

Transcript

Wild for Scotland Podcast

Season 1, Episode 3: 'Out of Nowhere' - Isle of Barra

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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, we're heading to the Isle of Barra in the Outer Hebrides. It is famous for its stunning beaches and the unusual airport that uses one of them as a landing strip.

Barra is where I started my 2-week solo hike on the Hebridean Way and in today's story I take you with me on the trail.

This is "Out of Nowhere".

ferry horn blows

Suddenly and out of nowhere, a dark coastline appears. For the past 5 hours the ferry I'm on, has been gliding through a sea of fog hovering closely above the water surface.

We left Oban in the sunshine, light bouncing back from the deep-blue surface of the sea, gentle waves lapping against the distant shores. We sailed past the Kerrera North Spit lighthouse with its distinctive red and white stripes. The ruins of Duart Castle on the eastern tip of the Isle of Mull.

We made our way through the narrow Sound of Mull, past the ferry port in Craignure and the colourful harbour of Tobermory. The houses are painted in bright colours, red, yellow and blue. Just as I remembered from my trip to Mull last summer.

Countless motorboats and sailboats glide across the water, without resisting the smooth movement below. The waves of the ferry make them bob up and down a bit more, but soon enough they settle down again.

I stand at the back of the ferry, watching the white lines drawn in the water disappear in the distance. The mountains left and right of the Sound are wearing hats made of clouds. An omen of what was to come. As we move on, past the tip of Ardnamurchan - the westernmost point of mainland Britain, islands are supposed to come into view. Coll to the south, Muck, Eigg and Rum to the north. But where I should see the dark outlines of these rugged outliers, there is only mist. The clouds have drawn closer, wrapping the ferry in a whiteblanket.

Cold and wet, I move inside, find a comfortable seat near the bar, and drift off. The hum from the ship's engine, like a lullaby. The sway back and forth on the waves, like a mother cradling a child. I've never had a problem sleeping on transport.

A few hours later, I wake up. The ferry is still engulfed in the mist, but my watch tells me that we should be getting closer. I make my way outside again, impatiently awaiting our arrival and the start of my adventure. I am exactly where I'm supposed to be. Flights to the island were cancelled this morning and I am glad I booked a train and the ferry instead. A longer journey, but also more reliable.

And then, out of nowhere, the island appears through the fog. Like the menacing arms of a monster reaching out from beneath its cover, rocky outcrops of land stretch out towards the ferry.

We move deeper into the bay and I can see bright spots appear on the land. Small houses with white chimneys nestled between the sea and the overhanging rocks above. Suddenly a castle appears in the water. Sitting on a rock that is submerged by the tide. A tower house surrounded by an imposing wall. Once the seat of the chief of the Macneils of Barra, it guards the entrance to the bay. Kisimul Castle - it's name means 'the castle of the rock of the small bay'.

After a few more minutes, the ferry docks on the pier of Castlebay. I make my way to the baggage racks, grab my backpack and follow the other passengers down the ramp. The first part of my journey is over and I am glad to be back on solid ground.

I made my way to Barra to hike the Hebridean Way. In the next 2 weeks, I would walk from the southern Isle of Vatersay to the northern Isle of Lewis, where I would finish my walk after 155 miles in Stornoway.

I am one of the few foot passengers who isn't picked up by a loved one at the ferry pier. I watch the cars and lorries drive off the ferry, cyclists mounting their bikes. Fellow foot passengers embrace a friend or family members in a hug, get in their car and one by one, they pass by me and drive off. I walk down the pier and up the road into the village. I can see a grey-blue building by the road, 'Foodstore' it reads on the wall. Behind it, there are the lights of the Castlebay Bar. I turn left, away from the foodstore, away from the lights, and continue down the road until I reach a grey building with large bay windows and a low white-washed wall. Big black letters on the side of the wall inform me that I have reached my

destination for the night - Dunard Hostel. Even though I plan to camp the majority of nights on the Hebridean Way, I decided to ease myself into the adventure and booked a bed at the hostel for my first night. I check into a small 4-bed dorm that I share with a woman from Austria who is spending a few days on Barra after an unfortunate accident put a sudden end to her cycling holiday on the Hebridean Way, before it even began. There are also two Englishmen in our room. They had cycled the trail in the other direction, all the way from the Butt of Lewis to the Isle of Barra. Very unusual, as most people choose to walk or cycle *with* the wind, from south to north. Having completed such an arduous task, they are in good spirits.

