

FOCUS ON...



The Islands Of Islay & Jura

Small places can have a big impact...

by ROBERT WIGHT



Saligo Bay

FOCUS ON... Islay & Jura

Touring Loch Gruinart

A campervan and a sense of adventure is all you need...

I RECENTLY travelled to Islay and Jura via Tiree. A convoluted route perhaps. However, this "Tiree" isn't the island but the model of campervan from Scots firm Jerba we used for our trip.

Well, I've always wanted a campervan, and I've always wanted to visit these stunning west coast islands, so what better way to make the road trip?

Only around 3000 people live on Islay, and on Jura the population is less than a tenth that – they say deer outnumber people 30-1. Two decent A-roads cross the island roughly north-south and east-west, but much of the travelling is on single-track.

There is a bus service linking "major" settlements but many island highlights lie off the beaten track. A few locals count taxi-ing among their several job titles, but journeys are pricey – so bringing the van proved handy. Indeed, I'd say a vehicle is pretty much necessary.

Luckily, getting one here isn't as expensive as you'd think – a CalMac return from Kennacraig to Port Ellen for the Volkswagen and two adults cost £91. For a regular car, two adults and two kids, it's £104.

The thing about a campervan is you carry everything you need wherever you go and I was a wee bit nervous about driving it along single-track roads, but I needn't have worried – it was just like a slightly bigger car and there are plenty passing places.

First stop after the two-hour sail was the RSPB reserve

A dunlin rests on seaweed



“Many island highlights lie off the beaten track”

at Loch Gruinart, a 40-minute drive from Port Ellen, the second-half of which is along that dreaded single-track.

At RSPB's cottage HQ we met warden Louise Muir, who lives on neighbouring Jura, where her husband is a deerstalker, making the short ferry crossing daily.

Loch Gruinart is famous for barnacle geese – a few dozen of which remained when we visited mid-April.

Louise says, "The geese winter here before returning to breeding grounds in Greenland at the start of April. Our last official count numbered a record 36,000 geese."

In summer, the standout species is the corncrake. It's incredibly rare in most of the UK, but the island is now something of a stronghold for this elusive wee bird.

Species spotted included lapwing, redshank and loads of ducks. Others had seen another very rare bird, the hen harrier. Otters, seals, deer and hare are often also spotted in the salt waters and surrounding mudflats.

The reserve also has short signposted walks. The 2km moorland route in particular gives stunning views of much of Islay and over to the imposing Paps of Jura. The reserve, free to access, is always open. The visitor centre is open 10am-5pm except Christmas and New Year's Day.

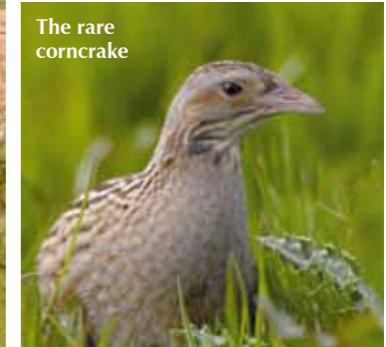
Record numbers of barnacle geese



Loch Gruinart Reserve



The rare corncrake



A white-fronted goose



Paps Of Jura – A Hillwalking Must-do

The magnificent Paps of Jura dominate the skyline from much of Islay and Jura. Huge as they appear, none reaches Munro level. At 784m, the highest, Beinn an Oir, is a Corbett. Beinn Shiantaidh and Beinn a'Chaoisais, are just under 762m, making them Grahams. A round of the Paps, one of the true classics of Scottish hillwalking, is a huge day out and even strong walkers should allow 10hrs for a route of around 16km with almost 1524m of ascent.

If that's not tough enough, how about the 27km annual Isle of Jura Fell Race? It takes in seven island summits, including the Paps, for a total ascent of 2286m. Course records are an astounding 3hrs 6mins by Hector Haines and 3hrs 40mins by Angela Mudge. »

FOCUS ON... Islay & Jura

Whisky Galore!

