

A WILD AND GEOLOGICALLY RICH LANDSCAPE, THE WEST COAST OF JURA OFFERS SOME OF THE MOST CHALLENGING WALKING ANYWHERE IN SCOTLAND – PARTICULARLY WHEN THE WEATHER TURNS, DISCOVERS **PETER EDWARDS**

WHEN THE WIND BLOWS

PHOTOGRAPHY: PETER EDWARDS; RICHARD ROWE; TIM HAYNES



THINK OF THE ISLE OF JURA and most people conjure images of the 'Paps', the three rounded hills that dominate the skyline from almost every direction. However, tucked away on the west coast of the island, unseen by most, is a hidden world of raised beaches, caves and twisted basalt dykes that form one of Scotland's most fascinating – and unforgiving – landscapes.

Our plan was to trek this wild, uninhabited coast from the northern tip of the island down to Feolin Ferry, the usual jumping off point for those arriving from neighbouring Islay. However, the trip was almost over before it had begun. The Hebridean weather can be extremely unsettled at the end of October and my plan to venture along this particularly exposed part of Jura with my friends, Andy and Jen, was very nearly scuppered by gale force winds. We were due to make the crossing from Croabh Haven on the Argyll coast to Kinuachdrachd near Jura's north-eastern tip but the poor forecast obliged our skipper, Duncan Philips from Farsain Cruises, to cancel with a big question mark hanging over the coming days.

Fortunately, the winds had died down sufficiently the following day and we were delivered to Kinuachdrachd with a few hours of daylight remaining. With little time

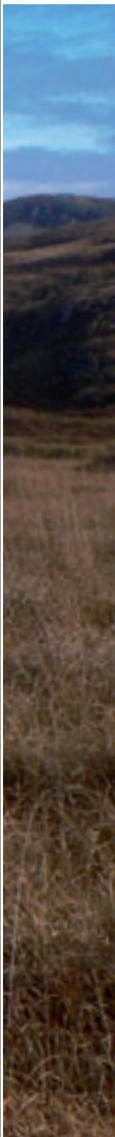
to lose, we set off across the boggy terrain, aiming for the northern tip of the island high above the Gulf of Corryvreckan, a narrow strait between Jura and the nearby island of Scarba.

On arrival there was no sign of the famous Corryvreckan whirlpool – the third largest in the world after even more impressive examples in Norway's Lofoten Islands and off the coast of Maine. The Corryvreckan only raises its hackles when a flood tide enters the strait from the west and is catalysed by a submerged pyramidal rock known as the 'Caillich' or Hag. Powered by the wind, the Hag can throw up a standing wave some 30 feet high and the roaring tumult can be heard from the mainland.

As the light faded, we descended with care to the west coast using paths worn by generations of deer and feral goats. Their tracks are generally worth following as they weave efficiently through the broken, rocky terrain below the cliffs, contour around hillsides and find the easiest route across bogs and raised beaches.

Having worked our way round to Bagh Gleann nam Muc without mishap, we pitched our tents above the shore in the dark and cooked the venison steaks bought earlier in Glasgow. Given that Jura is home to around 6,000 red deer this really was like bringing the proverbial coals to Newcastle.


Hard yards (clockwise from above): heading south along deer paths; views from a cave across Loch Tarbert; the Corryvreckan Whirlpool; the coastal landscape north of Ruantallain



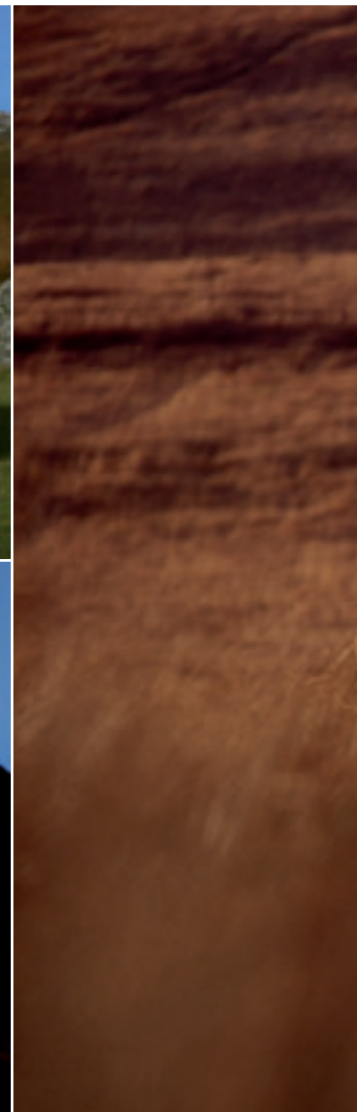
HEADING SOUTH

Dawn arrived calm and reasonably clear, the rising sun lighting Scarba a fiery red as we struck camp and headed along the shore. Forging south over cobbled beaches and around sandy bays, the buckled, rust-hued bracken glowed in the morning light. Here, the wild coastline is garlanded with magnificent geological phenomena – raised beaches, sea caves, natural arches and rock stacks.

