Hop Scotch: Island-Hopping the Hebrides of Scotland

By Adam Sternbergh | 2.1.2011

Nothing quite evokes the essence of away-living like sipping tea on a remote Scotland beach, soaking in the sandy alchemy of a nasty shoreline listed by colorful seashells and gnarled stones.

I encountered this picture of tranquility in the Hebrides, an unspoiled and biologically diverse archipelago off the northwestern coast of Great Britain that makes up part of the broader Scottish Highlands and Islands region.

It's the peaceful paradise where time ticks just a notch slower. Scottish Gaelic still trickles off tongues and tall tufts of grains and ashes get passed down across generations. Here, the incurious, extraordinary nature of the rugged locals belies the intense ebbs and blows power struggles these islands encountered centuries ago under the reign of the Vikings, the Lords of the Isles and Bonnie Prince Charlie.

Despite the northerly latitude, the winters here stay mild, thanks to the warm Atlantic Gulf Stream. But the islands truly come to life in summer, when the heather-purple landscape behind Iorsair is bathed in near-constant sunlight. Days are long, and nights are short, and the sun never sets.

With 51 populated islands in total, most accessible by car ferry and a few by plane, the Hebrides take a bit of an effort to get to, but that's precisely the point. They're a private haven where you can escape the trappings of modern life and simply enjoy the Scotch time that is the Scottish way.

I spent a week island-hopping on a tour with Iorsair Holidays, which, in a tight-knit, community-owned nature, they should be. Iorsair is a whiskey-obsessed, and cute, shorthand for hundreds of rain-wet rocks. Each of those rain-wet rocks. Each of those islands are reached via boat following a two-hour car ride from Glasgow.

The circuitous drive to reach these destinations cuts through pastoral Argyll County, a territory famous for its diamond-patterned lochs. Sights along the way include Argyll Forest Park, Loch Fyne, the historic town of Inveraray and nearby Inveraray Castle — where the Duke and Duchess of Argyll reside — and the Kintyre Peninsula, home to the Mull of Kintyre and Paul McCartney. The pumping-off points for my adventure:

ISLAY — Whiskey, Wool and Wings

I sailed it — I am a whiskey aryan. I can barely tolerate the acrid taste of alcohol in most wines, let alone a shot of Scotch. The best way I can describe it: it's like drinking a forest fire.

But even if you share my aversion for hard liquor, you can still appreciate the painstaking process it goes through from barley to bottle. And one of the best ways to experience this is touring one of the eight whiskey distilleries on Islay, a small island that's home to more than 3,000 people, 40,000 sheep and

Known as the Queen of the Hebrides, Islay is the fifth largest island in Scotland, with a population of approximately 3,200. The scenic ferry trip to Port Askaig in the northeast whisks you across the inner Hebrides and past the Paps of Jura, a trio of 2,500-foot-high quartzite peaks.

From Port Askaig you can rent the southernmost in Loch Indaal brings you to Bowmore, Islay's administrative capital. This picturesque harbor village features charming whitewashed buildings, lovely water views, the best fish-and-chips restaurant in the region (Peat Inn) and the oldest distillery on Islay — a 200-year-old relic that has been operating in one form or another since 1779.

Sworn off the sauce altogether? That's okay. Islay has plenty more to offer. A must-see is the Islay Woollen Mill, a family-owned textile factory that's been in business since 1883. Originally a cottage industry, the mill's industry has vastly diminished in Scotland over the decades, and the Woollen Mill is one of the last bastions of this time-honored tradition, which is famously associated with the tartan.

Tartan patterns, which Americans refer to as plaid, are created by weaving alternating bands of colored yarn together in crisscrossing horizontal and vertical configurations. Centuries ago, these designs were incorporated into the kilts and cloaks of traditional Highland costumes.

Today, specific tartan designs have come to symbolize various cities and regions of Scotland, as well as the original clans that once ruled the country's rugged, mountainous terrain. Including non-Scots, can create their own unique tartan pattern and register it with the official Scottish Register of Tartans to record and preserve the design.

Set in a stone cottage house that looks straight out of a fairy tale, the Islay Woollen Mill is a family-owned store and factory operated by husband and wife proprietors Gordon and Sheila Cowell. Boasting Victorian era looms, vintage machinery and historic look books of tartan samples, this place is full of interests and purposes a museum as well.

Gordon Cowell, co-owner of the Islay Woollen Mill.

Selling wool, silk and cashmere apparel, the Woollen Mill has manufactured authentic tartan wear for numerous Hollywood films, including "Braveheart," "Rob Roy," and "For and Away." One quick stroll around the shop and I knew I wasn't leaving without a genuine tweed bag to call my own.