"It looked sooo cool when the ferry arrived," they tell me over a pint of beer at the Castlebay Bar later that night. "We could hear the ferry horn long before we could see it." And then all of a sudden, out of nowhere, the ferry appeared from the fog. It's all a question of perspective, I guess.

I wake up early the next morning, to pack up my bag and organise the things I would need most likely during my first day on the trail. When you pack for a long-distance hike it is important to store the things you might need more frequently somewhere where you have easy access. Rain gear, hat and gloves, a knife, a map and my compass - no one wants to dig through their entire bag when they find themselves in need of these things.

I check out and make my way to the road. At 9 o'clock on the dot, a car pulls up. The driver gets out and stretches his hand towards me. Dan is a local taxi driver who is going to drive me to the official start point of the hike on Vatersay. There is also a bus, but not on a Sunday - something I hadn't realised until the night before. Luckily, the women working at the counter at the local community shop were kind enough to phone around and Dan agreed to pick me up and take me where I needed to go.

After a 15-minute journey from Barra to Vatersay, Dan pulls up at the community hall near Traigh a Bhaigh. He offers to take a picture of me next to the sign marking the official start point of the Hebridean Way, but then after he drives off, I am alone again.

The sky is gloomy, the air is wet. If the weather was nicer, I would be tempted to explore the beaches of Vatersay before hitting the trail, but instead, I put on my rain trousers, unfold the bright orange rain cover for my backpack and hit the road.

I stop briefly at the wreck of a Catalina aircraft that crashed here during a training exercise in 1944. A monument shaped like a standing stone carries the name of all 9 crew members, three of whom died in the crash.

From there, it is an easy, but monotonous stroll along the road back to Barra. Just a few minutes ago, I was driving down the very same road in Dan's taxi. Luckily, the hike would get more interesting soon.

After about an hour or so, I reach the Vatersay Causeway. Until 1991, Vatersay could only be reached by boat. Cattle who were brought to Castlebay and on to the markets on the mainland by ferry, had to swim across the 250m Sound of Vatersay. Many drowned. The population on the island declined throughout the 20th century, until eventually, the

government agreed to build a causeway. This made it easier for locals to access services, improved the infrastructure and increased opportunities for tourism. It took 18 months and 220,000 tonnes of rock to build. I walk across in less than 5 minutes.

Soon after, the Hebridean Way branches off from the road and leads into the hills of southern Barra. Beinn na Sguith to the left, taller Beinn Tangabhal to the right. Not that I can see either of them. The clouds are hanging low, it is raining and visibility is very poor.

The Hebridean Way is marked with signposts even when there is no formal path to follow. The hills rise steeply in front of me now. Rain lashes into my face. The bog engulfs my hiking boots. What would be a tough situation under normal circumstances, is made even more difficult by the 17-kilo monster on my back. I was never a light packer and my fear of running out of water or food respectively didn't help. Slowly I climb higher, lifting one foot, setting it down heavily, and then the other. I make painstaking progress. Cotton grass covers the green slopes. A reminder that it is not only wet because of the rain, but I am in the middle of a bog.

At first, it is easy to follow the waymarkers. But as I reach higher grounds, my path leads me into the clouds. Visibility becomes even poorer. Sometimes I can only see a few metres ahead.

I reach another waymarker and pause. I am surrounded by fog now. The wind is blowing towards me from below, pushing me closer against the steep slope above me. I look ahead. Then left - right - I turn around - and then ahead again. I can't see a thing. Just white in all directions. My heart starts beating faster and my breath gets even shorter.

"I'm lost," I think. I'm lost on my first day on the Hebridean Way. What was I thinking? Going on a hike by myself in a place I've never been before. No one knows where I am. No one expects me on the other end. It's just me and my backpack. No phone reception. No sign of a way marker.

That was it, I thought. I'm gonna have to turn around and somehow make my way back to Castlebay defeated. Day one and I've failed.

The wind is blowing stronger now and through the blurry haze of tears shooting to my eyes, I suddenly spot a dark vertical stripe hovering just above the ground ahead of me. I take a step towards it, wipe the tears from my face and squint.

A waymarker! Thank god. I'm not lost. I've not failed. I just panicked. I take a deep breath and start walking again. I can now see the reflecting white surface of the round badge near the top of the signpost and as I continue traversing the pathless slope of Beinn Tangabhal, they become my beacons through the mist.

And then, the unexpected happens. Out of nowhere, the path starts to descend again. I made it across the hill that forms the highest point of the Hebridean Way. Slowly I emerge from the fog and squeal with joy, as if seeing land after a long voyage at sea. I can see the next signposts without effort now. Then sheep come into view. Then the coast and dark ocean below.

