



TOP STORIES

Trudeau taps veteran Jeremy Broadhurst to run Liberal re-election campaign



Scotland's Isle of Mull offers a true chance for mindfulness

On the small Scottish island, Ellen Himelfarb reconnects with nature and discovers that patience is a virtue

ELLEN HIMELFARB

SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL

PUBLISHED APRIL 21, 2019

FOR SUBSCRIBERS

7 COMMENTS



Coloured houses and sailing boats in Tobermory, Mull.

VISIT SCOTLAND

On the south shore of Loch na Keal on the Isle of Mull, little has changed in the past few hundred years. Gliding along the barren coastline, a couple of goosanders dunk their heads. A heron dives into the bay for a snack. A seagull, up on the mossy land, stomps her feet to lure worms to the surface.

Then an otter cub addles up onto a rock and squeaks out a cry, his glossy tail flicking. About 10 metres offshore, a head bobs closer: his mother. The two meet on a mass of slick yellow bladder whack seaweed and frolic, rolling together, dipping in and out of the water.

A half-hour into their frisky dance, my snack sits back in the car, uneaten. I haven't checked my phone (no point; shoddy reception), nor bothered reaching for a camera. I haven't managed to tear the binoculars from my eyes. If mindfulness were always this fun, I'd be hooked. Remind me to cancel that silent meditation retreat I booked.

You don't tend to hear much about Mull, a handprint of an island 50 minutes by ferry from the port town of Oban. Second largest in the Inner Hebrides after Skye, which endures the lion's share of tourism, Mull has 3,000 residents, marginally more in summer. And yet, says Don, my tour guide from Wilderness Scotland, "If you put Scotland on its side, Mull is right in middle, so it's got wildlife, plant diversity, Iron Age settlements ... everything."



Mull is 50 minutes by ferry from the port town of Oban.

WILDERNESS SCOTLAND

Sure enough, the island has a 220-year-old single-malt distillery in Tobermory, the island's vibrantly painted capital. It's got film sets galore (Don has a side hustle as a character extra). And more adorable roaming sheep than people. In springtime, I'm told, you could board a ferry with no seal in sight, then return that evening to hundreds of pups, who've been birthed and learned to swim in the time you've been gone.

Don and my other companion – a Mull-based conservationist invited along for the morning – say our otter sighting is their closest and most prolonged encounter. And they've observed a few in their time.

"You'll see great ones out in the bay – the head of one and the body and tail of another," says David Sexton, the conservationist from the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds. "It looks like the Loch Ness monster. Otters are probably responsible for more than one Nessie sighting."

While Sexton always has time for otters, his business is birds of prey – specifically Mull's elusive white-tailed eagles, or sea eagles, which soar through the air with a majestic eight-foot wingspan.



A white-tailed eagle. Patience is a virtue when touring the Scottish wild in search of rare birds.

YATHIN KRISHNAPPA/WILDERNESS SCOTLAND

Revered at least since the ancient Picts inhabited the area, the species disappeared after the last known eagle was killed in 1917. A reintroduction scheme in the works since the 1970s has only recently picked up steam: Mull currently has 22 nesting pairs, descendants of ancestors brought from Norway. (Sexton can recognize them all by name.) The process has been plagued by nasty storms and illegal egg-collectors. But when they do survive, even sea eagles released on other islands eventually migrate to Mull's Norwegian spruce habitat, with its wealth of prey (the birds will happily devour a lamb for supper).

The coastline here is dramatic, with sharp switchbacks, sandy coves and views to islands of brushed-suede hills such as Inch Kenneth. When the weather comes in – as it inevitably does every few hours – you see it first in the ominous clouds, then in the squalls that blow the sycamores sideways, then in the dark streak across the sea, sweeping the rain closer. Even after a storm, though, the eagles emerge to dry off, skimming the ground lower than they'd usually fly.

As Don says, “Any day on the hill is a good day.”



A spongy turf called machair forms a fringe-like border between the beach and a wild pasture as trim as a golf course.

WILDERNESS SCOTLAND

Earlier this morning we visited the grey-stone remains of an Iron Age fort with an unpronounceable name – as peaceful and deserted as it must have been before the Common Era. Later that afternoon, as accordion jigs play on BBC Gael, our jeep meanders through fields of heather up to Calgary Beach and my eyes blink in a view as exotic as a screensaver.

Nobody had told me that Hebridean beaches could have sand so white, water so Barbados-blue. I should have brought a swimsuit. And, the icy surf soon reminds me, a wetsuit. Between the whistling wind and the grumble of the tide, conversation is impossible. Instead we sit back on the dunes, protected by a spongy turf called *machair*. The clean tufts of grass form a fringe-like border between the beach and a wild pasture as trim as a golf course.

Back along a lonely track we come by Calgary Castle, a Gothic manor of rough-hewn stone and namesake of the Albertan city. The charming Gaelic translation, “beach of the meadow,” does nothing to address the dissonance between this Calgary and our own, but says all you need to know about the gentle landscape, big sky and salty air.



The coastline is dramatic, with sharp switchbacks, sandy coves and views to islands of brushed-suede hills.