A casual drive around Islay, once home to the ruling Clans Donald and Campbell, offers a fascinating introduction to the island's history. Ancient ruins, like the 13th-century Dunyvaig Castle, and monuments of Celtic crosses lying in wait and patterns of glowing sheep, cows and even ponies.

When it comes to livestock, perhaps no animal is as symbolic of the region as the lyrical, or Highland cow, a shaggy-haired breed of cattle with long, curved horns. Legend has it that the cows' horns fit eyes like a teenage emo rockers. The extra hair protects the animal from the wind and elements.

Bird watching is also a big pastime on Islay, home to such species as oystercatchers, lapwings, puffins and hen harriers. Especially popular is the Islay Natural History Trust's annual Islay Birdwatching Festival, which draws ornithologists from Great Britain and Europe. Ornithological activity is especially robust at the Loch Gruinart and Oa reserves, two prime habitat preserves.

JURA: Deer Memories

Just a five-minute ferry ride northeast of Islay is Jura, the name of which is a derivation of the Old Norse word for "deer island." There's no shortage of deer on Jura, which is home to the famous Paps of Jura mountain trail deer, for exceeding the secluded island's human population of 200. But there is also an abundance of seals, otters and eagles. Jura has also earned itself a perfect setting for camping, hunting and nature walks. In short, it's a perfect place to get lost.

There's only one official paved road on Jura, and it leads to Craighouse, the main settlement on the island — and essentially a church, a general store, a hotel, a cottage and the one-and-only Jura Distillery. Just over 200 people live in Craighouse, which is also the island's ferry port.

The Jura Lodge, owned and operated by the distillery, served as my home on Jura for two nights. Essentially boasting an American interior design specialist Bambi Sloan (a fitting name on this island), the three-floor, four-bedroom abode is not only one of the most unique accommodations I've ever slept in, but it's also the most expensive, at a whopping £1,000 per night (that's $1,600 U.S.) for the entire house, per night stay. That comes to over $13,000 Amerikan dollars. (Fear not, the Jura Hotel just down the road is a more reasonable option.)

Inside, a medieval suit of armor stands guard in the living room, watching over an array of antler furniture and deer-hide rugs. Outside, a herd of Jura deer roam the grounds, even bedtime as a tiny world magnifies music on the stereo or read a relaxing book.

Playful touches abound, from seashells in the light fixtures to wake-up call bells hanging from antlers outside each bedroom. Even the bathroom mirrors have deer motifs etched into them, and on my group shoes he felt a little like we were on The Real World, fighting over who gets what bed.

If you can stop gawking at the interior for two seconds, there are beautiful views to be had of the Sound of Jura just out the window — almost mesmerizing enough to compensate for the lack of TV or Internet. (Well, not for me. Old habits die hard.)

Another perk of the Jura Lodge's location is the perfect way to get acquainted with the local landmarks, and of course our into-some deer-ish friends: we hiked. Of all the amazing sights to be had on this 100-square-mile wonderland, the Paps of Jura, a trio of 2,500-foot-high quartzite peaks on the western side of the island, are quite literally unmissable.

All three mountains can be climbed, and those who do are rewarded with marvelous 360-degree views. Every May, the island hosts the Paf Race, in which competitors run a total of 16 miles over all three summits, starting and ending in Craighouse.

Another stop on the island is the Parish Church, which has done a remarkable job of preserving the island's religious history with its quaint and elaborate woodworking. Also on the coast, the aforementioned tea on the beach at Inverlussa Bay, where you can order delicious shortbread cakes and muffins with your piping hot beverage.

The tour is punctuated by a series of tall tales and legends, arguably the most famous of which is The Corryvreckan Whirlpool — a swirling, churning maelstrom that, some say, is the inspiration for Moby Dick and Jules Verne's 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea. Campbell described it to Jane Lusk would be blind in one eye, and Orwell himself nearly drowned in the whirlpool's treacherous waters. Orwell's wife, Eileen, died during surgery later, this very prediction supposedly came to pass — not that the southpaw was around at that point to gloat.

For a more adrenaline-pumping excursion, try a powerboat ride into the infamous Corryvreckan Whirlpool — a swirling, churning maelstrom that, some say, is the inspiration for Moby Dick and Jules Verne's 20,000 Leagues Under the Sea.

In he background: George Orwell's Barnhill estate, on the way to the Corryvreckan Whirlpool.

Situated in the Gulf of Corryvreckan off the northern tip of the island between Jura and the tiny uninhabited isle of Scarba, the whirlpool is the third largest in the world and has claimed many a ship over the centuries. Legend has it that a Norwegian Prince by the name of Breadalbane sailed into the whirlpool and ultimately emerged on the other side of the world, in the Mediterranean Sea, where he founded Naples.

The phenomenon is caused by the unusual topography of the narrow channel of water. "Is it dangerous?" we asked our boat captain. "Of course it is dangerous!" he cracked with a smile.

