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MOROCCO

SAND, SONGS, SPICE & STARS

EPIC JOURNEYS, FROM THE ATLAS MOUNTAINS TO THE SOUKS OF FEZ



Georgia

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— the Deep South's best-kept secret

Ibiza

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WEEKENDER

ISLAY

Scotland's fifth-largest island may be heralded for its distilleries, but its wild beaches, spectacular sunsets and rugged interior are intoxicating with or without the famous whisky. Words: Sarah Barrell

A wild, rural treat, Islay is well worth the work it takes me to get here — a winding journey on board the Caledonian Sleeper for a dawn arrival in Glasgow. From there, it's a final 100 miles of road, ferry or air travel to where Scotland frays gradually into the open Atlantic.

But what rewards await. The peat that perfumes Islay's legendary whiskies dominates the landscape on this rugged Southern Hebridean isle, and while the island is synonymous with whisky, you need no real interest in the local spirit to wind up here. Its distilleries are found all over, draped along craggy bays in beautiful old farm estates — all whitewash warehouses, gabled

roofs and regal smokestacks — and merit exploration even if you don't give a damn about a dram.

There's plenty of action for outdoors lovers, too. Even reluctant drivers will revel in navigating quiet rural lanes down to bays where sheep roam free and locals collect cockles and crab for beach picnics. But beyond the grassy dunes that back the empty, white-sand beaches, adventure beckons: skilled surfers ride fearsome Atlantic swells; birders flock to the vast, wildlife-rich tidal lochs; and hikers and bikers venture into the rural northeast for epic views of the peaks of the Paps of Jura across the water. Come for the whisky, stay for the wilderness.





Boats moored at Port Askaig, with the Paps of Jura visible across the Sound of Islay
LEFT: Cliffs drop to the sea along the Oa Peninsula

DAY ONE SHELLFISH & SUNSETS

MORNING

Start off in Bowmore, the island's capital, where you'll find Islay's best shops. Spirited Soaps sells toiletries fragrant with heather, myrtle and single malt; while The Celtic House stocks arty island souvenirs. Around the bay, in pretty Port Charlotte, the Museum of Islay Life is stuffed with artefacts tracing island history from the Stone Age to the Second World War, when flying-boat squadrons landed on Loch Indaal. A highlight in these parts is, of course, the Bowmore Distillery, producer of a rounded single malt for over 240 years. If a late-morning tasting has left you wobbly, then refuel at Bowmore's Peatzeria, where Stornoway black pudding and Islay scallops top stone-baked pizzas, and the terrace overlooks the serene loch.

AFTERNOON

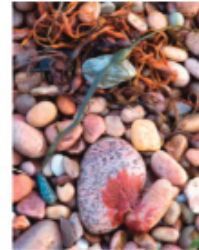
Ride around the Rinns of Islay with Donald James MacPhee. A former gamekeeper and the owner of adventure operator Islay Outdoors, 'DJ' is a superb guide for exploring the island's wild, westerly peninsula. Go foraging for cockles in the Rinns' plentiful rock pools on the shores of Loch Gruinart and Loch Indaal, pull up creels of crab and lobster from craggy, black clifftops, and learn about Islay's ancient peatland ecology. An islander of many generations, 'DJ' shares his rich knowledge of the natural world, from Hebridean birds to the uses for fluffy bog cotton. This is prime birding territory, notably in the autumn, when white-fronted and Greenland barnacle geese descend on Gruinart's waters in their tens of thousands.

EVENING

Photographer Mark Unsworth knows where to capture Islay's stellar sunsets, skills that he'll share during bookable evening lessons. Portnahaven is one such location: a picture-perfect hamlet of fishermen's cottages around a seal-populated cove. It's overlooked by the Isle of Orsay, where a 19th-century lighthouse (designed by lauded civil engineer Robert Stevenson) stands sentinel for the boats that ply these shores. Follow grassy cliff paths to find a string of deep-set bays, backed by white-sand beaches and rocky bluffs. Reward yourself with dinner at Port Charlotte Hotel, where a local folk band may be on the tiny stage, or head back to Bowmore and The Harbour Inn for coastal views, gastropub-style dining and a vast selection of single malts.

