

CALL OF THE WILD

Flushed with the success of his TV series *Great Escape*, Monty Halls is turning his attention to another remote and glorious corner of the Scottish Hebrides, the Uists. **Lucy Gillmore** joins him for a weekend of foraging, twitching and surfing. Photography by **Oliver Pilcher**

Far horizons
Cattle enjoy the quiet at Griminish, Benbecula, a tiny island in the Uists



Surf's up Monty Halls' dog Reubs; the highest density of otters in Britain is found in the Uists (top); Monty makes waves near Sollas, North Uist (opposite)

So this is Stinky Bay. The clumps of seaweed on the shore can pack quite a punch, apparently. Its real (and far more romantic) name is Poll Na Crann, Gaelic for the ships' masts washed up after savage storms pummelled the coast. 'In 1830, some boys stoned a mermaid to death here. Her body was found on the sand the next day. And down there' – my Gaelic-speaking guide, James MacLetchie, points to a huge rock – 'is where a group of 14th-century crofters tied the nuns of Benbecula at low tide. The cows had stopped milking so they accused them of witchcraft. The seaweed still looks like their curled fingers gripping the rocks as they drowned.'

'The locals are a friendly lot then?' I yell, struggling to close the car door into a wind that has the exfoliating potential of a spa facial.

I'm on the tiny island of Benbecula in the Uists, a string of rocky outcrops in the North Atlantic, separated from the mainland by the 'Minch' strait. I'm closer, in fact, to Reykjavik than London – and it feels like it. Down on the beach, through the sheeting spray, we can just make out Monty Halls, marine biologist and TV presenter, battling against a force seven wind and throwing sticks of salty kelp for his big black mutt, Reubs. Mad dogs and Englishmen – without the midday sun.

Monty is spending six months here, in the Outer Hebrides, filming his second BBC *Great Escape* programme. The first, based in Applecross on the west coast of Scotland, focused on his attempt to live like a crofter. Around three and a half million viewers tuned in and tourism in Applecross increased by 1,000 per cent. This year, the Uists are hoping for their share of the action, when Monty turns his back on city life once again, this time to become a countryside ranger.

I'm here to spend a few days with Monty and James, the inspiration for the series. James was the ranger here for five years until funding ran out. Since then he has worked as a freelance tourism consultant around the world, developing sustainable tourism programmes in the Falklands and Iceland. He has been showing Monty the ropes, and one of Monty's aims while he's here is to raise enough money for the post of ranger to be reinstated permanently.

'Any other country on earth would make sure they had a full-time ranger here if the islands belonged to them,' says Monty. 'This is our New Zealand. Every nation needs a wilderness and this archipelago is ours. Visitors need to be educated about the wildlife when they come here, the ranger is their guide and he's also the guardian of the environment.'

While on the islands, Monty's job includes everything from creating walking routes to developing education programmes and organising beach clean-ups. Starting with Stinky Bay, which has thrown up some surprises already. 'We've had beached Sowerby's whales, which is incredibly rare,' explains Monty. 'They usually hunt deep in the oceans for squid, so the only chance you have of studying them is when they're beached.'

Atlantic breakers batter the coastline and the horizon is lost in churning steel-grey waves. But when the sun breaks through, there's nowhere quite like it: the powder-white beaches, backed by grassy dunes and lapped by turquoise waters, could be straight out of a Caribbean brochure. >



“ THIS IS OUR NEW ZEALAND – EVERY NATION NEEDS A WILDERNESS AND THIS ARCHIPELAGO IS OURS ”

Catch of the day

Fish for your supper near Claddach Vallay, North Uist; wild Shetland ponies, South Uist



Around 200,000 tourists visit the Uists each year. The islands might be twice as far from the British mainland as France, but they are just a short hop from Glasgow airport. Berneray is Prince Charles's favourite, then there's North Uist, Grimsay, Benbecula, South Uist and Eriskay, all linked by causeways. Barra, dangling off the bottom, is a short ferry ride away (while flights still land on the beach) and Harris and Lewis are down north. That's Hebridean-speak: up south, down north.

Visitors come for the wildlife – and wild beaches. The islands, blanketed in peat-sprung heather and machair, a sandy carpet of 200 or so types of flowers and grasses, are the perfect place to see the golden eagle, red deer and basking shark. The RSPB reserve at Balranald on North Uist is one of the last strongholds of the corncrakes. In South Uist, the Loch Druidibeg Nature Reserve is one of the largest breeding grounds in the country for the Greylag Goose.

'The wildlife here is tremendous. We don't appreciate what we've got on our own shores,' Monty explains. 'This archipelago is the last barrier between Britain and the North Atlantic. You've got a front row seat here. This is the best place in Europe to see whales and dolphins. You've got the second largest colony of grey seals in the world on the Monach Islands and the highest density of otters in Britain is found here.'

As I head back to my hotel, road signs warn me of otters crossing, while tubby little Shetland ponies toss their manes and native Eriskay ponies, once close to extinction, wander wild.

I am staying at Langass Lodge on North Uist, owned by Niall and Amanda Leveson Gower. The hotel was once the old sporting lodge. Today, it's part traditional lodge and part Scandinavian-style clapboard wing. The restaurant serves up local venison and Hebridean lamb (the original black sheep). Fish and shellfish are also a speciality, unsurprisingly.

