POLLY'S PLACES

Islay – Land Of Geese And Ghosts

You will be awed and moved by Polly Pullar's visit to the evocative and beautiful island

The glorious sandy beach of Sanaig

ISLAY, often referred to as the Queen of the Hebrides, has reason to boast of its loveliness. It is indeed an island of superlatives.

Like all the Hebrides, though, it is notoriously fickle in mood: rain-drenched, mist-swathed, gale-lashed, sleet-beaten, or sun-kissed, it has a gentle side, a vibrant history, a thriving farming community, and a fabulously diverse fauna and flora.

Its beaches stretch eternally and its scenery, dominated in the north by the nearby Paps of Jura, is breathtaking. The island has long attracted visitors in vast flocks due to the richness of its sustenance.

There are more distilleries here per square mile than anywhere else in the country, though it is the sheltered sea lochs – Indaal and Gruinart – and their intertidal flats, plus the island's lush pastures and stubble fields, that draw the vast flocks of wintering geese. A few Brent geese are also sometimes seen in among the shelduck guddling in the nutrient-laden sands overlooking Bowmore and Bruichladdich.

Our drive to Sanaig from Port Askaig is slow – so much to see. A sea eagle quarters hill ground close to the road, and a male hen harrier, grey and white against the low sun, flies moth-like over tweed-coloured scrub. Lapwings dive and wheel above verdant brackish pools, their emerald crests blown by the breeze.

And then there are thousands and thousands of geese. The morning is calm, an early mist drifting into oblivion, the sea turning a rich shade of navy. The sky is a thoroughfare for more geese, which move back and forth in sweeping skeins, filling the air with their yapping cacophony.

The island is an ornithological reverie – it is abundant with songsters, ducks and waders, corncrake in summer, as well as birds of prey year-round, including merlin, peregrine, sparrowhawk, kestrel and golden and sea eagle. The rare chough, that most dapper member of the crow family with its brilliant »

crimson legs and bill, and cheery disposition, clings on too thanks to a carefully managed grazing system.

Brown hares lollop through fields bordered by wind-sculpted hawthorn, and there are roe and red deer as well as large populations of grey and common seals. Islay has neither moles nor foxes, badgers, red squirrels nor pine martens, yet the abundance of other life is astonishing.

My partner Iomhair and I walk over the sandy beach at Sanaig and on to the moorland crossing tiny burns to follow the cliff top heading west. Highland cattle stand on the headland, their hair wind-crazed. Choughs follow us, emitting distinctive laughing calls, teasing our three collies.

We are heading to Traigh Bhan – a remote stone and pebble-smattered beach close to a treacherous sea-girt chasm in the cliffs, Ghodha Ghillie Moire. I have been before. That initial visit etched a mark on my heart.

It was the late Joe Wiggins who first told me its story, of the tragic event that took place here in April, 1847. Islay has a long history of shipwrecks – this one was the worst. When Joe first heard of it and visited the site, he was deeply moved. He began a laborious process contacting many of the relatives in a mission to have a proper memorial built to the 241 Irish emigrants who lost their lives on that terrifying night.

The *Exmouth* of Newcastle, a two-masted brig initially used for whaling, and carrying timber to Canada, had sailed forth from Derry in North Ireland, over-laden with optimistic Irish families. Desperate to flee the horrors of the Great Famine, this was their chance for a new start.

The weather was soft – calm before the storm, as they began their fateful voyage crammed in conditions totally unfit for passengers. As the ship lost sight of land a wicked storm was brewing, with hurricane force winds. Soon the inexperienced crew were battling a destructive tempest.

The captain saw a light he took to be Tory Island, off the Northern Irish coast. He made for what he believed to be a safe landing. He was instead heading to Orsay, opposite Port Wemyss in Islay.

The ship hit a vast rock at Ghodha Ghillie Moire and was smashed to splinters, her sails and rigging ripped to shreds. Three crew members clung to fragments, crossed onto treacherous rocks and miraculously reached land. Staggering across deep bogs in the dark and lashing rain, many hours later and near death, they found help too late.

Yet another spectacular fly-past

Goose barnacles

Days after as the sea began to return broken bodies, some of them infants, a dedicated group of Islay people laid them to rest under the soft green turf of Traigh Bhan.

For almost 150 years the graves remained unmarked. However in 2000, thanks to the generosity of many Islay people and relatives of the dead, Joe Wiggins' mission was accomplished and a beautiful memorial was unveiled at Sanaigmore. Above that remote gale-blown shore is a simple stone memorial with a carved dove. It is one of the most eerily beautiful and moving places I have ever visited.

Our walk is glorious, skylarks serenading high above us. Gulls cry plaintively when we reach Ghodha Ghillie Moire's rock bastions and peer into the cauldron below, where the sea boils and fumes at its base. We stand holding the dogs, knowing that this is a place of no return.

At this northern end of the island, the landscape is ruggedly beautiful. Flowers dot the headlands, primroses in profusion before bracken takes hold. Buzzards nest on rocky outcrops, and chough and rock dove may choose nest sites in the sea caves below. Wild goats cling to the cliff tops as they seek succulent morsels. Some, like the sheep, tumble to their deaths on the rocks below – food »

FASCINATING FACTS

Islay is the fifth-largest Scottish island and the seventh-largest surrounding the UK, with a total of almost 620 square kilometers (239 sq miles).

Westering Home is a Scottish song about Islay written by Hugh Roberton in the 1920s. It tells of a traveller's longing to return to the island.

The Rev, Dr. Donald Caskie, the Second World War's "Tartan Pimpernell" who helped allied escapees, was born on Islay in 1902.

Top: Loch Gruinart's sweeping sands – can you spot the collie? Above and left – the lashing waves and whipped spume

for ravens, buzzards, hooded crows and eagles.

At Traigh Bhan, the tide is out; sunlight and rainbows skim opaque waves. The wind has whipped the sea into white peaks – a stiff meringue mixture caught between a deep cleft in the cliffs. Peaks of spume fly up in soft drifts, rolling towards us, floating away into the blue like massive snowflakes. The collies are intrigued while we stand and watch intoxicated by the pull and suck of the tide, and the continuous flypast of air-bound salty suds.

Goats watch from a distant rock, silhouettes against the sun, their aroma mingling with the salt sea tang. An eagle appears from the west, and passes without a wing beat. It glides slowly above the short turf covering the graves, and still a skylark sings. We stand silent inhaling the scene – it is not only the wind that makes me wipe away a tear.

A large log lies on the sand festooned with bizarre goose barnacles – a filter-feeding crustacean found in the deep Atlantic. Sailors believed that it contained the young of the barnacle goose, and even swore to having seen the birds emerging from the crustaceans floating on flotsam far out to sea. They also believed that gulls – in particular the kittiwake – were the souls of sailors lost at sea.

A few gulls drift over the cliffs, hanging in the wind with the spume over this green and pleasant land that provides a peaceful resting place for the 108 souls cast up from the brutal depths. Many bodies from that tragic voyage were never recovered. Now thanks to Joe Wiggins' dedication, their memory is immortal and they rest with the joyous arias of skylarks, the cries of raven, curlew and chough, and the ceaseless sough of the wind off the Atlantic.

Pictures: POLLY PULLAR