At every turn we startled up herds of red deer as well as tribes of wild goats grazing on kelp along the shore. Jura's feral goats are reputedly descended from animals aboard shipwrecked galleons from the Spanish Armada, though their provenance is more likely from domestic animals abandoned by crofters in the mid-19th century.

After several hours spent weaving along the coastline, the red roof of Glengarrisdale bothy came in to view across Glengarrisdale Bay. Following a sinuous route beneath quartzite cliff faces before emerging onto the bay, we crossed the outflow of a river as it fanned out across the beach. Glengarrisdale Bay is the site of the last working croft on the west coast which was abandoned after the Second World War. Around this time, George Orwell, who was living at Barnhill near Kinuachdrachd on the east coast, came here for camping trips with his young son, Richard – navigating the Corryvreckan in his small boat to get here. I knew 





D from past trips that the bothy is a wonderful place in which to stay, but on this occasion we had to make do with a quick brew before continuing on our way.

For much of the afternoon we kept to a route above the shore where sections of the coastline are impassable. It's a magnificent landscape with views across the Firth of Lorn to Colonsay, lying supine on the horizon. However, hauling our heavy backpacks over the challenging terrain was beginning to take its toll and we were relieved to drop down a springy, peat-turfed incline towards the shore at Rubha Lagg Losguinn.

Back at sea level, we negotiated a path along a raised rock platform below the cliffs, much of it overlaid by raised beach deposits of large cobbles. It made for entertaining walking, but we were all a bit worn out by the time we arrived at Corpach Bay. Fortunately, with the tide out, we could walk along the sandy shore before eventually taking to the machair-like greensward above the beach and continuing around to the far end of the bay at Traigh a' Mhiadair. It was a perfect bivouac spot with a burn nearby, plentiful driftwood and – crucially, as we were to discover – a sheltered position.

We pitched our tents, gathered plenty of driftwood and got a roaring blaze going. Later, having eaten, we sat with a dram gazing into the flames until at last the fire burned down to embers and we clambered into our tents. After a

tough day's walk, a good night's sleep was keenly anticipated, but it wasn't to be: the wind returned with a vengeance and soon began to tug and shake at our tents in violent gusts. Worried that our lightweight tents would be shredded, none of us slept a wink.

AND THEN THE RAIN

By dawn, the howling wind had been joined by driving rain. It was not a place to linger, so we struck camp and sought shelter in a huge rock arch to brew and eat breakfast before contemplating the day's walk to the shelter of Ruantallain bothy at the mouth of Loch Tarbert.

The environmental artist Julie Brook lived in this very rock arch for an entire year in the early nineties. Julie had supplies delivered by fishing boat and aside from occasional forays into Craighouse – the sole village on the island – she lived a solitary existence with only her cat for company. As well as a number of large impressionistic paintings, Julie produced ephemeral sculptural pieces including 'firestacks' – driftwood fires set on top of stacks made up of large pebbles at low tide, which turned into floating islands of fire as the tide came in.

Thankfully, given the atrocious conditions, Ruantallain was only a three-hour walk away. Summoning the necessary resolve we battled our way out into the wind and lashing rain. The weather was so wild there was no hope of keeping

Sitting pretty (clockwise from above): enjoying a driftwood fire; wild goat; a moment of calm at Glengarrisdale bothy; red deer are everywhere on Jura; a classic raised beach; looking north across Traigh a' Mhiadair and Corpach Bay



“WE SAT WITH A DRAM GAZING INTO THE FLAMES UNTIL THE FIRE BURNED DOWN TO EMBERS”

dry, but safe in the knowledge that we would soon reach shelter, it was strangely exhilarating.

Stumbling along, we again startled up herds of red deer at close quarters, before trying to cross the seething outflow of the Eas Allt an Tairbh below the magnificent stepped waterfall at Sliabh Allt an Tairbh. The heavy rainfall had transformed the burn into a raging torrent and the water level was very high. Forging the burn proved impossible and so we followed it upstream until we could find a safe crossing point.

We soon emerged onto the magnificent sandy crescent of Shian Bay and the walking became considerably easier. Shian Bay is a wonderful spot, but we had eyes only for the shelter of Ruantallain bothy. Leaving the bay behind, we abandoned the shoreline and continued on elevated ground a few hundred yards back from the coast. This stretch offers some of the easiest walking on the west coast through yet more remarkable landscape of huge raised beaches and dark, peaty lochans.

The raised beaches along Jura's west coast are the result of a phenomenon geologists describe as 'glacio-isostatic uplift'. At the end of the last glacial period, the sea level rose as the ice cap covering the island retreated. Freed from the weight of the ice, the land rebounded and continued to rise long after the sea level had reached its maximum height, stranding once-submerged caves, rock arches and beaches high above the water line.

At last, having been buffeted by wind and rain every step of the way, we dropped down through glacial cliffs to the bothy. Startled stags stampeded away along the shore of Loch Tarbert and a feathered monster the size of a pterodactyl lifted off from a nearby rock: a sea eagle. We gazed after this magnificent bird with its unmistakable white tail feathers before taking shelter in the bothy.

