

Transcript

Wild for Scotland Podcast

Episode 99: 'Island Hopping (Again)' - The islands surrounding the Isle of Mull

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[main theme tune]

Hello there and welcome to Wild for Scotland,

a podcast full of immersive travel stories from Scotland.

I'm your host and storyteller-in-chief, Kathi Kamleitner.

Wild for Scotland helps you connect with Scotland
Its people, wildlife, landscapes and histories.

In every episode, I either whisk you away on a beautiful adventure,
Or introduce you to inspiring locals and their stories.

In between, I share my top tips for your own Scotland trip,
And how to follow in my footsteps.

So, lean back and enjoy -
Let's travel to Scotland!

[main theme tune end]

A little over five years ago, I sent the following message to an audio producer, named Fran Turauskis:

'Hey Fran, I wrote a very short story last weekend and recorded it to get a better sense of word count and length. I loved reading it so much - I could hear the soundscapes in my head and it took me back to that moment I wrote about. I hope others will feel the same way.'

In the years that followed, I would write several more, not-so-short stories, record them, add soundscapes and publish them for the world to hear. Fran became my editor and sound designer, and the Wild for Scotland Podcast took its course.

Overall, we published seven seasons and nearly 100 episodes of Wild for Scotland, filled with travel stories, immersive soundscapes and fascinating conversations with people from all over Scotland.

And while the focus of the show remained the same, both Fran and I have gained a lot of skills along the way and developed as storytellers and sound designers respectively.

And that brings me to today's story.

To this day, the most listened to episode of Wild for Scotland is the very first episode I ever shared.

Season 1 was all about the Scottish Isles. We travelled to different islands and spent time exploring their nooks and crannies, histories and landscapes. Our first trip took us to the Isles of Iona, Staffa and Lunga in the Treshnish Isles. We explored colourful coasts, wandered into an ominous sea cave and met the clownish inhabitants of a tiny island off the coast of Mull.

And while I still love this story, Fran and I both feel like the episode doesn't quite reflect the quality of work we're able to produce now, five years later.

So we decided to give it another go, and re-do the very first Wild for Scotland story.

But even if you listened to it before, all those years ago, it's worth sticking around. With new story additions, more soundscapes and an overhauled tips section, this will feel like a brand-new episode to you.

So, buckle up and let's dive in. This is "Island Hopping".

[jingle]

[soundscape: boat engine]

Our story begins - as is often the case with Scottish isles - on board a boat: the small passenger ferry from the Isle of Mull to the Isle of Iona. We arrived on Mull the evening before. We, that is my brother and his wife, and me and my partner. We treated ourselves to a BBQ dinner and fell asleep knowing that the next day would be one big adventure.

Early in the morning, we left Craignure on the east coast of the island and made our way along the winding single track-road to Fionnphort as far west as you can go on Mull.

From there, we took a boat, but the crossing was over almost as quickly as it began. Only 10 minutes lie between Fionnphort and the port of Iona - the first of three islands we would visit today.

[soundscape: soft waves, some seabirds, maybe a boat disappearing from earshot]

The sky is overcast but the clouds have little effect on the sheer beauty of the landscape that lies before us. The shallow water near the ferry slip is crystal-clear. The seabed is covered with bright sand and despite the grey skies, the water looks as if someone had crushed a load of green fluorite crystals and scattered them in the water - different shades of green and blue. Are we definitely still in Scotland?

We follow the paths around the village for a while and I find pops of colour behind every corner.

The rocks near the shore are covered in yellow mats - lichen that gets exposed at low tide. Down a narrow footpath, I spot the familiar Royal Mail red of the postbox mounted onto a white stone wall. The grounds of Iona Abbey are littered with flowering bushes, blooming in bright pink, red and orange.

From here, we follow a path and a series of boardwalks out into the moorland.

Bright orange petals bloom beneath our feet as we walk from the coast facing Mull towards the west where there is nothing but the sea. Each stem carries up to 20 blossoms and yet, they seem to weightlessly sway in the breeze.