VISIT SCOTLAND

Suddenly, as we wind our way toward the cottagey seafood restaurant Am Birlinn, Don swerves onto the shoulder and slams on his brakes.

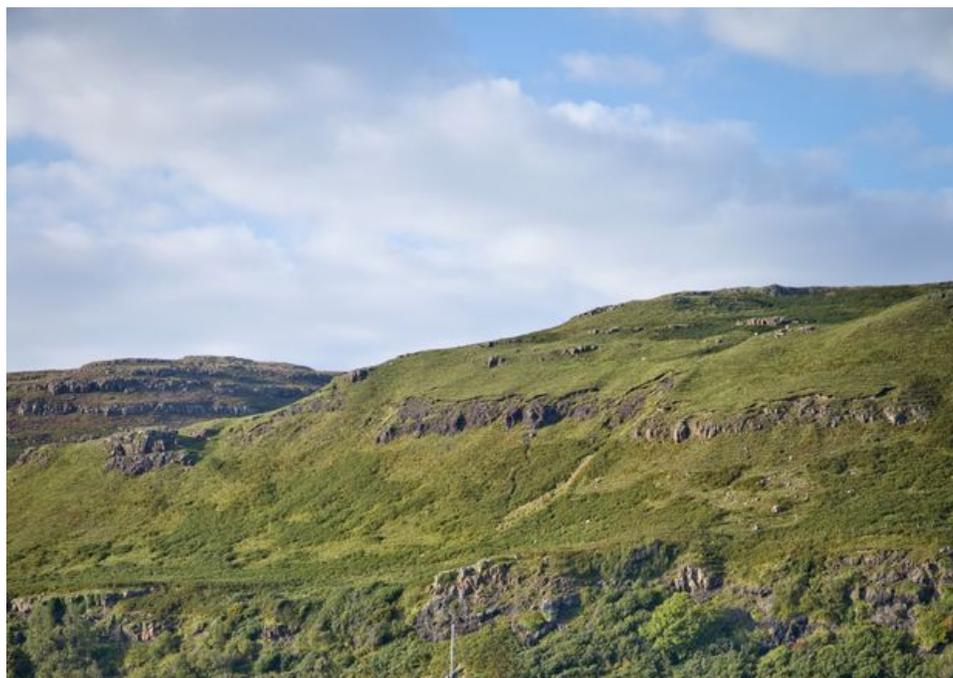
“What’s *that?*” he pants, swiping his binoculars. Aiming at a copse of oaks, he sucks in his breath.

“It’s a goddamn golden eagle.”

We sit for a while, watching it soar and dip, hide then emerge again. Golden eagles are smaller versions of the sea eagle, but just as rare to spot, according to Don: more plentiful but also more aloof.

Patience, I learn, is a virtue when touring the Scottish wild in search of rare birds. But after a couple of days, it ceases to be patience and becomes a sort of sanguine calm. When you’re this remote – so remote, a phone box near Lagganulva contains a defibrillator – all but immediate pleasure falls away. You start to pity the hardcore birders running with tripods to a hot sighting and simply enjoy the fresh air, the view and the inevitable rainbows that frame them – sometimes four in a day. Watching Don, I learn to scan the crests of hills for flying objects and skim the mottled shore for animal life. My wingman credentials improve substantially.

Days slip by, pottering between villages such as Dervaig, where gusts of wind force an entire waterfall to defy gravity. Or island hopping. To reach quaint, car-free Ulva, we first signal the ferry captain by sliding open a peep-window on the boathouse.





The second largest island in the Inner Hebrides after Skye, Mull has 3,000 residents and marginally more in summer.

VISIT SCOTLAND

Along the way, Don plies me with bits of local wisdom. Like the difference between a loch (big), firth (bigger) and sound (biggest). Or that fledgling gannets, or *gugas*, are too fat to fly, so they drop down onto the surface of the sea and float. Or the worst insult you could give a Scotsman: “So, what part of England are you from?”

But no day goes by without an eagle-sighting. Late one brilliant afternoon by Knock House, an 18th-century country pile washed white with lime, Don senses something hovering on the horizon. Moments after pulling out our binoculars, we spot him: Colin the white-tailed eagle, swerving to evade a buzzard. For a while we watch Colin glide and drift, then perch primly in an oak, flaunting yellow beak and talons.

An hour later on the coastal path from Treshnish, we spot one of his friends floating over silhouettes of feeding stags. When we reach the North Atlantic at sunset, we're glowing and so are the fields, blanketed in rose-gold light, accompanied by a symphony of bleating sheep. Time has evaporated again.

The six-night Wildlife Adventures Scottish Highlands itinerary from Wilderness Scotland includes a stop on Mull and starts at £1,725 per person.

The writer travelled as a guest of Wilderness Scotland. It did not review or approve this article.

Live your best. We have a daily Life & Arts newsletter, providing you with our latest stories on health, travel, food and culture. Sign up today.



VISIT SCOTLAND

Live your best. We have a daily Life & Arts newsletter, providing you with our latest stories on health, travel, food and culture. Sign up today.

© Copyright 2019 The Globe and Mail Inc. All rights reserved.

351 King Street East, Suite 1600, Toronto, ON Canada, M5A 0N1

Phillip Crawley, Publisher