TOP 4

Beautiful beaches



MACHIR BAY

This mile or so of unspoiled dunes is favoured by surfers and swimmers familiar with local currents. Known locally as Kilchoman, it's adjacent to the distillery of the same name that began whisky production in 2005. It was the first to be built on the island in 124 years. kilchomandistillery.com

SALIGO BAY

Popular with photographers, walkers and birders, this western stretch is famed for beautiful light and show-stopping Atlantic sunsets. With several sandy bays and grassy dunes, it has spectacular beach-break waves that aren't safe for swimming, but are legendary among experienced surfers.

KILNAUGHTON

A sheltered beach backed by low dunes and a ruined chapel near Port Ellen that's great for spotting dolphins (in summer), as well as kayaking, swimming and paddling in the shallow surf. Pick up fish and chips from the SeaSalt Bistro & Takeaway in Port Ellen. seasalt-bistro.co.uk

LOCH INDAAL

Islay's largest sea loch is lined with sheltered beaches suitable for swimming, notably around Port Charlotte, plus plenty of opportunities for canoeing, kayaking and SUP. Port Ban and Blackrock are favoured beach-picnic spots. At Killinallan, meanwhile, seals pack the sands at low tide.

TOP 3 Distillery routes

THREE DISTILLERY PATHWAY

Stroll or cycle three miles east of Port Ellen, where deep crescent bays are dramatic backdrops for the beautiful distilleries of Laphroaig, Lagavulin and Ardbeg, all offering pre-bookable tastings, tours and special-release bottles of powerful, peaty whiskies. It is hoped that the greenway, which opened in 2017, will be extended between distilleries across the island. laphroaig.com malts.com ardbeg.com

BRUICHLADDICH

Opened in spring 2021, the Bruichladdich Foot and Cycle Path is the island's newest car-free distillery trail. The paved route snakes along Loch Indaal's coast, from the pier in the village distillery of Bruichladdich (pre-book for tastings and tours) to Port Charlotte, with little wooden bridges spanning inlets and golden barley fields. bruichladdich.com

CAOL ILA, ARDNAHOE & BUNNAHBHAIN

Stacked against the island's cliffy northeast coast, in view of Jura, the distilleries of Caol Ila, Ardnahoe and Bunnahabhain form Islay's most remote, rural whisky route — one for a designated driver. Follow a single-lane road along winding clifftops, with views of purple heather and dunes, for pre-booked tastings and tours of these lighter profile whiskies. malts.com ardnaehodistillery.com bunnahabhain.com

IMAGE: ARDNAHOE DISTILLERY

RIGHT: Men at work at Ardnahoe, one of the whisky distilleries on the island's northeast coast

DAY TWO SANDS & STANDING STONES

MORNING

Take a stroll on the Big Strand. Spanning the west coast from Laggan Point to the Oa Peninsula, Islay's longest beach is a seven-mile stretch of white sand backed by rolling grassy dunes where little inlets flow through the heather. You can spend hours here without encountering another soul. In summer, the pristine turquoise water — if not the temperature — could pass for the Caribbean. Just to the south, explore the heights of the Oa Peninsula, laced with inlets where rocky cliffs soar 650ft out of the sea. Beyond Oa's Carraig Fhada lighthouse — where, if you're lucky and stealthy, you may spot otters — you'll find the Singing Sands, a beach where fine silica in the grains sometimes emits a squeaky 'song' due to vibrations underfoot. Don't forget to look up, though, as golden eagles are often seen soaring overhead.

AFTERNOON

Tuck into a lobster and a whisky-laced crème brûlée in the flower-filled courtyard at the elegant Islay Hotel in Port Ellen, then make a beeline for The Blue Letterbox around the corner. The gift shop and post office is one of a handful of stores serving Islay's 'big' harbour town, and stocks works by some 40 Hebridean craftspeople. Don't miss the caramel studded with Orsay Sea Salt crystals; nature-inspired accessories by such talented local jewellers as Charlotte Hannett and Sarah Brown; and cheery, colourful woollies made with homespun Islay sheep fleece. Head east of town, away from the hulking industrial shadow of Port Ellen Maltings, and follow the lane to Kilbride farm. Here, in a field, stand two slender stones, one now supine, thought to be celestial markers from either the neolithic or Bronze Age.

