

Transcript

Wild for Scotland Podcast

Season 1, Episode 10: 'Day and Night' - Isle of Coll

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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.

I'm a little sad to say this but we've reached the final episode of season 1 of Wild for Scotland. For the past weeks, we have travelled to thirteen Scottish islands together, explored their nooks and crannies, history and landscapes. We went island hopping on boats and in kayaks, we saw seabirds and marine wildlife below the surface. We explored historic and prehistoric ruins, dug our feet into the soft sand of west coast beaches. We climbed mountains and had a dram or two.

It's been such a journey for me to write, record and edit this podcast, but one thing I enjoyed in particular is to read the messages you sent me and the reviews you left of the show. I read them all and do a happy dance every time you say something nice about the podcast. Here is one left by Marie, who spells her name with 18 e's at the end - that was fun to count. She says:

"It's like I'm in Scotland!

I've absolutely loved these podcasts! I've listened to them all and can't wait for more! I'm missing Scotland but it's just like I'm there listening to these! Could listen to Kathi all day!"

Thank you so much Marie! Things are opening up within the UK and we are expecting an announcement about international travel soon, so hopefully it won't be much longer until you get to visit again.

Here's another review by Craig who wrote on my Facebook page. He writes:

"It's so awesome listening to the podcast and then seeing the posts on Scotland that if we're never able to visit, although we very much plan on it, I still get to

"visit" through these things. It's really cool. If you haven't listened to the podcast yet I highly recommend it. I think it's neat the way technology connects us to people and places. Keep up the good work and stay safe."

Thank you so much Craig! This is exactly what I've been hoping to achieve with these stories.

I've connected with so many listeners over the last few weeks. It makes me a little sad that I'm at the end of the season, but I promise I'm already working on season 2 and Wild for Scotland will be back later this year with more stories from my travels.

Until then, I will keep producing bonus episodes for Patreon subscribers once a month. I fell a little bit behind with my recent holiday and know I still owe you one for April - so you'll get two stories in May instead! The good news is that anyone signs up now for £6 per month or more, gets double the bonus content this month. So, what are you waiting for? The link to my Patreon is in the show notes.

For now, though, let's turn to this week's travel story. I found it difficult to decide which story to tell in the final episode of this season. There are so many islands we haven't visited and so many stories I'd like to tell.

But, with the help of my newsletter family and followers on social media, I eventually made a choice.

We're heading to the Isle of Coll. In a way I'm going full-circle with this episode, because the first story I wrote for this show was "Lullaby", which if you remember, was a story about cycling on the Isle of Tiree. Definitely go back and listen to it, if you haven't already. I actually visited Coll right after my time on Tiree, so today's story picks up where "Lullaby" left off.

The Isle of Coll is a breath of fresh air. Whether you spend five minutes or two weeks on this island, it relaxes you, recharges your energy levels and makes you feel like you could take on the world. There isn't much to do on Coll, other than taking in the stunning scenery and basking in the tranquility of sandy beaches and quiet bays. But to me, that's exactly the appeal.

Coll caught me a little by surprise and after just 24 hours on the island, I returned to the mainland missing a small piece of my heart.

This story is an ode to the Isle of Coll and I hope it inspires you to visit some time in the future.

This is "Day and Night".

[waves sound effect]

I'm sitting on a rock, my back warm from the sunshine, my face cool from the soft breeze that is blowing this morning. I watch the seaweed, gently swaying in the water. The sea is calm, but the push and pull of the tides is strong enough to create soft movement on the surface. I can see different kinds of seaweed. Some greenish-yellow, with frilly leaves and long yellow air-filled bladders. Others green like olives and perfectly sphere-shaped air bubbles on the leaves. In between long and thick brown kelp floating from side to side.

I am mesmerised by the never-ending movement, yet listening closely to the sounds carried across the sea by the wind. I am waiting for the arrival of a boat to take me away from this island and on to the next.

There is a pier nearby. Only one boat is tied up next to a concrete wall. On the slipway, creel baskets are stacked up tall, drying in the sun, waiting for the day they would be used again by the local fishermen.

At last, I hear a distant humming in the air.

