

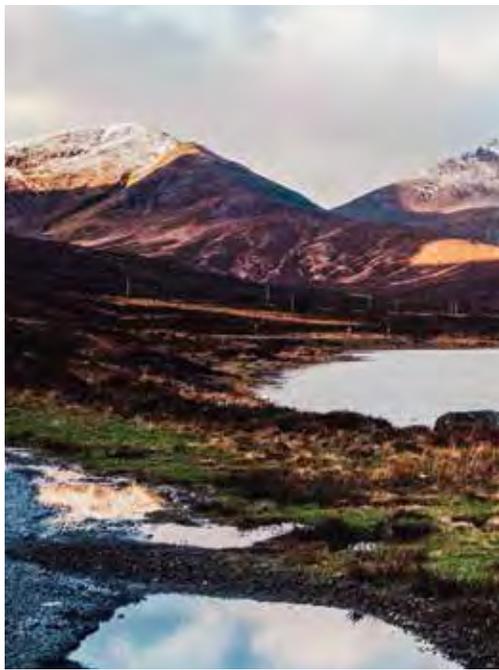
# THE STAYCATION OUTER & INNER HEBRIDES

SHROUDED IN FOLKLORE AND ONCE RULED BY NORSE GODS, SCOTLAND'S WILD, CROWNING ARCHIPELAGO IS NOW COLONISED BY CREATIVE MAVERICKS AND FORAGING CHEFS, WITH A COSMIC NEW DARK-SKIES FESTIVAL ABOUT TO LAUNCH

BY ANTONIA QUIRKE



PHOTOGRAPH BY WIL ELSOM



I'VE HEARD THE HEBRIDES described as 'not islands, but an intoxication'. Reefs and lochans. Tyrian sunsets flaring behind 3,000ft peaks. Boomingly bright double rainbows and a harvest moon that drifts down like a gold doubloon. The wild creatures here have the aspect of legend. Birds of prey everywhere, feathers taut for the swoop. Once, an old stag appeared in front of me like an apparition on the road, with a ragged coat matted green as moss, and stared for long minutes with the heavy drifting silence of an owl before springing off, hotly savage as an ember.

Cast off the north-west coast of Scotland, the Hebrides comprises more

the ochres and madders and oranges of a raging New England, the moorland like an entire sea of flames, dotted about with bothies and tweed-weavers' huts, the occasional car toiling against the wind.

### SKYE HOME FRONT

To the east, near Sleat, **The Cabin** is a two-bedroom grass-roofed hideout overlooking the island of Ornsay through a great wall of peel-back glass. At dusk one evening, I watched a family chug out in a dingy from a yacht moored in the natural harbour below to the bar at **Eilean Iarmain** hotel (superb fish and chips) on

velvet crab caught by his wife's uncle, and a beetroot and apple soup, floral and crimson as a doll's cheeks. He has also concocted a handmade gin distilled using only ingredients he could find within 200 yards – blackcurrants, meadowsweet, sea herbs – with such a clean, sweet-bitterness it might yet rival the now famous Isle of Harris gin that's flavoured with sugar kelp. [threechimneys.co.uk](http://threechimneys.co.uk). Doubles from £360. [edinbanelodge.co.uk](http://edinbanelodge.co.uk). Doubles from £299 (rooms open March)

### CLAN SEAT

**Kinloch Lodge** is a historic hotel, recently refurbished but completely drenched

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than 136 islands. This time I took in three: Skye, Lewis and Harris.

Skye has long been celebrated for its drama and scale, its scoops and jagged notches, and the dark promontories of the Cuillin mountains. It is consistently named as one of the world's most prized locations, and attracts the travellers to match. But there are still many areas where you won't find a soul. Lewis and Harris (technically the same land mass) are four hours away by ferry, and it's in these underpopulated islands that you'll find the surreal Hebridean white sand, so pearlescent it's doubled for Thailand in photographs. You feel the sand's presence before you see it, a kind of vibrating glimmer, hard to rationalise, that perpetually shifts into dunes and canyons on beaches such as Luskentyre and Europie, cut through with surging rivulets as purple as amethyst and rising with the liquid bubble noise of hidden curlews. In summer find banks of bluebells and explosions of lilac rhododendron, orchids and yellow irises sweltering across the island's peaty moorlands. In autumn this same landscape turns to

the nearby shore. By dawn, they had vanished out to sea. The Cabin's garden slopes steeply down onto seaweedy rocks, otters fishing the pools and mudded cracks. Come spring, the grass is a forward-roll of buttercups hilariously patrolled by a fat songthrush and a solitary teenage golden eagle. [thecabin-skye.co.uk](http://thecabin-skye.co.uk). Doubles from £1,500 for a week. [eileaniarmain.co.uk](http://eileaniarmain.co.uk). Doubles from £80