By late afternoon, the wind and rain had eased so we were able to venture out and explore the bothy's environs. In autumn, grey seals haul out around Ruantallain to have their pups and we soon encountered several wide-eyed animals tucked away along the rocky shore, watched over by anxious parents.

FINAL PUSH

That night, stretching out on the bothy's three ancient iron bed frames, we slept the **D**



D sleep of the righteous. We were up before dawn, however, packing our kit and preparing for the walk ahead. We were aiming for Glenbatrick Bay just two miles across Loch Tarbert as the crow flies, but which in reality involves negotiating 15 miles of very rough terrain along the north and south shores of what is a deeply-indented sea loch.

Setting off east along the shore, and with the day thankfully calm and clear, we soon encountered more seal pups. Andy pointed out a black-furred pup that seemed to have been deliberately settled among some black rocks while the more usual white-furred pups were tucked away among the paler quartzite rocks along the shore.

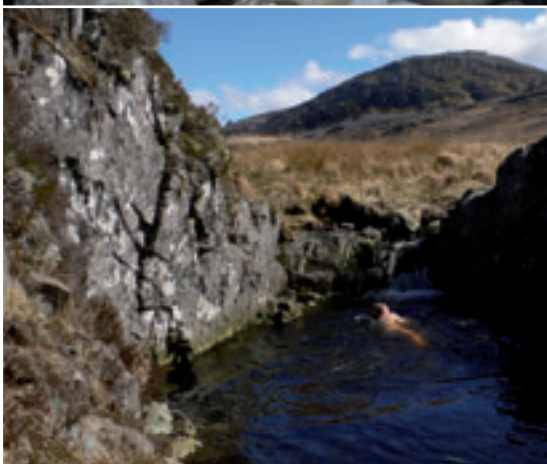
We soon gained a rock platform below the cliffs and weaved a route along yet more broken, rocky terrain, clambering through notches in the natural walls formed by basalt dykes. This stretch of the coast is full of interesting geological phenomena including numerous caves, but the going can be very tough with a lot of awkward terrain underfoot and a few precarious rocky sections to scramble around. Jen had acquired a couple of nasty blisters the previous day and although she kept it to herself it was costing her some pain to manage on the uneven ground.

After a couple of hours walking, we took to the low hills above the loch where it becomes estuarine. The hinterland can be very boggy here and we attempted to avoid the wettest ground as we headed for Cruib Lodge bothy, our first objective. A river crossing had to be made at Garbh Uisge – or 'rough water' – where the heavy rain had swollen the volume of water thundering down to the shore. We removed our packs and hurled them and then ourselves over to the far side.

Soon after, we arrived at Cruib Lodge bothy and it became immediately apparent that Jen's feet were too badly blistered for her to continue. The game was up. We agreed to stay the night at the bothy and then walk the four miles out to the road at the head of Loch Tarbert the following day.

Our final afternoon was spent half way up a nearby wooded gorge, washing in a freezing pool and gathering dead wood for a fire. Later, thick black rain clouds passed over Cruib, the mountain that rises to the rear of the bothy, and as the sun emerged from beneath them the landscape was lit up in fiery orange hues and a huge rainbow arched above us. It was a fitting end to a journey we vowed to return to and complete another day. ■

Rocky road: one of many basalt dykes along the route (above); grey seal pup (below left); a bracing swim to end the trip



FURTHER INFO

There are several ways to reach Jura. Farsain Cruises (Tel: **01852 500664**) operates a water taxi service from Craobh Haven Marina to Kinuachdrachd, while a small passenger ferry runs a seasonal (April to September) service between Tayvallich and Craighouse. Advance reservations should be made (Tel: **07768 450000**). Finally, Caledonian MacBrayne (www.calmac.co.uk) provides a large ferry service between Kennacraig on the mainland and Islay (arriving at either Port Askaig or Port Ellen). There is a short onward ferry crossing from Port Askaig to Feolin Ferry.

On the island

Those without transport can make use of the connecting Jura Bus Service which runs from Feolin Ferry to Ardlussa, some 22 miles along the coast.

Safety

Walking on the west coast of Jura is rarely less than challenging and should not be undertaken lightly. Make sure that you are properly prepared and equipped. Unsurprisingly for an island so full of deer, ticks are ubiquitous from early spring through to late autumn and are often picked up when walking through bracken and long grass. Wearing shorts increases your chances of picking up passengers. Ticks can carry Lyme disease, which can become seriously debilitating if left undiagnosed.

FURTHER READING

Walking on Jura, Islay and Colonsay, Peter Edwards

Scotland Outdoors readers can buy a copy of *Walking on Jura, Islay and Colonsay* for just £10.00 (including free p&tp). Buy online from www.cicerone.co.uk and simply add the voucher code JURA on the shopping basket page.

For much more on the wider island, visit www.jurainfo.com

