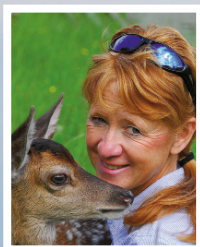


POLLY'S PLACES

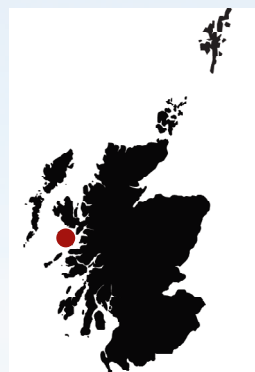
In Celebration Of Eigg



An Inner Hebrides island of astonishing rock formations, tranquil wildlife... and murderous history

by POLLY PULLAR





THE resonating call of the cuckoo echoes around Galmisdale Bay as MV *Sheerwater* pulls into Eigg's bustling pier; the Sgurr dominating this island landscape (pictured overleaf) is mercurial.

I'm accustomed to viewing this massive pitchstone ridge, the largest of its kind in Europe, from the northernmost shores of Ardnamurchan where it frequently takes on the appearance of a breaching whale, its top floating in a sea of feathered clouds.

For generations Eigg's geology has intrigued visitors. Pioneering geologist Hugh Miller relished his island forays, and during the 1840s discovered plesiosaur remains, and other important fossils. The names of climbing routes on the Sgurr reflect their severity: Collie's Cleft, Eagle Chimney, the Flue, and Botterill's Crack. The summit is just 393m (1289ft) and can be easily reached.

Early summer; we walk to the top via a well-trodden path through lush woods verdant with ferns and pungent with the aroma of wild garlic.

Chiff-chaff and willow warbler add to an avian symphony, primroses and marsh marigolds smile as we pass. On the heather-clad hill, skylarks are in full »



voice, ascending high in a silvery sky mirroring the colours of the Atlantic, and the reverberation of distant drumming snipe mingles with hairspray drizzle.

The moor sucks beneath our boots as we face the bastion before us, skirting beneath its austere prow, guided by somersaulting ravens. A steep, narrow path leads onto the vertiginous summit between boulder and wetly glistening slab, from where a Hebridean panorama unfolds.

Flat white light creates an eerie view of the jagged Rum Cuillin – Askival, Hallival and Sgur nan Gilleann, and to the west the little green Isle of Muck shimmers.

The sun appears as we bike to Cleadale via a twist of wind-smitten hazels, past thickets of brambles where mousy wrens busy themselves. The island is etched in gold leaf. Yellow flag iris, with pointed leaves, yacht sails in a regatta, wavers in a sea of bog cotton, and the midges come out to play.

By nightfall Laig Bay's white sand becomes an exotic cocktail: pineapple, mango, tangerine, lemon and blood orange; the sun gradually slips to bed between silhouettes of Rum's feisty ridges. Amid the big silence a curlew calls.

A huge sprawling sycamore outside our bedroom window has survived the vagaries of the winds; at dawn, fluting blackbird song accompanied by a cacophony of sparrows and starlings proclaims a glorious morning.

The walk around the coast with its backdrop of buttresses and pillars seems straight from a Spaghetti Western. Instead of Clint Eastwood appearing over the »

*“We face the bastion
before us, skirt beneath
its austere prow”*





Moss and the Sgurr of Eigg



Life's a beach



Sea pinks



Dandelions on shore



Sgurr of Eigg

crest of the amphitheatre, an eagle drifts without a wing beat, and ewes and lambs call from crofts. A collie barks; snipe rise flirtily into the blue, and swallows join the aerial ballet.

Around the shore from Laig Bay to the Singing Sands, where quartz sands squeak beneath the boot, we find a wealth of intoxicating rock formations fringed with vibrant emerald and jade weed. Fronds of soft cloud hiding Rum's peaks evaporate like smoke signals. The seascape is turquoise, navy and aquamarine. Dandelions set their seed adrift on a gentle sea breeze. The midges have retired.

Time jettisoned, we wander, listening, stopping, spying; ringed plover, eider duck, oystercatcher, sea pink cushions, and sea-honed cauldrons of gin-clear water teeming with life. Scuttling crabs and blood-red anemones, coarse crushed shells and gull pellets. Deep rock clefts, strange shapes emerge; creatures of the imagination – a portly hippopotamus, the noble head of a Red Indian. Sand is warm to the touch as it slips slowly through my fingers, like an "Eigg timer"!

From the shore we clamber to the dramatic crest of Beinn Bhuidhe. The ravens are laughing. By mid-afternoon banks of inky cloud consume Rum's dominance. The island submissively vanishes for the night.

Our biking to Galmisdale next day is wet; the views have gone. We walk out to Eigg's two spectacular caves.

The Massacre Cave has a tiny narrow entrance slit through which we squeeze, revealing a huge chamber where in 1577 – allegedly following a battle over women – the resident MacDonalds hid from their enemies, the MacLeods, but were discovered. A fire lit at the entrance

Rock formation
at Singing Sands



filled the cave with asphyxiating smoke. All were killed. It was Walter Scott who eventually campaigned for their tragic remains to be laid to rest. Ferns drip sadly onto rock, teardrops falling for the fallen. It's overwhelming.

The Cathedral Cave is a place of celebration once used for Roman Catholic services after the 1745 Rebellion. We approach between a rock and a hard place, slithering our way across greasy weed to a vaulted sanctum carved by time and tide. A ray of light highlights a spider tying-up its victim with gossamer thread. We listen to an ocean of anthems – nature's hymns in praise of the beautiful island of Eigg. ❶

“A fire at the narrow entrance filled the cave with asphyxiating smoke. All were killed”

Sunset over Rum