With no fewer than nine distilleries, you'll have to leave the car behind

Of course some of the major attractions of these islands aren't compatible with driving – the distilleries! Islay is home to eight, Jura one. It's perfectly feasible to visit all during a holiday, but if tasting tours are what you plan, your liver won't thank you for it!

Our first night in the van's folded down seats/bed was surprisingly comfy, at least for two. The van actually holds four, the two others on a platform in the extendable roof. I really can't imagine sharing with three.

After rustling up a quick fry-up on the diesel-powered two-ring stove, we left the van pitched at Port Mor Campsite, near Port Charlotte, because our next Islay mission called for taxis...

We visited four distilleries over two days – the others give an excuse to return! First up was Islay's newest, Kilchoman. Established from scratch at an old farm in 2005, it was the first on the island for 125 years.

It's Islay's only non-coastal distillery and lies down lengthy single-track roads a 20 minute drive – £20 in a taxi – from Port Charlotte. They produce just 800,000 litres annually – a tiny amount – and it's pretty much a handcrafted product.

Obviously, it's all "young" spirit – and if anyone says whisky has to be old to be good here's the proof they're talking nonsense. Kilchoman was also the first to produce a "100% Islay" malt – the barley was grown on the island, then malted, fermented, distilled and bottled on site.

Not far off lies stunning Machir Bay – also the name of a Kilchoman expression. A walk along the beautiful, and



usually deserted, beach followed by lunch at the top-notch distillery café is highly recommended.

A £15 taxi ride gets you from Kilchoman to another unusual distillery, Bruichladdich.

Production here ceased in the late 90s, but a syndicate led by wine merchant Mark Reynier bought the plant for about £6.5million in 2000. They found most of the equipment and décor hadn't changed since Victorian times. Renovations brought it back to its previously glory and workers use traditional techniques and equipment. No computers here – everything's done by hand, eye and taste. Bottling of the 1.2million litres produced annually takes place on-site too. In 2012 Remy Cointreau bought Bruichladdich for a reported £58m. Distillery marketing man Carl Reavey told me, "Nothing's really changed. When they took over they just said 'keep doing what you're doing' so we have!"

Next day we called at Islay's oldest distillery, Bowmore, which started production – legally at least – in 1779.

Here, 25% of barley used is malted and dried on-site, which gives visitors the rare chance to see traditional malting floors and kilns – and even have a go at turning the germinating barley. The highlight was the chance to

see a bottle of the oldest malt Bowmore has ever released – a 57-year-old bottled in 2011. The angels took so much from the cask, just 12 bottles were produced.



The distillery kept two, one of which is on display in the tasting room, securely locked in a glass case which is no doubt bomb-proof. Another two bottles were auctioned for charity, and the rest put on general sale. If you'd like one, you'd better hurry as only four remain. All it takes is a spare £100,000!

Later, a kind soul dropped us at Ardbeg Distillery, three-miles outside Port Ellen. It's famed for producing perhaps the peatiest of all malts on an island renowned for peaty whisky. The "standard" 10-year-old is a robust, smoky number, but for a real peat-fire blast, try Supernova – it's peated to 100 parts per million, around three times more than normal. It'll draw your cheeks.

The distillery's also home to a superb restaurant always packed with locals.

Just a stone's throw away, heading back toward town, is Lagavulin Distillery. A mile or so beyond that, Laphroaig. Linking all three with Port Ellen is an excellent footpath. So, if you're staying in town, you can enjoy an Ardbeg tour, a fantastic lunch, then a leisurely stroll home, calling in for a wee visit at other distilleries en route.

Islay's two other distilleries – Bunnahabhain and Caol Ila – lie near the ferry port for Jura.

Caol Ila, with six stills, is by far Islay's biggest, producing upwards of 6.5million litres a year.

For all its size, workers take as much care as any craft producer. The distillery's setting also makes it a standout – the views of the Paps of Jura are spectacular.

Just a couple of miles away is



"Now that has to be whisky at its most exclusive!"

