

THE YELLOW FLAGS OF IONA.

We discovered that a friend of a friend had a holiday cottage/croft in Mull. Pam and I thought it would be a nice place for a holiday so arranged with our close friends, Brenda and Doug, to book; to go for a fortnight. We lived close to Leicester at the time and to make the best of it, we decided to drive to Oban on the first day. A long, long drive! The ferry for Mull sails from Oban. We could only go with "close friends", like Doug and Brenda because we intended taking our dog Gilly with us, and Gilly was on her last legs, with breath smelling like garlic all the time. The "girls" sat in the back seat with Gilly between them....with all the windows open...all the way.

So after an overnight stop in Oban, it was little more than an hour to sail, with the seagulls keeping pace gliding with the ferry, across from Oban to Craignure in Mull; then perhaps a thirty mile drive to Bunessan on the west coast of Mull. Our croft was a good walk from Bunussen. It was sandwiched between the moorland and an ancient coral beach. Consisting of two crofts stuck together, made into one basic but acceptable holiday accommodation. One croft was the kitchen and lounge and the other was two bedrooms and the bathroom. To get from one croft to the other you had to slide sideways through the "crack" in the wall. Thinking about it, the friend of a friend who owned the croft, was a rather buxom lady so she must have had quite some trouble getting to bed at night. In front of the croft was a small garden surrounded with a low drystone wall. The wall was no obstacle for the local sheep and if you forgot to close the front door, the sheep would be found inspecting the luggage of the latest visitors.

Bunessan had a small hotel, but with no visitors. The regular Saturday CEILIDH at the hotel had been cancelled because the manager was on holiday. We found that pubs as such did not exist on the island so had to rely on the hotels to explore the single malts. On any visit to a hotel bar we would each chose a different malt then share each one; so we got a taste of everything on the shelf. What an adventure! The barman was very helpful, so we had quite an education and a lively time as well. Whisky Galore it was!

There was also a small village shop, stocked from floor to ceiling with anything and everything you might need, We soon got to understand that the sign outside which said "Steak! 1lb...1/2 lb...1/4 lb..." I do not remember the prices but translated that was; a full bottle of whisky! a half! and a quarter!. Each time we visited the village shop Pam and Brenda were accosted in conversation by this ancient local resident, who never stopped talking; and we never understood a word! He only spoke Gaelic! Five miles further down the road to the west we reached Fionnphort where you find the ferry to Iona. Iona was the home of St Columba and as you leave the ferry, walking this time, you are surrounded by yellow flag Irises. It seemed to me that all around the island, just in the marsh 50 yds from the beach, the yellow flags and the reeds found it ideal; especially on the walk to St. Columba's Abbey. Somewhere along that walk to the Abbey I heard a corncrake in the reeds for the first and only time. It was May and the weather was beautiful the whole holiday, and the trip to Iona and the yellow flags stayed with me. Each time I see these irises I think of that holiday and it must be the reason that front and back in our ponds where we live, we have a few.

Also from Fionnphort the local boatmen organise trips to Staffa to visit Finga's Cave to listen to the waves wash into the cave. On calm days, as our visit was, there is a small landing platform where you can offload and wander around the corner into the Cave with its hexagonal basaltic columns; (Hope I got that right) and with imagination you can hear Mendelssohn with his baton and some Philharmonic serenading you as the waves wash into the cave. I gather this was also an inspiration to Jules Verne and Pink Floyd.

On that side trip the boatmen also took us to the far end of Staffa and allowed us to climb up onto top where it is quite flat and a blanket of some sort of orchid. What an inspiring days trip.

The wildlife was special, with the occasional golden and white tailed eagles. Many seals! On one day we crept out on a little peninsular just a few feet above a beach and the seals were not 20ft away.

In Scotland there is a "Right to Roam". We were told that some foreigner, probably English, bought Ben More (966 meters high), and immediately closed it to walkers only to find that that was against the law. So we decided to climb it. Halfway up the fog rolled in. The ladies turned back, but Doug and I carried on. We were shortly above the cloud and had a pleasant half hour in the sunshine at the top among the cairns; with views east across mainland Scotland, to the Cairngorms!

I gather that the whole population amounts to perhaps 1,800 and most live in Tobermory, which was a beautiful colourful little town when we visited all those years ago, but we were more interested in the countryside and the mountains. If you want isolation and wildlife, you could not find a more enthralling place than Mull with its outer islands of Iona and Staffa.

Keith