Hop Scotch: Island-Hopping the Hebrides of Scotland

By BRAD BARTH 08.17.2011

Nothing quite evokes the essence of easy living than sipping tea on a remote Scotland beach, soaking in the sandy serenity of a rocky shoreline dotted by colorful seashells and graceful swans.

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

In this peaceful paradise where time ticks just a notch slower, Scottish Gaelic still trickles off tongues and tall tales of giants and witches get passed down across generations. Here, the courteous, welcoming nature of the rugged locals belies the internal strife and bloody power struggle these islands encountered centuries ago under the reign of the ancient Celtics, Norsemen and Scottish warrior clan chiefs.

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-and-thistle-blanketed terrain is bathed in near perpetual sunlight — when it's not raining, of course. This is Scotland, after all.

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 bucolic bliss that is the Scottish Isles.

I, myself, visited the three southernmost islands in the Inner Hebrides: Gigha (Gee-yah), a tight-knit, community-owned island; Islay (Eye-la), a whiskey wonderland; and Jura, where thousands of deer run wild. Each of these can be 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 socks. Sights along the way include Argyll National Park; Loch Fyne; the historic town of Inverary and nearby Inverary Castle, where the Duke and Duchess of Argyll reside; and the Kintyre Peninsula, home to the ports of Kennacraig and Tayinloan, the jumping-off points for my adventure.

ISLAY – Whiskey, Wool and Wings

I admit it — I am a whiskey wuss. 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 best ways to experience this is touring one of the eight whiskey distilleries that make up the backbone of Islay's economy, along with farming, fishing and tourism.

Known as 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 Irish Sea into the scenic, narrow Sound of Islay, between Islay and Jura.

From Port Askaig, a short car trip southwest to Loch Indaal brings you to Bowmore, Islay's largest city and administrative capital. This picturesque harbor village features charming whitewashed buildings, lovely water views, the bed-and-breakfasty Harbour Inn Hotel and Restaurant, the eye-catching Round Church — built with no corners so the devil has no place to hide — and the famous Bowmore Distillery, founded in 1779.

Bowmore Distillery's claim to fame is that it's the only distillery to be visited by Queen Elizabeth II herself. The story goes that Her Majesty requested dozens of bottles as gifts to present to her relatives, guests and foreign dignitaries, and then kept them for herself.

The distillery offers regular tours through its facilities. The first main stop is the malting floor, where visitors can try their hand at raking moisturized barley, helping it to germinate and turn into sugary malt. The malt is then dried in a kiln heated by burnt peat, giving Islay whiskey its distinctive smoky flavor.

After the malt is ground down into grist and mixed with hot water to form a sugar-water, yeast is added to commence the fermentation process (the sour smell takes some getting used to). The liquid next flows into copper stills, where the distillation process occurs. The distilled liquid is then stored in barrels where it matures for at least three years before it officially becomes whiskey.

Of course, the tour would not be complete without a visit to the tasting room, where wannabe connoisseurs can sample various flavors and pinpoint the subtle differences — if you can get past that initial firestorm swirling around in your gullet.

Sworn off the sauce altogether? That's okay. Islay has plenty more to offer. A must-see is the Islay Woolen Mill in Bridgend, established in 1883. Despite the country's legendary reputation for knitwear, the wool industry has sadly diminished in Scotland over the decades, and the Woolen Mill is one of the last bastions of this time-honored tradition, which famously gave rise to the tartan.

Islay Wool Mill
First Established
1883
Shop and Showroom

Tartan patterns, which Americans refer to as plaid, are created by weaving alternating bands of colored yarn into horizontal and vertical criss-cross configurations. Centuries ago, these designs were incorporated into the kilts and cloths of traditional Highlander dress.

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 Gaelic regions. Fascinatingly, anyone, including non-Scots, can create their own unique tartan pattern and register it with the official Scottish Register of Tartans. Doing so grants the tartan creator exclusive rights to that specific pattern.