[insert sound effect]

It's growing louder. I get up and jump from rock to rock, making my way to the pier. I can see the boat now as it is approaching the jetty and know that my ride is here. I may be leaving one island behind, but my adventure has only just begun.

I get aboard. My skipper is John. He has travelled the world with his job, but he recently retired and returned to his home island to start a small business. He tells me that even though he's seen some amazing places around the world, he wouldn't want to live anywhere other but Coll. My excitement to see it for myself grows exponentially.

As we leave the sheltered waters of the harbour behind, the wind picks up. Wrapped up in my jacket, scarf, woolen hat and sunglasses, I try to brave the cold temperatures out on the open deck of the boat. And my efforts pay off. A few minutes later, John cranks the boat to a halt. He has spotted something in the water and is pointing towards the rocky shoreline.

For a few seconds I see nothing. Only black seaweed covering the rocky outcrops of the island and small waves crashing into them. But then, a round black dot pokes out of the water. Then another. And another. I see a sleek grey body with dark spots dive up and down again. More heads are coming out of the water now, and they are moving closer.

Grey seals.

I've seen them before, but usually, they bask on a rock in the sunshine and are either startled by my presence or not phased at all. They either make a run for it below the surface or stay exactly where they are, not moving an inch. I've never seen them being so inquisitive. There are now 10, 15 of them, heads bobbing at the water surface, their eyes fixed on the boat, my camera fixed on them.

After a prolonged stare off, they seem to lose interest and we move on.

John started his business IsleGO when he returned to the Isle of Coll for his retirement. Never one to sit idle, he made it his job to show others the beauty of his island. Together with his sons, he runs tours on his boat - to see local wildlife like puffins, whales or basking sharks, to visit nearby islands like Lunga, Staffa, Ulva or Muck. And he operates as a water taxi, picking up travellers like myself to visit Coll without heading all the way back to Oban for the ferry.

We have left the waters of Tiree behind. Looking back I can still make out the island with its sandy beaches on the horizon. Ahead of me though, is another island. One I had never even heard about before. The Isle of Gunna. A tiny island between Coll and Tiree. It is privately owned and there is only one house on the island, used as a holiday home a couple of weeks of the year. I can see dark sheep near the building, standing out clearly from the backdrop of blue sky, green grass and grey rocks. They are brought over from Coll to graze on Gunna. I wonder if they can appreciate the sheer beauty of the sandy beach that frames all three sides of the eastern tip of the island.

We leave Gunna behind and are making our way up the sheltered east coast of Coll. We pass Crossapol Bay which has the longest beach on the island. Almost 2 kilometres of high dunes and fine sands. Behind it lies an RSPB nature reserve, home to rare corncrakes, waders like lapwing, redshanks and snipe who come here to breed in the summer, and during the winter, a great spot to see barnacle and white-fronted geese. In the waters you might see otters or basking sharks, or seabirds on the hunt, puffins, razorbills and terns.

At the next bay over, I spot two large buildings near the beach. They are the old and the new Breach-acha Castle. The original castle was built here by the Macleans of Coll in the 15th century. The typical style of a tower house features one defensive-looking keep surrounded by multiple smaller buildings, including a round tower at one corner. It was lived in even after the newer castle was built, but abandoned sometime in the mid-19th century. The new castle, also known as Breach-acha House, was constructed in the 18th century to allow for more timely living conditions. This was not uncommon at the time as it was often easier to build a new dwelling in the style of the period, rather than adjusting and modernising existing medieval structures. However, what is unusual - at least to me - is that the new castle lies just a stone's throw from the old building, making it easy to see the different purposes these buildings once served. While the old castle seems to be a defensive stronghold first and foremost, the new castle is much more flamboyant and was clearly meant to impress by looks rather than intimidation.

Coll has, like many remote islands off the Scottish west coast, a small population and a rich history. The island has changed hands many times - invaded by the Irish Gaels and later the Vikings, fought over bitterly by the Norse and the Scottish clans. Eventually, the island became part of the Lordship of the Isles and after some squabbles about inheritance, the Macleans of Coll took over the island and built the castle to defend their land.