Bunnahabhain, and the tiny village that once housed its workforce.

Again, a spectacular setting. The distillery uses water from the underground Margadale river and the resultant malt is arguably the island's lightest, showing Islay whisky isn't all about peat.

Then there's what must be Scotland's most remote distillery – Jura. As well as getting the ferry from the mainland to Islay, you have to get another from Islay to Jura. It feels remote because it is remote, but it's well worth the travel effort. If you're on foot, there is a passenger-only ferry from Tayvallich.

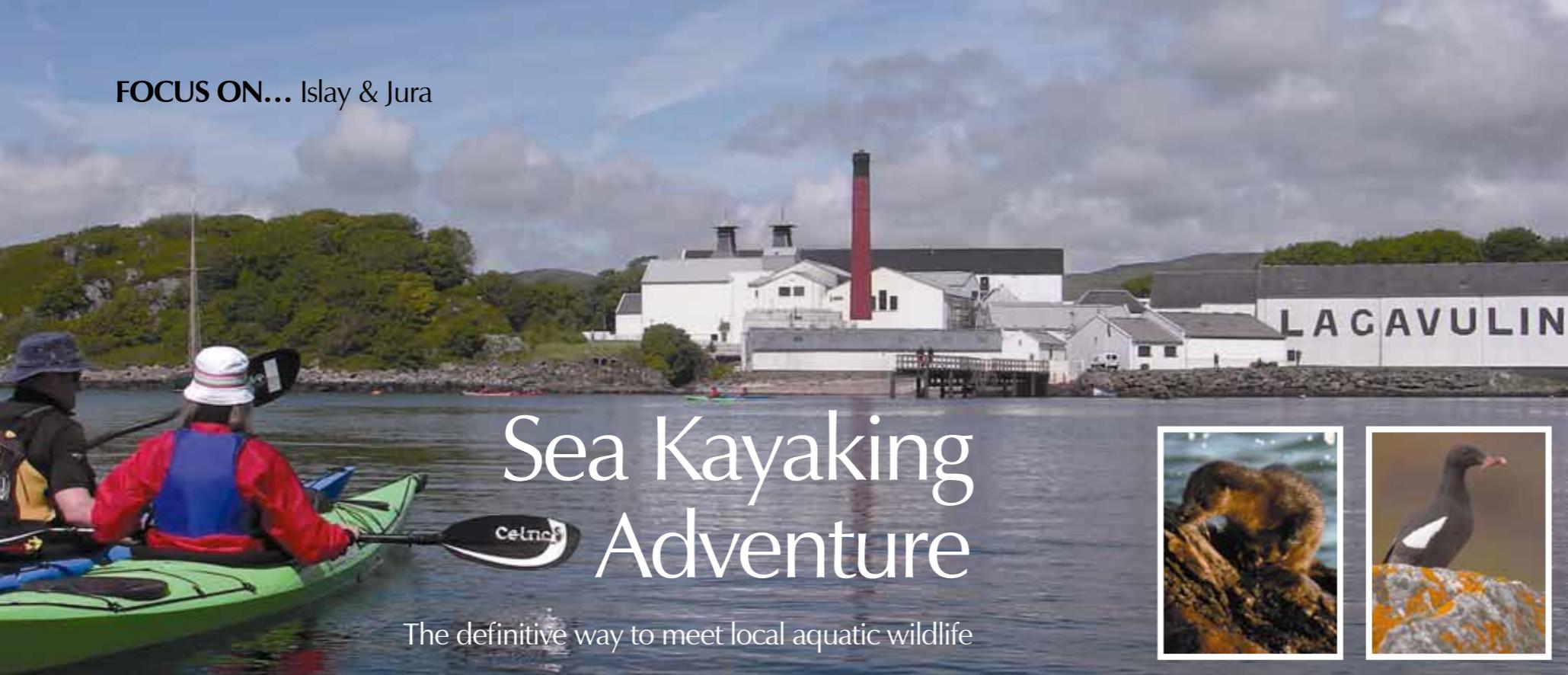
Jura's seclusion and clean Hebridean air are the reasons why writer George Orwell came here after the war, famously penning 1984 in a farmhouse there. In recognition of this unique connection, in the year 1984, Jura laid down some special single malt. 30 years later, they bottled just 1984 bottles. Now that has to be whisky at its most exclusive!