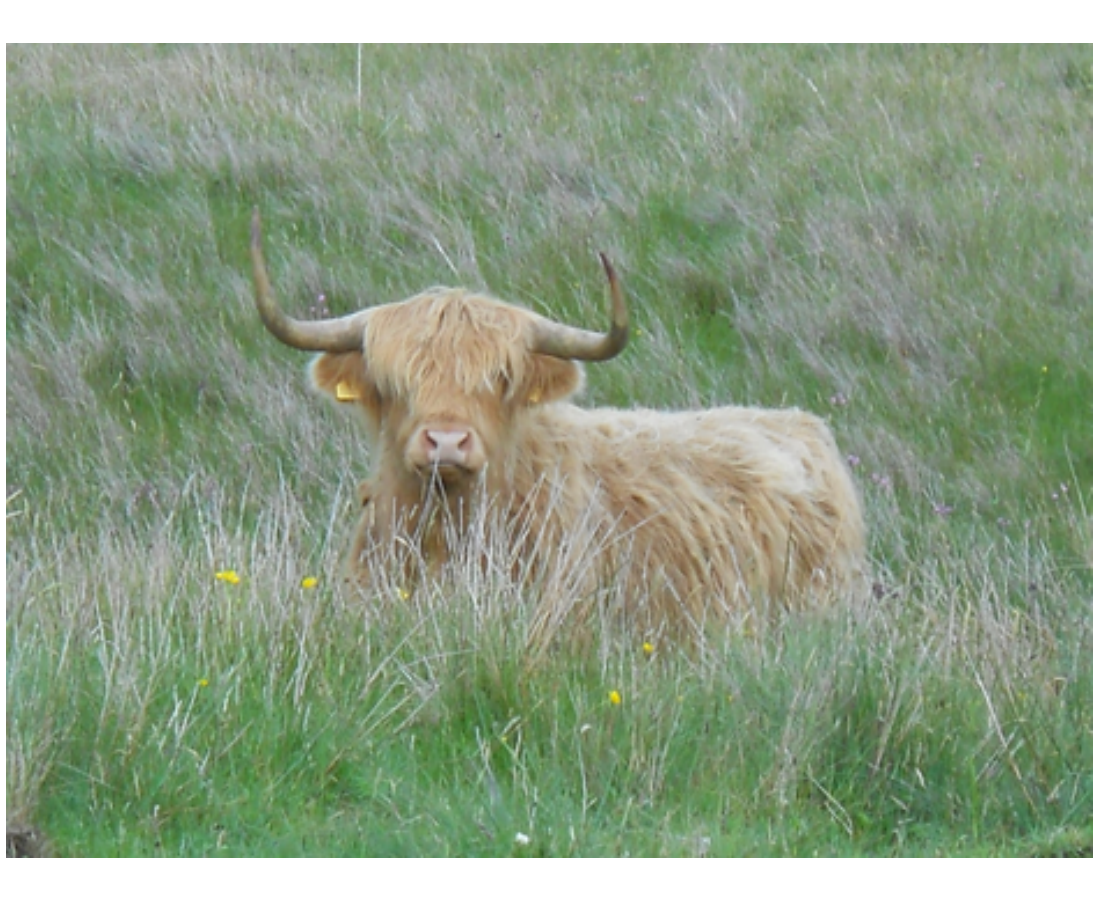
Set in a stone cottage house that looks straight out of a fairy-tale, the Islay Woolen Mill is a family-owned store and factory operated by husband and wife proprietors Gordon and Sheila Covell. Boasting Victorian era looms, antique typewriters and historic look-books of tartan samples, this place is for all intents and purposes a museum as well.

Gordon Covell, co-owner of the Islay Woolen Mill.

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

A casual drive around Islay, once home to the ruling Campbell Clan, offers a fascinating glimpse into its local life and history — fishing vessels hauling in their latest catch, centuries-old remnants of stone houses lying in ruin, and pastures of grazing sheep, cows and llamas.

But when it comes to livestock, no animal is as symbolic of the region as the kyloe, or Highland Cow, a bovine identified by its uniquely long horns, wavy coat and a stylish wisp of hair that covers its eyes like a teenage emo rocker. 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 the rare golden eagle. From October through May, the island is inundated with tens of thousands of Barnacle geese originating from Greenland. Ornithological activity is especially robust at the Loch Gruinart and Oa Peninsula nature preserves.

