

Transcript

Wild for Scotland Podcast

Season 1, Episode 4: Wake Up' - Isle of Bute

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Hello there and welcome to Wild for Scotland, a podcast that allows you to travel to Scotland through stories. My name is Kathi Kamleitner, I'm a writer and storyteller And I run the Scotland travel blog Watch Me See. After years of helping people from around the world plan their trips, this podcast is my way to help you connect with Scotland regardless of your travel plans. Each episode starts with a travel story about a location or an experience from my travels. Then I'll tell you some of my top tips for visiting to inspire a future trip.

Are you ready?

Great, let's travel to Scotland.

The first season of Wild for Scotland is all about the Scottish isles. Each week, we travel to a different island and spend some time exploring their nooks and crannies, history and landscapes.

This week, I'm taking you with me to the Isle of Bute, an island in the Firth of Clyde not very far from Glasgow. Once a popular seaside resort and getaway from the busy city, Bute has somewhat become overshadowed by other, more famous Scottish islands.

But one look at the Isle of Bute and everything it has to offer, makes clear that the island deserves a lot more stage time.

My trip to Bute lies a few years back. I hiked the West Island Way, a 30-mile trail that takes in the island's far corners from Balnakailly Bay in the north to Glencallum Bay in the south. I spent three days on the island, hiking and wild camping, and along the way, exploring some of Bute's most wonderful locations. From a sleepy coastal village to an eventful night on the beach, let's travel to Bute together and explore.

This is "Wake up".

Slowly I make my way up the hill. One step after the other. My feet dragging under the heavy weight of my backpack. I have just left the village of Kilchattan Bay, with its single row of houses along a promenade, wedged between the waterfront and a wooded hill.

I managed to fill up my water bottle in the kitchen sink of an elderly lady, who was friendly enough to allow me into her ground floor flat - or perhaps too polite to say no. I needed all the water I could get and filled up not only my bottle, but also my water bladder that is now

safely stowed away in my backpack. I can hear the water glug back and forth, as I take one step and then another.

I left Rothesay some 3 hours ago and followed the trail of the West Island Way across the southern part of Bute. I reached Loch Fad, a long deepwater loch at the heart of the island, right on the Highland Boundary Fault. In the distance, I spotted a mountain range, reflected in the water. If I hadn't known better, I might have been misled to believe that they were *on* Bute. But alas those mountains were the peaks of the Goatfell range on neighbouring Arran, an island further south of Bute.

From there, I continued across farmland and fields to the west coast of Bute. The dirt track was bone dry and had a warm orange colour. Bright yellow gorse lined the way, giving off the hypnotising scent of coconuts. So out of place in these parts of the world, yet so integral to the landscape. I walked across Scoulag and Birgidale moorlands, until I reached the beach of Stravanan Bay. Here I sat down to the views of the mountains sprawling out on the horizon, across the sea. I watched the waves gently lapping on to the shore, the water glistening in the sunshine.

Following the edge of Bute Golf Course, the West Island Way eventually returned back to the east coast and led me to Kilchattan Bay, the last glimpse of civilisation I would see that day.

It is unusually hot today. While there was a little breeze on the beach, the air seems to be standing still on the hillside I'm on now. Bute is a fairly flat island, and yet, I managed to somehow find the steepest path around and attempt to walk up it with 4 litres of water on my back, in addition to my camping gear.

Not that I would necessarily need 4 litres of water, but you never know. Tonight would be my first time wild camping on my own and I wanted to be prepared.

I chose the Isle of Bute for this adventure for a variety of reasons. First of all, I didn't have too far to go. Getting to Bute from Glasgow is a straight forward journey by train to Wemyss Bay and onwards by ferry to Rothesay, the biggest town on the island. Door to door, it took about 2 hours.

Secondly, the West Island Way is a great long-distance trail for novices - only 30 miles long, well signposted and lots of infrastructure along the way. The trail could be split up into sections and if something was to happen, the next bus stop would never be too far. Bute seemed to me like the perfect training ground - to get far enough away from civilisation to feel that sense of adventure, but never too far to feel exposed or at risk.

And I was right - my walk across Bute was nothing but joyful. Until now. Now, I wish, I had booked a room in Rothesay, so I wouldn't have to carry my heavy backpack up this hill. Oh well...