We wander for a while longer until a dreich drizzle pushes us back towards the village and into the public shelter by the pier.

Our next boat is a spacious vessel used to ship day trippers back and forth to the Isle of Staffa and its surrounding islands.

We're bound for Lunga, the largest of the Treshnish Isles. Ever since I had learnt that these islands are home to a thriving colony of Atlantic Puffins, I knew I wanted to visit. Who *wouldn't* want to meet the so-called "Clowns of the Atlantic" in person?

If only it wouldn't require such a long boat ride. While the grey weather and the rain weren't much cause for concern while we were on land in Iona, things look quite differently when you're on a boat in the middle of the ocean.

[soundscape: boat in rough weather]

Luckily, there are only a handful of passengers and plenty of seats inside our boat. At least we wouldn't have to brave the elements on deck. As we sail out, further and further away from the sheltered coast of Iona, the boat starts rocking side to side, and front to back. I hold on to the seat in front of me, tightly gripping the handrail. Always keeping the horizon in sight, I stare out the window, and somehow, using all my concentration, I manage to not get sick.

As we reach the coast of Lunga, our skipper pulls up next to a floating jetty. The crew pull out a large wooden step ladder and with a little help we step off the boat. One by one, we walk down the jetty and onto the island. After the last passenger joins us on land, the boat blows its horn and sails off. For a few precious hours, we would have the island to ourselves.

During the journey, the skipper told us where to pick up the path around the island and the best spot to find the puffins. But actually following those instructions isn't quite as easy as we thought.

[soundscape: stones moving, rain]

The drizzle has increased to actual rain now and before we can join the path, we first have to scramble across the slippery rocks along the shore. I am glad that we took up the crew's offer to put on some additional rain gear for our walk. Not only would the bright yellow rain jackets protect us better from the rain. They would also be easier to spot from the sea, letting the skipper know when to return to the shore.

Eventually, we reach the path and start following it in a single file, leaning into the wind and rain, taking shelter behind the back of the person in front. After a few minutes, we come past the ruins of an old village. Lunga was abandoned in 1857 and after a while in the hands of the Hebridean Trust, the islands are now under the ownership of the National Trust for Scotland, safeguarding the local wildlife and heritage.

Thanks to its biodiversity, significant breeding grounds for seabirds and marine habitat, Lunga is a Site of Special Scientific Interest, a Special Protection Area and a Special Area of Conservation. In lay terms, they are instrumental to the wildlife along this coast.

Visitors are asked to do their bit and take great care while they are on the island. Don't damage any of the fragile landscape, respect the unique plant life and don't disturb nesting birds.

Slowly, we make our way towards the top of the cliffs, where we were told, many of the puffins had dug their nesting burrows. Unlike other seabirds, puffins don't nest on the bare, rocky cliff faces. Instead, they have come up with a unique way to protect their offspring from the elements as well as preying seagulls. They dig burrows in the soft soil on top of tall cliffs, around 3 feet deep and up to 9 feet long. At the end of the tunnel, there is a chamber where the puffin lays a single egg per season. Once the puffling hedges, it spends up to 2 months in the burrow, waiting patiently - or sometimes not so patiently - for its parents to return with food. Mostly sand eels, slender, eel-shaped fish that swim in large shoals close to the seabed.

Having reached the top of the cliffs, we're now walking on a carpet of wildflowers, white and bright yellow spots of colour among a blanket of purple heather. The rain has eased off a little, but the clouds are still hanging low. Apart from the black holes marking the entrances to their burrows, there is no sign of the puffins. Maybe they're hiding from the rain.

[soundscape: puffins arriving, wingbeats]

But then, within a few minutes, the birds start arriving one by one. Their beaks are filled to the brim with tiny silver fish - 3, 4, 5 or even more at a time. The highest number of sand eels ever recorded in a single puffin beak was 83. Eighty-three little fish! That's one lucky puffling right there.

