

A photograph of a traditional stone bothy (a small, simple shelter) with a blue corrugated metal roof. The building is constructed from rough-hewn stones and has a single window and a door. It is situated in a rural, mountainous area with tall grass in the foreground and large evergreen trees in the background. The sky is clear and blue.

A HOME IN THE HILLS

SCOTLAND'S NETWORK OF ROUGH AND READY BOTHIES MEANS THAT YOU DON'T ALWAYS NEED A TENT FOR OVERNIGHT ADVENTURES, AS **JAMES CARRON** DISCOVERS ON A TRIP TO THE NORTHWEST HIGHLANDS ▶



EVERY JOURNEY starts with a single step. And every backpacking adventure starts with the shouldering of a heavy pack. But one way to lighten the load is to leave the tent at home and use bothies instead of wild camping. These simple shelters and rough and ready refuges can be found tucked away throughout the mountains and glens of Scotland. Unlocked and free to use, they offer a welcome home from home in the hills for anyone escaping into the outdoors, whether on foot, two wheels or by kayak.

And it was on two feet that I set off along the pot-holed road leading to the lighthouse at Cape Wrath in the far northwest Highlands. In summer, a minibus conveys visitors across this wild, uninhabited stretch of country but after crossing the Kyle of Durness on the tiny ferry-boat (the 19-foot long vessel is the smallest licensed ferry in Britain), I chose to walk. Leaving the Kyle and its gloriously tranquil beaches behind, I headed west through an altogether bleaker landscape of heather moor concealing little more than a spattering of small lochans, some low hills and the odd abandoned cottage.

With the dust settling behind the departing bus, I marched along the narrow strip of tarmac laid in the early 19th century to serve the lighthouse. Prior to the Second World War there was a thriving community here. Shepherds tended flocks while their children were educated at a small school. The road was a vital lifeline. A weekly lorry run, taking food, fuel and other essentials to the lighthouse, dropped off supplies at cottages along the way.

Now no one lives here and the only regular traffic is the minibus, which I watched fade into the distance. As I tramped on, the fine weather that had encouraged me to

don my boots after breakfast was rapidly deteriorating. Banks of dark cloud lumbered in from the sea and after a preliminary smattering of drizzle they mustered sufficient vigour to send in a full-blown rainstorm.

As much by good fortune as by any meteorological planning, I stumbled upon a derelict cottage. Although dilapidated, it still boasted most of its roof and that was enough for me. It was not a bothy as such but I snuck in through an open window, shook off the worst of the rain and settled down for a brew.

I was clearly not the first person to seek refuge here; strewn across the floor were the remnants of military ration packs – sachets of coffee, sugar and powdered orange juice left by soldiers who visit Cape Wrath for training exercises. Thanks to its remote location and absence of a resident population, this northwest tip of Scotland has long been used for army, navy and air force activities. This is another reason why so few people venture here.

After downing my tea, I set off again, wandering out into the last vestiges of the rainstorm. I made good progress and soon neared Cape Wrath. A lighthouse clings to the edge of the rocks here. To the east, Clo Mor, the highest sea cliffs on the mainland, mount their defence against the swirling froth of the Atlantic. It was in the shadow of these towering bluffs that I would spend my first night at Kervaig bothy.

ROOMS WITH A VIEW

The cottage enjoys a prime location. Accessed by a rough track leading down from the lighthouse road, it overlooks a slender arc of golden sand. A finer sea view would be hard to find. I stepped through the door to find the

Cape crusaders: (clockwise from bottom left): Sandwood Bay; waiting for the 'ferry'; the Cape Wrath lighthouse; soaring cliffs at Clo Mor; Kervaig Bothy

PHOTOGRAPHY: JAMES CARRON; IDA MASPERO; IAIN ROY/JOHN MUIR TRUST



cottage empty. Sometimes this is the way; you enjoy a peaceful night with the place to yourself. Then again, others may come, tales will be exchanged and drinks shared by a roaring fire.

Bothies can be solitary spots or hubs of social interaction. That is one of the great joys of staying in a place like Kervaig – you never know whom you will meet and more often than not passing strangers quickly become firm friends. It is a very communal activity, much more so than wild camping.

Like many bothies, Kervaig is sparsely furnished. A few old wooden chairs encircle a brick fireplace and there are benches and a table. Upstairs there is plenty of floor space for rolling out a mat and sleeping bag. Bothies are simple shelters – there are no home comforts like electricity or running water. In most cases, a nearby stream suffices while a spade is provided for calls of nature (some of the more popular bothies, Corroun in the Cairngorms for example, now have compost loos).

Kervaig is one of around 100 bothies maintained by the Mountain Bothies Association (MBA), an organisation that was established in 1965 in response to the growing recreational use of bothies by hill walkers and climbers. While some bothies were fortunate enough to enjoy the support of climbing clubs or enthusiastic individuals, the majority were not so well tended and many rapidly deteriorated. The MBA's first project was at Tunskeen in the Galloway Hills. Other new bothies quickly followed, all consistent with the aim 'to maintain simple shelters in remote country for the use and benefit of all who love wild and lonely places'.

And Kervaig is certainly a wild and lonely place. On a


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fine day, it is a place to linger, to explore or to just sit and ponder the world. There is no rush to leave, no check out time, no need to hurriedly pack bags before insistent chambermaids descend. If the rain comes on, or the midges strike, refuge can always be found within its walls. Unlike camping, there is room to move around, to spread out your stuff, to dry damp clothes by the fire or just sit and soak up the warmth.

