



Hebridean spirit

IT'S THE QUINTESSENTIAL SCOTTISH ISLAND,
AND ONE OF THE MOST REMOTE. ALL IT LACKS
IS A WHISKY DISTILLERY. HANG ON...

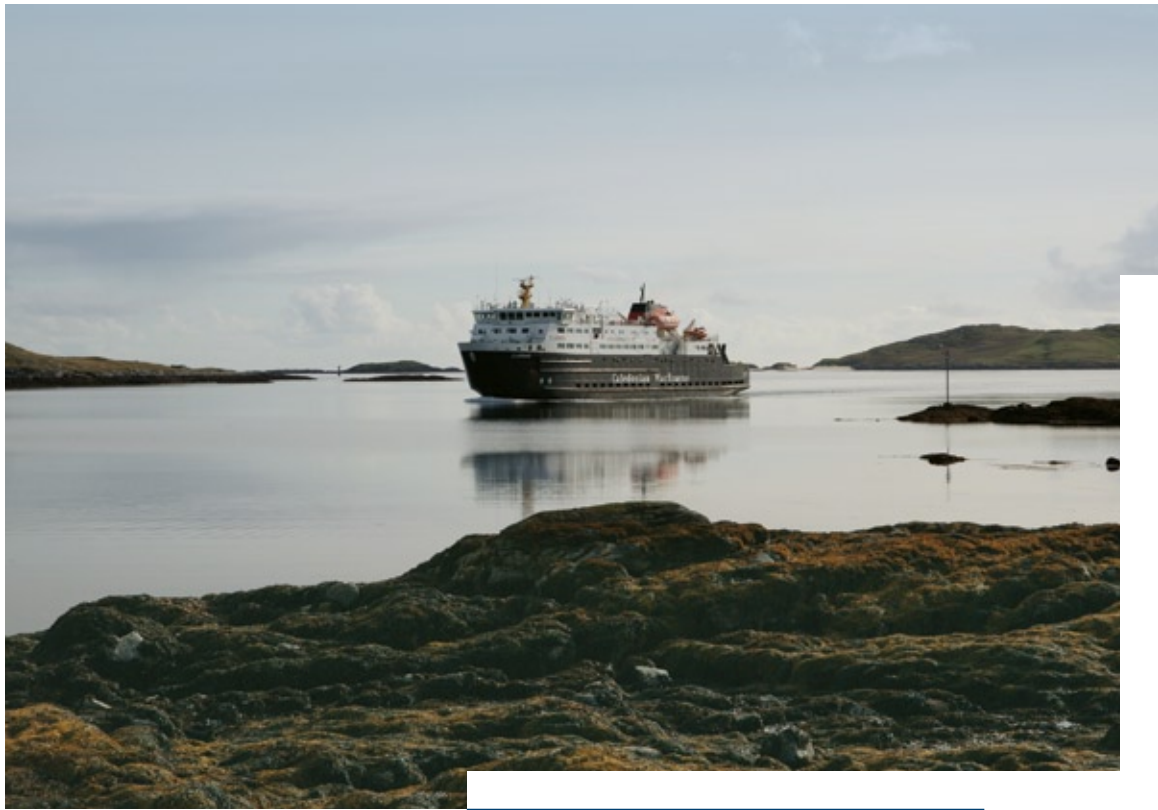
WORDS & PHOTOS ALAN HARPER

▶ You haven't yet sampled a dram of Barra whisky, but you will – eventually. You'll just have to be patient. If one man gets his way, the remote Hebridean island could soon be mentioned in the same breath as Skye and Islay as a producer of *uisge beatha*, the 'water of life', distilled with pure, peat-infused water and matured in the wild sea air of the North Atlantic.

"I used to come to Barra on holiday as a child," says Peter Brown. "Getting back here was always an objective." He might have lived on the island with his family for 15 years, but says he is still not quite regarded as a local. Edinburgh-born, and a self-confessed 'serial entrepreneur' whose CV runs from cafés to courier companies,

his plans might just cement his position as an honorary islander. If you ever get to taste Barra whisky, he is the man you will have to thank.

The new distillery on Barra will be the most far-flung in Scotland. The island is about as remote from mainland Britain as you can get without actually leaving the country. Arriving by sea, threading your way through the rocks and islets strewn across the approaches, it is easy to understand why Barra is off the beaten track for all but the most intrepid cruising yachtsmen. It's a five-hour ferry trip from Oban, and the Minch can seem a wild and windy expanse of unforgiving ocean for a small boat. St Columba sailed these waters ▶



Lifeline - the ferry arrives in Castlebay. Below: Donald Macleod, decorated Barra lifeboatman. Bottom: the island's Severn-class boat at her mooring. Previous pages: Castlebay.



too, in the sixth century, but it's difficult to trace his route today, because the place names have changed. The Vikings came in his wake, and stayed for 400 years – the names on the chart are mostly in Old Norse.