Surprisingly, the puffins on Lunga are not afraid of humans. In Scotland, puffins have been protected and safeguarded by law for a long time. And since they know humans won't cause them any harm, they don't mind the visitors arriving on their home turf. In fact, the opposite is the case. Tall humans are very useful in keeping predators away. Vicious seagulls are known to attack puffins to steal their catch, or worse, they might even attack an impatient puffling that has left its burrow. It is a lot safer for puffin parents, their beaks full of fish, to land and deliver food for their babies when humans are around. It's a win-win situation.

By now, we are surrounded by puffins soaring through the sky. In the air, they are magnificent to watch, as they draw circles above our heads, choosing the ideal moment to approach the cliffs. And yet their landings can be quite comical, clumsy even, as they crash-land with their orange feet in a tangle. Nevertheless - or maybe because of that - it is a joy to watch them. Chattering away with each other, greeting their pufflings, some of which are now starting to emerge from the burrows, equally happy about seeing their parents and the fish in their beaks.

[soundscape: camera clicks]

I sit down and take out my camera. Filled with excitement, I snap away, one photo after the other. There are about 10 people on the cliff, each of us equipped with cameras, phones and binoculars. Watching the show.

The puffins are not phased by the attention. They simply continue with their routine. Fly out to sea, catch some fish, come back and keep the babies fed. Their bright orange beaks and feet stand out from the deep blue of the ocean below, the green grass and the warm brown soil on the clifftop. Watching them is hypnotising.

Eventually, we have to pull ourselves away again and continue our walk across the other side of Lunga. As we reach the coast, we see our boat on its way back to the floating jetty. It must have spotted our rain jackets against the dark background of the island and realised that we are on our way back. A perfectly designed system.

Back on the boat, we flick through our pictures. Even though we all shared the same time with the puffins, we excitedly re-tell our favourite moments and encounters. Despite sharing the experience with our friends, these memories are uniquely ours.

But this isn't the end of our island-hopping adventure yet. There is one more stop to go: the Isle of Staffa.

Out at sea, we learn how quickly the weather can change. The sun has come out and we approach the cliffs of Staffa in all their glory.

Despite the sunshine, though, the wind and the swell are strong, so our skipper takes us straight to the landing slip, and from there, we make our way up the stone jetty.

Instead of climbing all the way to the top though, we follow a rocky path off to the side. It's elevated just a few metres above the sea, and hangs onto the steep cliff face. The rocks

beneath our feet are oddly shaped - they are hexagonal, or six-sided, and made from darkest basalt rock. They continue visibly below the sea, and rise again like columns a few feet away, to form rocky outcrops, battered by the sea.

It's these bizarre rocks along the coast that are the main draw to the Isle of Staffa. And then, there's the matter of Fingal's Cave.

We don't exactly know how long local people had been aware of the sea cave in the cliffs of Staffa. Presumably for quite a while.

But it wasn't until the 18th century, when English naturalist Joseph Banks visited the cave and spread its location far and wide among the British upper classes. He even gave it a new name, inspired by the hero of an epic poem collected from Gaelic traditions and put down on paper by James Macpherson.

According to legend, there once lived a giant on the Irish coast called Fionn mac Cumhaill [Finn McCool]. He was tall and strong, like no one else - apart from maybe the giant Bennandonner, who lived across the sea on the Scottish coast. The two giants were legendary warriors, and yet, they had never met one another. Keen to test out each other's strength and settle once and for all, who was the strongest, they built a rocky causeway from coast to coast.

As Bennandonner approached the Irish coast, Fingal realised that the Scottish giant was much taller than himself. Robbed of his confidence, he considered hiding away, but his cunning wife saved him with a knack for deception. She wrapped Fingal up in a white cloth and placed him in a giant cradle. When Bennandonner arrived, he saw how huge the Irish giant's baby was, and came to the conclusion that his father must be enormous. Intimidated, he turned around, walked straight back to Scotland and tore down the causeway on his heels. Only the basalt columns of Staffa and on the Antrim coast remain as a symbol of their feud today.

