast or a hotel. Personally in general, I would always opt for a B&B given the choice where hospitality is particularly warm and welcoming. Scottish cuisine has entered a renaissance. More of that later. And interspersed among them all high technology has brought a new energy to crofts buzzing with computer-based services. One person I know is a successful jazz reviewer – all thanks to the Internet.

Where to go and how to start can be daunting faced with such a choice and distance. The islands stretch like a long necklace; each with something different to offer. Depending on the time available, you make your selection. Using the car and a comprehensive ferryboat service, every nook and cranny can be reached, even some of the uninhabited islands.

### **When to go**

The warmest months are June, July, August but even then the weather is variable but at least generally mild and most importantly with daylight lingering to 10 pm or later. May and September can be every bit as good and with fewer visitors. Winter though can be a challenge being distinctly cold, fierce winds and heavy skies. Not that this should in any way discourage the enthusiasts especially at the New Year, for Hogmanay is partying time with warm hospitality which rises to a crescendo as the weather worsens. Whenever you go take waterproof footwear, walking boots or the equivalent; light waterproof clothing which can be stripped off according to the changing moments.

### **The Queen and the Hebridean Princess**

In August the Queen will celebrate her 80<sup>th</sup> birthday taking a cruise with her family around the islands aboard the luxury yacht the Hebridean Princess. It has just thirty cabins, all large and lavishly furnished down to marble-clad bathrooms with gold-plated fittings. Touches like fine cotton sheets, big fluffy towels and bathrobes all add to the comfort. Almost all the cabins have large picture windows and a balcony. There is one suite, the Arran, most likely to be reserved for the Queen, which also provides a spacious sitting room.

The Royal Tour is expected to embrace the major ports of call – and no wonder, for each one of the islands have so much to offer.

### **Mallaig**

For the purposes of this journey, it began at Mallaig, a small, noisy port at the end of a beautiful road from Fort William. The town itself is a cluster of pebble-dashed houses that struggle for space amid great lumps of granite, which tumble down to the sea. The engine of the port is centered around the harbour providing the base for the islands' ferryboats and thriving fishing industry. So beware as you step along the quayside for fear of tripping over piles of nets, tackle and ice-crates. And when the fleet is in, the scavenger sea gulls whirl raucously above before dipping for discarded debris. You also need a strong head, the pubs are considered the liveliest on the west coast and host to serious merrymaking.

### **Rum**

The ferryboat, the celebrated Caledonian McBrayne chugged off towards a distant outline over the sea – Rum. The sun was beginning to set throwing a dramatic, almost tropical golden backdrop to peak at 2,663 feet which drops sharply into the sea. Landing is a local excitement for the population of just thirty. All their needs have to be brought in; the dropping of supplies a daily feature for the village shop. There is limited accommodation for the stopover ranging from a couple of four-poster bedrooms in Kinloch Castle, built by an Edwardian magnate Sir George Bullough to a B&B and a hostel. Apart from the Castle itself, which is well worth a visit for its outrageous flamboyance; the island's most notable achievement has been the reintroduction of white-tailed (sea) eagles whose wingspan is even greater than that of the golden eagle.

## **Canna**

Canna, measuring just five miles by one and with a population of less than 20. The entry into the harbour catches the eye for passing boats of all kinds have painted their names up on the rocks surrounding it. This island is essentially just one farm owned by the National Trust of Scotland, a bird sanctuary, the Harbour View tea room (delicious carrot cake and a talented owner Winnie Mackinnon, who takes pictures for the island postcards; and can help with almost any visitor's query) ; St Columbus (shaped like a rocket and built in the 1890s for the then Roman Catholic congregation) and the St Edwards opened by the Princess Royal as a hostel and study centre on the adjacent Sanday island linked by a bridge.

There is basic accommodation available but if you time the ferry boat right, there is plenty of time to walk from the dock across a grassy basalt plateau to the bony sea cliffs on the north shore known as Compass Hill – so called because the high metal content distorts compasses. The blustery walk across the tree-less landscape with just the very occasional white croft was bracing but it makes you realise how man is at the mercy of the elements.