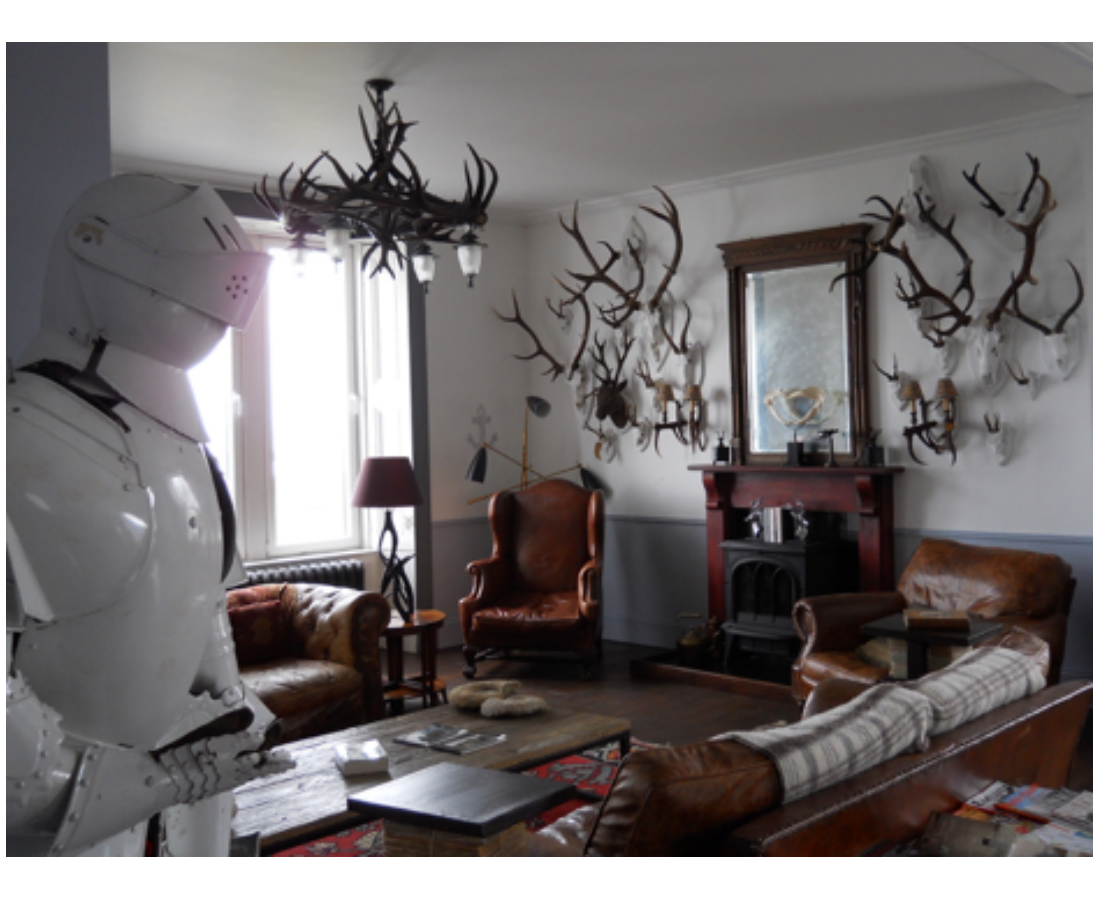
JURA: Deer Memories

Just a five-minute ferry ride east of Islay is Jura, Gaelic for Deer. There's no mystery behind this name — Jura is crawling with several thousand majestic red deer, far exceeding the secluded island's human population of 200.

Joining Bambi and his antlered friends are an abundance of seals, otters and rare birds, making this untamed land 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 — anchored by a church, a general store, a hotel, a lodge, and the one-and-only Jura Distillery. Just over 200 years old, the distillery is available for free, 40-minute guided tours.

The Jura Lodge, owned and operated by the distillery, served as my home on Jura for two nights. Eccentrically decorated by 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. Renting out the lodge costs 2,500 pounds per night, with a minimum three-night stay. That comes to over $12,000 American 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 wall mounts. Just down the hall, the curios-filled music room beckons you to play some bagpipe 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. Incidentally, the bedrooms are so cool that the journalists on my group press trip felt a little like we were on "The Real World," fighting over who gets which 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.)