Ever since Fingal's Cave rose to fame, the island has attracted a huge number of visitors, who took up the arduous journey across rough seas. As such, Staffa became a symbol of British romanticism, the "wild Scottish coast", made for our enjoyment, rather than to be populated and cultivated sustainably by the local population. In a twisted kind of way, places like Staffa and their natural beauty are closely linked to the justification of the Clearances and the sale of entire islands to be turned into private retreats.

But this history does not make Staffa any less beautiful. The characteristic hexagonal basalt columns rise out of the water and form tall cliffs above our heads. The sea is forceful and we have to carefully watch our steps across the rocks.

[soundscape: waves in a cave]

Inside the cave, the water is deep green, and I can see hundreds of tiny fish below the surface. The water level rises and drops with the push and pull of the swell, but the columns reach high enough to sit on them comfortably and watch the waves. I let my feet dangle over the edge and listen to the sound of waves echoing in the back of the chamber.

After a while, we find ourselves back at the landing pier and start climbing the steep stairs that lead up the side of the cliffs.

At the top, a small network of trails leads around the island. There is a small puffin colony on the far side in the north, but our skipper had told us that they had already left for the season. They'll spend the rest of the summer and all of winter at sea before returning to shore next April and May to nest once again.

We stick to the southern part of the island. A small cairn made from slate marks the highest point of Staffa and from here, we enjoy views of the entire island, as well as over to Mull and Iona, Lunga and the other Treshnish Isles on the horizon.

Composing a picture in my head, I hand my camera to my partner, briefly explain my idea and run down the grassy slope, careful not to trip over roots or rocks. I take position and with outstretched arms, I look out towards the ocean. Giddy with excitement - and breathing heavily from running back up the hill - I return to examine the results. A tiny figure in a yellow raincoat, dwarfed by the dramatic cliffs dropping into the sea. The bright blue sky above and the deep ocean below. To this day, it is one of my favourite travel pictures of my adventures around Scotland.

A little while later, we are back on the boat. There are no seats left inside the cabin and so, we get back into our big yellow raincovers and find seats on the deck. The sun is still blazing, but the boat has to sail right into the wind now. Every time it crashes into a wave, the spray washes over the back of the boat, and hits our faces.

By the time we reach Fionnphort, we are drenched to the bone, wet hair and salty lips. But, it was worth it. We had spent the day braving the elements and made memories that will last for a lifetime, island hopping on the west coast of Scotland.

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I hope you enjoyed this day trip to Iona, Staffa and the Treshnish Isles.

I'm still so proud of this first story I wrote for Wild for Scotland, but it has also been fun going through it, making changes and adding more detail five years down the line.

Much of what I experienced is still the same today, but there have also been some big changes. For example, in 2023, the Treshnish Isles changed ownership. After many years in the care of the Hebridean Trust, these islands are now owned by the National Trust for Scotland, ensuring their long-term protection as a heritage site and breeding grounds for countless birds.

Another great change is the ban of commercial sandeel fisheries in the English waters of the North Sea and all Scottish waters. Sandeels are a building block of our marine eco-system and many species like puffins and kittiwakes depend on these fish. Sadly, overfishing of

sandeels has led to a drastic decline of seabirds nesting in the UK. Let's hope that this ban, which has been in place since 2024, will lead to a recovery in seabird numbers, so the puffin colony in Lunga can be visited for many years to come.

If you'd like to support similar efforts to secure and protect bird species in Scotland, you can join the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and learn more about their ongoing campaigns at rspb.org.uk.

And now it is time for the practical part of the show. Here are my top travel tips for a day of island hopping near Mull.

