

Transcript

Wild for Scotland Podcast

Season 1, Episode 7: 'Island on the Edge' - St Kilda

Published on 20 April 2021

Written, hosted and produced by Kathi Kamleitner

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. So far, we've island hopped to Iona, Staffa and Lunga, cycled across Tiree, went for hikes on Bute, Barra and Arran and paddled around the Isle Martin in sea kayaks. If you've not listened to previous episodes of Wild for Scotland, make sure you check them out after you're done with this one.

This week, I'm taking you with me on a journey to the edge of Scotland and one of the remotest places in the British Isles. We're going to St Kilda, an archipelago that has been assigned double World Heritage status for its cultural and its natural significance.

St Kilda can only be reached by boat and lies some 40 miles off the coast of North Uist - the closest landmass. On land, 40 miles isn't much - think, an hour's drive from the sands of Luskentyre to the Callanish Standing Stones. Easily done. But 40 miles at sea - feeling the full force of the Atlantic ocean as you cross unsheltered waters - that's an adventure.

I visited St Kilda during my hike on the Hebridean Way. Like most visitors, I left from Leverburgh at the southern tip of the Isle of Harris. Crossings are scheduled almost every day during the summer months, but adverse weather and strong winds often put a hold on these trips. One has to be lucky to make it over to St Kilda on a specific day - but as you'll hear soon, luck was on my side.

St Kilda has been inhabited for thousands of years before the last islanders were evacuated in 1930. What remains are thousands of seabirds who visit the islands year after year to nest on the cliffs and raise the next generation. But that is not all - St Kilda is a place of lore and legend, life and mystery - but you're gonna have to listen to today's story to find out more.

So, let's travel there together - over the sea to St Kilda.

This is "Island on the Edge".

[Phone ringing]

The phone call came in the most unexpected of moments. I had spent the day walking from Leverburgh to Seilebost. It had been raining most of the day and I was soaked to the bone. My path led me through some of the worst bog I had ever come across. Somewhere up in the hills high above the coastline, I almost lost my way. The clouds were hanging so low and visibility was poor, I could barely make out the signposts among the rocks. There was no sight of the beaches Harris is so famous for. I had finally made it down to safety and was ready to turn right onto a small track, leading away from Harris' west coast and the main road, when suddenly I heard a familiar beeping coming from my hip belt. I was surprised - I hadn't had reception since I left Leverburgh earlier that day and this road certainly didn't strike me as a hotspot for mobile reception. But, I was curious - who could it be? I stopped and with wet hands, I dug out my phone.

[Hello? Yes, this is she. Oh wow, yes, thank you for your call. That's excellent news. I'll be there, see you tomorrow!] [start loud, fade out and start narration on top]

It is Angus Campbell from Kilda Cruises. I had dropped him a line a few days ago to enquire about a trip to St Kilda, but unfortunately, all their boats were full and travelling on foot, I wasn't exactly flexible. Once I was too far from Leverburgh, it would be impossible for me to go back and catch a boat. But I had made peace with it - one day I'd come back and make it to St Kilda.

I didn't quite expect the day to come this fast though. Angus' has good news. Someone dropped out of tomorrow's tour and the spot was mine, if I could make it back to Leverburgh in time. His timing was perfect - just half an hour earlier I was still up in the hills, wrapped in rainy mist, no reception insight. I can't believe my luck - it seems I was destined to make it to St Kilda after all.

I turn on my heels and start walking back towards the main road from Tarbert to Leverburgh. It is Sunday early evening and I know there are no busses. So I do the only thing I can, set down my backpack and stick out my thumb. There is not much traffic, but to my utter surprise, the first car that drives past me stops and lets me jump on the backseat. The stars are aligning once again.

Back in Leverburgh, I check into the hostel, crank up the radiators and spread out my wet belongings. They only have a few hours to dry before I would start my adventure to St Kilda, the island on the edge.

I rise bright and early and make my way down to the harbour. I join a group of people who are already standing at the pier. Some have binoculars around their necks. All look a little tired and cold, hoping that their efforts would pay off. Boats bob up and down on the calm water. The sky is overcast and it looks like it will stay like that for the rest of the day. There are two boats that belong to Kilda Cruises - a 55-foot motor cruiser with a cabin, indoor and

outdoor seating and a larger catamaran with a little more space. But all in all, these are small vessels, taking only a handful of people across to St Kilda at a time. The crew is already on board. They welcome us, split our group into two and off we go.

