



The granite Red Cuillin have a distinctive rolling silhouette

Skye is the limit

TRAVEL LOGUE

Rolling hills, beautiful lochs, white beaches and remote castles create magic in the Isle of Skye, says **Arundhati Basu**

Expectation hung ripe in the air. Mingled with the anticipation of my co-travellers, it intensified as we geared up winding hilly roads to the most northerly island in the Inner Hebrides. At one point we seemed to be headed straight for the skies. Fancy lent credence to the imagination that we were being transported to the time when Norse men inhabited the Isle of Skye and called it Skuyö, or 'isle of cloud'. An archipelago off the west coast of Scotland, the Inner Hebrides is home to the spectacular Skye.

The most bombastic adjectives fall short once you hit the remote isle. Adding a startling quotient to its dramatic landscape of miles and miles of bleak moors, beautiful lochs and white sandy beaches are the misty Cuillin Hills. Jagged edges add a distinct personality to the Black Cuillin that rise above the sea at 3,000 ft and were



The ruined country house of the clan MacDonald in Armadale

once a great volcano. Locals say that the brooding hills were created by the sun god. He burned the ground so that great blisters arose and, to this day, they have not cooled enough to allow thick snow to settle. In contrast, the Red Cuillin, formed from granite that assumes a red tinge, look tamer with their rounded outlines.

Skye is about the vast outdoors. There is a wildness to it that is palpable. It was befitting in the scheme of things then that our cottage should be placed right on the Waternish peninsula in northwest Skye. The conservatory, with its view of Loch Bay, always made us feel like we were in a fantastic filming location. Part of the cottage overlooked a gushing stream cutting through green rolling fields that were populated

MAP BY NILRATAN MAITY



NOT TO SCALE

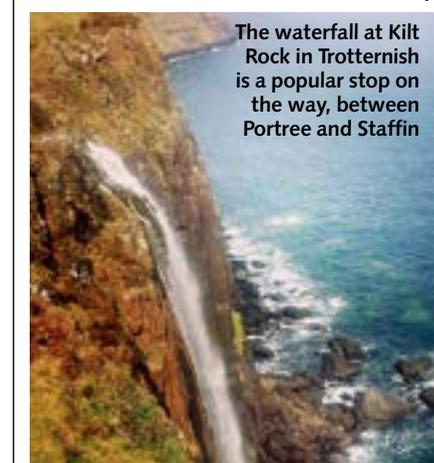
by fat, woolly sheep. My wayward instincts to chase them had to be curbed because from experience I can vouch that they can run, and how! Let their girth not deceive the casual onlooker.

The high point for my partner was an afternoon spent at the Talisker Distillery in Carbost. On the shores of Loch Harport, this is a distillery with a view. Of course, having a 30-something man breathing down your neck about his precious single malts is distracting.

This was our holiday of leisure. We romped around without stressing about a list of To Dos, yet managed to drive around the isle in the four days that we had on it. One of the must-stops on the way to Skye is Eilean Donan Castle. On the small tidal island of Eilean Donan, the 13th century castle was a stronghold of the clans Mackenzie and Macrae. The interiors are beautifully done up to

reflect life as it once must have been. The Isle of Skye is deceptive in its proportions. It is fairly big and wreaks its magic on travellers with its natural formations. The most photographed piece of the isle has to be The Old Man of Storr, a 50m-high pinnacle of basalt in Trotternish. There is a legend to it — that the Old Man was a giant who had lived there and, when he died, he was buried with his finger sticking out, thus creating the ridges. I was as enchanted by the Quiraing, a part of a landslip on the northernmost summit of the Trotternish ridge that is still moving and the road at its base needs repairs every year. I had to let my imagination take over to do justice to the tales of yore that the highlanders would use the folds in the Quiraing to hide their cattle from Viking raiders.

It is difficult not to be bowled over by



The waterfall at Kilt Rock in Trotternish is a popular stop on the way, between Portree and Staffin

The Eilean Donan Castle, Scotland's most dreamy and romantic castle, sits at the meeting point of three lochs



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READY RECKONER

- **Getting there:** You can fly to Glasgow, rent a car and drive down to Portree 216 miles away. A bus company, City Link (www.citylink.co.uk), runs coaches from both Glasgow and Inverness to Skye. As public conveyance is poor there, driving is best.
- **Staying there:** The Croft Bunkhouse, Bothies & Wigwams (www.skyehostels.com) in Portnalong is on a 12-acre croft next to a loch. Its heated, wooden wigwams proffer the ideal glamping experience.

the different types of landscapes of the Skye, such as the Kilt Rock in Trotternish. It is a sea cliff resembling a kilt, its pleats formed from vertical columns of basalt and sills of dolerite cutting through to complete a plaid pattern. Not to be missed are the fairy pools, a series of waterfalls and crystal clear pools surrounded by rocky cliffs, walls and lush foliage. We did flit through the big town of Portree (the home of the Quidditch team, The Pride of Portree, in Harry Potter's hallowed world) with its pretty little harbour. But the day that we took off for the Sleat peninsula in the south of the isle was filled with drama. A biker had died in an accident on the road that morning. So, we were diverted through a narrow as a ribbon B road that skirted a loch and gave us a few heart-stopping moments.

The Sleat is home to one of the two major clans on Skye, the clan MacDonald. We made a stop at their ruined, former country house, Armadale Castle. Roaming through its beautifully maintained gardens, I could not get enough

For connoisseurs of whisky, a visit to the Skye is incomplete without stepping into the renowned distillery of Talisker on the shores of Loch Harport



The Black Cuillin are a favourite with climbers because of their cliffs, gullies, lakes and corries (terrain feature created by glaciation); (Below) The Longhorned Highland cow

of its view across the Sound of Sleat.

Another day, we went looking for otters. The lady at the coffee shop near Dunvegan Castle had assured us, "Oh there are plenty of them out there. Hundreds of them can be spotted across the beach." After exploring the area around the castle that is the seat of the clan MacLeod for over 800 years, we tripped down to Tràigh a' Chorail, a coral beach just north of it. As luck would have it, there was not a single otter to be seen.

Our encounter with a native of the highlands did make up for the earlier disappointment. In the scenic village of Uig, we chanced upon a comic Longhorned Highland cow that, at first sight, seemed to possess one horn rising high into the air. At closer quarters, it turned out that he did have another pointing downwards. No, I did not get friendly. They say on the isle that the wild ones are to be left alone, especially if they



have their young ones by their side. You never know when they toss those gigantic horns and make a go at you.

The last evening of our trip, with the wind in our hair, we sat outside with our glasses of wine, watching the sunset at Waternish and then lay down on the soft, springy grass to stargaze into an inky sky.

All over Skye, we came across the traditional Gaelic tongue in the names of the places, but I am partial to the poetic ring that the Isle of Skye carries in Gaelic, Eilean a' Cheò, or the island of mist. The extraordinary beauty of the isle makes me echo British rock band Jethro Tull, which sang a song for the isle's beauty, "Come with me to the Winged Isle,/ Northern father's western child/ Where the dance of ages is playing still/ Through far marches of acres wild." ◆

Photographs by author