## **Skye**

Skye is synonymous with romance. Few can be unmoved by the story of 23-year-old Flora MacDonald disguised as a servant girl smuggling the Young Pretender, Bonnie Prince Charlie over the water under the cover of darkness from the island of Uist to Skye to escape the Hanovarian forces. The inspiration for The Skye Boat Song lingers on and is frequently sung in the local hostelryes. Flora was arrested a week later and held in the Tower of London for a year before returning home, marrying a local man, had seven children, emigrated with him to America where her husband was taken prisoner during the American War of Independence. Flora returned to Scotland and was reunited with her husband on his release; they resettled in Skye and she died at the age of 68.

Equally Skye remains the important centre for Gaelic culture and language. Indeed today there is a revival in the culture with a special festival in July; and indeed a third of the population now speak Gaelic. Added to this is the home to the bagpipers; with an annual recital held at Dunvegan Castle in early August.

The access to the island is either by the bridge at Kyle of Lochalsh or via ferry to one of the ports around the coast, For the visitor there is a rich feast to dwell upon. Unusually the landscape varies from the wide-open spaces of the Cuillens mountains to woodlands, to waterfalls and lochs such as Loch Aynort. Bringing its own peace and stillness. Then dotted all round the landscape are the distinctive highland cattle with their long wool coats and wide horns.

Historically, you cannot escape visiting Dunvegan Castle, the stronghold of the MacLeod chiefs for nearly 800 years, and it remains their home today. The present building dates from 1840 and may not be stunning inside but still possesses details of history which are impossible to pass up; a lock of hair from Bonnie Prince Charlie (whom in fact the MacLeods fought against); Flora Macleod's corsets and the Fairy Flag, which dates from 1066, and allegedly blessed with the power of the fairies to protect the clan in times of danger. Even in World War 11 MacLeod pilots carried pictures of it for luck.

For me of course the high point of the island must be Claire MacDonald's hotel and restaurant in Sleat. Award-winning cook and food writer, Claire Macdonald is surely Scotland's foremost ambassador, well known across the world, talisk way beyond her own kitchen at Kinloch Lodge. She is married to Lord Macdonald, High Chief of Clan Donald and for three decades they have run their home as a luxury hotel, characterised by blazing log fires, ancestral portraits and all the atmosphere of an old hunting lodge.

For the bon viveurs however her menus are mouth-watering all based on local produce. For example just try her seared Isle of Skye Scallops with sweet chilli sauce and crème fraiche served with local grown salad leaves or go for the pan-fried fillet of Scotch beef with port, ginger and green peppercorn sauce. For the vegetarian try the roast aubergine, red onion and garlic mousse with cherry vine tomato, basil and black olive relish followed by the fillet of halibut with homemade spinach gnocchi served with toasted walnut pesto. And to complete the story try the rich dark chocolate and toffee tart with pecan nut and brown sugar pastry served with crème Chantilly or rhubarb Bavarian cream rhubarb compote served with almond biscuits.

I could say more as a long-term fan of Claire MacDonald but I will leave it for you to discover. The price would be worth every penny.

One final touch for the devotees must be a visit to Talisker distillery. Friends of the classic malts will appreciate the very smoky single malt they produce.

And for the honeymooners, the perfect hotel for them might be the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Isleornsay Hotel, also known by its Gaelic name Hotel Eilean Iarmain and owned by Sir Iain Noble. The hotel has won many awards for its cuisine and is especially proud of its seafood and local game.

A sample menu could include game terrine with parsnip crisps and apple chutney, or grilled seafood sausage with cucumber pickle and Glendale organic herb salad. To follow could be a cappuccino of smoked haddock and potato. The main course could be grilled calves liver with crisp bacon thyme mousseline served with fondant potato and a shallot and sherry jus. An alternative might be a medley of local seafood poached in Chablis and saffron accompanied by cocotte potatoes and a chervil hollandaise. Desserts include a rich warm chocolate and Armagnac tart with cinnamon cream or banana fritters rolled in nutmeg and served with butterscotch sauce.

Price wise, regard this as a treat.

