



Outer Hebrides Sea Kayaking

SEA KAYAKING AROUND THE ISLES & ST KILDA

*Robert Emmott, Tim Pickering
& Mike Sullivan*



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*Robert Emmott, Tim Pickering
and Mike Sullivan*

PESDA PRESS
WWW.PESDAPRESS.COM

Reprinted with change of title, minor updates and corrections 2022

First published as *The Outer Hebrides* in Great Britain in 2010 by Pesda Press

Tan y Coed Canol, Ceunant

Caernarfon, Gwynedd

LL55 4RN

Wales

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ISBN: 9781906095093

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Printed and bound in Poland, www.lfbookservices.co.uk

Foreword



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A guide to the Outer Hebrides ... I have kayaked around these Islands for over twenty years and still have not seen it all. I was born on Lewis and took up kayaking in 1986, under the guidance of another Stornoway Canoe Club paddler Derek Graham. I progressed quickly and within a year had done my first open crossing to the Flannan Isles with more to follow. The variety of kayaking in the Outer Hebrides is endless. There are so many sea lochs, inlets and hidden places which I am still exploring as there are over two thousand kilometres of coastline to explore.

The Outer Hebrides have kayaking areas for everyone from the beginner to the advanced paddler; some of the large sea lochs are exceptionally good for downwind runs for those that enjoy surf in a sea kayak, and you can enjoy the exposure of the high sea cliffs or the relative safety of the sandy beaches. On a summer's day when the sun is shining and the winds are light, parts of the west coast of the Hebrides are like a tropical paradise.

For the more adventurous you can paddle to the offshore islands, or you can go by charter boat. St Kilda is one of our most visited offshore islands and has the highest sea cliffs in Britain; it has one of the largest colonies of gannets in the world and some of the sea caves go deep into the cliffs. The Flannan Isles, known as the 'Seven Hunters' are uninhabited and lie seventeen miles off the west coast of Lewis. The Monach Isles have one of the largest colonies of seals in Europe and are easily accessible by kayak. As you visit any of them you could see one or more of the twenty plus species of whales and dolphins recorded around the Hebrides.

A lot of the crossings between the Islands from Barra Head to the Butt of Lewis are achievable in good weather. The Sound of Harris is exceptional because of the numerous islands within it; you could easily take a week exploring and it is suitable for most paddlers.

It is important to remember there can be quick and sudden changes in the weather. We are often visited by gales, more usually in winter, but we had a force ten storm in July recently.

Enjoy the guide book and the Outer Hebrides, The Islands at the Edge of The World.

Murdy Campbell



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Scottish Outdoor Access Code

Access to the outdoors in Scotland is encouraged; visitors and locals have a right of responsible access. Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) is responsible for promoting and publicising the Scottish Outdoor Access Code (SOAC).

Where you have access rights to is not shown on Ordnance Survey maps, or any other map in Scotland. The Scottish Outdoor Access Code deals with the land and freshwater access which is pertinent to the sea kayaker as you have to gain access to the sea over land or down a river and then again land to camp, walk or rest. You are completely free to kayak on the sea.

THE SCOTTISH OUTDOOR ACCESS CODE IS BASED ON THREE KEY PRINCIPLES AND THESE APPLY EQUALLY TO THE PUBLIC AND TO LAND MANAGERS.

RESPECT THE INTERESTS OF OTHER PEOPLE

Acting with courtesy, consideration and awareness is very important. If you are exercising access rights, make sure that you respect the privacy, safety and livelihoods of those living or working in the outdoors, and the needs of other people enjoying the outdoors. If you are a land manager, respect people's use of the outdoors and their need for a safe and enjoyable visit.

CARE FOR THE ENVIRONMENT

If you are exercising access rights, look after the places you visit and enjoy, and leave the land as you find it. If you are a land manager, help maintain the natural and cultural features which make the outdoors attractive to visit and enjoy.

TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR YOUR OWN ACTIONS

If you are exercising access rights, remember that the outdoors cannot be made risk-free and act with care at all times for your own safety and that of others. If you are a land manager, act with care at all times for people's safety.

