

HEBRIDEAN HIDEAWAY



Five-star luxury is usually conspicuous, not camouflaged by the side of a Harris hill, but Fiona Armstrong takes a trip to one of Scotland's remotest spots to find indulgence in its most environmentally friendly form

There's something you need to know about driving in the Outer Hebrides: the sheep are suicidal, head butting each other in the middle of the road regardless of how speedily your hire car has taken the previous corner. Mindful of their prestige as Harris Tweed in its rawest form, they are kings of the road – and you are at their mercy.

We're en route to Blue Reef Cottages in Scarista, following the road from the only town in the Hebrides, Stornoway in Lewis, to the south west of Harris. In case you're not up on your Hebrides, Lewis and Harris comprise one island separated by deep incisions of lochs and miles of mountainous terrain. It's a stunning drive, one tempered only by the equally stunning flight into Stornoway from Edinburgh – and the luxury of the cottages themselves.

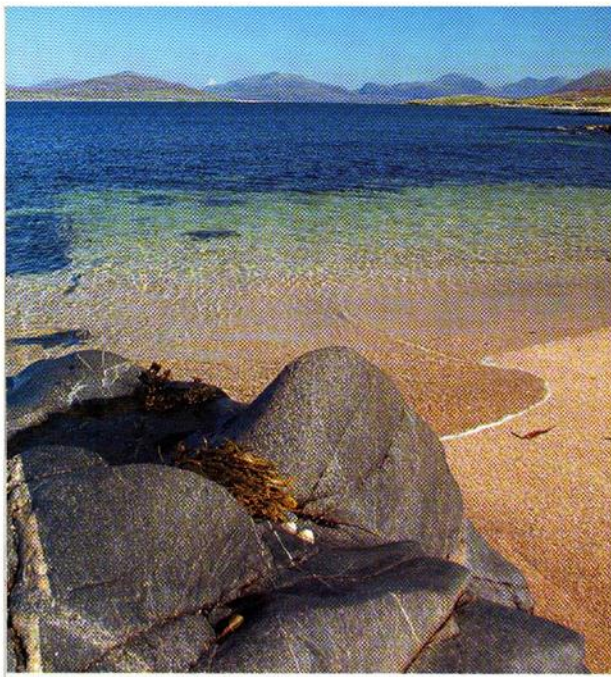
When Rhoda and Neil Campbell built a house on this dramatic coastline a couple of years ago, they also decided to create a new business for the top end of the tourist market. They approached Lewis-based architect Stuart

Bagshaw with a view to building holiday accommodation which could make the most of the breath-taking beach views. Stuart's plans weren't exactly what the couple had in mind...

Stuart had decided to draw on the island's past, looking back to Harris's Neolithic history when housing was situated underground. His resultant designs – complete with turf roofs and exteriors clad with stones reclaimed from island ruins – meant the holiday cottages would 'slot' into the hillside. Rhoda and Neil loved the idea.

I'm immediately engrossed by the view to the wintry Scarista Beach where there's an enchanting scene of snow against white sand on this cold, bright day. Harris beaches are among the finest in the world and the water gives Blue Reef Cottages their name. A notebook records guests' sightings of island wildlife from golden eagles to dolphins – you might even spot the northern lights.

You need to plan ahead if you're staying in the Outer Hebrides. The only sign of life on a Sunday silently ►



“Settling into one of the vast red sofas is like being in a big, cosy bed – you won’t want to move”

radiates from the churches as a luminescent glow. Do not expect to pop out for the papers, petrol or even food, especially off season when many hotels are shut. Only relatively recently have planes landed here on Sundays and you probably recall the furore that caused.

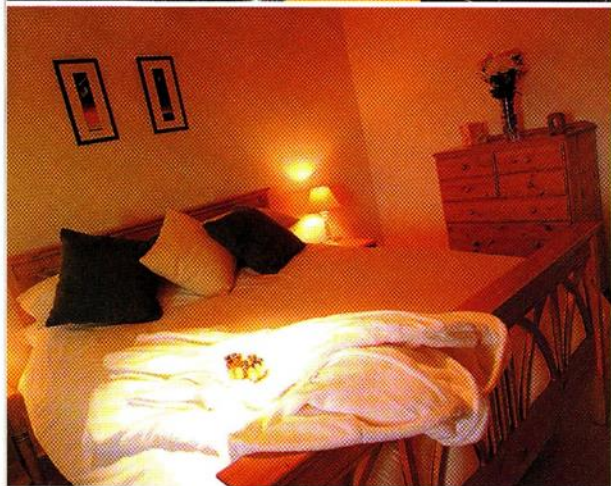
We have planned ahead and contacted Atlantic Edge, a gourmet microwave meal service operated by local Lena Maclellan. Neat tubs filled with parsnip, lemon and ginger soup, mushroom crepes, Harris venison and local salmon arrive at our door requiring only heat – they prove as tasty as they sound. Rhoda and Neil have also provided a complimentary bottle of champagne to get us started, along with fresh Atlantic smoked salmon from the award-winning Salar Smokehouse on South Uist and a selection of handmade chocolates from Skye. It seems that lots of really good things come from this part of the world.

Certainly good taste has furnished these one-bedroom cottages each equipped with a large office, ideal for young professional couples (lots of guests are honeymooners) who may need to plug into a computer. Settling into one of two vast red sofas nestling within the window curve is like being in a big, cosy bed and you won’t want to move, especially with the view, piles of magazines and a bottle of wine to complete the blissful scene. These designs by Sofa Workshop take centre stage in the open plan living/kitchen area where a log-burning stove is recessed to the natural stone wall. Under-floor heating keeps the slate tiles toasty, and it’s all beautifully back-dropped by richly textured Harris Tweed.

