

TRAVEL JULIA HORTON GOES HORSING AROUND ON LEWIS

STONE ME: Callanish, the standing stones on the Isle of Lewis



HEBRIDES OVERTURE

I'VE always liked pigs for some reason (pre Babe films) so riding past a particularly large, gingery one in a roadside field I turn in my saddle for a better look.

Robbie, my horse, meanwhile, looks round at me, apparently a little unhappy about my interest in this creature.

In a few minutes it transpires that today, for some reason, Robbie has decided to develop a serious aversion to pigs, and so has the horse behind us.

Both of them act as though the next hogs we come across are in league with the devil and they stop, refusing to budge.

For about 20 minutes we fail to persuade them to move in any direction at all and our chances of reaching the nearby beach for a glorious gallop start to seem slim.

Eventually, after much laughter and apologies from our friendly trek leader we get off and lead them past the fearsome, satanic snouts.

Minutes after re-mounting, the horses return to normal, thundering enthusiastically along an almost deserted stretch of pristine white sand, turquoise sea glittering behind in the afternoon sunshine.

Anyone who has ever been to the Hebrides will know just how beautiful the beaches are and how easy it is to find you have them to yourself.

While those on Harris, like Luskentyre, are more famous, Lewis also has spectacular sandy bays such as this one, Coll, not

far from Stornoway. Just minutes along the coast from here is the vast sweep of Broad Bay, with another stunning beach which has inspired the construction of one of the island's most luxurious guesthouses.

Even in bad weather the view from Broad Bay House is wonderful, gazing out at the white-flecked sea beyond masses of yellow buttercups and pink clover blowing in the wind while seabirds wheel past.

With cosy leather armchairs beside a fire, a music system and an honesty bar, the lounge in this five-star guesthouse is perfect for whiling away the hours if the rain closes in.

When it's fine the location is even better. A small gate at the end of the garden leads to a path taking you down to the beach within minutes, while back in the lounge there is a telescope for watching seals basking on distant rocks in the water.

Sightings of basking sharks recently had guests queuing up for a glimpse, Marion says.

She helps her husband Ian run the guesthouse, today serv-

ing breakfast to myself, two Americans and a Spanish couple in the dining area beside the lounge, with the same amazing views.

The Spaniards' English is a little limited, forcing Marion into comedic bird impersonations as she tries to explain the choice of chicken or duck eggs.

I choose seasonal fresh fruits and yoghurt, no impressions of either required sadly, followed by a full Hebridean breakfast, all of which is delicious.

Ian is both proprietor and chef, and his culinary prowess recently won a third silver award from Eat Scotland for his "imaginative, stylish dishes using locally-sourced ingredients".

The islands are an abundant natural larder, with venison, salmon and shellfish all on the menu.

In the four ensuite rooms guests who still have an appetite can enjoy free wine and nibbles as well as tea, coffee and chocolate biscuits.

Broad Bay House is designed along traditional island lines

with plenty of wood, including decking outside the lounge, and paintings of distinctive Scottish landscapes decorate the walls.

Although many people come here to get away from the trappings of modern life, others are keen to enjoy the mod cons with which the guesthouse is kitted out, such as wifi, DVD players and ipod docking stations.

My visit coincides with the Hebridean Celtic Festival, a growing annual music event which brings thousands of fans to hear performers play below the historic Lewes Castle in Stornoway.

As the name suggests, it's a good place to hear traditional Scottish folk music, but many bands combine folk with all kinds of other musical styles including indie, rock and country.

Crowdpleasing regulars The Peatbog Faeries, from Skye, have a repertoire with influences stretching from jazz and hip-hop to reggae and an infectious energetic stage presence.

Rising star on the folk scene, Seth Lakeman, doesn't disap-

point either and nor does headliner KT Tunstall, who is clearly as delighted to be here as her fans.

At the end of the night festival regulars all head straight over to the local arts centre, An Lantair, the venue for the legendary festival clubs which follow every concert.

With pubs still serving at 5am, though officially only to residents, the four-day festival is one of the biggest parties of the year in Lewis.

Most foreign visitors probably come to the island to see, and sometimes to hug, the legendary Standing Stones at Callanish.

Until September, the far smaller but equally famous Lewis Chessman are also on display on the island.

Thought to have been made in Norway in the 12th century, these ivory figures have incredibly lifelike expressions, the kings scowling while 'berserker' warriors bare their teeth.

You can also walk to the site at Uig where the historic sculptures are said to have been found about 200 years ago.

Hiking and cycling are both popular ways to explore the remote islands, with Harris accessible by road from Lewis.

The bus drivers here are possibly the friendliest in Scotland, though the buses themselves are not that frequent.

There are also, of course, some superb places for horse riding, like Coll Bay – and despite Robbie's performance I'm told pigs rarely stop play.

LATE DEALS

WALKING HOLIDAYS:

HF Holidays – the UK's largest walking and leisure activity holiday organisation – has savings on all its three, four, six and seven-night guided walking and leisure activity holidays taken before 30 November at any of its 17 UK country houses. They include an Unmissable Britain holiday offering a mix of activities based at Glen Coe. Options include white water rafting, horse riding, visits to the Isle of Mull, the Isle of Lismore and Urquhart Castle, an evening meal in Oban, plus a selection of walks. The price, starting 1 October, is £438, saving £281. Prices are per person, twin-share and include full-board accommodation, transport as required, plus the services of HF Holidays' leaders. Call 0845-470 7558, www.hfholidays.co.uk

MINI CRUISE:

Pickncruise (0131-443 0766) has last cabins at £379p/p (no single supplement) on a four-night Fred Olsen cruise leaving Rosyth on 10 September to Bergen, Kirkwall and Newcastle with free return coach. Also just announced are nine-night informal NCL Canary Isles cruises flying from Glasgow from £714p/p available from December to April 2012.

MAJORCA HALF TERM:

Airtours has seven nights in Majorca from £1396 for a family of four, including family entertainment and activities, staying at the three-star Siesta Apartments in Alcudia, half-board, from Edinburgh on 15 October. Visit www.airtours.co.uk or call 0844-871 6636.

HARROGATE:

To celebrate the return of Harrogate's landmark hotel, the Majestic – restored to its former glory following a fire in spring last year – Barceló UK is offering one-night B&B breaks from just £75 per room per night. Visit: www.barcelo-hotels.co.uk or call 01423-700300.

INDIA CRUISE:

Voyages of Discovery's Grand Voyage to India takes in Greece and Egypt on the way to Mumbai. The 29-day voyage costs from £1699 per person. To book visit www.voyagesofdiscovery.co.uk 0844-822 0820

YOUR GUIDE The Evening News reader holiday service offers a wide

range of holidays to suit all tastes and budgets. For a brochure call:

0131-620 8400

TRAVEL FACTS

A double room at the five-star Broad Bay House guesthouse on the Isle of Lewis is £175 per night bed and breakfast. Dinner for residents is £35 per person for three courses. (www.broadbayhouse.co.uk, tel 01851-820990, email stay@broadbayhouse.co.uk) An hour beach ride at the Hebridean Equestrian Centre on the Isle of Lewis costs £25. (www.hebrideanequestrian.com, tel 01851-820550, email hebrideanequestrian@gmail.com)

