

Transcript

Wild for Scotland Podcast

Season 1, Episode 9: 'Between the Tides' - Isle of Colonsay

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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 are heading to one of my favourite islands on the Scottish west coast, one that you have to make a little extra effort to visit. And from there the story actually takes us to a place that requires even more dedication to get to.

We're going to the Isle of Colonsay, sometimes called the Jewel of the Hebrides. The island lies out at sea on its own, but from its shores you can always see at least one of its closest neighbours - Mull, Jura and Islay.

The ferry ride from Oban leads south through the Sound of Kerrera, past the Slate islands and eventually into Scalasaig Bay. The island is home to a tiny community, less than 200 people call the island their home. But don't let this fool you into thinking, Colonsay is a boring place to visit. Between the breathtaking beaches, 22 official MacPhie summits - think Munros, but smaller - and a staggering two gin distilleries and a beer brewery, Colonsay really packs a punch.

Oransay on the other hand, is a place to visit for its tranquility. This small tidal island is connected to Colonsay by a tidal causeway - although it's nothing like the causeways you might know from the Outer Hebrides. Unless you charter a boat, the island is only accessible during low tide and the walk across the Big Strand is quite the adventure.

And that's exactly where today's story is going to take us. Let's travel to Colonsay and Oransay -

This is "Between the Tides".

I'm sitting in front of a pile of rubber boots. One by one, I took them out of a large basket, checked their size and dropped them on the floor next to me. There are kids boots and tiny sizes for adults, 3s and 4s. There are also large sizes, 11, 12, 13, and a few solitary boots without a matching partner. But not one of them is my size. I weigh up my options. Wear boots that are 5 sizes too big, or go without and see how it goes.

Weary of time and with my mind made up, I move all the rubber boots back into the basket, grab my backpack and head out. I jump in my car and drive off. I will have to face today's adventure in my bare feet.

I drive along the island's small single track roads. There aren't many of them on Colonsay. Yesterday, I drove round the entire main road, a circle at the island's centre, connecting a couple of small villages, and a road reaching out to Kiloran Bay, the most famous beach on Colonsay. But today I am going south, to the end of the road at Garvard.

I park up and get organised. I have to bring everything I need for the next few hours. Layers to be prepared for any weather, my camera equipment and a spare pair of socks. The hotel made me a lunch pack which I place carefully at the top of my bag. I lock the car, safely stow the keys in a zip pocket and set off towards the beach. A few people are walking across in the wet sand, looking for shells and hidden treasures, but mostly just enjoying themselves. Low tide is approaching its peak and the water is retreating as I walk towards it. The sky is overcast, turning the remaining water on the sandy surface into a shiny mirror. Like a mirage on the horizon. It looks like there is still quite a lot of water between me and my destination. But I trust the locals - they said you can reach the island on foot.

I am still wearing my boots, but increasingly I have to navigate little pools and puddles of water, too deep to step in with my shoes on. I stop and awkwardly balance on one foot as I take off one shoe, and then my sock.

As my bare foot hits the ground, an icy shockwave goes through my body. The ground is cold, a shock to my system. The sand closes in on my toes and heel, like a wet and cold hug for my foot. I regret not bringing the ill-fitting rubber boots. This is going to be interesting.

I take off my other shoe and sock and regroup. I've not gone far yet. I could go back to my car, drive back to the hotel for boots and get back. But I would lose precious time and would risk missing the low point of the tides to get across to the island. I decide not to take a chance, pick up my shoes and start walking.

With every step I take, my feet are feeling better. Whenever there is a sand bank, I can see tire tracks pressed into the ground. I had heard that the postman drives across the bay every day, when the tides allow. I imagine it to be fun and nerve-wrecking alike, like crossing a river or a stream with your car. Every now and then, cold water spills over my feet, numbing them just enough to get accustomed to the temperature, but not to the point of soreness. The further I walk, the more frequent these puddles become until eventually I find myself

wading through ankle deep water. I roll up my trousers and continue. The water keeps rising. I roll them up a little more.

I'm now not walking anymore, I am stilting. Lifting my feet high in the air to take a step forward and minimise the splash. Maybe I could have waited a little longer for the tide to retreat further. But there is no way back now. My ankles and calves are feeling numb from the cold, but at least the ground is soft and sandy, and it is easy to walk.

