

SCOTTISH ISLANDS

EXPLORER

THE UK'S ONLY MAGAZINE DEVOTED TO EXPLORING THE ISLANDS OF SCOTLAND

Mousa Broch

Bute
Walk

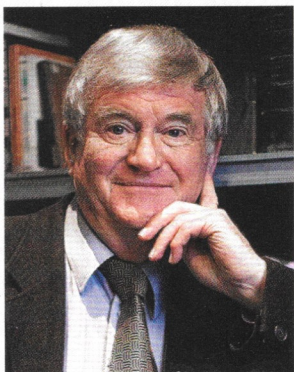
Hebridean
Woodlands

Orkney
Filming

Artificial
Islets

Plus: Canna - Erraid - Finlaggan - Out Stack - and much more ...





Editor
John Humphries
 on aspects of travel

John Tuzo Wilson, the Canadian geophysicist and geologist, spoke of the Antarctic continent and explained that 'No one comes here casually'. The extremes of temperatures, daylight, distance and human survival zones make that a certainty. However, he died in 1993 just as the tourist ships were bringing untutored visitors in their thousands to a most remarkable part of the world.

That phrase concerning visits that are undertaken 'casually' certainly applies to the Scottish islands. Skye is the only major island where comings and goings need minimal planning, although the shortage of accommodation for those wanting a roof over their heads is apparent in the 'high season'. Sometimes spaces are in short supply on campsites. Wild-campers face no such problems.

There is a distinct advantage to having a journey, jaunt or exploration, even an escapade, needing a certain degree of preparation. This can involve fellow-travellers sharing their acquired information and being conscious that they have reached somewhere distinctive and special. Obstacles of distance and difficulty-of-access have the effect of encouraging conversation and exchange.

I recall returning from a visit to Raasay on that quietest of vessels, the diesel electric hybrid, MV Hallaig. The journey to Sconser is short and highly-scenic. As there were only five passengers on board, there was a certain camaraderie evident. When asked whether I had had a good visit and what took me there, I revealed my identity and product, delighted to discover that my questioners were subscribers.

Some customs of British social life discourage people from being friendly and forthcoming. The emptier the space in which people meet, the more likely it is that they will communicate. That's one of the pleasures of mountain-walking, hill-climbing, beach-strolling and machair-mooching. Striking up acquaintances is an acceptable convention and, in these cases, it's done casually!

For the Editor's daily item on Scottish islands, go to
john-humphries.blogspot.com



Guest Columnist
Maeve Bruce on a
 continuing potent mix

Seventeen years ago, newly-married with a young son, I went over the sea to Skye and very nearly didn't come back. The landscape was simply *elemental* - stone and earth, water and wind, fiery sunsets and moody skies. Embedded in the land were almost unbelievable stories of giants and faeries, of a young defeated prince and a displaced people. It was a potent mix.

While we were there, we chanced upon a business for sale, a bunkhouse on the edge of a loch beneath the Black Cuillin. But we were not brave enough and I returned south with a heavy heart. Of course, it is too easy among such fierce beauty to romanticise island life and forget the unforgiving wind that whistles over the bleak land in winter. Myth and magic won't keep you warm at night or pay the bills, and many islanders are forced to leave. Stories are often all that is left, etched into the landscape.

I am currently working towards a Master's degree in travel and nature writing while also studying folklore. For a writer whose main area of interest is in a sense of place, the Scottish islands offer rich inspiration. Humans are narrative beings and this is particularly apparent in the islands where heritage and history are entwined with mountains and moors. There, the veil between the past and the present is thin. In places, you can still hear the clash of steel echoing after ten thousand years, if you listen hard enough.

In a few weeks I travel to Colonsay and Oronsay. The landscape of these tiny Hebridean islands is inextricably linked with myth and magic. Tales of selkies and brownies, saints and kings, Vikings and giants are evidenced in the topography. Amid the golden sandy beaches, wild rugged cliffs and undulating heather-clad hills lie holy wells and ruined chapels, standing stones and burial chambers. Man has left his stories on the earth.

I will pack my usual kit for a field trip: camera, binoculars, voice-recorder, laptop, notebook, maps and nature guides. However, I shall also be taking an open mind and a very glad heart.