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 are heading to a tiny island and I’m going to lean out the window and assume that the majority of you have never heard of it before - I certainly didn’t have it on my radar, until I literally came eye to eye with it.

We’re going to the Isle Martin, a small island off the north-west coast of Scotland. It is one of the better known Summer Isles, but kind of a solitary outlier of this archipelago north of Ullapool.

It is an island that is shrouded in legend, rich in history and heritage. It has neither roads nor permanent residents, yet it is full of stories and traces of history.

Let’s travel there together and find out more.

This is ‘A whole new world’.

Under the surface, a whole new world is hiding. Or is it waiting to be explored? I’d like to think the latter is the case.

To me, learning is all about changing your perspective. Seeing the world from a different viewpoint. Understanding things you previously couldn’t grasp because you’ve expanded your horizon.
Travel can be a great way to do this. Removing ourselves physically from what we are used to and surrounding ourselves with new impressions, people and experiences.

But some lessons require a different kind of perspective change. A change that removes us from what we are used to alright, but instead of travelling far away, it simply allows us to look at what we know from a different standpoint.

And that's what sea kayaking does for me.

There is something about being on the water, removed from the solid ground I am so used to, that fascinates me. I can know a coastline by heart, having walked along the cliff tops or across the beaches a hundred times. But from the water - it always looks like a whole new world.

Take the northwest coast of Scotland, for example. When you’re driving along the North Coast 500, you see a rugged coastline with bare rocks and sandy beaches. At first glance, it may seem like there is very little wildlife in these parts. It almost feels empty.

But one quick paddle on the water, and you’ll see that the coast is bustling with life.

And heading out in a kayak allows us to take a closer look at this world that hides below the surface.

After a rainy drive from Gairloch to Ullapool, I was excited to see the sun rising above the horizon this morning. Together with a friend, I am driving the North Coast 500, one of Scotland's most famous road trips. After breakfast, we meet our guide for the day - Will Copestake who runs kayak tours and expeditions in this part of Scotlan.

Years ago, Will was the Scottish and the UK Adventurer of the Year for his year-long adventure that included circumnavigating Scotland by kayak, cycling from coast to coast and ascending all 282 Munros in winter conditions. Clearly, we are in good hands.

We meet up at the quiet waterfront of Ullapool and discuss our options. Despite the clear skies and beaming sun, we have to be mindful of the wind - and it's picking up. Will suggests a leisurely paddle from the beach of Ardmair, a small village just a few miles north of Ullapool.

With a plan and lots of excitement, we jump in our car and make our way there. After helping Will lifting down our kayaks, we change into drysuits, ready to go. I walk down the beach and take a look around. The sun is still rising from behind the bare rocky hills behind us. It is April. The short grass on those hills is not yet green but shines in a yellow-orange hue. The heather is dark brown. It will be months before it blooms in shades of pink and purple.

To the south, a rocky headland forms a natural barrier for the sheltered bay. At the bottom of the hills, near the surface of the ocean, I can see horizontal lines that mark the high point of the water at high tide. At the top, a bright line, where the rocks are seemingly bleached from the sunlight reflecting off the water. In the middle, a thick, dark line and below the shiny grey
of smooth rocks that are submerged underwater for half the day and out in the open air the other half.

These geometric lines of nature continue along the beach where they expose the slow to and fro of the tides that wash seaweed and kelp up on the shore. They follow the calm water edge like concentric circles, the midpoint somewhere out at sea.

The beach is littered with bright white stones, round and about the size of my palm, but flat, like coins. Moulded by the sea and the waves for thousands of years. Closer to the water, they are shrinking in size, like small pebbles now that rustle as I walk across them, carrying the front of two kayaks, one in each hand.

We set down the boats, get in and with a bit of help from Will, we float off, leaving the solid ground of Ardmair behind.

Our plan is to paddle around the island ahead of us. Isle Martin, the closest of the Summer Isles to Ullapool. Rich in history and wildlife, it is an incredible spec of land. Although much of that history has gone undocumented, it lives on in the tales Will tells us as we paddle across the bay to reach the shelter of the island’s coast.

Even though there hasn’t been any archaeological work done on the island, people assume that it has been inhabited on and off for thousands of years. According to legend, Saint Martin, whose generosity is celebrated around the world each November, established a monastery here many centuries ago.

In the 18th and early 19th century, the island was home to a thriving fishing community. They cured herring and exported it with great success until the number of fish they caught got too big and the stock collapsed. The island was then split up into crofts and for a while, a flour mill produced flour that was shipped off to bakeries across the north of Scotland. But eventually, the mill closed and the population dwindled.