Tip Number 1: Book the right boat trip

Since we stayed on the Isle of Mull overnight, we booked a boat trip that left from Fionnphort. The Staffa and Treshnish Isles Wildlife Tour with Staffa Tours includes a landing on Lunga for just over 2 hours and about an hour on Staffa. The way the departure time works out, you could spend some time in Iona before or after boarding.

Another option is to join a boat trip with Staffa Tours from Tobermory, or to go with Turus Mara whose trips leave from Ulva Ferry on Mull's west coast.

If you're staying in Oban, you can also book a tour with Staffa Tours, but that is a long day on tour. It includes the Calmac ferry to Mull and the bus journey across the island to Fionnphort.

A few years ago, I visited Lunga again - this time from the Isle of Coll. Tiree Sea Tours offers tours to the Treshnish Isles from Tiree and Coll.

Tip Number 2: Choose the best time to visit

The best time for a wildlife trip to the Treshnish Isles is early May to mid July. The puffins arrive on the island towards the end of April to breed and leave by late July or early August. They spend the rest of the year at sea, so you won't get a chance to see them up close outside of their breeding season.

It's still worth visiting Iona and Staffa outside of this time frame, but those tours usually don't even land on the Treshnish Isles because there is not much else to see.

Tip Number 3: Avoid the crowds on Staffa

While we had Lunga to ourselves, Staffa felt much more crowded on the day we visited. The island is a very popular destination for day trips from Mull and Oban, and while the visitor numbers are managed, the narrow sea cave, particularly, can feel a little crowded. I recommend taking your time on the path to the cave to fall back and let others visit first. By the time you get there, they will have had their fill and start heading up the cliffs

Alternatively, you could also climb the cliffs first and time your walk to the cave between the arrival of new boats.

Tip Number 4: Be prepared to deal with seasickness

It's never fun being seasick, but it might be something you have to put up with when island hopping on the west coast of Scotland. The most important thing to keep in mind is to focus on the horizon and, if possible, stay outside in the fresh air. Common remedies include foods containing ginger or eating a green apple. Some people swear by wrist bands with beads that press certain pressure points on your wrist.

If all else fails, you could reach for seasickness pills, but they might make you feel drowsy, so it's best to find a brand your body can cope with.

Tip Number 5: Stay on Mull or Iona for a few nights

As I mentioned, it is possible to visit Iona, Staffa and the Treshnish Isles on a day trip from Oban. But I do recommend spending a few days on the Isle of Mull or even on Iona, to maximise the time you can spend on the islands. There is a lot more to do and see here. If you're looking for more inspiration check out my Isle of Mull travel guides which I'll link to in the full show notes of this episode on our website.

And here's an **extra tip**: if you want to find out more about the history of Staffa, check out Madeleine Bunting's book *Love of Country*. The chapter on Staffa is one of my favourites and it contains a lot more detail about private land ownership and the idealisation of so-called empty landscapes in Scotland. I'll include a link to the book in the show notes as well.

[podcast music]

And with this, I send you off to dream about your own island hopping adventure to Iona, Staffa and the Treshnish Isles off the coast of Mull.

With the re-do of this story, we're celebrating Wild for Scotland's fifth birthday - and 99 episodes of your favourite Scotland podcast.

We're gonna take a little break for now, but don't worry - we're not gonna leave you hanging at episode 99.

In fact, we'd love to hear from you. Head over to speakpipe.com/WildForScotland to leave a voice note of up to 90 seconds, and tell us what you've enjoyed about the show. You can share your favourite episode, or let us know if any of the stories have inspired you to go on your own adventure. It's completely free to leave a voice note and you'll find the link to do so in the show notes.

Thank you so much for tuning in and listening to Wild for Scotland.

Wild for Scotland is written and hosted by me, Kathi Kamleitner. Fran Turauskis is the co-producer, editor and sound designer of the show. Podcast art is by Lizzie Vaughan-Knight and all original music is composed by Bruce Wallace.

Until next time, when we travel to a different place in Scotland.