Actually, if you know what you're doing, you're not in any major peril. Just don't tell overboard. And you may want to knock down a shot of Drambuie beforehand, as your boat will do a fair share of rocking and bobbing as you brave the violent vortex and its choppy waves.

Ex-cuse, we encountered a pod of seals lazily lounging along the shore. Lucky tourists may also encounter whales, dolphins and porpoises, which frequent the Sound of Jura in search of food. Orwell, who lived on Jura's west Barnhill, the secluded former estate of late author George Orwell, who penned his classic novel 1984! Now some 60 years notorious, Orwell himself nearly drowned in the Corryvreckan Whirlpool when his boat capsized in the treacherous waters, but he survived to finish his masterpiece.

GIGHA: Small Wonder

If a population of 200 is too congested for you, consider Gigha, a seven-mile-long, one-mile-wide island with a mere 100 citizens.

Inhabited since prehistoric times, quiet little Gigha has a surprisingly tempestuous history. In medieval times, the Vikings ruled the roost, and in the 1600s, Gigha was the property of the Clan Macdonald, one of the most Highland families, including Clan MacNeil and Clan Donald, leading to centuries-marked by clan warfare, bloody battles and political intrigue.

Gigha exchanged hands many times since, but sadly, by the late 20th Century, much of the island had fallen into disrepair under the watch of its owners, and its population had dwindled down to normal numbers.

Then in 2002, the inhabitants of Gigha rallied the local masses — what little there were left — and purchased the island themselves, with the help of a £4 million grant from the Scottish Land Fund. Since then, residents have been enjoying local and international tourists to see for themselves what the sunny island is absolutely dormant from the Native word for "gaoc." (Some think it actually comes from the word for "Goth." Either way, it fits.)

A three-mile ferry ride from the mainland leads to the southern tip of Gigha's namesake, Ardminish, which modestly boasts one general store, the island's only full-service hotel (the Gigha Hotel), two restaurants and a post office. Gigha's only pub, the Boathouse, is also the island's only Wi-Fi hotspot, so it's always packed.

The current head of Gigha is Achamore Gardens, an approximately 50-acre horticultural haven featuring both regional and exotic plants. Thanks to the Atlantic Gulf Stream that keeps Gigha's winters mild and largely frost-free, plants that tend to prefer more tropical climates surprisingly flourish in this wooded promenade.

Standing in the middle of these gardens is Achamore House, built in 1884 by estate owner Captain William Scarlett, who surrounded his home with trees to shelter his property from the ever-present, salty ocean winds. Sir Scarlett's daughter, Lady Annabella Brassey, was responsible for the creation of the gardens, which Achamore Gardens. Now publicly owned through the Gigha Heritage Trust, the gardens are currently undergoing a much-needed restoration.

Gigha is a historian's dream, with archeological relics liberally scattered throughout the island. Particularly noteworthy are the Gigha Standing Stones, which date back to 2,000 B.C.

For example, the infamous Whaligoe Steps — quite a hard regard to the formal there a giant's tooth — was according to folklore, a place where local authorities hung criminals for stealing livestock and other serious misdemeanors. The steps are actually a set of 365 stone steps that were built by the Vikings, and dates back to the 5th or 6th Century. Situated above a spooky sea cave, the steps are incredible written in Pictish, a language from the early Middle Ages, featuring a series of shallows representing letter characters.

The Isle of Gigha's Hanging Stone.

Popular leisure activities on Gigha include sailing, fishing, hiking, wildlife excursions and snorkeling. There's even a mini-golf course on the island, which is free to play.

After all of that island-hopping, I finally headed back to the mainland and arrived in bustling Glasgow (population 593,000). Admittedly, after four nights in quaint, but old-fashioned countryside hotels, it felt good to step in a luxury metropolitan property with uninterrupted high-speed Wi-Fi, 24-hour room service, large flat-screen TVs and a fitness center.

But despite that sudden, simple way of life, the kind, hard-working people of the Hebrides have shown me that they could power a city alone with their lively spirit. And by "lively spirit," I don't mean whiskey.

WHERE TO STAY IN THE HEBRIDES

Gigha
Gigha Hotel
Isle of Gigha
Argyll, Scotland PA41 7AA
Tel: +44 (0)1583 505254

Islay
Harbour Inn Hotel and Restaurant
Bowmore, Isle of Islay, Argyll, Scotland PA43 7JR
Tel: +44 (0)1496 810330

Jura
The Jura Hotel
Craighouse, Isle of Jura, Argyll, Scotland PA60 7XU
Tel: +44 (0)1496 820243

Jura Lodge
Isle of Jura Distillery
Craighouse, Isle of Jura, Argyll, Scotland PA60 7XT
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