Islay Has Ales, Too

What does an island with eight distilleries need? A brewery! That was the reasoning of beer-loving pals Walter Schobert, Paul Capper and Paul Hathaway when they set up Islay Ales in 2004. We met accountant-turned-brewer Steve Bavin, who told us, "We're a four-barrel plant and have two brew days a week – each give us about 1150 pints. A lot of what we produce is sold in pubs and restaurants here on Islay but more mainland outlets are stocking, and we recently sent 75 cases to Switzerland, 136 to Germany and 150 to France."

A brewery tour doesn't take long – it's really just a couple of rooms – but the enthusiasm and passion Steve and the rest of the Islay Ales team have for their award-winning beers make for a fun visit. »



Sea Kayaking Adventure

The definitive way to meet local aquatic wildlife



THE waters around Islay and Jura are rich in wildlife – but a sea kayak is just that wee bit more exciting. Kayaking needn't be the full-on adrenaline sport some imagine – and certainly not on the beautifully sunny, breezeless day I had a go, with the sea as calm as the proverbial millpond.

I pulled into the car park just outside Islay's Port Ellen to meet Dave Protherough, owner of Kayak Wild Islay, and gazed in wonder at the golden sands and turquoise water – like something from a Caribbean holiday brochure.

Dave tossed a wetsuit in my direction. Sadly this was to be no dip in some tropical ocean. "You might want to keep your socks on too," he warned.

Cliché alert – sea kayaking is an activity for all the family. To prove it, I was joined on the water by the Kendricks – Andre, Dianne and 12-year-old Iona on holiday from Linlithgow – and in our wee group only Iona had ever been in a kayak before.

After a safety chat and demo from Dave we pushed off shaking and wobbling into the bay.

Within a few minutes, we were all pretty comfortable,

although it did prove a bit of a struggle going in a straight-line, but we more or less were all headed in the same direction.

On a day as calm as we enjoyed, paddling was a skosh and Dave reckoned we'd see plenty of wildlife.

"There are all manner of sea birds – cormorants, shags and gannets," he told us. "Although it's not such a good thing to see a gannet. If they're close to shore it generally means a storm's approaching."

"You get loads of seals – the ones in this bay are harbour, or common, seals. My favourite, though, are otters. You can practically guarantee seeing all the other wildlife, but not otters. They're actually fairly common here – but you rarely see them, which is why it's such a treat when you do."

We splashed our way out to a scattering of small skerries on which chubby-looking seals were lounging.

Dave, who also drives Islay's mobile library, said he thought kayaks were the best way to get up close to Islay's aquatic creatures.

"You just drift along," he whispered. "There's no engine noise, barely any splashing. You can get really close

to seals in particular, if they're in the mood to let you."

Proving his point, I get to within a couple of kayak-lengths of one seal, who lazily raised his head, looked me directly in the eye, then, dismissively, went back to sleep.

Dave explained, "Any wildlife encounters we have are strictly on the animals' terms, since we don't want to cause them any undue stress or agitation. They're quite used to us now, though, and they know we're no threat. The seals sometimes circle and come up behind us for a closer look."



The best way to get up close to seals

Finlaggan, Steeped In History

Islay is home to one of the most significant sites in Scottish history – the seat of the Lords of the Isles, Loch Finlaggan. It's a few miles south of Port Askaig, and has three small islands. The largest, Eilean Mor, is covered with the remains of dozens of overlapping ruins. From here, the Macdonald lords ruled what was a more-or-less independent kingdom covering the western isles and much of the mainland's western seaboard. Chiefs would travel to the site to pay homage and feast. Access to the site today is via a visitor centre and museum.