## **Lewis Harris the Western Isles**

### **Lewis**

It was time to move on to a totally different landscape, the outer reaches of the isles, Harris and Harris facing the Atlantic and taking the full rage of storms as they pounded their shores. This is the land that is truly on the edge of nature where the turbulent seas smash up against a geologically complex terrain whose rough rocks and mighty sea cliffs are interspersed by a thousand sheltered bays and in the west by a long line of sweeping sandy beaches. The clean, unpolluted waters caught in the full sunshine can rival any colour of blue produced in the Caribbean. Paradoxically the influence of the Atlantic Gulf Stream ensures a mild but moist climate but the winds also ensure rain on two out of every three days. It is part of life and if prepared for it, this does not spoil the enjoyment of the area.

The islands' interior is no less dramatic with a series of formidable mountain ranges soaring high above great chunks of boggy peat moor; in short a barren wilderness enclosing a host of tiny lakes or lochans.

The fragile economy is weaving, crafting , fishing, tourism. The culture is strong and important. It has been occupied for 9,000 years with evidence of every age. The Outer Hebrides remains the heartland of Gaelic culture and language, which is spoken by the vast majority of the 26,000 islanders. Religion has an all-pervading influence through the strict Free Church of Scotland (the Wee Frees). In 1988 fierce controversy broke out when one member, Lord Mackey of Clashfern who became the Lord Chancellor, attended a Requiem Mass during a Roman Catholic funeral of a friend.

The rigour of the Free Church of Scotland stems from the days they fought bitterly against the highland clearances, which destroyed communities, and forced people from their homes often to boats to take them to America. Today they are still the cohesive element for the community . The Free Church on Kenneth Street in Stornoway has reputedly the largest Sunday-evening congregation in the UK with up to 1500 attending.

But away from all this, the discerning traveller will focus on the natural landscape. The roads make the sweeping beaches accessible especially in the southwest. A boat tour can take you to the offshore islands and some of the lagoons, a good opportunity to see basking sharks and porpoises. Or you can make your way to the lochs – the enthusiast will enjoy the salmon fishing. Wherever you go you may see eagles, buzzards, sheep and rarely a person in sight.

Remember to stop! Take in the space, the big skies, and the silence. This is when you will be rewarded with glimpses of wildlife – and the spirit of Lewis.

There are manmade features to see. The Garrannan Blackhouses stand out for their grittiness hunkered low down built of hefty rocks with very thick thatching. They were designed to withstand every element that came their way. Small, barely a couple of windows, smoke-filled interiors with curtained box beds for what little privacy they could find, they were also home to distinctive crofting communities.

For sheer drama you must see the islands' most dramatic prehistoric ruins, the Calanais standing stones. They are huge upright monoliths reminiscent of Stonehenge, standing 5' high, nearly 50 of them, a seeming forest, somehow lugged into position anytime between 3000 and 1500m BC by the Neolithic peoples. Their very serenity causes you to pause. They have stood the test of time; seen the island wax

and wane but they go on forever. And to get the full flavour of their history listen to our friend pictured here with his beard flowing in the wind. He is the self appointed guardian of the Calanais stones. He walks there every day with his dog, breathing in its timelessness.

Note the red telephone boxes. Today they are empty, as the world has taken to mobile phones. Instead enterprising folk are using them as green houses to raise seedlings. Perfect!

And for a spot of indulgence you could stop over at Scarista House hotel with a reputation for good local food. A sample menu could include seafood and Sound of Harris langoustine sauce followed by seared loin of Highland lamb with Burgundy sauce, aubergine puree and dauphinoise potatoes, Scottish chees and an iced Drambrui and praline parfait to follow.

### **Harris**

Harris may be the southern extension of Lewis, but it is proud of its own identity – let alone the world-famous Harris Tweed.. Harris is distinctive with superb contrasts. In the north are mountains, which are interesting from the geological point of view as they protruded above the 2,000 feet of ice, which covered most of the Western Isles 10,000 years ago. Then are sea level you have the fertile machairs or grasslands. There are spectacular to see for their astonishing carpet of wild flowers – every type imaginable including if you're lucky – the wild orchid. The qualities of machairs are such they attract a rich harvest of bird life.