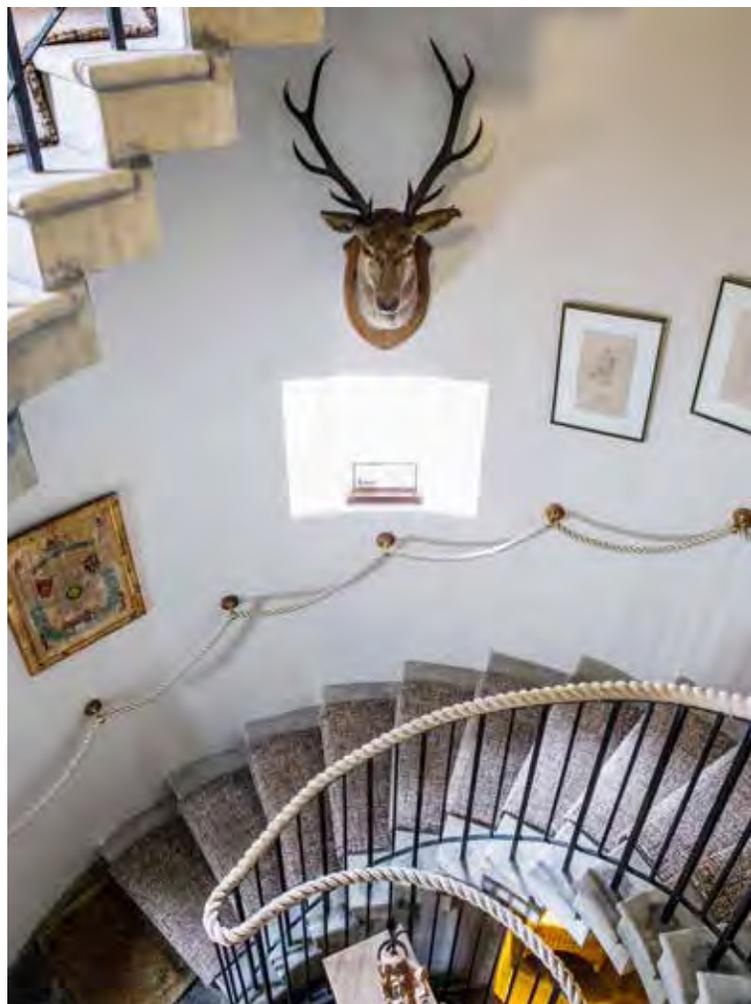
### SOMETHING'S COOKING

You could amuse-bouche your way all around the Hebrides – the smart dining tradition started on Skye with **The Three Chimneys** in the 1980s, which still draws hungry visitors from all over the world. Its food is exquisite, its manner so relaxed. When I last went, a little girl sat under the table next to mine humming and dipping her bread into raspberry juice. But the talk of Skye right now is Calum Montgomery, a 28-year-old local chef who this winter rebuilt **Edinbane Lodge**, a stone coaching inn built in 1543 (rooms open from March) and is now serving in an uncluttered dining room a tasting menu using

in the character of a family-run outfit; specifically the venerable Macdonald clan. Portraits going back to the exiled Stuart king hang on 16th-century walls. There are lords of the isles, old photos of beaming debs in pearls, copies of John Buchan novels that have been thumbed by visitors down the decades. The beds are voluminous and there's cinnamon-buttered oatmeal for breakfast, and kedgeree balancing a perfectly poached egg like an acrobat (the kitchen really is something special, care of chef Marcello Tully). Fires burn fragrantly everywhere and outside, the sea loch Na Dal spreads in black-blues, echoing to the yickers of kestrels. [kinloch-lodge.co.uk](http://kinloch-lodge.co.uk). Doubles from £220

