

Words Claire Macaulay

# Queen of the Hebrides

SOUTHERNMOST OF THE INNER HEBRIDES, ISLAY IS A STUNNING JEWEL OF HABITAT AND CULTURE



**Image:** Carraig Fhada, Islay's famous square lighthouse opposite Port Ellen.

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**Image:** The 8th century Kildalton Cross stands in the graveyard of the ruined former parish church.

Islay, the 'Queen of the Hebrides', sits proudly off the west coast of Scotland. From rolling sand dunes to towering sea cliffs, this truly is an island of contrasts. Benefiting from the warmth of the Gulf Stream, Islay's climate is mild, like its seasons, and generous rainfall sustains abundant greenery. Due to the presence of Lochs Gruinart and Indaal in the north and south respectively, Islay has a long coastline of stunning beaches and precarious cliffs, fringing machair, moor, farm and woodland, and is ever popular with artists and photographers.

The Big Strand, spanning over seven miles, is the longest uninterrupted beach on the island. Stretching from Laggan Point to the Oa Peninsula, the beach is exposed to the elements, making it a bracing but nevertheless popular walk. The sheer size of The Big Strand affords visitors a degree of privacy not offered by many other beaches, making it a hotspot in summer. On a smaller scale, Killinallan Point, with its sun-bleached sands and cerulean waters, is the epitome of a Hebridean beach, and on a clear day the Isle of Mull can be seen across the waters.

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In contrast to the sweeps of sand, formidable cliffs overhang the coastline. Notably, the unforgiving wildness of the island can be observed at the Mull of Oa, where the cliffs rise to 200m at its most southerly point, Beinn Mhor (literally 'big hill'). Oa is the site of the American Monument, erected in 1920 to memorialise those lost in the Tuscania and Ontario ship disasters in the year 1918. Regrettably, Islay has seen many ships wrecked on its shores; ferocious winds and strong currents have proven fatal for many vessels.

While Islay's human population sits

at around 3,000, it is famed for its bird population of more than 200 species, 100 of which breed here. The multitude and range of habitats allow for a wide variety of birds to thrive, and the convenience of so many birds existing in one location proves tantalising to many ornithologists. The abundance of the population is such that one isn't required to go birdwatching to observe a satisfying amount of birdlife year-round. For the more avid birdwatcher, there is an RSPB hide on Loch Gruinart located on the north coast of the island.

The Gruinart Flats, which lie at the

*While Islay's human population sits at around 3,000, it is famed for its bird population of more than 200 species, 100 of which breed on the island*



**Image:** A ringed plover, just one of 200 species of birds on the island.



**Image:** The picturesque fishing village Portnahaven.

*Contention for the ownership of the island in 1598 saw the MacLeans burning the MacDonalds alive inside the chapel*

head of the loch, are flooded by the RSPB to provide a habitat for waders and other birds. Created in the 1830s by diverting the river which flowed from the loch, this marshy habitat sees over 45% of the world's Greenland barnacle goose population wintering here each year, with up to 18,000 on the flats at any one time.

This fiercely beautiful landscape possesses a legacy of lost power. In the fourteenth and fifteenth century, the islands on Loch Finlaggan functioned as the administrative centre of the Lordship of the Isles, which at the time maintained much of the highlands and islands as an independent and largely democratic society. Lords of the Isles were inaugurated here, providing an opportunity for feasting and celebration equal to that of a coronation of the time. Nowadays, ruins of sixteenth century houses lie among carpets of heather on the site of this bygone nucleus. This area holds a quieter power now than in days of old, the captivating lake views and uninterrupted tranquillity



ty creating a pocket of reality not often seen in the hubbub of modern 21st century life.

To the north of the island, the bones of Kilnave Chapel overlook Loch Gruinart. The serene beauty of this water-facing ruin masks a grisly history, where contention for the ownership of the island in 1598 saw the MacLeans burning the MacDonalds alive inside the chapel where they took refuge following the battle of Gruinart Strand. Standing tall in the grounds, a high cross bore witness to this slaughter on holy ground.

Perhaps the most iconic building on the island is Kilarrow Parish Church, known locally as "The Round Church" due to its circular design, which, according to legend is thus shaped to deny the devil a hiding spot in a place of wor-

Image: Kilarrow Parish Church, known as 'The Round Church'



ship. One of only two circular churches in Scotland, it proudly sits atop Main Street in Bowmore; the main village on Islay. The church was built in 1767 by order of Daniel Campbell of Shawfield, a former MP who bought the isles of Islay and Jura following the Glasgow Malt Riots of 1725. During these riots, Campbell's property was vandalised, and using the resulting compensation he refurbished and sold his home in Glasgow, relocating his family to Islay. It is said that Campbell's inspiration for this unconventional building resulted from his exposure to Italian architecture on a trip to Europe.

Islay's whisky legacy is famed worldwide, with legend stating that distilling was first brought to the island by Irish monks in the fourteenth century. The abundance of peat as fuel, spring water, and home grown barley makes the location perfectly suited to whisky production. Currently the island houses eight distilleries, with plans for more, all of which produce unique whiskies similar only in the possession of a peaty smokiness from the location. The more famously peaty distilleries, such as Ardbeg on the south of the island, use the peat of the island in as much of the process as possible, using peat rich water



Image: You won't be fighting the crowds on any of Islay's beaches.