Eventually, after what feels like an eternity, but was probably closer to 30 minutes, I reach the other side of the bay. I walked about 1 mile across the Strand, the bay that connects Colonsay to the island I'm about to explore, Oransay. Its name is believed to derive from St Oran, who founded the first monastery here in the 6th century.

According to legend St Oran arrived on the island, together with St Columba, the famous Irish monk who brought Christianity to Scotland and founded the monastery on Iona. They landed on Oransay but continued their journey after realising that they could still see the coast of Ireland from the highest point on the island. The Kintyre peninsula lays a similar claim on the missionary, but whether these stories are true is not entirely certain.

The other way to explain Oransay's name is that it stems from the Old Norse word for "island of the low tide" - a reference to the fact that it is only a real island when the tide is high. Considering that there is another Oransay off the Isle of Skye, that is also a tidal island, the later derivation of the name makes more sense to me.

I'm now almost knee-deep in water, but getting closer to the edge of Oransay. The ground is different here. Not sandy and easy to navigate, but rocky and slippery. I have to wade carefully across the final stretch of water until I reach reasonably dry land. Kelp is piling up all around me, forming a squishy carpet to walk across. Finally, I reach the safe grounds of the coast and a sandy road reveals itself to me. I sit down on a rock to put my socks and shoes back on. Suddenly it hits me - I just walked across the sea to an island.

Oransay is privately owned, but the farm on the island is rented out to the RSPB who make sure that farming is done in harmony with the eco-system. The island is home to many bird species, some of which depend on remote habitats like this one. Corncrakes are incredibly well-camouflaged, so while you may not see them during your time on Oransay, you might be able to hear their characteristic call.

[Corncrake call]

Other species include chough, a black bird with a bright red beak and feet, lapwings, skylark and more. The island is also home to rare butterflies, rich meadows with wildflowers that bloom in summer, and even a rare orchid species. Thousands of Barnacle geese come to Oransay to spend the winter.

[Chough pronunciation: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=89V_0ti3VwU]

Back on solid ground, I start walking down a wide farm track. There are not many features I can see along the way. Fern is overgrowing left and right of the track, beyond are grass fields and small hills that stand in the way of a view of the sea.

The sky is overcast and it is looking like it might rain soon. Eventually I reach the end of the road and the only place on the island you could consider a settlement. Next to the private farm buildings, stands the historic site that is the main reason for many to visit the island: Oransay Priory, or rather its ruins. Built in the 14th century, it is one of the best-preserved medieval priories in Scotland. It was founded by John the Good in 1340, then the Lord of the Isles. The High Cross outside the church stands almost 4 metres tall. Unbelievably, it was carved from one single slab of rock. I wander around the ruins for a while, see the impressive high altar and walk along the arches of what must have framed a serene colonnade. I inspect the stone walls, the contrast of grey rock against the fresh green of little plants and lichen.

A collection of carved medieval gravestones is exhibited in a restored stone building next to the priory. A wooden roof has been constructed to protect the stones from the temperamental west coast weather. Since it is starting to rain, I decide to seek shelter, but luckily the weather only lasts for a short while. Soon, I'm back on the trail, continuing my journey. On my way to the priory, I spotted a sign post pointing away from the farm track. It was painted in bright colours and carried a single word that promised an adventure. Beach, it said in bright blue letters.

I make my way to the sign and follow its directions down a path between two stone walls. I pass a gate and cross a meadow with sheep on it. At the top of a small hill, I spot a standing stone, but upon closer inspection, it turns out not to be a prehistoric one, but rather a modern memorial for the late owner of Oransay. Ike Colburn, an American architect who bought the island in 1984. When he passed away a few years later, his wife, who owns the island to this day and visits regularly, commissioned this standing stone to be erected in his honour.

As I turn towards the sea, I can see why she would have picked this location for the stone. From this vantage point, I can already see the beach. A glorious sandy bay, sparkling now in the even more glorious sunshine. I told you the weather here was temperamental.

I follow the footpath down to the beach, past a white-washed bothy overlooking the bay. Even though the tide is approaching its highest point, a large expanse of the beach is still exposed, ready to be explored. The wet sand is doing that thing again - turning into a mirror and as I walk a line parallel to the water's edge, it is becoming increasingly difficult to separate the water and the ground on the horizon. It is magical.