### TAKE THE HIGH ROAD

Watnash was the last hold of wolves on Skye. 'Turn off the road, north at the fairy bridge' sounds like a mythic instruction, but people living along this distant peninsula talk readily about will-o'-the-wisps and moonbows (they happen over the Hebrides). By the time you reach **Mint Croft**, a profoundly pretty, detailed and



handcrafted B&B, your eyes will be on stalks at the kaleidoscopic patterns thrown up by the light coming off the sea; as hard to explain on the page as love is. The two rooms here, created by Shaz and Ali Morton (she, an interior designer and baker, he, a furniture designer and master builder), are housed in entirely separate, very private, distinct buildings – one a converted blackhouse, the other a hayloft,

California. On colder days it fits near 20 people, quietly obliterating home-made soup, quadruple-layered parsnip and mascarpone tortes. In the summer a crowd of up to 100 have been known to loll on the grass outside, and there was talk of having to reserve places in advance – absurd for a tiny café, only this one also sells the work of local artist Rebecca Waterstone (it's run by her wife Indi). It's also an art supplies

place is warm in the best kind of way. Its windowsills are painted the colour of honey, its rooms and salons are a fresh grand sweep of old aromatic wood and ingenious soft lighting. The ceiling of the entrance hall has been restored in an inky turquoise with glimmering stars, like a scattering of supernovas. Its café is open on Sundays (elsewhere, expect everything to be shut, in keeping with the local Free

## YOU FEEL THE SAND'S PRESENCE BEFORE YOU SEE IT, A KIND OF VIBRATING GLIMMER, CUT THROUGH IN WINTER WITH SURGING RIVULETS AS PURPLE AS AMETHYST

which has a high glass-walled snug that noses out towards the Red Cuillins, giving the illusion of floating. [mintcroftskye.co.uk](http://mintcroftskye.co.uk). Doubles from £240

### OFF-THE-CHART BREWS

**Single Track** is doubtless Scotland's most remote espresso bar and takes coffee as seriously as anywhere in Naples. The place juts like a surprise out of the landscape off a road miles from anywhere, a distinctively stylish narrow slither of aluminium, turf, wood and glass. Part survivalist, part

shop with shelves full of putty rubber, good sharpeners and 9B pencils. [facebook.com/singletrackskye](https://www.facebook.com/singletrackskye)

### LEWIS & HARRIS MONARCH OF THE GLEN

For years this 19th-century country house – built from the proceeds of the Chinese opium trade – mouldered on a hill overlooking the harbour in Stornoway, but **Lewis Castle's** recent total renovation into apartments and rooms of varying sizes is a masterclass in how to get it right. The

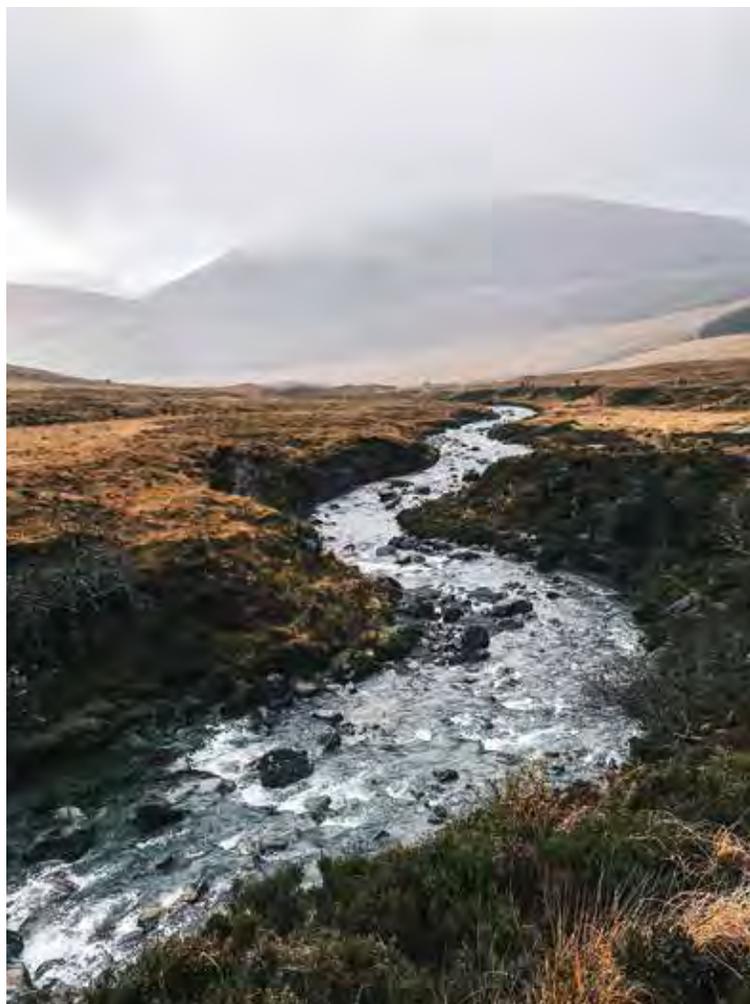
Presbyterian church tradition still strong on Lewis). [naturalretreats.co.uk](http://naturalretreats.co.uk). Doubles from £160