Although the island's dozen visitor moorings can expect to see only about 200 adventurous yachts in the course of a typical summer, every four years the main harbour at Castlebay fills up. The hardy competitors of the Round Britain and Ireland Race are due to make their next pit stop here in 2010, but it was the last race, in 2006, which saw Barra's volunteer lifeboat coxswain Donald Macleod and his crew undertake one of the most dramatic rescues of recent years. "It was blowing a lot harder than this," he says, tilting his head outside at a freshening gale. "The yacht had been pitchpoled. One of them was hurt. We escorted them in – it was safer than trying to put anyone aboard." He makes the episode sound routine, but Royal National Lifeboat Institution records show that it was blowing Force 9, the seas were nine metres high and breaking, and at one point the 17-metre Severn-class all-weather lifeboat suffered a knockdown. Macleod, 42, also neglects to mention that he was awarded the RNLI's bronze medal.

We are standing aboard his fishing boat, *Spray*, under a flapping blue tarpaulin that has sheltered her deck for the last three months, while he and his mate install a new engine, gearbox and fuel tank. It's a huge job, but there isn't a boatyard on the island. "You've got to do everything yourself here," Macleod smiles ruefully.

Not far from the main fishing harbour of North Bay – which provides much better

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shelter than Castlebay – lies one of Barra's most significant historic sites, the religious settlement at Cille Bharra. One of the buildings has been re-roofed to house some ornate medieval tombstones, along with a replica of a unique eighth-century stone, which has a Celtic cross incised on one side, and Norse runes on the other. The original is in the National Museum of Scotland. Islanders complain that they borrowed it to photograph, and never gave it back. There are other, simpler Celtic headstones in the graveyard which are almost as ancient.

Here too is the grave of author Compton Mackenzie, who lived nearby. He is today best remembered for his wartime tale of islanders outwitting the authorities over a cargo of salvaged whisky. It is based on real events, and although the actual wreck took place on Eriskay, the next island north, Ealing Studios set their film version on Barra. It is, perhaps appropriately, the *Whisky Galore* island.

Mackenzie's house overlooks the spectacular beach of Traigh Mhor, much frequented by cockle-fishers, but more famous for its dual role as the island's runway. Arriving in Barra by sea might be dramatic, but nothing beats coming in by air. This is the only airport in the world where scheduled flights are timetabled according to the tide. Captain Annag Bagley, 28, can justly claim to know the place better than any of her fellow pilots. I catch up with her in the terminal building as she grabs a lunchtime sandwich between flights, and she tells me she grew up "just over there" in Eolaigearraidh, watching the doughty, 20-seat De Havilland Twin Otter ►

Right: Castlebay from the slopes of Heabhal. This page: Capt Annag Bagley, chef Slawomir Pilarski, Barra Airport and (bottom) Cille Bharra. Opposite page: Kisimul Castle, ancestral home of the MacNeils.



take off and land, and she never wanted to do anything else. “It was pretty exciting,” she says, recalling the first time, nearly six years ago, that she piloted the aircraft in over the family home to touch down on the firm sand.

In spite of the wild weather that prevails, especially in winter, the triangular service between Glasgow, Benbecula and Barra has an impressive record of reliability – the wind has to blow at a sustained 50 knots before flights are cancelled. A bigger factor, Bagley explains, is low cloud, due to the high ground around Barra’s airport – there is no autopilot in the aircraft, and certainly no instrument landing system on the ground. “It’s real flying,” she says with evident satisfaction, and climbs back up to the sandy cockpit.

The centre of island life is Castlebay, a welcoming and hospitable town in the south, arranged loosely around the broad sound where the ferry comes in. The

lifeboat is based here, and a stout castle guards the seaward approaches. As head chef of the Castlebay Hotel, Slawomir Pilarski is one of Barra’s most accomplished yet least visible inhabitants. Originally from Poland, he trained in the US and has worked as head chef of the Ritz Carlton and the Wyndham in Palm Springs, and as the personal chef to both Frank Sinatra and Lord Hanson. He still has family in California and Poland, but after four years seems settled, for the time being, in the Hebrides.

“It was quite difficult to adjust to working here,” he admits. “Basics like bread and vegetables all come in on the boat – and in winter that can take three or four days. But we have good local lamb and fish.” Local langoustine, scallops and lobster are also regulars on the menu, although his customers’ conservative palates lean less towards the spicy Oriental dishes he used to love to prepare for Sinatra’s high-rolling



BEYOND VATERSAY LIE THE LAST ISLANDS OF THE HEBRIDES - ALL, LIKE BARRA, BEARING TRACES OF LIFE FROM MEDIEVAL, NORSE AND PREHISTORIC TIMES



buddies. “After living the high life, people don’t understand why I would want to live here,” he says smiling. “But I’m 50 now. I’m over all that. I like the wildness here.”

For all its charms, Castlebay can be thoroughly explored in about ten minutes. But bicycles can be hired. One of the best reasons for doing so is to visit the neighbouring island of Vatersay, linked to Barra by a stone causeway, where there are two remarkable white beaches – one facing east and the other west. On the way you pass the site of an old Norse fort high above the road, and further on, the melancholy remains of a crashed RAF flying boat, left over from World War 2. It was lost, one dark night, and flew into the hill. Between the beaches, the grass-covered sand dunes hide a secret – the mass grave of 350 people who died in 1853 in the wreck of the *Annie Jane*, an emigrant ship en route from Liverpool to Quebec. A small stone memorial marks the spot.