We leave the harbour of Leverburgh and begin the long journey to St Kilda. Even at full speed, it takes almost 3 hours to get to Hirta, the biggest of the islands and the only one where landing is possible. Often tours get postponed or even cancelled if the weather doesn't play along. But not today. In fact, it barely happened at all this season, our skipper tells me.

The Outer Hebrides just saw a 7-week heatwave. Barely any rain, perfect holiday weather and almost daily sailings to St Kilda. I could tell that our crew wouldn't have minded a day off here or there. But when you live and work in these remote parts of Scotland, you have to make the most of the weather while it lasts.

Our boat is now racing full-speed across the water. There are two skippers on board with us. One is in charge of commandeering the boat and keeps an eye on where we are going. The other tells us more about what lies ahead.

Birds are following us. Fulmars, shags and gannets. Spending the day at sea, fishing and hunting. They fly close above the water surface with grace and in formation. We would see a lot more of them very soon.

Because I am travelling on my own, I get the best seat in the house, right next to the captain. Not only does that give my great views of the sea ahead, it is also a lot more comfortable than the benches behind me. My seat is cushioned and has a suspension. Every time we hit a wave, it goes up and down, absorbing the shock and lulling me back into a dream-like haze.

But all of a sudden, our skippers shout at each other and the boat cranks to a halt. One of them jumps outside and most of us follow him through the small doorway at the back of the boat. It all went so quickly, I didn't even have time to grab my camera.

Did they spot whales? Dolphins? Or maybe a basking shark? Those are the kinds of animals you could encounter on a boat trip in these waters. You could feel the excitement in the air - we all wanted to know what they had seen.

Our skipper tells us to look down into the water and there I see it. A big silver disc floating below the surface, a fin poking out of the water. Imagine holding your arms out in front of you, as if you were hugging someone. Or carrying two very big watermelons. That's about as big as that disc. I have no idea what it is.

'What is it?', someone finally asks.

'It's a sunfish', the skipper says. They live in tropical and warm waters, but come to Scotland during the summer to feed. They normally stay quite deep in the water, but sometimes they come up to the surface and bask in the sun on their sides. Sometimes they even let seabirds peck off parasites they have on their skin.

We watch the sunfish float in the water a little longer, mesmerised by this weirdly shaped animal. Then it is time to get going again - St Kilda is waiting for us.

My eyes are fixed on the horizon. On a clear day, you can see St Kilda from very far away. But today isn't a clear day. All I see is water all around us. Eventually, something appears on the horizon. A dark spec of land, rising high into the air above the surface. Weirdly shaped rocks poking out of the sea. I squint my eyes as the rocks grow larger and larger. We're almost there.

As we approach the bay of Hirta, our skipper starts to prepare the small dinghy at the back of the boat. The only way to land on St Kilda. I wait my turn, hop into the rubber boat and giddily await our arrival on the island.

We are not the only ones in the bay. There are a few other boats, roughly our size. Fellow day trippers arriving from Harris and Skye. There is a fancy looking sailboat surrounded by people in kayaks. They are here for a couple of nights. And then - there is the cruise ship. Not one of those giant, 4,000 passenger floating hotels, but a cruise ship nevertheless. Emerging from its bowels, I can see an armada of rubber dinghies, making their way towards us. Day trippers spilling out onto shore, disrupting my romanticised vision of an island on the edge.

But even without the sudden influx of fellow explorers, St Kilda would have busted the myth of a remote island away from it all. This island is not untouched and 'wild' only really applies to the weather. The military base near the shore is impossible to miss. Even though they tried to blend in with the natural surroundings by painting the barracks green, the buildings stick out against the backdrop of the ruined stone houses of the old village.

All I expected to hear was the uninterrupted roar of the sea, the screeching of sea birds. In reality, there are diggers and large trucks everywhere. Workmen are shouting to each other over the noise of the vehicles. After decades, the military base is undergoing redevelopment.

In many ways, with day trippers and construction work combined, St Kilda feels busier than some of the islands I walked across on the Hebridean Way.

But in a weird way, none of this matters. St Kilda is charming beyond the stereotype.

Stepping off the boat, we are greeted by a warden from the National Trust of Scotland, the organisation that manages the island. They welcome visitors, run a small museum and a shop, and conduct conservation work and research on the islands. The warden gives us a safety brief and an overview of the different areas on Hirta.