A scenic minibus tour of the island, arranged via the Jura Bus Service, is the perfect way to get acquainted with the local landmarks, and of course run into some deer (not literally, we hope). Of all the amazing sights to be had on this 142-square-foot 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 Fell Race, in which competitors run a total of 16 miles over all three summits, starting and ending in Craighouse.

Another stop on the tour is the Jura Parish Church, which has done a remarkable job of preserving the island's history through photographs and elaborate recordkeeping. Also on the route: 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 Prophecy. According to legend, in the early 1700s the reigning Campbell Clan forcefully evicted an old soothsayer, who prophesized that the last Campbell descendant to leave Jura would be blind in one eye, and would depart the island with his meager belongings carried in a cart drawn by a lone horse. Two centuries later, this very prediction supposedly came to pass. Not that the soothsayer 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, rumor has it, was once declared officially unnavigable by the Royal Navy.

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

Situated in the Gulf of Corryvreckan on 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 Breakan sailed into the whirlpool and ultimately perished in an attempt to win the hand of a Diurach princess (a Diurach is resident of Jura).

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

Actually, if you know what you're doing, you're not in any major peril. Just don't fall overboard. And you may want to knock down a dram of Dramamine beforehand, as your boat will do a fair share of rocking and bobbing as you brave the violent vortex and its choppy waves. Tours are operated via the Jura Passenger Ferry service.

En route, we encountered a pod of seals lazily lounging along the shore. Lucky tourists may also encounter dolphins or whales on their voyage. Barring a long and arduous walk, the boat ride is also the only way to view Barnhill, the secluded former estate of late author George Orwell, who penned his classic novel 1984 here while stricken with tuberculosis. Orwell himself nearly drowned in the Corryvreckan Whirlpool when his boat capsized on a leisure trip, 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 120 citizens.

Inhabited since prehistoric times, quiet little Gigha has a surprisingly tempestuous history. In medieval times, Gigha was ruled by the Lord of the Isles until 1493, when it fell into the hands of the MacNeill Clan of Taynish, who over the next three centuries fought many a bloody battle with rival clans and encroaching invaders, notably the Clan MacDonald.

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 nominal numbers.

Then in 2002, the inhabitants of Gigha rallied the local masses — what little there were left — and purchased the island for 4.5 million pounds. Since then, the island has slowly, but surely, been making a comeback, enticing local and international tourists to see for themselves why the name Gigha is derived from the Norse word for "good." (Some think it actually comes from the word for "God." Either way, it fits.)

A three-mile ferry ride from the mainland leads to the outskirts of Gigha's capital, Ardminish, which modestly boasts one general store, the island's only full-service hotel (the Gigha Hotel), two restaurants and a post office. Nearby is a small primary school; the older kids take the ferry to attend class on the mainland.

The crown jewel 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 strong, salty ocean winds. Sir James Horlick acquired the estate in 1944 and cleared some woodland to start what would become 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 numerous standing stones rising from the earth.

For example, the notorious Hanging Store – local lore says it was formed from a giant's tooth – was where local authorities hung criminals for stealing livestock and other serious offenses. Closer to the Achamore Gardens is the island's mysterious Ogham Stone, a monolith dating back to the 5th or 6th Century. Situated above a spooky old graveyard, it bears an inscription written in Pictish, a language from the early Middle Ages, featuring a series of dashes representing letter characters.

The Isle of Gigha's Hanging Stone.

Popular leisure activities on Gigha include sailing, fishing, hiking, biking, wildlife excursions and snorkeling. There's even a nine-hole golf course. Scenic boat tours are also available.

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 — where you still unlock your room door with an honest-to-goodness key — it felt good to stay in a luxury metropolitan hotel with uninterrupted high-speed Wi-Fi, 24-hour room service, large flat-screen TVs and other modern amenities.

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

WHERE TO STAY IN THE HEBRIDES
Gigha
Gigha Hotel
Isle of Gigha,Argyll, ScotlandPA41 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
Tel: +44 (0)1496 820601