Foraging might be increasingly fashionable, but it's been a way of life here for centuries. The next day,

“THE POWDER-WHITE BEACHES COULD BE STRAIGHT OUT OF A CARIBBEAN BROCHURE”

Amanda kits us all out for a morning's beachcombing (all you need is a garden trug, wellies and some washing-up gloves) before firing up the Argocat, a six-wheel, amphibious vehicle. Then we're careering over the springy turf down to a tidal inlet, or obb. Scrabbling over the seaweed, we wade out into the water with Wispa, the labrador, who's a dab hand at wild mussel collecting. As we prise them from the rocks, Wispa uses his teeth to delicately snap the mussels off and gobble them sushi-style.

Next on the menu are cockles. This time we're armed with a small fork and we rake the wet sand to unearth them. The telltale sign is a strand of >

green weed sticking up through the sand. The weed gets caught in the cockle's shell and you can scoop them out with your finger. As well as cockling, other crofting traditions that are still part of everyday life here include seaweed gathering (kelp is used as fertiliser) and peat cutting.

As Monty later explains, 'Experiencing the whole Hebridean culture as well as the wildlife is one of the highlights of being here. I've even played some gigs with James and his Gaelic band Bi Beo.' But apart from Monty strumming his guitar, the islands are quite quiet. There's no real crime. Although that's not to say there are no island squabbles. In Cairnish a couple of years ago the Church of Scotland bought the pub. It caused a local uproar. Of course, there are still a few

“THE WILDLIFE HERE IS TREMENDOUS... WE DON'T APPRECIATE WHAT WE'VE GOT ON OUR OWN SHORES”

places to enjoy a dram. We swing by the Polochar Inn, a traditional whitewashed pub dating back to 1750 at the southernmost tip of South Uist, which serves great seafood. The Lochboisdale Hotel has a roaring peat fire and an accordion-playing owner. But the Am Politician, named after the boat that sank with its cargo – 20,000 cases of whisky – and immortalised in Compton Mackenzie's novel, later turned into the Ealing comedy, *Whisky Galore*, is a bungalow. Bungalows cover parts of the islands like a rash.

'Has no one ever suggested a ban the bungalow campaign?' I ponder as we drive past another ruined croft itching to be done up. Thankfully, abandoned crofts are starting to be renovated now that grants are available. Monty is staying in a traditional blackhouse, which will become a holiday let when he leaves. 'A

blackhouse really comes into its own in the winter. You realise why they were built so low and with such thick walls – they need to withstand hurricane force winds. There's nothing nicer than sitting by a peat fire when the wind is howling outside,' Monty smiles. 'But then I've always wanted to live in a whitewashed cottage on a Scottish island.' He is living the dream. He adds, 'I'm surfing tomorrow if you want to come.'


I do, but only after a detour across the shallow lagoon of Vallay Strand. I want to see the ruined mansion of archaeologist Erskine Beveridge on a real-life deserted island. I pass anglers fly-fishing in the sea pools (the fertile machair lochs on the west coast have some of the best brown trout fishing in Scotland). A local crofter herding Highland cattle across the sand offers a perfect picture postcard moment.

Round the corner Monty is surfing on Sollas Beach. I watch as Reubs joins in exuberantly, before slithering down the dunes to join him. 'The waves here have a 600-mile run up from the North Atlantic onto the most perfect white sand beaches,' Monty shouts, before heading back into

the sea. The sun is high in the sky, bathing the shore in a silvery light. Suddenly, one man and his dog spending six months on these far-flung islands doesn't seem so mad after all. ■

WAY TO GO

British Airways flies to Inverness, Glasgow and Edinburgh. Visit ba.com. For James MacLetchie's Hebridean Adventures, contact +44 (0)7543 094 491 or hebrideanadventures.co.uk. For Visit Scotland, go to visitscotland.com/perfectday. *Monty Halls' Great Escape* is on BBC2 in the spring. To win a copy of Monty Halls' book, *The Great Escape: Aventures on the Wild West Coast* (BBC Books), visit bahighlife.com/competitions.

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NEED TO KNOW

STAY

LANGASS LODGE

From this revamped sporting lodge, with its mounted stag heads and contemporary tartan, there are views over Langass sea loch to Ben Eaval and the Minch beyond. The shore is a good place to spot otters, the surrounding hillsides red deer and golden eagles. Doubles from £90 including breakfast. +44 (0)1876 580 285, langasslodge.co.uk

TIGH DEARG HOTEL & RESTAURANT LOCHMADDY

This recently opened boutique hotel has more than a nod to Scandinavian design with its red clapboard exteriors, contemporary furnishings and a sauna. Doubles from £89 including breakfast. +44 (0)1876 500 700, tighdearghotel.co.uk

EAT

POLOCHAR INN

Right on the water's edge, this lovely old whitewashed inn is owned by local sisters Morag MacKinnon and Margaret Campbell and serves delicious seafood. Try the chowder and mussels. +44 (0)1878 700 215, polocharinn.com

ORASAY INN

LOHCARNAN

From the outside, this little place is unprepossessing. But inside it's cosy, with chunky wooden furniture and panoramic views. And the beef is from their own Highland cattle. +44 (0)1870 610 298, orasayinn.co.uk

CLADDACH KIRKIBOST CENTRE

This little community centre café is buzzing. Contemporary in design with big picture windows looking out to sea, it doubles as a shop selling local arts and crafts. +44 (0)1876 580 390

Wild and wonderful
Pobull Fhinn, a stone circle easily accessible from Langass Lodge, North Uist