VIKING HERITAGE

Nearly all the smaller islands around Barra end in ‘ey’ – Old Norse for ‘island’ – and their Gaelic names are often derived from the older language. Bearnaraidh, for example, Gaelic for Berneray, comes from Bjarnarey, meaning ‘Bjorn’s isle’. Pabbay is Old Norse for ‘hermit’s isle’.

The headland of Leinis is thought to come from Old Norse loegines, or ‘a peninsula where there is an anchoring place’ – and indeed, just below it lies Breivig Bay, which offers excellent shelter. Breivig itself derives from *breidhvik*, or ‘broad bay’. There is a Breivik in Norway.

Some features now bear names in both Old Norse and the later Gaelic: the island name of Lingeigh Fhada, for example, simply means ‘long’ in both languages, while neighbouring Garbh Lingeigh is ‘rough’ in Gaelic and ‘long’ in Old Norse.

Not all the Old Norse names are to do with the sea: the Vikings might have been great seamen, but once they arrived they were farmers, too: Tangasdal, on the east coast, translates as ‘the milking place near the headland’. And they weren’t afraid to get in touch with their inner child. In Old Norse, Allathasdal was Alfa-stödhull – ‘the fairies’ milking place’.

MAP

Beyond Vatersay lie the last islands of the Hebrides: Sandray, Pabbay, Mingulay and Berneray – all, like Barra, bearing traces of life from medieval, Norse and even prehistoric times, but today left to the seals and seabirds.

This dramatic and deserted island chain leading south is easily visible in settled weather from Barra’s highest point, Heabhal, which looms 384m (1,260ft) above Castlebay and provides a commanding view over the island and its neighbours. If you’re very lucky with your weather you will not only spy Barra’s near companions to the north and south, but also the mountains of Skye spread out in the far north-east, the outposts of Rum, Muck and Eigg due east, and Coll and Tiree about 30 degrees south of them – islands which are themselves usually regarded as isolated, lonely and virtually mythical by those who forget that Barra and its windswept ilk lie some 40 miles further out into the North Atlantic.



Castlebay street scene, with the lifeboat house and the island of Vatersay beyond. Below: wartime wreckage of an RAF Catalina flying boat.



Between them – and for this your weather needs to be not only settled, but crystal clear (the one often goes with the other in these high, clean latitudes) – you might be lucky enough to discern a faint line of rugged peaks low down on the eastern horizon, which are the fringes of the Scottish Highlands, more than 70 miles away.

From the heights of Heabhal you can also look down the valley towards the west, where the energetic Peter Brown wants to build the Barra Distillery. Plans are well advanced. A plot has been purchased, on the slope overlooking the settlement of Borgh. An Edinburgh architect has produced

BROWN PLANS TO USE BARLEY GROWN BY LOCAL CROFTERS, AND HAVE IT MALTED ON THE ISLAND. THE WHISKY WILL BE A PURE EXPRESSION OF THE SPIRIT OF BARRA

One day, all this will be whisky. Edinburgh-born Barra resident Peter Brown at Loch Uisge, the water source for his proposed Barra Distillery.

plans and profiles for an attractive, low-profile set of buildings. A water supply has been secured – the diminutive but appropriately-named Loch Uisge, on the hill above the site – which will also provide electric power, backed up by a pair of small wind turbines.

“I like a dram as much as the next man,” says Brown, “but it’s the business side that I

find really exciting.” He plans to use barley grown by local crofters, and have it malted on the island. Made with water from the slopes of Heabhal and matured in the moist North Atlantic air, the finished product promises to be a pure expression of the spirit of Barra. Much of the first two years’ production has already been sold to patient whisky enthusiasts from all over the world, who have each paid good money for individual casks that won’t be ready for at least ten years. It’s like betting on the 2020 Derby – the horse isn’t born yet, but you’ve got a hunch it’s going to win.

And you wouldn’t be the only one. Harry Cockburn has no doubts. A consultant with 45 years’ experience at the sharp end of the business, he has been Brown’s advisor on the Barra project since the beginning. “It will be like the other island whiskies, Islay and Skye, and a few of the mainland ones as well,” he says. “The water will be from much the same strata, and most other parameters are the same. After all, the spirit is only 25 per cent of the whisky – the rest is in the warehousing and the cask.”

There is a lot of work to do. Before the first dram can be poured, there is a business plan to be pored over by potential investors. Brown needs to raise £1.8 million (about €2m) but he seems quietly confident. Devotees of the *uisge beatha*, meanwhile, have settled down to a long wait for their first sip of the Barra single malt. And in passing, Brown remarks that every journalist he has spoken to so far about the project – every single one – has led with the *Whisky Galore* angle. I promise him that I won’t.

www.uisgebeathananeilean.co.uk

