

Wild at heart

Scotland's Mull and its rugged islets were home to an early governor of NSW

STELLA MARTIN

"WHEN a man of ideas, like myself, emerges from a mere speck in the ocean, he becomes a citizen of the world."

Thus wrote Major General Lachlan Macquarie, governor of NSW from 1810 to 1821.

I'm standing on that speck in the ocean — the Isle of Ulva, separated by a narrow strait from the Inner Hebridean island of Mull, off the west coast of Scotland. I may even be looking at the very cottage in which the future governor was born in 1762. A plaque near some tumble-down stone cottages which once comprised the settlement of Ormaig hedges its bets, reading: "This village was the home of an important cadet branch of the clan MacQuarrie, from whom may have sprung Major General Lachlan Macquarie, Governor of New South Wales."

The MacQuarrie clan has a long association with the island. Public records show a connection as far back as the mid-15th century but they claim a much longer pedigree. Although the last MacQuarrie chief to inhabit the island was forced to sell Ulva in 1777, and no more MacQuarries now live there, it still draws people with that surname from around the world.

A small passenger ferry connects Ulva to Mull. It runs on demand — the stretch of water is so narrow the boatman can easily spot waiting passengers on the other side. We spend the day wandering the hills, carpeted with bluebells like mislaid slices of sky, and exploring deserted hamlets. Life must have been hard for the inhabitants who derived a meagre income from gathering, drying and burning seaweed for use in the soap and glass industries. On small adjacent islets seals lounge on the beaches and in a leafy glen we spot a small herd of red deer with growing antlers. A young Canadian joins us on the 10-minute return ferry trip, proudly announcing that he is a MacQuarrie "returning to his homeland".

A rather longer boat trip, accompanied part of the way by leaping bottlenose dolphins, takes us from Mull to the island of Staffa. To the strains of Mendelssohn, our boat noses into Fingal's Cave before allowing us to land and walk part way into this world-famous cave. It is indeed spectacular, crowded vertical columns of basalt lining the walls, with the clear green Atlantic pulsating back and forth below.

We walk along the cliffs to a puffin colony. These delightful clowns of the sea come to land for only a few months each summer to nest; the rest of the time they are far out at sea. As we sit quietly on a clifftop the birds land astonishingly close to us, rattling their striped bills together in greeting and pushing through cushions of pink flowers to disappear into their burrows.

Another ferry connects Mull to Iona. A swirling sea mist lends a mysterious air to this almost fabled isle with beaches of silvery sand. In 563 Saint Columba sailed here from Ireland, setting up a monastery from which he spread Christianity throughout Scotland (then Alba). The monastery was repeatedly sacked by Vikings between 794 and 878 and eventually relocated, along with its famous illustrated manuscript, to Kells in Ireland. The current abbey is of more recent construction but re-



Tobermory on the Isle of Mull, left; visiting puffins, below



DENIS WALLIS

tains links to the past, notably the magnificent ninth-century carved stone cross of Saint Martin, one of the best-preserved Celtic crosses in the British Isles. It is the burial place not just for early Scottish kings but for kings from Ireland, Norway and France. A place of pilgrimage, the abbey is central to the Iona Community, an ecumenical assembly of men and women from different Christian traditions.

After visiting the abbey we walk across the island to explore the wonderfully coloured pebbles piled up on the beaches and search for "mermaids' tears" — pebbles of

A swirling sea mist lends a mysterious air to this almost fabled isle

green and white marble once mined for semi-precious jewellery, now found only serendipitously, smoothed, rounded and washed up by the waves. Keep one with you, it is said, and you will never die from drowning. I give my prize find to my brother-in-law, who goes fishing alone in an inflatable boat.

In contrast to the mere specks surrounding it, Mull is Britain's fourth-largest island. Its wild mountains, home to shaggy Highland cattle and soaring golden eagles, rise to more than 900m. Its complicated 480km coastline of gnarled peninsulas and long sea lochs hosts rare white-tailed sea eagles and frisking otters.

We base ourselves in the main town of Tobermory, an 18th-century fishing village whose brightly painted houses face a sheltered harbour filled with yachts. We spend our days on coastal walks, rock-hopping to find fossilised tree trunks, peering over sea cliffs at the relentless surge of the ocean and exploring ruined stone cottages in abandoned crofting villages. And, somehow or other, we always manage to end up in the oldest pub on the island, established in the village of Dervaig in 1608.

A rare heatwave coincides with our visit. "It's scrrrrrrching!" exclaims a young woman on her mobile as temperatures soar to the mid-20s. A sky like this would surely have made Macquarie nostalgic for Australia after he returned to Scotland. The governor's last resting place is on Mull, his mausoleum at Gruline a mere otter's paddle along the loch from his birthplace.

• isle-of-mull.net

A perfect haven of peace in north Devon

NEIL CLARK

IT was late September. My wife and I were feeling overworked and overstressed — our mental states not helped by the fact that we hadn't managed to get away for a proper summer holiday. We couldn't face the prospect of middle-of-the-night flights or airport queues, so we looked for somewhere close to our Oxfordshire home that we could drive to.

We hit upon Wheel Farm cottages near Combe Martin in rural north Devon.

We got to Wheel Farm at 11 o'clock at night but were already feeling more cheerful than when we'd set out. And it was a case of love at first sight when we opened the door of Mill Farm cottage. There was a large open-plan kitchen and living room, two large sofas, a wood-burning stove, wooden beams and stone walls. Our new home was part of a renovated 17th-century watermill.

THE
INCIDENTAL
TOURIST

The word "cosy" didn't really do it justice. For the first two days we just crashed. In between the sofa sessions, we went for gentle walks around the farm following the nature trail, and relaxed in the sauna and swimming pool. The fact that there was no internet or mobile phone reception helped us to switch off.

It was bliss, just for once, to be disconnected from the outside world.

On Monday, restored, we felt ready to do some exploring. We drove to nearby Exmoor. At Simonsbath we parked the car and walked up to Birch Cleave, the highest beech wood in Britain.

Nowhere in Britain do you get the same wonderful combination of woods, cliffs, moorland and sea that you get in Exmoor.

We stopped for lunch in the 16th-century White Horse Inn at Exford and enjoyed a delicious venison pie before a leisurely drive back to Wheel Farm, stopping every now and then to admire the amazing views. Back

at base, we moved to the nearby Farmhouse — bigger than Mill Farm cottage but just as comfortable. It had a lovely walled garden and the baby rabbits frolicking on the lawn only added to the Arcadian charm.

On our final day, we visited Lynton and Lynmouth. "Lynmouth," wrote English poet Robert Southey, "is the finest spot, except Cintra and the Arrabida, that I ever saw." Shelley was impressed too, and no wonder. Pull up at the lay-by just east of the town on the A39 and gaze at the sight in front of you and you'll think you've gone to heaven.

We returned home feeling totally refreshed. The best thing about a break in north Devon is that you can do all the disconnecting you need, but if you do feel a bit more active in between, there's still plenty to see and do. Not least, enjoying arguably the finest coastal scenery in England.

• wheelfarmcottages.co.uk

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