

Scottish Travel

A DISTILLATION OF BEAUTY

Julia Horton visits the Isle of Harris, where the scenery and culture are as rich as the whisky

Life takes time. The Hearach will be ready when it's ready." Alexander Macleod, of Isle of Harris Distillers, is talking about his company's long-anticipated single malt, which could be poured from next spring.

The whisky is named after the Gaelic word for islanders, many of whom, like Macleod, leave these remote shores to study and work around the world – before the irresistible pull of their Hebridean home brings them back.

Many natives are lured back by the beauty and the drama of land and sea. Furthermore, with a marina in development nearby, the distillery expects to be welcoming more visitors arriving in Tarbert by yacht.

Anyone arriving on a Sunday, however, would find the distillery doors firmly shut, as Harris and neighbouring Lewis both still largely follow a long-standing religious tradition of staying closed on the Lord's day of rest.

Sunday sailings were launched nearly a decade ago, after flights had already begun; pubs and hotels had started to trade in places such as Stornoway long before then.

The issue remains controversial, though, with some residents arguing that opening more businesses on Sundays would boost tourism and the islanders' quality of life, while others fear that it would destroy the very difference, and the peace, beloved by visitors and locals alike.

A recent trial of Sunday cinema at the An Lannfair arts centre in Stornoway attracted sellout crowds – who were urged by two protesters from the Free Church to repent their sins.

Driving along twisting single-track roads, it is easy to see why people feel so passionately about preserving these wild and beautiful islands at the northernmost tip of the Outer Hebridean arc.

Although they have separate names and identities, Harris and Lewis share the same land mass, stretching from dramatic mountains and cliffs to dark expanses of peatland dotted with Neolithic ruins, bordered by vast stretches of sandy beach where you are more likely to see a stray cow than a crowd.

Passing the most famous of these, Luskentyre – which looks inviting even in a downpour under the alluring Hebridean light – I pull in at Northton to visit one of the youngest weavers keeping the Harris tweed industry alive.

Standing in a tracksuit top and jeans in her loom shed as rain hammers down on the roof, and with swatches of greens, pinks and purples on her work table, the



thirtysomething Rebecca Hutton of Taobh Tuath Tweeds says cheerfully: "When you're born and bred here, you don't suddenly discover tweed – it's always been part of your culture and heritage.

Back in Stornoway, Lews Castle is among the newest attractions in town. Built by the Victorian opium baron Sir James Matheson, who also bought the entire island of Lewis before selling both to the industrialist Lord Leverhulme, the castle was used as a hospital and college before falling into disrepair, but reopened last year after a £19.5m facelift. It is now a museum, cafe and hotel.

Today guests can book an exclusive breakfast in the newly restored morning room overlooking the woodland grounds and the harbour. Its walls feature delicate paintings of ferns dating from the Victorian pteridomania, or fern fever, a craze for adorning almost everything with motifs of the plants.

The room in which I stay has a luxurious freestanding bath, though I'm surprised to stumble upon it in the bedroom, beside a window overlooking the car park.

The cafe and bar here are open every day of the week, while Museum nan Eilean houses the Lewis chessmen, a set

of beautifully hand carved game pieces mysteriously discovered among the dunes on Camas Uig beach in 1831 and currently on a long-term loan from the British Museum. The collection also features a flare gun from the ill-fated naval ship the *Iolaire*, which struck rocks off Stornoway on New Year's Day 1919 and foundered with the loss of more than 200 islanders returning from the First World War.

Flying home on a Sunday, it seems unlikely to me that Lewis or Harris would ever lose their attraction, or the welcome more relaxed pace of life. Yet if you're worried that change is afoot – or are a big whisky fan – you might want to book sooner rather than later.

Julia Horton was a guest of Lews Castle (doubles from £110, room only; lews-castle.co.uk). Isle of Harris Distillery tours cost £10pp, including whisky and gin sampling (harrisdistillery.com). Fly to Stornoway from Edinburgh, Glasgow, Aberdeen and Wick with Flybe (flybe.com), Loganair (loganair.co.uk) and Eastern Airways (easternairways.com); ferries take seven hours from Ullapool, departing daily in summer (£50.95 per car plus £9.50pp; calmac.co.uk). Car hire from circa £23 a day, carhire-hebrides.co.uk

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From Luskentyre beach to the Lewis chessmen, left, and tweed, right, there is much to see in the Hebrides



GREAT BRITISH BREAKS

ISLES OF SCILLY

Take the chopper to where the weather is warm and the beaches are brilliant

WHY?