At the height of their success, Coll was home to a thousand people and supported a thriving community of farmers and fishermen. But both economy and population soon declined after the collapse of the kelp industry and the devastating potato famine - many islanders were forced to leave and start over in Australia, Canada or South Africa. In the end, the Macleans

sold the island and today, ownership is split between a local trust, the RSPB and individual farmers.

Less than 200 people live here today, but the population has grown over the last few decades and the growth rate has been significantly higher than on other Scottish islands.

We are now sailing past Arinagour, the largest village on the island. The large Calmac ferry "Clansman" is docked at the pier, ready to make its way back to Oban.

John briefly considers dropping me off here, seeing that I booked a hotel in the village and strictly speaking, I only booked him to transport me from Tiree to Coll - but, his passion for the island is too great, and my appetite for adventure too big. He decides to continue north and show me more of the island by boat.

Past the village, the east coast of Coll is an empty land - no roads, no houses or sandy beaches, just a ragged, rocky coastline. The only exception is a tiny settlement called Sorisdale near the top of the island. There, John tells me stories about his childhood on the island, people who lived here in the past, those that have left and some who returned. The house closest to the beach has been modernised and expanded. Large glass doors and floor-to-ceiling windows let the light flood inside. Sunrise must be a spectacle in this location. On the beach, there are cows, licking salt off the rocks at low tide.

As we move on and start turning west to make our way around the top of Coll, the wind picks up again and the water becomes choppy. Out here, we are met with the unbroken force of the Atlantic ocean. And it's brutal.

Soon we are surrounded by rocky outcrops, diving in and out of sight with the rising water. White horses ride at the top of waves breaking on these rocks. The Cairns of Coll.

The boat, gently swaying from side to side just a few moments ago, is now tumbling from side to side, elegantly dodging the rocks. John knows these waters like the back of his hand, but still I hold on for dear life and grasp my camera with a firm hand.

On the largest of the rocks, there is a small white lighthouse. It marks the location of these treacherous waters and has kept boats safe since 1909. Before that, seafarers knew to stay away from this spot, unless they possessed the kind of local knowledge John is proving today.

After we pass the wildest parts of the channel and turn south towards the west coast of Coll, the sea calms down again. Like the waves never happened. John steers the boat in among the rocks closest to the coastline and from this side, sandy beaches are revealed. Their fine white sand continues below the surface, colouring the shallow water of the sea in a blue-greenish tint. The scenery looks tropical.

We potter along from one little beach to another, navigating the shallow bays and looking for wildlife. Seals are basking in the sunshine, unphased by the low humming of the boat's engine. Birds are resting on the rocks. Mostly seagulls, but also cormorants, spreading their wings to dry the feathers in the sun.

Eventually, John cranks up the engine again and continues south towards a bay near his house. After a cup of tea, we jump into his car and drive back down to Arinagour. On the way, we meet one of the island's most famous inhabitants. A friendly Highland coo with wonky horns - one pointing up, one pointing down. No trip to Coll would be complete without meeting her.

I check in at Coll Hotel, the only hotel and pub on the island. From my room on the first floor, I can see the sea. Despite being renowned for a menu boasting fresh local seafood, the chef whips up a fantastic plant-based dinner for me - though, with some seaweed for that characteristic island taste.

With a smoky dram in my hand, I watch the sky go darker and darker, until eventually the island is swallowed up by the night. You'd think my day on Coll is coming to an end, but the island has one more surprise up its sleeve.

The darkness is almost uncanny, especially to a city dweller like myself. There are no street lamps on the Isle of Coll and any lights on buildings must only illuminate the ground below to avoid any light pollution of the sky.

The Isle of Coll is a Dark Sky Community, an area with an exceptionally clear view of the night sky and great visibility of stars. The lack of street lamps and any larger settlements makes for incredible darkness after night fall. One just has to pray for a clear sky to see the spectacle of the universe unfold.

Wrapped up in warm clothes and layers, I head out now. My camera mounted on a tripod, extra batteries in my pocket. There are a few places near the hotel that are great for stargazing. I chose to head up to the small church overlooking the village. It is pitch black and I have to use my head torch to find my way up the rocky footpath. At the top, I set up my camera. I can see stars in the sky, but also a few clouds. My camera screen is completely dark, I can't make out a single thing that is in the frame. I set the camera to the longest possible exposure, point it towards the sky and press the trigger.