Every few steps, I halt, take a sip from my water bladder and wipe the sweat from my forehead. I take breaks, faking interest for a plant growing on a small stone wall or a flower that I see on the ground. Not that I could bend down to inspect it any closer anyways, but it

camouflaged my slow progress. Eventually, I get to a small wooden kissing gate and decide to stop for a break. I turn around and look back in the direction I was just coming from. The funny thing about hiking uphill and into the sun, is that you barely have a chance to look around you. You just focus on the track and keep going. But as I turn around, I see the coast explode in a myriad of colours. The hill is covered in yellow gorse and the sea behind me is the brightest blue. I can still just about see the top of the houses of Kilchattan Bay below - proof for the painstakingly slow progress I am making. Fuelled by the beauty, I push on. If it was this pretty where I came from, it must be even better where I was going.

The south of Bute is littered with ruins of historic sites. One that lies right on the path of the West Island Way is the ruin of St Blane's Church dating back to the 1100s. I stop here for a while to explore the remains of the church and the kirkyard around. The first monastery was established here 1500 years ago by St Catan, but after a few centuries, the island was captured by Vikings and the site was abandoned. It was only later, the church was erected here in honour of St Blane and it became the religious centre of the Isle of Bute. Eventually, the church fell into disuse after the Reformation and only the ruins we see today remain.

The path continues around the southern tip of Bute. I pass a herd of red cows, the same colour as the characteristic Highland cows, but a different breed, arguably better equipped for the scorching temperatures of this hot summer's day. Many of them have tiny calves who look at me with sceptical curiosity. Not quite sure if I'm fiend or friend, but also too lazy from the heat to jump up and run away. I keep my distance, best not to disturb a herd of protective mother cows. Walking is hard enough with my heavy backpack, let alone the idea of running from an angry cow.

I continue my walk high above the sea and the rugged coastline of Bute. I can see the rocky cliffs of Little Cumbrae across the water, the houses of Millport and the windmills on the mainland. Suddenly a lighthouse appears below on a rocky outcrop and I know I've reached my destination. I make my way down the hill towards a sheltered bay. Glencallum Bay would be my home for the night.

Tired and relieved I let my backpack slide to the ground. I find a suitable spot to pitch my tent - flat, well-drained and far enough from the cows that are now congregating at the far end of the bay, grazing in the evening sun. I decide to follow their lead and make my way across the bay to a sunny spot, fire up my gas stove and cook dinner. I use the last light of the day to walk out to the lighthouse. It is surrounded by small purple flowers and rocks that are covered in yellow lichen. In the evening sun, the ground looks golden.

A short while later, the sun dips behind the hills above the bay and the temperature drops almost immediately. Don't ever let a hot summer's day fool you. I make my way back to my tent, make myself a cup of tea and curl up in my warm sleeping bag. What a day.

wave sounds

What's that noise? I wake up disoriented. Still half-asleep, I come to the conclusion that it must be the waves rolling onto the beach. I open my eyes, all of a sudden wide awake. Why do these waves sound so close? I look at my phone. It's 3 am. I have been asleep only for a few hours, and it's the middle of the night. Still many weeks away from the summer solstice,

the night is dark and I can't see much. I lie still in my sleeping bag, head spinning, heart racing, a creeping panic slowly growing inside me.

Did I really choose a good spot to pitch my tent? Or was I too close to the water edge? I pitched on the grass, but maybe there is some kind of freak tide happening tonight? Could it be possible that the waves are going to wash me away? Pull me out into the sea? They certainly sound close enough. Maybe I'm already floating?

My thoughts become irrational, but something keeps me on my back. I am too scared to check what's going on outside.

Eventually, I have enough. I need to know.

I sit up and slide forwards to reach the front of my tent. I get a hold of the zipper and pull. First the inner tent, then the outer. Carefully, I peel back the tent door, look outside and -

The sea is exactly where I last saw it. Well down the beach, nowhere near my tent. The tide looks a bit closer and the waves are certainly bigger than they were last night, but there are no freak waves, I'm not floating. Everything is fine.

My mind at ease, I lie back down, curl up and fall asleep.

After a few hours, I wake up again. This time, I can tell immediately that it is light outside. The sea has returned to its gentle self, lapping onto the beach in tiny waves. The sun has not yet risen above the horizon, but it already fills my tent with light. Time to rise and welcome the new day on the trail.

As I unzip the door, I am greeted by a silvery sky, melting almost seamlessly into the smooth and shiny surface of the sea. Both water and sky are so similar in colour, it takes all my concentration to tell them apart with my tired eyes. I instantly regret the decision not to bring any coffee for this occasion.

I spot something on the horizon and squint my eyes. There it is - a boat with two large sails suspended from its tall masts. It glides slowly across the water surface without a sound and crosses from one side of the bay to the other. The sight is peaceful, yet also mysterious. Who might be sailing on that boat?

What a wonderful experience it must be to explore the Scottish coast by boat, I think, and make a mental note to try it myself one day.

