The edge of Scotland

The Outer Hebrides is an island chain off the coast of Scotland. Also called the Western Isles, the archipelago is the last stop before North America, should you set sail over the vast Atlantic. Travellers of all description visit the isles to cycle, surf world-class waves, sample freshly caught seafood, or follow lines of ancestry. Whatever brings you here, you're sure to fall in love. Text and images by **Jemma Beedie**

A 'shieling', or summer shelter.

Edgemoor Hall, one of the ruins of abandoned Filiscleiter, on the moorland between Skigersta and Tolsa.

On a good day, the sea is a brilliant, tropical turquoise. Sunshine hits soft white sand beaches in all the right ways, and, apart from the ring of distant purple mountains, it's easy to forget you're on Scotland's westernmost archipelago.

The Outer Hebrides have a special kind of magic. I like to think they're what would happen if you took the rest of Scotland and boiled it down to a concentrate. Whatever makes Scotland unique, whatever draws people to this small, chilly country, it's nowhere more prevalent than here.

I have lived on the Isle of Lewis for just under a year. Giving up my comfortable job in Glasgow, moving away from my friends and the familiarity of city life, I took up a position at a rural newspaper on a gamble. Scary at first, yes, and the winters can be challenging, but it has turned out to be the best decision of my life.

On Lewis, and especially in my village of Ness, Gaelic is prevalent. The language is used on road signs just as it is (inauthentically) in Edinburgh and Glasgow, but here is isn't just a quirk to draw tourism. It is the first language of most of the people who are born here. Gaelic is spoken at home and at church; it is not uncommon to meet someone who did not learn English until they started Primary School. Walk into any post office, shop or pub and you'll hear it.

It can be disconcerting to hear another language spoken so freely and commonly within the British Isles, and this is part of what sets Lewis, and indeed, the Hebrides in general, apart from the rest of the nation. Lewisians are fierce about their history and heritage, and Gaelic is a huge part of that. In recent years Scottish Parliament has focused on the language, actively working to preserve it with Gaelic classes for adults and children, a Gaelic school in Glasgow, and radio and television channels. Even the Scottish Parliament's website is dual-language. This is all positive and wonderful, but for the people of Lewis, it is also an afterthought.

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Martin's Memorial Church.

Looking straight down Stornoway's pedestrian high street.

It's hard to get lost in the tiny town centre!

The recently refurbished Stornoway town hall.

The culture of these islands is in the blood. In my village, children as young as five years play the bagpipes and melodeon (a type of accordion), and sing in *puirt à beul*. This is Gaelic mouth music: in communities far from the wider population, in halls and at home, sometimes music was desired where no musical instruments were available. *Puirt à beul* was born. The rhythm and sound of the song carries more importance than the lyrics, though what lyrics are used are often jovial, even bawdy. *Puirt à beul* is cheerful, upbeat music, and is often used as background for *ceilidh* dancing.

A traditional Scots dance, *ceilidhs* have made their way around the world. Scottish expatriates have taken their heritage with them. In my teenage years I was lucky enough to attend *ceilidhs* in Bahrain. Dressed in a flowing ball gown, treated to a spoonful of haggis and choking down a sip of whisky, twice yearly we stumbled our way through the steps as they were called out by the band. It was great fun; perhaps you've attended such an event yourself.

In Lewis, I can attend a *ceilidh* most Saturdays. At the local village hall or in our social club, all it takes is for one of the local chaps to put down his dram and pick up his instrument to get the room whirling. We are wearing jeans, and there are no callers: if you don't know the steps, you're on your own. This is how people have kicked back for generations, and they're not going to stop now.

As I mentioned, life can be hard. Winters are brutal, and this past season has been particularly bad. With winds of over 200km an hour, only the hardy survive. There are positives to this weather though: when the 'weather bomb' hit the island earlier this year, I went to the most north-westerly point of Britain, the Butt of Lewis. The sea roared, and waves crashing on the cliffs were so powerful, they were, at times, as tall as the 37m lighthouse. The day was electric: we experienced nature at her most intense. Power systems failed, and as they couldn't go to work, many of my neighbours ended up in the pub with me. A traditional peat fire crackling away in the fireplace, pints pulled in the dark, conversations by candlelight; I have rarely felt as connected and enthralled as I did that day.

During the harsh winters, this is also where the strong community comes into its own. Crofting (farming) is still very much a way of life on Lewis, and during December and January neighbours help each other, weighing down chicken coops, rounding up sheep, and replacing windowpanes in greenhouses before the plants inside can suffer.

A question I'm asked often by visitors is, what makes the communities here so strong? As an outsider, I think I'm well placed to answer. The short answer is 'family'.

Youngsters may leave the island to attend university or to find jobs in Glasgow, Aberdeen, or even further afield, but many of them return. They come back with new skills and set up businesses of their own, or they join their fathers fishing or crofting.