Sea eagles

White-tailed eagles nest in trees and on crags in coastal areas. They and their nests are protected by the Nature Conservation Scotland Act 2004 all year round and there are serious penalties for causing intentional or reckless disturbance. If you suspect you may be near an active nest between March and July, please move along the coast and do not land or attempt to photograph the nest or birds in flight. White-tailed eagles can be very vocal if disturbed and have a loud, echoing 'kok kok kok' call. They will also show clear signs of distress such as throwing their legs forward or appearing to falter in mid flight (see photo Route 13 taken under SNH licence). If you see this behaviour, please move out of the area as quickly as possible so they can return safely to their nest which may have eggs or small vulnerable chicks to brood. It would also be helpful if you could report any sightings to the RSPB, noting any wing tag details such as colour and letter/number.

Important Notice

As with many outdoor activities that take place in remote and potentially hostile environments, technical ability, understanding of the environment and good planning are essential. The sea is one of the most committing environments of all, and with this considered it should be treated with the constant respect that it deserves. This guide is designed to provide information that will inspire the sea kayaker to venture into this amazing environment; however it cannot provide the essential ingredients of ability, environmental awareness and good planning. Before venturing out on any of the trips described in this book ensure that your knowledge and ability are appropriate to the seriousness of the trip. If you are unsure, then look for appropriate advice before embarking on the trips described. The book is purely a guide to provide information about the sea kayaking trips. For the additional essential knowledge of safety at sea, personal paddling, environmental considerations and tidal planning the authors recommend gaining the appropriate training from experienced and qualified individuals.

WARNING

Sea kayaking is inherently a potentially dangerous sport, and with this considered, users of this guide should take the appropriate precautions before undertaking any of the trips. The information supplied in this book has been well researched, however the authors can take no responsibility if tidal times differ or information supplied is not sufficient. Conditions can change quickly and dramatically on the sea and there is no substitute for personal experience and judgement when kayaking or during the planning stages of a sea trip.

The guide is no substitute for personal ability, personal risk assessment and good judgement. The decision on whether to go out sea kayaking or not, and any consequences arising from that decision, remain yours and yours alone.

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to thank: Our families and friends for encouragement and patience; Murdy Campbell, Donnie 'Barra' Macleod and all from Stornoway Canoe Club for great company, laughs and adventures on many of these trips; Murdanie and Cathy Macdonald and Hamish Gow for St Kilda insights; Douglas Wilcox, Chris Murray, Chris Denehy, Lauren Maciver, Mick Berwick, Patrick Winterton, Cailean Macleod, Frank Stark and Richard Lodge for photos and information; and Donald W Macleod, coxswain of the Barra lifeboat, for local information.

Photographs

A special thanks is due to those who allowed us to use their photographs. All photographs are acknowledged in the accompanying captions.

How to Use the Guide

To use the guide you will need an up-to-date tide timetable of the relevant area, the appropriate Ordnance Survey maps and the knowledge to use them. Unlike many inshore journeys in the UK, an Admiralty Tidal Stream Atlas is an important source of information for planning journeys around the Outer Hebrides.

Each of the forty-four trip chapters is set out into six sections:

Tidal & Route Information – This is designed as a quick reference for all the ‘must know’ information on which to plan the trip.

Introduction – This is designed to give the reader a brief overview of what to expect from the trip and what the appetite.

Description – This provides further detail and information on the trip including the coastline, launching/landing points, the wildlife and environment, historical information and places of interest to visit.

Tide & Weather – Offering further tidal information and how best to plan the trip which takes the tides, weather and local knowledge into consideration.

Map of Route – This provides a visual outline of the route’s start/finish points, landing places, points of interest and tidal information.

Additional Information – This section provides further information (including Admiralty Charts and other useful maps) that will complement the trip, or be of interest if in the local area.

Using the Tidal & Route Information

Each route begins with an overview of pertinent details beginning with the following information: grade of difficulty, trip name, route symbols, and trip number.