St Kilda is a double Unesco World Heritage Site, the only one in Scotland to be both recognised for its natural significance and its cultural heritage.

Until the 20th century, St Kilda was home to a small, but thriving island community. Up to 180 people lived here and sustained themselves primarily by harvesting seabirds. Fishing in the treacherous waters was often too dangerous, and growing vegetables or grains almost

impossible. In a tragic irony, it was the advent of tourism and increased influx of visitors that contributed to the demise of the island population. The arrival of the military during the war and increased awareness for health and wellbeing also affected the way of life on the island. The subsistence economy was no longer viable. More and more young people left. Diseases arrived, but help was only accessible on the far away mainland.

Eventually the remaining 36 islanders requested to be resettled on the mainland and left Hirtain 1930. After their departure, St Kilda lay empty for almost 30 years until the military established a permanent base in 1957.

Since then, St Kilda has been permanently occupied, although no-one lives there permanently.

But the people of St Kilda have left their marks on the island. Following the advice of the warden, I make my way past the village ruins towards the hills of the island. The highest is Conachair, whose peak stands tall at 1,410 feet above sea level. From the village, the hill climbs steeply up towards the sky. The slopes are littered with piles of rocks. Every few metres, another one, like a grid of cairns that span the hills for no apparent purpose. Upon closer inspection, I find that they aren't just piles of rocks though. They are carefully built stone huts. Cleits, they are called, and were used to store seabirds, fish, hay and turf. Some have fallen into ruin, but others are perfectly intact and actually quite spacious, by both standards.

While they are not in use by people any longer, they have been adapted into nurseries by some birds, who build their nests in these stone huts. Here their chicks are protected from wind and weather. All they have to worry about are unassuming day trippers who stick their head into one of these cleits, not knowing they are already occupied. Best to let a flightless chick rest in peace, I say to myself after such an unexpected encounter, and continue my way up the slope to an area simply called The Gap.

The Gap is a vantage point on the bealach or the low point between Conachair, the highest point of Hirta and Oiseval, a lower hill south-east of it. From the Gap, you can get an excellent view of Village Bay far below as well as Borerary, the St Kilda island that is furthest away from the others. It is here that I catch my first glimpse of the cliffs of Hirta too. While the approach of Conachair from the village is steep, nothing compares to the vertical 1,400 foot drop that awaits on the other side. These are the highest sea cliffs in the UK. There are no fences or safety lines. No missteps allowed.

Here at the Gap though, the cliffs don't just drop down, there are a few steps to gradually go lower towards the edge and you can get really close to it. I take off my backpack to be more flexible and go low down on the ground, carefully edging forwards. Before I know it, I can look over the verge. I see the vertical rock face drop down below me. Here and there, there are ledges sticking out, covered in yellow, purple and white wild flowers. Holding on for dear life in the most literal sense of the words. Birds are soaring through the sky below me, utilising the upward currents created by the cliffs. I can see white lines drawn on the water by a speed boat, but the boat itself is too small to describe. Mesmerised, I lie there on the ground, overlooking the scene from above, like a bird mid-flight.

Eventually I tear myself loose, carefully edge backwards and pick up my backpack. There are only a few other people around me now. Most of the cruisers have already turned around again or they stayed down in the village entirely. A few brave souls push on to climb to the top of Conachair. I join them for a while, convinced to reach the highest point of Hirta, but the clouds have moved in and soon I can only see a few metres ahead. Without safety barriers between me and the drop, I decide that it's best to turn around.

Back at Village Bay, I wander past the ruins of the old medieval village down towards the main street of the modern settlement. People lived in these blackhouses until the first half of the 19th century, when a member of the British parliament gave money to build new blackhouses and improve the living conditions. Just a few decades later, new houses came in again - this time, modern cottages with zinc roofs and chimneys. But the old blackhouses remained, serving mostly as stables for the sheep. Further back, there are even remains of prehistoric structures. It is this mix of architecture and the remnants of buildings across time, that makes the main street of St Kilda such a cultural treasure.