Americans, Canadians, South Africans, Australians and New Zealanders especially may be second or third generation Scots. People are often drawn to the islands through curiosity about their cultural identity. Tracing their roots back, they find themselves on Lewis, perhaps in Ness, where we have the Comunn Eachdraidh Nis, or Ness Historical Society. This small museum is a wealth of information. It is not uncommon for inquisitive travellers to find records of their relatives within these four walls, sometimes alongside photos or drawings, but what is much more astonishing is that they will also often meet distant kin. The collective memory in Ness works in incredible ways: mention that your grandmother was born at 36 Cross and someone will exclaim, "Oh, you're Mary Margaret's great-grandson!"

These historical societies can be found in many of the communities on Lewis, and a particular favourite of my own is Comunn Eachdraidh Uig. Uig is spectacular. The long bay stretches so far out that at low tide, you can't see the water. The hills enclosing this beach are steep and green, but with a gentle aspect to them, setting them apart from the stark mountains of Harris to the south. It is here that the famous Lewis Chessmen were discovered in 1831, and a statue in honour of this towers over the bay. Information about the Chessmen, along with family records and other fascinating local history, is on display at the Comunn Eachdraidh Uig.

People are often drawn to the islands through curiosity about their cultural identity.

The Callanish Stones in the late evening sun.

Unfortunately, the Chessmen reside in the British Museum in London and the National Museum in Edinburgh, so you won't be able to see them here just yet, but when the Lews Castle Museum is opened to the public in July this year, some of the pieces will be moved and on permanent display in Stornoway.

Also in July is the 20th Heb Celt festival. This award-winning event is one of the top music festivals in Britain and doubles the population of Stornoway for one weekend every summer. Ostensibly a folk festival, in recent years more mainstream music has been on offer, though the focus is still very much on traditional techniques. A band I particularly enjoyed last year, Hò-rò, comprises musicians in their 20s who have taken traditional Gaelic songs and instruments and added their own flavour. Their storming tunes had the crowd going, and the dancing made the striped circus tent shake. This year's line-up is incredible, and festival goers will be entertained by innovative folk-dance band Treacherous Orchestra, blending old with new; the phenomenal Shooglenifty, now in their 25th year; and world-famous indie rockers, Idlewild.

Though the winter months can be exciting, if given the chance I would visit in summer. Outdoor adventure is a highlight of the Outer Hebrides. During summer months the normally empty roads fill with cyclists on the Hebridean Way, touring from Barra to the Butt.

One of my favourite trips for visitors is around the loop of the West Side. We visit Gearrannan Blackhouse Village, perfectly preserved examples of blackhouses. Crofters lived in these stone huts for hundreds of years, entire families and all their animals. It is possible to stay in the blackhouses at Gearrannan, though you'll be politely requested to leave your cow outside.

From here, a short cycle or car ride takes us to Carloway Broch, a structure built in the first century AD, and then on to the Callanish Standing Stones. This stone circle pre-dates Stonehenge, and, unlike its more famous cousin, you can actually walk about inside the circle, touching their smooth faces. Youngsters in particular might recognise them; they were featured heavily in the Disney film, *Brave*.

For a late lunch, we stop at 40 North, a take-away in Bragar. Everything on offer is local, from the beef to the duck to the fish. Vegetables and herbs are grown on site and eggs are taken from the chickens pecking about in the parking area. My biggest problem when visiting is trying not to buy everything on offer. Taking a selection, along with some freshly baked bread and a couple of bottles of locally brewed ale, we'll go back along the coast a little, down a windy, single-track road, avoiding kamikaze sheep, to Dal Mohr. This breathtaking bay is framed by rocky cliffs on both sides. The lilac gravestones in the cemetery above the beach add depth to the landscape and serve as a reminder of the history and heritage of the island, even as we sip our drinks in the slowly softening sunset.

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Bright colours on Stornoway's artistic town centre shops.

Best places to ...

Eat
Auberge Carnish is open to residents and non-residents. Overlooking the Uig sands, it is billed as 'the restaurant on the edge of Europe'.
aubergecarnish.co.uk

Drink
The Cross Inn is situated in a traditional stone dwelling. The wooden bar and fireplace filled with peat cut just steps away will transport you back to a simpler time.
crossinn.com

Stay
Whitefalls Spa Lodges in Breasclete offer five-star self-catering accommodation. Each wooden lodge comes with a spa bathroom and specialists will come directly to you to massage, primp and pamper you.
whitefalls.co.uk/

Hike
For experienced walkers, the 21km technical trek between Tolsta and Lionel is rewarding. Start at Lionel, taking in the sights of the Butt of Lewis lighthouse and St Moluag's chapel first, and finish with a refreshing dip on the long strip of clear white sand at Tolsta.
walkhighlands.co.uk/outer-hebrides/heritage-trail.shtml

For beginners, a gentle stroll around Great Bernera is flat, but will still allow you to take in the sights, smells and sounds of the Hebridean countryside.
walkhighlands.co.uk/outer-hebrides/great-bernera.shtml

Best time of year to visit
May and June offer warm, bright, long days, and there are still lambs in the fields.

Entertainment
In rural communities people pull together so there's always fun to be had. Talented musicians play in Stornoway's pubs every Thursday night and there are *ceilidhs* and concerts in village halls throughout the year. Pick up a copy of the free publication, *Events* to see what's on during your visit.
welovestornoway.com