

2011 - SCOTLAND

3 May 2011

Sunset outside our van on Islay



Unspoilt Islay

"Islay has a preponderance of sheep and cattle. Cows are heavier than you, so can cause serious damage. The best way of dealing with them is to start talking to them. Sheep on the other hand are the most predictably unpredictable animals you are likely to meet, so keep your wits about you." Islay brochure

A TASTE OF ISLAND LIFE

Today we intended to road test Islay - the most southerly island of the Inner Hebrides and pronounced "eye-lar".

It's claim to fame is that it has 8 whisky distilleries and a serious sheep (to a lesser extent, cattle) population. The pace of life here, according to travel brochures, is very laid back - "expect shops to be shut in the afternoons and nothing to be open at all on Sundays". We were ready to expect a perpetually pissed (but pious) population overrun by sheep.

But Islay is no hillbilly country. Gauging by the huge bulk liquid malt tankers and semi trailer trucks going on the ferry, it was obvious that the locals do not consume all the stuff distilled on their island. And as far as sheep are concerned there was plenty of arable land to keep them and the local native

animals occupied eating grass all their life. There were some parts of Islay that had a charm we think could be bottled but this is not manicured country however. It has a lived-in, working-farm, feel. Tussocks abound on over-used land and the barren hills stand out starkly.

The trip by ferry from Kintyre took 2 hours - a good time to go inside to enjoy the view to distant shores in warmth, write emails and scan the local newspaper. Meanwhile, outside, on the open deck, passengers were wearing heavy coats despite the sun shining. Bright weather tends to make one optimistic about life here but once we disembarked we immediately realised that Islay is not a busy place - we could not find an ATM and were told there probably was one on the other side of the island at the only bank but it closed in the afternoons. Welcome to the Scottish islands!



WILDLIFE

Islay is well known for its wild life so we decided to drive south along the coast to Port Ellen and beyond to see seals and birdlife. The road became very narrow and eventually we did come across seals basking on rocks. A red deer crossed the road and propped right in front of our van. We then drove to the most southerly point on the island to see eagles and other soaring coastal birds. This road too was long, poorly constructed with only one lane - but it did have regular passing bays. We finally found the nature reserve and walked a short track up to a large monument in honor of American sailors who died in conveys coming to UK. The wind was howling and freezing despite the sunshine. Below on the cliff face was supposed to be abundant bird life but obviously they decided it was too cold. We did spot a lone eagle however, and Sig snoozed on the soft grass in a sheltered spot, whilst Heather scanned the sky for more bird life.

BOWMORE

We had lunch overlooking this georgian town built in 1768 to replace the village of Kilarrow which was totally destroyed by the local laird (Duke) because the

town spoiled his view of the water. He not only built a new town (out of his view) but also built a new church which was very unusual in that it was round - so that the devil could not hide in any corner. Unlike the general population, Scottish lairds can be a bit prickly we are told.

And so it was time to move on and find a caravan park on the other side of the Loch Indaal inlet. The road on that side was absolutely spectacular because it hugged the beach and there were no fences so sheep can graze freely and cross suddenly in front of motorhomes. The little villages along the way were very pretty. Our caravan park, in Port Charlotte, was also right on the water and, even better, had showers with as much hot water as a dirty camper can want. Absolute heaven for a lady in a motorhome. Tomorrow we are on the hunt for otters nearby and we also hope to go for a long bike ride. Islay has a number of great bike tracks but we have yet to find one that has no hills. We might even visit the Museum to view first-hand the leather boots worn by the horse that pulled the lawnmower on Islay House estate so it would not leave footprints on the lawn. Wot tha?