I collect a handful of shells - conical common limpets in shades of yellow and grey, spiralling common welks, or at least some broken parts of them, scallop halves as big as my palm. I brush them off with my hands and arrange them neatly on the dry ground. I take a photo and leave them, to slowly be ground down by the elements and turn into the dust that fertilises the wildflower meadows on the island.

I continue my walk across the farmland of Oransay, vaguely following some paths across the meadows, but mostly just my nose. I reach another beach. Somewhere here is an old ruin

called Seal Cottage, but I am way too fascinated by another structure - the Boathouse, which lies right behind the sand dunes. The building has been modernised, even though I can see through the big windows, that the character of it hasn't changed too much. Behind the table there is a fireplace and above it a mirror, artistically framed by scallop shells.

I sit down and watch the clouds roll back in, turning the sky into a dramatic spectacle of shadow and light. In the distance I can see the Paps of Jura, their rounded summits wrapped in soft clouds.

Eventually, I have to rip myself away from this view and my time on the island has come to an end. I return to the farm track and find my way back to the bay to begin my walk across the Strand back to Oransay. The tide is properly out now and it is a lot easier to walk than it was in the morning. A group of cyclists overtakes me, their bright rain jackets reflecting the light of the sun, which is shining bright again. I take off my shoes and socks and start wading across the sea. The wet sand is doing that thing again - turning into a mirror. A miracle you can only see, between the tides.

I hope you enjoyed this story about visiting the Isle of Colonsay and our walk across to Oransay. Maybe you even feel inspired to do this walk someday too.

A word of caution though: Like I said at the top of this episode, Oransay is only accessible during low tide and it is absolutely essential that you check tidal times before you embark on this journey. You don't want to get stuck on the island when the tide comes back in. I will add a link for where to get information on tides in the show notes.

Now, it's time for the practical part of the show - the walk to Oransay is not the only highlight of a trip to Colonsay. Here are my top 5 travel tips to get the most out of your trip.

Tip Number 1: Take a walk to Balnahard Bay

The most famous beach on Colonsay is without a doubt Kiloran Bay. It's easy to access by car and just a short walk from the car park. Don't get me wrong, it's a stunning beach, but if I had to choose a favourite, it would still go to Balnahard Bay.

The beach at Balnahard Bay takes a little effort to get to. From the car park at Kiloran Bay, it is a 1.5 hour walk to reach Balnahard. But once you get there, you'll be rewarded with golden sands and stunning views of Jura and the Slate Islands. There is also lots of wildlife to see on this beach, so make sure you pack your binoculars.

Tip Number 2: Book a getaway at the Gin Lover's Retreat

One of the gin distilleries on Colonsay, Wild Thyme Gin, actually offers a private gin retreat which includes accommodation and all meals, a tour of the gin distillery and a gin tasting where you can choose from over 200 kinds of gins from the owner's collection. In between you have plenty of time to explore Colonsay, walk to the beaches and even to Oransay.

I will link to the Gin Lover's Retreat in the show notes.

Tip Number 3: Leave your car on the mainland

Of course you can bring your car across on the ferry, but some locals actually encourage visitors to leave their car on the mainland and discover Colonsay on foot or by bike. The island is small enough to get around this way and your accommodation should be able to arrange transport for you, should you need it with your luggage. You could bring your own bikes or hire some on the island from Colonsay Bike and Board Hire.

Tip Number 4: Stay at Colonsay Hotel

When I visited Colonsay I stayed at Colonsay Hotel, the only hotel on the island that also runs the only pub on Colonsay. It lies just a stone's throw from the ferry pier, in walking distance to the village of Scalasaig and its rooms offer great views of the bay or the hills behind it.

Tip Number 5: Join a local beach clean

Even though Colonsay is a remote island with very few inhabitants, its beaches see a fair share of litter washed ashore by the sea. Every Saturday local volunteers gather to clean one of the many beaches on Colonsay together - and visitors are more than welcome to join.

And with this, I send you off to dream about your own trip to Colonsay. Like I said, this is one of my favourite islands in Scotland and if you're looking for an island adventure at a slower pace, I can't recommend Colonsay enough.

I'm currently away on my own adventure to Angus on the east coast and the West Highland peninsulas over on the other side. Follow me @wildforscotland on Instagram to see what I'm getting up to.

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.

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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.