Of particular interest is the ruined chapel with several carved grave markers on display.



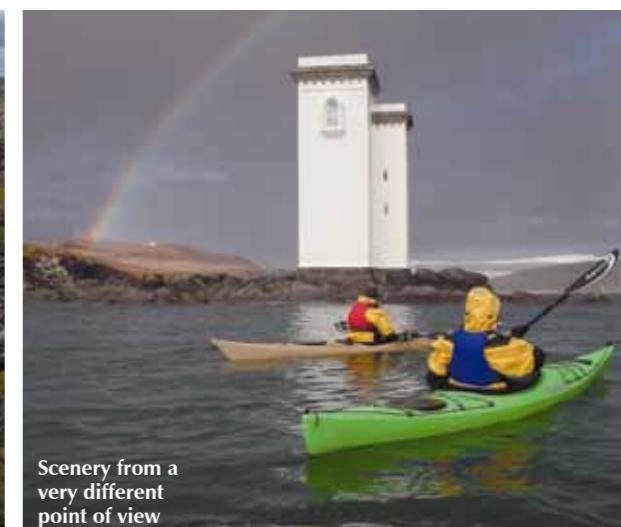
The ruins of Eilean Mor

Hours fly (or float!) by and before long we're back on shore packing up. I make a mental note of another good thing about a camper van – it's the perfect mobile changing room. I can even stick a kettle on!

The Kendricks had a great time, too.

Dianne said, "It's an ideal activity – amazing scenery, wildlife, fresh air and a bit of exercise. It's difficult dragging kids away from laptops and mobiles, but this did the trick perfectly."

kayakwildislay.co.uk »



Scenery from a very different point of view

FOCUS ON... Islay & Jura

GETTING THERE...

ISLAY: by Caledonian MacBrayne ferry, from Kennacraig, near Tarbert to Port Ellen or Port Askaig. Journey time to Port Ellen approx 2hrs.

Timetable and prices:

www.calmac.co.uk

Daily flights from Glasgow Airport to Islay www.flybe.com

JURA: regular vehicle ferry crossings from Port Askaig, Islay, to Feolin. Summer foot-passenger service from Tayvallich. Booking essential. www.jurapassengerferry.com



We combined transport and accommodation with a campervan supplied by Jerba Campervans, of North Berwick. A typical converted VW T5 costs around £46,000 but they can be hired for around £100 a day. The company was set up by Simon Poole and Cath Brookes – a couple who actually use campervans, so they know what they're talking about.

Simon said, "We've used campers to travel across Canada and Australia with our kids, so when it comes to conversions, we know what works!"

We certainly couldn't fault our van – build quality was excellent, and it was comfortable – for a van. If you're happy with a bit of a squeeze, it can be a lot of fun. It did feel like a proper adventure! www.jerbacamervans.co.uk

...EATING OUT...

Lochindaal Hotel, Port Charlotte.
Probably the best seafood platter on Islay.

Yan's Kitchen, Port Charlotte. Super food, great prices.

The Islay Hotel, Port Ellen. Food is OK but pricey.

Bridgend Hotel. Local produce. The hotel's "Katie's Bar" is great for lunch.

The Harbour Inn, Bowmore.
Award-winning restaurant with stunning views of Loch Indaal and over to the Paps of Jura.



...AND THINGS TO DO

The Distilleries

Ardbeg, 01496 302244
Bowmore, 01496 810441
Bruichladdich, 01496 850221
Bunnahabhain, 01496 840646
Caol Ila, 01496 302769
Kilchoman, 01496 850011
Lagavulin, 01496 302730
Laphroaig, 01496 302418
Jura, 01496 820385

Kayak Wild Islay,
www.kayakwildislay.co.uk

Islay Sea Adventures, boat trips, wildlife spotting, fishing,

www.islay-sea-adventures.co.uk

Pony Trekking, Ballivicar Farm,

www.islay-farm-accommodation.co.uk