### A BIT ON THE SIDE

Driving from Lewis down to Harris you begin to notice tiny unmanned roadside stalls. Some have the melancholy look of shrines on winding Italian mountain paths, only these ones are stocked with handmade crafts and food, and a cheering honesty box for donations. At **The Hebridean Mustard Company** it's for

*Above, from left:* the croft of Luib on Skye; a stairway at the recently refurbished Kinloch Lodge, owned by the chief of the Macdonald clan

GOLDEN TICKET 'SUMMER LUNCH BENEATH THE TRAILING GERANIUMS AT HOTEL PLAZA ATHENEE. HAZY, HUSHED AND UNBELIEVABLY SPECIAL.' ISSY VON SIMSON, DEPUTY EDITOR



mustard flavoured with liquorice root and stout. An obsession of the island is the kiosk/shed **Croft 36** in Northton, with warm knotted loaves and orange polenta cake stacked daily inside, and venison pies and fish curries it will deliver hot to your door – or tent, or camper van. **Harris Classic Campers** rents out a few 1960s VW models, their interiors distinctly, inventively and tenderly renovated. You can

handsome sheep with thick white coats and mottle-horned, imperious faces – then further towards Borrisdale and a jagged cliff and incomparable viewpoint where a couple of new wooden houses sit like blazons of craftsmanship. The interiors of **Sound of Harris** are full of mid-century furniture and objects – with framed fragments of definitive Sixties wallpaper designs, originally painted by

in the village. [soundofharris.co.uk](http://soundofharris.co.uk). Doubles from £333. [borrisdale.co.uk](http://borrisdale.co.uk)

#### BROAD STROKES

Buying good art in the Hebrides is not hard. Everybody seems to be at it – painting, sketching, selling canvases (most small and covetable enough to slip inside a glove compartment) that reflect in a dazed myriad of yellows and lilac the addictive

## THIS WAS THE LAST HOLD OF WOLVES ON SKYE; PEOPLE LIVING ALONG THIS DISTANT PENINSULA STILL TALK READILY ABOUT WILL-O-THE-WISPS AND MOONBOWS

park up and sleep absolutely anywhere on Harris and Lewis. One great spot is right on the dunes at Uig, where the Viking-made Lewis chessmen were found in 1831. Look out for **The Wee Stall** here too, full of beeswax candles poured into jam jars, improbably and gorgeously scented with bog myrtle. [hebrideanmustard.com](http://hebrideanmustard.com). [croft36.com](http://croft36.com). [harrisclassiccampers.co.uk](http://harrisclassiccampers.co.uk)

#### MODERN MARVELS

Follow the Golden Road across Harris – narrow and twisting and covered in

the father of owner Rob English. But here is also a love letter to local materials and traditions. Sofas and plush beds are slung with tweed designed by English and his wife Carol Graham, woven on Harris by the legendary Donald John Mackay MBE of Lusentyre Harris Tweed, who has made limited-edition fabrics for Nike on a foot-powered loom in his weaver's shed. Only, Rob and Carol's tweed is infinitely vibrant – shades of saffron and agate. The couple sell fabric and cushions too, in their pop-up shop **Borrisdale Tweed**

variousness and savage power of the shifting landscape. It's still possible to track down the incomparable work of the great printmaker Tom MacKenzie, who died aged 70 this year (ask at the Relish coffee shop in Portree, Skye). On Harris, head to the **Talla na Mara** centre (there's a marvellous café here too, The Machair Kitchen) where artists sell their work out of studios. Best are the thick-swiped oils by Owen Williams – also a dry stone waller and lifeboatman – which you'll find at Isle of Harris Fine Art. [tallanamara.co.uk](http://tallanamara.co.uk)

PHOTOGRAPH: HELEN CATHCART

Above, from left: tea and cake on the Isle of Skye; a stream near the island's Kinloch Lodge, which runs into the sea