After a quick breakfast of porridge and tea, I pack away my tent and re-assemble my backpack. At least there is now less water to carry.

I make a final trip out to the lighthouse that I had inspected closely last night, but in the morning sun, it looks like someone changed the entire scene. The purple flowers are still closed and the yellow lichen is barely visible in the morning glow. Only the little white lighthouse with its red top looks exactly the same.

I pick up the trail near the end of the beach. Yesterday, the West Island Way led along farm tracks and moorland across the interior of Bute, but today it follows the glorious coastline. The path hugs the shore and follows the narrow stretch of grass between the sea to the right and the rocky cliffs to the left.

In the distance I can still see the sailboat as it glides along the coast of Ayrshire. Soon it picks up speed and starts disappearing in the haze to the north, headed for the marina near Dunoon or perhaps the port of Greenock.

Eventually, the trail leads me back to Kilchattan Bay, that picturesque village where I filled up my water supplies yesterday afternoon. It marks one of the end points of the West Island Way. My plan is to catch the bus from here to Rothesay to continue walking the northern section of the trail.

But first, since I missed my boost of caffeine in the morning, I decide to treat myself to a hot cup of coffee from the village shop. There are a few small tables set up across the road, on a patch of grass near the sea. I carefully carry my steaming cup over and sit down, facing the calm water. As the sun rises higher, the mellow colours of the morning give way to the brighter palette of a wonderful summer's day. It would be another hot day on the trail.

As I sip my coffee and watch the morning colours fade away, I think back to that first glimpse of the day I got just a few hours ago. The silver dance of the sea and the sky, the gentle sound of the sea, the fresh salty air streaming into my nose. That's what I came on this trail for. What a glorious moment to wake up to.

I hope you enjoyed our trip to the Isle of Bute and it has inspired you to look into hiking the West Island Way or wild camping by yourself some time soon.

A big shoutout to Susanne Arbuckle from Adventures Around Scotland, who showed me some of her favourite places of Bute and took me to Scalpsie Bay to camp near the seals.

Now, it's time for the practical part of the show. Here are some of my top tips for visiting the Isle of Bute.

Tip Number 1: Spend at least 3 days on Bute

Whether you hike the West Island Way or not, I recommend spending at least 3 days on Bute. Apart from the hiking trails, you can visit Mount Stuart, a 19th century mansion with expansive gardens. Spend some time in Rothesay, explore the beaches along the west coast and discover historic sites all over the island.

Tip Number 2: Visit the seals at Scalpsie Bay

Scalpsie Bay is a south facing beach on Bute's west coast that is famous for its seal colony. Over 200 seals call this bay their home and they love basking in the sunshine here. At low tide, they can be seen perched up on the rocks, looking like upside down bananas.

Tip Number 3: Find the hidden World War 2 bunker

Tucked away in the forest on the northern tip of Bute, there is a World War 2 bunker that was used as a decoy to trick German bombers away from more populated areas. The bunker lies just a short detour from the northern loop of the West Island Way and offers stunning views across the Kyles of Bute sea channel and to the Cowal peninsula.

Tip Number 4: Stop at the Ettrick Bay Beach

I ended up taking the bus from Kilchattan Bay all the way to Ettrick Back, cutting my walk on the West Island Way short by a few miles. But, this enabled me to spend some time at Ettrick Bay Beach - a long, golden sandy beach.

I recommend swinging by the Ettrick Bay Tearoom which serves up fantastic food with lovely views.

Tip Number 5: Extend your trip on the Five-Ferry Route

Bute is just one stop on the Five-Ferry-Route, a road trip that connects the Scottish mainland with Bute, the Cowal peninsula, the Kintyre peninsula and Arran by - you guessed it - five different ferry connections.

This is an island hopping trip that you can do in just a few days. You'll be rewarded with natural beauty, interesting history and no crowds in sight.

And with this, I send you off to dream about your own trip to Bute.

At the time of recording this episode, the Scottish isles are of course out of reach for most of us. But the Isle of Bute isn't going anywhere and before we know it, we can safely plan trips again.

Thank you so much for tuning in and listening to Wild for Scotland. If you enjoyed the podcast, please subscribe to it. You can leave a review to make it easier for others to find the show or share your favourite episode with a friend. Sign up for my email list for a peek behind-the-scenes and additional resources about the places we visit each week.

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Wild for Scotland is written, hosted and produced by me, Kathi Kamleitner, with additional support by Fran Turauskis. Podcast art is by Lizzie Vaughan-Knight aka the Tartan Trailburner. All original music is composed by Bruce Wallace.

Until next, time when we travel to a different place in Scotland.