On a more historic level you must pay a visit to St Clement's at Rodel. It is an ecclesiastic jewel. Built on the site of an older church, today's building dates from the 1520s. The outside is truly impressive, sitting tranquilly and sturdily on a mound overlooking the loch. But step inside and what you will see is just stunning, in particular the carved wall tombs – they represent the finest example of medieval sculpture in the Western Isles.

Nearby there is the Rodel Hotel which is well worth visiting either to stay or sample their varied seafood and fish menus which include locally caught scallops, prawns, crabs, mussels, salmon, cod and so on.

St Clements is just a tiny particle of history. Just to the south linked by a bridge is the tiny island of Bernera. Here you will find a replica of the Iron Age house, which came to light in 1992 when gale force winds blew the protective sand away and excavated the original

homes. Today's building demonstrates how spacious the houses were but very dark and illuminated only by a central hearth and a few chinks of light.

### **North Uist**

And so, over by ferry to North Uist. Compared to the mountainous scenery of Harris, North Uist is flatter; over half the surface area is covered by water or water logged bogs. The mountains may have receded but in their place are the enormous and dramatic skies interspersed with flaming rainbows. This land is perfect for trout and salmon fishing and deerstalking, both of which are critical to the island's economy. The joy must be the superb beaches – miles and miles of pure, virgin sand.

The sense of remoteness can be really felt at the not very beautiful town of Benbecula. It is more a landmark for the airport with flights to Glasgow, Barra and Stornoway) and the need to use the ATM (the only one on south Uist);

### **Eriskay**

A separate island to the south joined by a causeway. And a must to visit for its famous patterned jerseys and the Eriskay ponies which roam wild. Among its community of 150 is the splendid Sheila McIntosh who has made a mission of protecting the ponies. Open hearted and generous with her explanations, everyone enjoys her company.

Eriskay has had its share of history. Bonnie Prince Charlie landed there from France on July 23 1745. The sea bindweed that grows there to this day is said to have sprung from the seeds Charles brought with him from France. The Prince as yet unaccustomed to hardship, spent his first night in a local blackhouse, ate a couple of flounders but could not sleep for the peat smoke and chose to sleep sitting up.

Eriskay's other claim to fame came in 1941 when the 8000-tonn SS Politician or 'Polly' as it was locally known, on its way from Liverpool to Jamaica sank with a cargo of £3m in Jamaican currency and 264,000 bottles of whisky, inspiring Compton MacKenzie's book 'Whiskey Galore!'. The ship's stern can still be seen at low tide.

### **Barra**

And back on the ferry captained by Ross Lawrie, a character who has travelled the world, but is never so happy as back in his own land running the ferry to Barra. It may be just four miles by eight, but it

certainly packs all elements of the Western Isles . It has sandy beaches, so firm that the local airline lands their planes on the beach itself. And backing it are the floral covered machair. It has mountains, prehistoric ruins. Gaelic culture and a welcoming community of Roman Catholics. It also has one other factor, a unique poet: Tom Pendrey. Enjoy hearing him declaim his poetry a the Isle of Barra hotel made all the livelier for its ceildhs. Somehow this all fits into a visit to Kisimul Castle the ancestral home of the MacNeil clan which sits proudly on a tiny island . Go down the slipway and a boatman will always ferry you across the water to reach it.

A final souvenir must be Hebridean Toffee in fact a fudge cum toffee known by its local name as a Tablet which is wonderfully rich and fudgy – in short ‘very more-ish’ . .

As author Tom Shields was to remark, “It was just me and my box of Hebridean Toffee on a huge white sandy beach....if this is not the perfect way to watch the sun gently decline, then it will do until a better one turns up.!”

And with that what more can I say, save that boarding the Caledonian MacBrayne and over to Oban, is a journey only partly completed. The islands retreat into the distance, hundreds and hundreds of them, hugging the birds, nature, the wilderness – knowing that in many places they are so remote that it is only time that holds them.

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