EVENING

Even if you're not staying at the Machrie, Islay's smartest hotel, dinner here is a must. Views from its restaurant-bar take in the Big Strand's dunes, surf and sands stretching as far as the eye can see. Dine on the terrace in fine weather, a martini with house-made Islay gin in hand, or retreat to the fire-warmed lounge to watch the weather through the vast glass wall. Try local venison carpaccio with egg yolk, hazelnut and island herbs, Loch Gruinart oysters, Port Ellen crab on toasted rye with pickled cucumber — and save space for cloutie dumpling (boiled in cloth) 'with clotted cream and a wee dram'. Revamped in 2018, the Machrie is now decked out with edgy contemporary art, while its 18-hole links, draped elegantly around the dunes and dating to 1891, remains one of Scotland's most venerable courses.





Dry-stone ruins, dating to the 14th century on the island of Eilean Mòr in Loch Finlaggan

GET ACTIVE EXPLORE THE WILD EAST

Islay's rugged eastern reaches are wild, undeveloped, largely unpaved — and ripe for exploring under your own steam. Your efforts will be rewarded by sightings of stags, soaring buzzards and seals basking on rocks

ON FOOT

Head to Finlaggan, the medieval-era seat of the Lords of the Isles under Clan Donald. This three-island settlement in secluded Loch Finlaggan has a ruined chapel, the remains of a 16th-century hamlet and a small museum. From here, push on for about six miles to the Bunnahabhain distillery on an off-road coastal trek. For an even more serious hike, carry on to remote Rhuvaal Lighthouse and the beautiful Bàgh an Dà Dhoruis beach. finlaggan.org

BY BIKE

Extend a Three Distilleries Pathway tour by heading north to the Kildalton Cross, believed to date to the eighth century. One of Scotland's early Christian crosses, it stands in remarkably good repair outside the picturesque cliff-top ruins of a medieval parish church. Follow the single-track lane a few miles north to find the beautiful, sheltered Claggain Bay. Bikes or e-bikes can be hired from Port Ellen. islaycycles.co.uk islaywheels.co.uk

BY PADDLE

The rocky outcrops of the island's south and southeast coasts beg exploration with a paddle. Calm waters and gentle tides make this shoreline a pleasure for canoe, kayak or SUP novices. Clear days offer views of Kintyre and even Northern Ireland, but Islay's shores are picturesque enough whatever the weather. Kayaking through a sea mist, spotting skerries looming out of the haze, is one of the island's most atmospheric experiences. kayakwildislay.co.uk

ON SAFARI

The South-East Islay Skerries, one of Scotland's Special Areas of Conservation (SAC), is a protected string of sheltered bays, shallow waters and low tidal ranges between Lagavulin Bay and Ardmore Point. It's an ideal landing spot for the common seal; keep an eye out for them on a nature tour, or take a foraging safari and sample hand-dived scallops straight from the sea. islay-sea-adventures.co.uk 📍

GOURMET GARNISH

For a tasteful souvenir, pick up some Orsay Sea Salt, harvested by Anna Hock and family. Sustainable, sun-dried and untreated, it's collected from the pristine, fast-flowing waters between the Isle of Orsay and Port Wemyss. orsayseasalt.co.uk

MORE INFO

Bowmore Distillery. bowmore.com
Spirited Soaps. spiritedsoaps.com
Celtic House. theceltichouse.co.uk
Peatzzeria. peatzzeria.com
Museum of Islay Life. islaymuseum.org
Islay Outdoors. islayoutdoors.com
Mark Unsworth. islaystudios.co.uk
The Islay Hotel. theislayhotel.com
The Blue Letterbox. theblueletterbox.co.uk
Islay & Jura. islayjura.com
Wild About Argyll. wildaboutargyll.co.uk
Visit Scotland. visitscotland.com

HOW TO DO IT

Caledonian Sleeper runs nightly services (excluding Saturdays) from London to Glasgow. One-way prices start from £140 for a Classic room. sleeper.scot
LoganAir flies between Glasgow and Islay. Alternatively, Port Ellen and Port Askaig are served by vehicle ferries from Kennacraig on the mainland. Islay has a limited bus network and is best explored by car. loganair.co.uk calmac.co.uk
The Machrie has double rooms from £250, B&B. campbellargayhotels.com
The Harbour Inn has double rooms from £145, B&B. bowmore.com/harbour-inn

IMAGE: ALAMY