I reach the end of the street and start walking across the green grass. Every now and then, a flock of hairy Soay sheep jolt up in front of me. The further I walk, the quieter it gets and soon enough, I can't hear or see the busy village, the construction noise, or the day trippers any longer. I reach a little gully and decide to explore, walking down into the crevasse, following the stream away from the coast, the banks of the gully rise steep to the left and right of me. I sit down on a rock and look back the way I came. I can see the sea at the end of the gully, the calm silver water flowing almost seamlessly into the white sky. Everything is bright green. The air is fresh, carrying a hint of salt. There is no noise apart from the soft trickling of the stream. It is here in this gully that I start to understand that despite all the noise and carfuffle in the village, St Kilda is still an island on the edge.

~~I return to the village and to our boat for a hot cup of coffee. Back at sea, our skippers take us to Dun, the island next to Hirta, where thousands of puffins soar through the sky. It's almost impossible to get a good glimpse of them, unless they come down to the surface and rest on the water for a while. We continue over to Borerary and the sea stacks, Stac Lee and Stac-an-Armin. At 500, 600 feet and more these are the highest stacks in the British Isles. They are home to massive bird colonies who use these remote rocks as their breeding grounds. Close to 50,000 breeding pairs of Leach's petrels come here every year—almost the entire European population of this species. Northern fulmars, great skuas, guillemots and the largest colony of northern gannets in the world. There are so many of them nesting on the ledges of these stacks, the rocks look white from a distance. It is a spectacle to watch. There is no question our skipper couldn't answer—he knows these islands like the back of his hand.~~

~~Eventually, we come to the end of our tour. The journey back to Leverburgh is long and it is time to get going. Along with the other day trippers I settle back into my seat inside the cabin, bobbing up and down on my comfortable chair, lulled into a soft sleep by the gentle waves. I am awakened by a familiar, but unexpected smell. The smoky sensation of peat fills my nostrils. Slowly I open my eyes and see that there is land ahead of us in the distance. Someone hands me a glass of whisky—the perfect ending to an amazing day. Slàinte Mhaith!~~

I hope you enjoyed this story about visiting the islands of St Kilda and I've inspired you to look into doing this trip one day too. I will pop the link to my practical St Kilda guide in the show notes - that should help you get planning!

Now, it's time for the practical part of the show - you know the drill, here are my top 5 travel tips for a trip to St Kilda.

Tip Number 1: Give yourself a generous window to visit St Kilda

I was incredibly lucky to make it to St Kilda when I did even though I wasn't particularly flexible, travelling on foot. I was fully prepared not to go if the weather was too bad.

Ideally, you should give yourself a few days on Harris to allow for flexibility - your tour may have to be rescheduled in case of bad weather. Kilda Cruises, the tour company I went with, offers tickets with a 2-day window as well as standby tickets. They've already started taking bookings for this season.

Tip Number 2: Bring binoculars and zoom lenses

If birdwatching is top of your list, don't forget to bring some binoculars for the boat ride. After exploring Hirta, the tour continues to see the bird colonies on the sea stacks. You get pretty close to them, but you'll get a better view of the birds with binoculars.

Photographers may also want to bring zoom lenses although it can be challenging to stabilise your images when you're on the boat.

Tip Number 3: Remember to bring food and water

Apart from toilets, there are no facilities on the island and there is nowhere to buy food or refill your water bottle. You will have to bring everything you need throughout the day.

That said, my trip included a hot drink and slice of cake on board the boat as well as a dram at the end - which was a nice change from my sandwiches.

Tip Number 4: Send a postcard

The small shop on St Kilda sells postcards and stamps. There is even a small postbox, so you can literally send a postcard from the edge of the world.

Tip Number 5: Consider a camping trip on St Kilda

The National Trust for Scotland manages a small campsite on Hirta with space for up to 6 people. You can arrange getting to the island with one of the tour companies who can drop you off and pick you up a few days later. Camping costs £20 per night which covers access to drinking water, toilets and shower facilities. This must be booked in advance, but note that the campsite is currently closed due to the pandemic. One to remember for the future.

And with this, I send you off to dream about your own trip to St Kilda. The islands and all facilities were closed to the public during the pandemic, but tour operators are starting to head out to the islands again these days.

Thank you so much for tuning in and listening to Wild for Scotland. If you enjoyed the podcast, please subscribe to it, leave a review on Apple Podcasts or share your favourite episode with a friend. Sign up for my email list, connect with me on socials or visit the website, WildforScotland.com. There you will find photos from today's travel story, transcripts and other episodes.

You can also support the show on Patreon. From just £3 a month you can support my work and for a little more, you'll unlock bonus content and goodies.

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

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.