Grade A | Relatively easy landings with escape routes easily available. Offering relative shelter from extreme conditions and ocean swell. Some tidal movement may be found, but easy to predict with no major tidal races or overfalls.



Grade B | Some awkward landings and sections of coastline with no escape routes should be expected. Tidal movement, tidal races, overfalls, crossings, ocean swell and surf may be found on these trips. They will also be exposed to the weather and associated conditions.



Grade C | These trips will have difficult landings and will have no escape routes for long sections of the trip. Fast tidal movement, tidal races, overfalls, extended crossings, ocean swell and surf will be found on all these trips. They will be very exposed to the weather and conditions, and therefore require detailed planning and paddlers to be competent in rough water conditions. With this considered, the journey may require good conditions for the trip to be viable.

CIRCUMNAVIGATION

COASTAL PADDLING

SHELTERED

OPEN SEA CROSSING

NO LANDING ZONES

STRONG TIDAL EFFECTS

PORTAGE NECESSARY

VEHICLE SHUTTLE

FERRY SHUTTLE

ROUTE SYMBOLS



Distance	Total distance for the trip.
OS Sheet	Number of Ordnance Survey 1:50,000 Landranger map required.
Tidal Port	The port for which tide timetables will be required to work out the tidal streams.
Start	△ map symbol, name and six-figure grid reference of starting point.
Finish	○ map symbol, name and six-figure grid reference of finishing point.
HW/LW	The high and/or low water time difference between local ports nearest to the trip and the tidal port.
Tidal Times	Location or area of tidal stream movement, the direction to which the tidal stream flows and the time it starts flowing in relation to the tidal port high water.
Max Rate Sp	The areas in which the tidal streams are fastest and the maximum speed in knots attained on the average spring tide.
Coastguard	Name of the relevant Coastguard Station.

MAP SYMBOLS



start & alternative start



finish & alternative finish



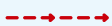
waypoint



possible escape



portage



described route



alternative route



tidal stream direction

-0520 HW

time relative to Tidal Port HW

7kn Sp

Max Rate at Springs



major counter-current



areas of counter-currents / eddies



areas of rough water / overfalls



lighthouse & light



lifeboat station



Coastwatch lookout (NCI)



ferry, passenger & car



campsite & bivi site



bunkhouse



town / buildings



prohibited area

About the Authors



📷 Robert, Tim and Mike in front of Lews Castle, Stornoway harbour.

Robert Emmott

Robert's first introduction to kayaking was at scout camp in North Wales, but it was only after he moved to Lewis that he really got into sea kayaking. Within just a few weeks of arriving on Lewis, he joined Stornoway Canoe Club and soon experienced some incredible paddling adventures. Keen to learn and help others enjoy the paddling in the islands, Robert took up coaching and is a committed member of the canoe club. His passion is storm paddling, for which the Outer Hebrides is often the perfect place.

Tim Pickering

Tim has been paddling longer than he would care to remember and, as a coach, he has tried to infect others with the same enthusiasm. Through his business, he has guided extensively in the Outer Hebrides as well as Arctic Sweden, Iceland and St Kilda. You will often find him in his surf boat on one of the many breaks in the islands. Writing this guide, however, has shown him there are still areas in the Outer Hebrides he has yet to explore.

Mike Sullivan

When Mike moved to the Hebrides his two burning ambitions were to kayak to St Kilda and catch his first Atlantic salmon; getting to St Kilda proved to be the easier of the two. He was converted to sea kayaking after ten years of river kayaking and open boating, and he is a keen coach and active member of Stornoway Canoe Club.

Eilean Leòdhais (Isle of Lewis)

Introduction

Lewis, the most northerly of the islands of the Outer Hebrides, has its most north-westerly point at the Butt of Lewis. Although referred to as separate islands, Lewis and Harris are one island. Lewis is sometimes described as one large peat bog, but there are areas of fertile ground on the east and west coast which have been cultivated since prehistoric times. It is difficult to imagine the island forested with alder, birch, ash, hazel and rowan when looking over blanket bog. Remains found in the excavation of prehistoric middens show that the people living here hunted, fished and farmed.