The shutter opens and light pours into the camera sensor through the lens. I stand patiently waiting, not daring to move, afraid I could disturb the process.

The shutter closes. The camera processes the image and... there it is, a picture of the night sky revealing more stars than I could ever see with the naked eye. It's a little blurry and the angle is kind of off. I adjust the camera position slightly, this time, framing the tower of the church as a point of reference.

I press the trigger again. And again. Every time I do, I have to wait patiently to see the result, a sensation I am not used to anymore. I've gotten too used to instant photography, being able to see and making adjustments instantaneously. But at night, I have to experiment and wait. Only 30 seconds, but still, with every shot it feels like a lifetime.

But the results are stunning. Just a few hours ago, Coll blew me away with its rugged coastline, sandy beaches and fast-changing seas - now, I see a different side to the island.

Slowly revealing itself to me through patience and joy. But one thing is for certain, when I will depart from Coll tomorrow, I will leave a small piece of my heart behind. In its stead I will cherish those memories of an island that takes your breath away, by day and night.

I hope you enjoyed this story about visiting the Isle of Coll. I will pop my Coll travel guide in the show notes.

Now, for the last time this season, it's time for the practical part of the show. Here are some of my top tips for a trip to the Isle of Coll in the near future.

Tip Number 1: Book a trip with IsleGO

I can't recommend a boat tour with John from IsleGO enough. He knows Coll and the neighbouring islands so well, and is bursting with stories to tell about the local history, people and wildlife.

Trips include short sailings to the Cairns of Coll and local bays, or longer journeys to Lunga, Staffa, Mull or Muck.

Tip Number 2: Make it a car-free trip

There are only two roads on Coll and if you are reasonably fit, you could easily navigate the island by bike and on foot. Leave your car on the mainland and take the ferry across, bring your own bikes or hire some at your accommodation. No car needed!

Tip Number 3: Stay at Coll Hotel

There are a few accommodation options on Coll, but I highly recommend spending a few nights at Coll Hotel, the only hotel and pub on the island. Since my visit a few years ago, they have expanded the historic hotel building and added a new restaurant and bar area with sea views. The family-run hotel is without a doubt one of the businesses that drive the growth on Coll.

Tip Number 4: Join a stargazing weekend

Dark Sky Communities, like the Isle of Coll, are committed to educating others about dark skies. The community on Coll hosts regular stargazing weekends, usually one in spring and one in autumn. In the course, you will learn from expert astronomers and try professional equipment to see the stars. I remember the first time I looked through an astronomical telescope and it blew my mind! I hope to join one of these weekends in the future too.

Tip Number 5: Prepare for the night skies

If you can't join one of the stargazing weekends, you can still enjoy a bit of stargazing. But you may want to read up and prepare to get the most out of the dark skies on Coll.

First of all, visit at the right time. Summer nights are way too bright to see the stars. October to April is the best time to visit.

Download a stargazing app to find out about the constellations you might spot, learn about night sky photography and bring the right equipment for it and most importantly, wrap up warm so you can enjoy the sky for as long as possible.

And with this, I send you off to dream about your own trip to the Isle of Coll. You can find photos from my trip and a transcript of this story on wildforscotland.com. If you enjoyed the podcast, please leave a review on Apple Podcasts or share your favourite episode with a friend.

As you know, this was the last episode of this first season of Wild for Scotland. If you haven't heard all the stories yet, make sure to go back and listen to the other episodes.

I will be back later this year with season 2 and I can already tell you that next time, I will be taking you on Scotland's epic road trips. Make sure you follow me on social media and sign up for my email list to be the first to know when season 2 will be out.

In the meantime, follow me over on my Scotland travel blog Watch Me See for travel stories and tips. If you'd like to show a little extra support, come and join me on Patreon. From just £3 a month you can support my work and for £6 or more, you'll unlock bonus episodes and special goodies. I will keep creating these extra stories between seasons too, so if you can't wait until season 2, sign up now.

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.