After a few decades in the hands of the Goldsmith family and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, Isle Martin was eventually gifted to the Isle Martin Trust.

Today, there are only a few houses left on the island and the Trust is balancing careful conservation work with the preservation of heritage and low-impact tourism activities.

There is a ferry that brings visitors across, a pop-up cafe and locals who offer guided walks. There is even a little cinema on the island - although Will notes that it’s maybe a bit of a stretch to call it that as he points out the little hut near the shore equipped with a projector, a few chairs and a screen.

In 2020, the island was supposed to host the Isle Martin Seaweed Festival to celebrate the importance of seaweed for the marine ecosystem and the economic significance of kelp farming on the Scottish west coast.

Kelp farming in Scotland looks back at a long and complicated history. After the Highland Clearances, many landowners relocated their tenants to the coast to work in the kelp
industry. But even though Scottish kelp brought a great price on the market, that wealth did never trickle down. Traditional agriculture and fishing was pushed to the side and when the kelp industry eventually collapsed, it hit these communities hard. They had given up too much and many were forced to emigrate.

But today, seaweed farming is having a comeback in Scotland, not at last because of its well-known ecological benefits. Seaweed captures more carbon than any forest on land. It provides habitat and shelter for animals in the ocean and nutritious food for us humans. It can be turned into biodegradable packaging and is often harvested for use in pharmaceuticals and cosmetics.

Even though it is not actively farmed here on Isle Martin, I am surrounded by seaweed now. Kelp with its broad, yellowish-green leaves and bright air bubbles that help it float towards the top. Below the water, I can see it sway back and forth with grace. But on the surface, it piles up, rubbery leaves sticking together, framing the shores of the island.

We made our way along the reasonably flat southern tip of Isle Martin and are now paddling beneath towering cliffs. Even though the RSPB couldn’t maintain the island as an official reserve, it is a haven for many bird species. Will points out little specs on the rocks and when I squint my eyes they turn into fulmars, shags and oystercatchers. Cormorants, Sandpipers and Turnstones. Hunting and breeding here on the island. Isle Martin is even home to a resident Peregrine falcon and is often frequented by Sea Eagles too. “Their wingspan can be as big as your kayak,” Will tells me.

The shoreline is littered with sea urchins clinging on to the rocks. Normally they would be submerged underwater, but now at low tide, they are exposed to our curious minds. Will picks an urchin off the rocks and hands it to me for a closer look. They aren’t the spiky black kind, but lavender-coloured spheres, just bigger than a tennis ball, with thousands of stubby spikes - Edible Sea Urchins they’re called, although I’m told their taste is an acquired one. After a while, we simply put it back and it happily settles back down again.

The cliffs below the surface reach 40 metres below. Attached to them we spot red cushion stars which have a large base and five short, thick arms. And then there are seven-armed starfish which have - big surprise - seven arms. I had never noticed these kinds of animals on the Scottish coast before. But that’s the thing with being in a tiny boat on the ocean. It changes your perspective and you see a whole new world.

We have now paddled around the northern part of Isle Martin and are making our way along the towering sea cliffs. Over on the eastern side of the island, the wind suddenly picks up and paddling becomes harder. We spot a narrow crevasse that offers a welcome break for our tired arms.

The Summer Isles and much of the north-west coast of Scotland are made from Torridonian Sandstone, a rock that is around 1,000 million years old. Because it is a fairly soft rock, it gets easily eroded by wind and waves and much of the coastline is littered with sea caves, stone arches and towering stacks.
But on the comparably sheltered Isle Martin, this is the only crevasse that is wide enough to be explored and it is only accessible on a low spring tide like today. I go first and paddle in, 1, maybe 2 lengths of my kayak, then it gets too narrow. There are sea urchins on the rocks all around me and I have to be careful not to bump into them with the boat or my paddle. As I push myself back out and we paddle on, I wonder what the sea will do to this crevasse in another million years.

Suddenly, Will stops and signals us to come closer, quietly. I line up my kayak with his and let my eyes follow the direction of his outstretched hand. And then I see it. A little otter, floating on its back, held on all sides by a cradle of kelp. In its paws one of the edible sea urchins, I was holding in my hands just half an hour ago. But in contrast to my own experience, curiosity was definitely not at play here. As the baby otter turns over the sea urchin, I can see a gaping hole in it. It must be lunchtime for the little one. Oblivious to our presence, the otter keeps munching away, getting every last bite out of its delicious meal. Then it looks up and with the flash of a second, it dives under. Never to be seen again. At least not by us. All that remains is the empty shell of the purple sea urchin, floating among the kelp.