Six years after financial pressure put paid to the Scillies' helicopter link to mainland Cornwall, services resumed from Land's End last week. They bring this woozily supine archipelago, with its dreamy white-sand beaches, exotic gardens and doors-unlocked vibe, within 20 minutes' reach of England's most westerly point. The mild microclimate is renowned – so get your summer off to a flyer.

WHAT YOU DO

The helicopter (from £215 return; islesofscilly-travel.co.uk) touches down on **St Mary's**, the largest of the five inhabited islands. Like the others, it's eye-catchingly green, warmed by the Gulf Stream, and feels like Enid Blyton's take on Tobago.

Barely a mile from the airport is the tiny "capital", **Hugh Town**, where bunting and a few gift shops qualify it as a Scillonian metropolis. Start at **Dibble & Grub**, a cafe overlooking the eastern end of Porthcressa Beach. Then stretch your legs on the coastal footpath to **Peninnis Head**. Allow an hour or so, and don't miss **St Mary's Old Church** amid the ferns and palms.

Back in Hugh Town, the **Isles of Scilly Museum** has been obsessively curated, with stories of shipwrecks, smugglers and Iron Age swords. Who knew St Mary's was the last royalist stronghold in the Civil War (£3.50; iosemuseum.org)?

A bike is the best way to explore the island's sedate world of wild flowers and honesty-box farm shops. **St Mary's Bike Hire**, on the Strand, has a good range, including tandems (from £14 a day; smarysbikehire.co.uk). Secluded **Pelistry Bay**, in the northeast, should be on your route; nearby, **Carn Veon Cafe** does an admirably indulgent cream tea (£4.95).

There are several interisland boat companies, but **St Mary's Boatmen's Association** is best suited to day trips from St Mary's. Times are announced each morning, and you buy tickets on the quay (scillyboating.co.uk).

Where to go? **Tresco** (£9.50 return; up to five sailings daily) is a must, for its limpid blue waters and the subtropical plants of the 19th-century **Tresco Abbey Garden** – towering eucalyptus, blooming proteas and blasé red squirrels (£15; tresco.co.uk/enjoying/abbey-garden).

Delightfully sedate **St Martin's** (£9.50 return; two departures daily) has a **seal snorkelling experience** from Higher Town quay. Ninety minutes of being flirted with by doe-eyed wild grey seals is the most fun you'll ever have in a wetsuit (£49; scillysealsnorkelling.com). Dry off on the terrace of the **Seven Stones Inn**, with an Ales of Scilly beer or two.

WHERE YOU STAY

Built around a 16th-century hilltop fortification above Hugh Town, the **Star Castle Hotel** has a heated pool, four acres of gardens and two award-winning



St Martin's, with Tresco in the distance

restaurants that serve lobster and crab caught by the hotel's own fishing boat, Gallos (doubles from £160, B&B; star-castle.co.uk). More modern, and affordable, is light-filled **Tregarthen's**, down in town (doubles from £95, B&B; tregarthens-hotel.co.uk).

Karma St Martin's is the best spot on the northernmost populated island, with a spa and sea-facing gardens (doubles from £180, B&B; karmagroup.com).

WHERE YOU EAT

The **Atlantic** overlooks Hugh Town harbour and serves generous pub grub and fresh seafood, with lobster and mussels among the standouts (mains from £11; atlanticinncilly.co.uk). A 15-minute walk north of town, **Juliet's Garden** has a locally sourced menu, a long gin list and panoramic views (mains from £14.95; julietsgardenrestaurant.co.uk).

Ben Lerwill

The writer was a guest of Isles of Scilly Travel, which also runs a boat service from Penzance (from £90 return) and planes from Land's End, Newquay or Exeter (from £140 return; islesofscilly-travel.co.uk)

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