I fall for this native product in a big way especially when I discover a pile of gorgeous bags and cushions fashioned from its tactile woven surface in the office – for sale. Evocative art (landscapes of the islands) can also be bought from cottage walls, while galleries dotted around the island challenge the resistance of creative types and their wallets.

A visit to the Luskentyre Tweed Company – which supplied Nike with Harris Tweed for a new range of trainers last year – comes highly recommended. Apparently it would have taken Donald John Mackay, who runs the company, more than two years to meet Nike’s order for nearly 10,000 metres of tweed on his Hattersley handloom and so assistance was called in from another Harris company, Mackenzie Holdings.

Donald John and wife Maureen run demonstrations of the weaving process and what better way to recall your trip than to leave with cloth bearing the unique Harris Tweed label. To do so it has to be hand woven by islanders of Lewis, Harris, Uist or Barra in their own homes, using pure virgin wool dyed and spun here. I opt for a coffee pot cover from the cottage stash (also designed and produced by Donald John) although a lovely little red bag is very tempting. Rhoda has chosen deep mulberry tweed to swathe our view, while sky blue dresses ▶



ABOVE (from top) The beaches on Harris are world class; the cottage’s kitchen is well stocked with every gadget you’ll need; the bedrooms are spacious and comfortable



ABOVE LEFT Architect Stuart Bagshaw's innovative historical design
ABOVE RIGHT Rhoda and Neil Campbell show off their good taste



IN THE AREA

EATING OUT There's an award-winning venue, **Scarista House Hotel** (01859 550238, www.scaristahouse.com), a mere 10-minute walk from the cottages, and if the visitors' book is anything to go by, it's a must for a meal. The former manse makes full use of the island's seafood, lamb, beef and game, while organic, local or home-grown vegetables and herbs feature on the menu wherever possible. The restaurant also bakes its own bread and makes its own jam, marmalade, ice cream and yoghurt, and the wine selection is highly recommended.

The four-star **Ardrhasaig Hotel** (01859 502 066, www.ardrhasaig.co.uk) is also highly regarded for its food although it involves a wee drive to the north coast. Meanwhile, local seafood is a speciality at **The Rodel Hotel** (01859 520 210, www.rodelhotel.co.uk).

EATING IN Get a gourmet meal delivered to your door by **Atlantic Edge** with main courses priced at £12. Contact Lena MacLennan (01859 550311 or 07786 685156) for a menu.

TAKE IN THE FRESH AIR Set on the Machair dunes, the links at the **Scarista Golf Club** (www.harrisgolf.com) have been naturally formed by the wind, making this one of the most spectacular golfing locations in Europe. Players still compete for the 'Faldo Fiver', a framed note deposited into the honesty box by Nick himself. A course to inspire even non-golfers, this is a paradise on a fine day and exhilarating otherwise.

SHOP FOR TWEED Watch a weaving demonstration and take home a souvenir from **Luskentyre Harris Tweed** (01859 550261, www.hebrides.com/busi/luskentyre).

SHOP FOR ART You'll find a selection of galleries signposted up various tracks and roads. These include the **Finsbay Gallery** to the east of the island (01859 530 244) and the **Ardbuidhe Cottage Gallery** in Drinishader (01859 511 218, www.williefulton.com), home to the evocative art of highly regarded Glasgow-born painter Willie Fulton and his wife Moira.

the windows in the bedroom and dining area, a timber-floored space which opens to the living/kitchen room.

The timber kitchen has every gadget and sophisticated appliance you'll need, Rhoda and Neil attentive to guests' every convenience. The bathroom proves even more luxurious thanks to the addition of a Jacuzzi. All too often these have water jets less enthusiastic than a gym-bound slug. This one is different, and the effect is really quite therapeutic. Don't get carried away with the bath foam though, tempting as the Molton Brown goodies may be. And then there's the sauna, equipped with aromatherapy oils, soothing mind and body before you wrap up in a thick bathrobe and slippers.

Of course, you'll appreciate all this so much more after some fresh air. The cottage provides temporary membership to the nine-hole golf course across the road while wildlife walks, boat trips, horse riding, tennis, beach yoga and llama trekking (yes, really) are also on offer. And then, of course, there are the majestic standing stones and other archaeological sites which many people come specifically to see. Winter's fading daylight curtails our activities a little, but we do unbatten the hatches for a jaunt along the east coast where the rocky terrain, indented by bays and lochs, resembles the surface of the moon.

Prising car doors open against the wind, we get out at Rodel where the 15th century church of St Columbus, preserved by Historic Scotland, is a superbly atmospheric stop-off. And you just have to go to the beach, whatever the weather is up to. Shades of sand and sea are resolutely vibrant beneath the dark, foreboding sky, a beauty unhindered by the wet trousers clinging to our legs. It's a comfort scurrying back indoors to relish the last few hours of splendid isolation.

The following day, it's odd to be back in Glasgow just two hours after leaving Stornoway. As two worlds go, these are pretty far apart and if you get the chance to stay remote longer, then do so. Just don't leave without a healthy hoard of Harris Tweed – I really must go back for more. ■

Blue Reef Cottages' seasonal rates are from £680 to £1150 per week. Call 01859 550 370 or visit www.stay-hebrides.com.

Loganair operates 12 return flights per week from Edinburgh and Glasgow to Stornoway, and daily from Inverness. Call 08708 50950 or go to www.loganair.co.uk and www.ba.com. Two days' car hire from Lewis Car Rentals starts at £58. Call 01851 703760 for details.

For ferry times and prices contact Caledonian MacBrayne on 08705 650000 or go to www.calmac.co.uk

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