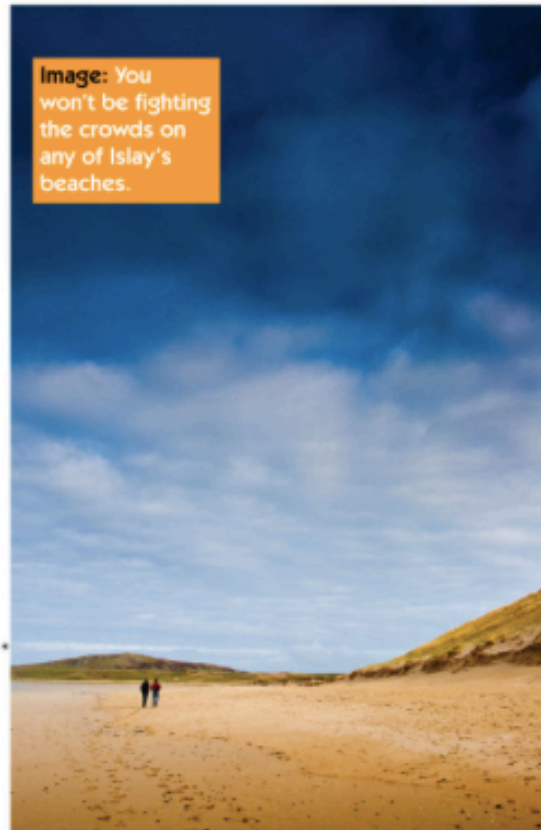
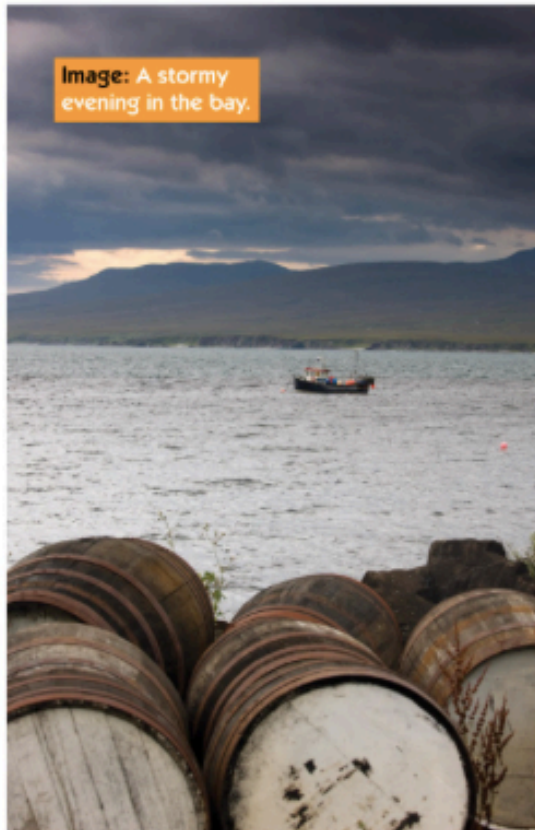


Image: A stormy evening in the bay.



and heavily peated malt. Bunnahabhain to the north, however, use minimally peated barley, giving a lighter tasting whisky, more accessible to the casual drinker.

One sure way to experience the island's full culture is through the week-long Feis Ile (or Islay Festival). Approaching its 31st year, it is an experience not to be missed. The festival of music and malt sees distilleries opening their doors, as well as plenty of live

music and entertainment. In addition to the tourists it attracts each year, the festivities draw in visiting creatives and musicians (including Runrig and Dougie MacLean).

From her stunning natural beauty, rich tapestry of history, and flourishing modern industry, the "Queen of the Hebrides" boasts many jewels to her crown; it is easy to see why she was so named. 🐏

## ISLAY AT A GLANCE

### ISLAY ROYALTY

Islay is affectionately known as the Queen of the Hebrides.

### BIRTHPLACE

Lord George Robertson the former NATO Secretary was born in Port Ellen.

### WHISKY GALORE

The island is small but mighty, it boasts 8 distilleries despite only being 25 miles long.

### TARTAN PIMPERNEL

Reverend Donald Caskie was born in Bowmore and later helped over 2000 escape France in World War Two. He was known as the 'Tartan Pimpernel'.

### ANCIENT DISCOVERY

A flint arrowhead has been found on the island. It is estimated to have been from around 10,800 BC.

### LIMPET POWER

Installed near Portnahaven in 2008, LIMPET (Land Installed Marine Powered Energy Transmitter) was the first commercial wave turbine in the world.



### CASTLE ON THE HILL

Finlaggan Castle sits on an island in the loch, and was the seat of Clan Donald.

### HISTORIC TITLE

The title of the Lord of the Isles now belongs to Charles, Prince of Wales.

### TAKE HEED

A traveller was once warned by locals, 'One sip and you live forever; two sips and you go blind; three sips and you expire on the spot.' Presumably referring to whisky!

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