All in all, we spent about 3 hours on the water, but considering how much I learnt and the variety of wildlife we saw, it might as well have been an entire day. Seeing the Scottish coast from the water did not only change my perspective in a physical way but also what I thought I knew about life in these parts of the world, the ecosystem and its role for Scotland on a wider scale.

I think about this, still today, whenever I come across a beach or a bay where the water is so clear you can see all the way to the bottom. Mussels and barnacles are holding on to the rocks as the current moves back and forth. The seaweed is swaying along rhythmically. Little fish are seeking shelter. But below and beyond, there lies so much more.

What you see from the shore is fascinating, but only when you hop in a boat and change your perspective, you’ll be able to see this whole new world.

I hope you enjoyed this trip to the Isle Martin and I’ve sparked a little fire for adventure in you - who knows, maybe you’ll make time for some sea kayaking on your next trip to the coast.

Thank you so much to Will Copestake, not only for taking us out on the water for this experience but also for answering my questions about the island and its wildlife when I was researching for this episode.

Now, it’s time for the practical part of Wild for Scotland. Here are my top travel tips for a visit to the Isle Martin and the wider region.

**Tip Number 1: Book a kayaking trip with Will's company, Kayak Summer Isles**
I had the best time on our paddle round the Isle Martin. Will is a fantastic kayaking guide and has such a wealth of knowledge to share with you - it’s really fascinating to learn about this part of the Scottish coast on the water with him.

Will is also an excellent photographer. He took some amazing photos of us out on the water, which is a great bonus in my books.

You can book a short excursion like we did, or join one of his multi-day expeditions to the further outlying Summer Isles.

https://www.kayaksummerisles.com/

Tip Number 2: Take your time on the North Coast 500

The Summer Isles are just a stone’s throw from the famous North Coast 500, a road trip that has become somewhat synonymous with Scottish road trips. While you can theoretically drive the 500 miles in 3-4 days, I would really urge you to spend more time on the route, or pick a region to focus on if that’s all the time you have.

The area north of Ullapool, specifically the Coigach peninsula, the Summer Isles and the mountains of Assynt would be a great choice for a taste of the west coast. Only if you slow down, will you have the time to enjoy a kayaking trip around the Isle Martin or a similar experience that brings you up close with nature.

Tip Number 3: Try Scottish Seaweed

If you’d like to taste Scottish kelp, you could try your hand at foraging some of it. I will link to a kelp foraging guide by Galloway Wild Foods in the show notes.

https://gallowaywildfoods.com/an-introduction-to-seaweed-foraging/

Alternatively, you could try to find seaweed products by the Scottish company Mara Seaweed. Their dried seaweed flakes are available in farm shops all over Scotland and many Historic Scotland sites with shops.

https://maraseaweed.com/pages/find-a-stockist

Tip Number 4: Hike up Stac Pollaidh

For a rewarding hike with fantastic views of Coigach and Assynt, look no further than Stac Pollaidh, an iconic mountain with a mean-looking ridge. But despite its appearance, the path to the top is actually fairly straightforward and only takes 2-4 hours. The true summit requires a tricky scramble, but unless you’re bagging peaks, there is no real need to gain those few extra metres of height.

Tip Number 5: Try your hand at diving or snorkelling
If you want to get even closer to the marine wildlife and ecosystem, get in the water and try your hand at diving or snorkelling. This part of the Scottish west coast is well known for its sub-sea species like plumose anemones, starfish, sea urchins and sea sponges. It’s a popular area among divers and the Scottish Wildlife Trust has created a snorkelling trail that points out some of the best sites to dip underwater.


Here is a little extra tip:

Of course, the Isle Martin Seaweed Festival I mentioned in the story had to be cancelled because of the pandemic. But hopefully this festival will be able to go ahead at a later date. I’ll put their website in the show notes so you can keep an eye on it.

https://www.islemartin.org/isle-martin-seaweed-festival-2020/

And with this, I send you off to dream about your own trip to the Isle Martin. If this story and my tips have inspired you to plan a road trip round the North Coast 500, head to my blog Watch Me See to find a guide for the route and lots of tips for places to see and things to do along the way.


At the time of recording, a trip to the coast is of course still off-limits for most of us, but if my time with Will has taught me anything, it is that these islands are going to be around for a very long time - and they will certainly be here once restrictions finally lift.

I am going to take a wee break from the podcast next week, because it’s Easter and I’m working on some stuff behind the scenes. Patrons can look forward to a bonus episode though, that will be coming out next Tuesday. For the rest, the show will be back with a new, regular episode on the 13th of April.

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.

You can also support the show on Patreon. From just £3 a month you can unlock bonus content and support my work.

You’ll find all the links in the show notes.

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.