The location of bothies used to be a closely guarded secret and most hikers simply happened upon them by chance or learned of their whereabouts through word of mouth. These days, however, they are much easier to find with the MBA – once a bastion of secrecy – even disclosing the location of bothies on its website.

MOVING ON

After a couple of relaxing nights at Kervaig, I said goodbye to the old cottage and set off for the lighthouse. Although the light is no longer manned, the buildings below are home to the country's most remote teashop. Run by John and Kay Ure, the Ozone Café serves up hot cups of tea and coffee to passing walkers at any time of the day or night.

Heading south from the lighthouse to Sandwood Bay, I was forced to relinquish the security of the road and 



Find my own way across the moor. The ground beneath my feet rose and fell incessantly. I ducked in and out of gullies, hopped back and forth across streams, fought ankle-trapping heather and squelched anxiously around increasingly expansive mires of marsh and bog.

Occasionally I stumbled upon what looked to be a path and my spirits would soar, only to be dashed when I discovered it was in fact a short-lived sheep or deer track. But at least it wasn't raining. Sadly, however, that was not to last much longer. A squall of light drizzle heralded the arrival of a rather more robust drenching. I pulled on waterproofs and pressed on, determined not to be beaten.

It was with great relief that I eventually spotted, tucked away in the base of a river valley, the squat little structure of Strathchailleach bothy. I lurched forward with renewed fervour, witnessing a spring in my step that had, up until that point, been sadly lacking. Rain clattered on to the corrugated iron roof above me as I darted through the front door but the weather was no longer of concern. I had found shelter without the worry of having to pitch a tent in a storm.

A shepherd's cottage for a century, Strathchailleach was abandoned in the 1940s. But that was not an end to its occupation. In 1962, James McRory Smith moved in. He was a reclusive character who embarked upon a life on the road after the death of his wife in the 1950s. He wandered north, taking work where he could find it, sleeping in bothies or under the stars before finally settling at Strathchailleach. His was a simple life, fishing or trapping animals for food and foraging through coastal flotsam for debris he could recycle.

James' only luxuries were cigarettes, whisky and beer, bought once a week when he made the long walk to Kinlochbervie to pick up provisions. He spent much of his time wandering the hills, listening to his radio, reading or painting. Some of his murals remain on the internal walls of the cottage.

As an overnight stop, Strathchailleach is a comfortable escape from the elements but to live here through all seasons and all weathers must have required considerable resilience and great strength of character. The cottage clings by its fingertips to the fringes of society. This is as lonely and as remote a place as you will find in Scotland. James survived here until 1994 when ill health finally forced him from his beloved bothy. He died five years later, aged 75.

As the crow flies, Strathchailleach is a mile from Sandwood Bay. It may be one of the country's most spectacular beaches, but in an area largely bereft of tree cover bothy users will covet its plentiful driftwood. James gathered timber for his fire here and so too did I, hauling sacks of the stuff back across the moor to make my stay that little bit more cosy.

As it crackled and burned in the grate I contemplated the rest of my journey: a trip into Kinlochbervie for supplies followed by a stay at Strathan bothy. But I was in no hurry to move on. I was holed up in a landscape of wild intoxication – warm, dry and well fed, free of midges and safe from the elements. In the end, that is what bothying is all about. ■



BEST BOTHIES

CORRYHULLY, GLEN FINNAN – A rare treat, Corryhully has electric lighting, heating and a kettle. A good base from which to climb Sgurr nan Coireachan, Sgurr Thuilm and Streap. Walk or cycle in from Glenfinnan.

RYVOAN, GLEN MORE – Single-room Cairngorm bothy in the RSPB's Abernethy Nature Reserve. Walk or cycle in from Glenmore, near Aviemore.

CHARR, GLEN DYE – Sadly no fireplace, but a fine bothy nonetheless situated close to Clachnaben and Mount Battock. Walk or cycle in from Bridge of Dye, near Banchory.

CAMASUNARY, SKYE – Coastal bothy overlooking Loch Scavaig, well placed for Black Cuillin climbs and Bla Bheinn. Walk in from Kilmalie or through Glen Sligachan.

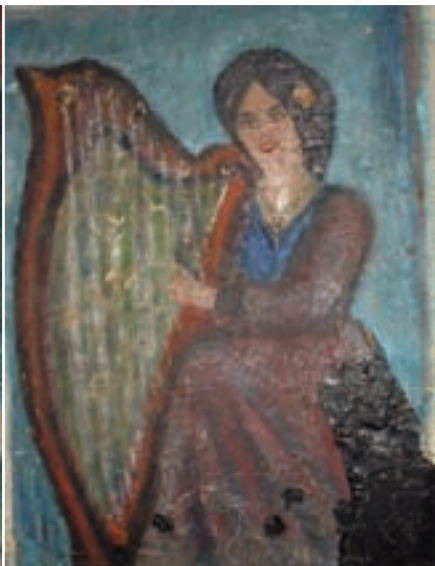
BOTHY MAINTENANCE

MBA bothies are maintained by its members who attend regular work parties. These range in length from a weekend to a week or longer, depending on the amount of work to be done. Jobs vary from simple repairs to complete renovations. Volunteers are always welcome.

www.mountainbothies.org.uk

Character building: (clockwise from below): Charr bothy; Kervaig Bay at low tide; James McRory Smith and some of his murals; wild camping – bothying without walls; Strathchailleach views; the popular Ryvoan bothy at Glen More





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