The footpath descends now just as steeply as it ascended on the other side. My legs are struggling under the weight of my backpack. I haven't had a chance to stop for lunch and my body is tired from the physical and mental challenge that lies behind me. Set on reaching the coast as quickly as possible I push on. I fall, more than once, as my tired knees give way to the weight, and my feet slip away. Luckily, I land on my backside every time. The sheep look at me with puzzled faces: "What is *she* doing here?"

Eventually, I reach the bottom of the hill. The path turns east and follows the coastline. I still sink into the boggy ground, but at least it has stopped raining and I can see far ahead of me. I pass a sheltered bay and see a group of campers pitch their tents on an exposed headland. I remember reading about it in the guidebook for the Hebridean Way - a great place to camp if you want to spend two days on the hike across Barra.

In the distance I can now see the golden glow of a sandy beach, water shining turquoise despite the overcast sky. A few houses are scattered around the bay, including the large building of the Isle of Barra Beach Hotel.

The short grass of the exposed clifftops is making way for lush meadows covered in wildflowers that reach up to my knees. Purple clover, yellow ragwort and buttercups, white yarrow and hundreds of others in a myriad of colours.

Then the ground changes again and reveals sandy dunes beneath the tall grass. Soon I find myself walking through the sand, followed by the gentle sound of waves lapping onto the shore and oystercatchers squabbling over the day's catch. I get to the hotel, find a group of wooden benches and tables overlooking the beach and grab an energy bar from the top pocket of my backpack.

And then, the Isle of Barra surprises me once again. Just like it first appeared out of nowhere in the mist, and like the trail traversing Beinn Tangabhal came to a sudden end, the clouds suddenly float apart to reveal a patch of bright blue sky. The sun breaks through and like a light switch was flipped somewhere behind me, the island and the sea light up in technicolour. The hazy turquoise colour of the water is now shining bright. The sea is so clear and smooth, I can see the contrast between patches of sandy ground and spots where seaweed is flourishing. Mesmerised, I stay for a little while longer, looking out at the spectacle of nature.

Eventually, it is time to get back on the trail. I still have 6 miles ahead of me across the moorland of northern Barra. But at this point I know I was alright - out of nowhere, my first day on the Hebridean Way was a great success.

And now it's time for the practical part of Wild for Scotland. Here are my five top travel tips for the Isle of Barra:

Tip Number 1: How do you get there?

The flight to Barra is a unique experience. The airport on the island is the world's only airport where scheduled flights land on the beach. And they can only do so at low tide when the water is out.

However, these flights are much more dependent on weather than the ferry. I ended up taking the ferry from Oban also because I wanted to bring gas canisters with me for camping. This would not have been an option on the plane.

But even if you don't fly, many visitors like to visit the airport to witness one of the famous beach landings for themselves. And I actually had the pleasure to do so at the end of my first day on Barra.

Tip Number 2: If you hike the Hebridean Way, avoid starting on a Sunday

There are no buses from Barra to Vatersay on Sunday morning, so if you want to avoid having to spend extra money on a taxi, like I did I'd say avoid starting the Hebridean Way on a Sunday. The community shop in Castlebay is also closed on Sundays, but the Coop supermarket is open.

Tip Number 3: Stay at the Isle of Barra Beach Hotel

If you don't want to camp, there are a number of hotels, B&Bs and self-catering cottages on the Isle of Barra. If I had a choice, I'd stay at the Isle of Barra Beach Hotel on the west coast of the island. The beach is just a few steps away and the views are hard to beat.

Tip Number 4: Explore the coast by kayak

The crystal clear waters of Barra could fool you into thinking you are somewhere in the Caribbean. Clearwater Paddling offers guided sea kayaking tours along the coast to explore remote bays and beaches and see local wildlife. If you're lucky you might even come across some basking sharks or orcas.

Tip Number 5: Visit Kisimul Castle

The castle in the waters of Castlebay is open to the public. Small boats take visitors there to wander the medieval ruin and enjoy fantastic views of the bay.

And with this I send you off to dream about your own trip to Barra. At the time of recording this episode, visiting Barra is of course off the table for the next wee while. But the island isn't going anywhere and the time will come when you can safely plan a visit again. I hope I've inspired you to do so.

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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I'd love to hear your feedback on Wild for Scotland, so please leave a comment on social media or on the website. You can connect with us on @wildforscotland or wildforscotland.com. There you will also find photos from today's travel story, transcripts and other episodes.

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, the Tartan Trailburner and all original music is composed by Bruce Wallace.

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