At the southeast end of Loch Ròg an Ear (East Loch Roag) are the Callanish standing stones. The stones (Clachan Calanais or Tursachan Calanais) are laid out in the shape of a Celtic cross. They are older than Stonehenge and predate the Egyptian pyramids by over a thousand years. Their original use is shrouded in mystery.

The main port and administrative centre of the islands is Stornoway, where supermarkets and petrol stations can be found. The ferry has recently introduced Sunday sailings.

History

In the 6th century, the missionaries who followed St Columba began arriving on Lewis. They were followed in the 8th and 9th centuries by the Norse from Norway and Denmark, marking the beginning of a brutal period in the island's history. There were massacres and pillaging as the Outer Hebrides was one of the first places which the Vikings arrived at on their journey down the western seaboard. This slowly ended as they settled in the islands.

In 1266, the whole of the Outer Hebrides were ceded by Norway to Scotland with the Perth Treaty. Lewis was then run by the MacLeods of Lewis who lost it to the MacKenzies in 1610. Sir James Matheson, who made a large part of his fortune through the opium trade, bought the island in 1844.

The 19th century brought the sorry episode of the clearances. Like the inhabitants of Sutherland, the people of Lewis were cleared from their lands for the creation of larger farms to maximise the profit for the landowners. This was often done with brutality and followed by the 'rasing' of the houses (removing or burning the roof). Some stayed and were pushed out to less fertile lands, but many emigrated.

Lord Leverhume bought the island from the Mathesons in 1918. He had grand plans for the development of the islands, based around the herring fishing. Locals had been promised land to farm if they went off to fight in the Great War. When this promise was reneged upon, the men 'raided' the land in 1920. These ex-servicemen halted Leverhume's development of the island and eventually caused the breaking-up of the ownership. After raiding, the farmland was returned to crofts for cultivation with a croft house being built on each. When Leverhulme died, his plans



were unfinished and the island was sold off by his accountants and broken into small parts. The areas around Stornoway and part of Broad Bay were put into trust for the people of the island.

Kayaking around Lewis

The coast offers a huge variety of paddling with the sheltered sea lochs and the exposed west coast to the Butt of Lewis. There are sections of the coastline where the authors (with thirty years experience of paddling here) can only claim to have paddled once or twice; other sections draw you to them again and again. The other islands are often talked about at the expense of Lewis, but a paddler would be missing a hidden jewel not to explore here.

The east coast offers sheltered paddling but there are also remote areas which are difficult to access, headlands with exciting tides and impressive cliffs. By the nature of its exposure to the Atlantic, the west coast is the more extreme to paddle. It is cut into by Loch Ròg (Loch Roag), however, providing scope for more sheltered paddling in a spectacular setting.





Beàrnaraigh & Beàrnaraigh Beag



No. 1 | Grade B | 20km | 7 hours | OS Sheet 13

Tidal Port Ullapool

Start  Bostadh (NB 144 402)

Finish  Bostadh (NB 144 402)

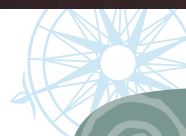
HW Local HW is 1 hour before HW Ullapool.

Tidal times SE going stream begins 6 hours after HW Ullapool and the NW going stream 10 minutes before HW Ullapool.

Tides at the mouth of the loch begin NE 4 hours 20 minutes before HW Ullapool and SW 2 hours 25 minutes after HW Ullapool.

Max Rate Sp Up to 1.5 knots between the islands.

Coastguard Stornoway, tel. 01851 702013, VHF weather every 3 hours from 0110.



1

Beàrnaraigh & Beàrnaraigh Beag



📷 Paddling out through the surf, Beàrnaraigh Beag | Tim Pickering

Introduction

You can paddle around these islands in a day but that would not do them justice. They are rich in history and have many bays and islands to poke around and explore. You could add to this by exploring the outliers of Campaigh with its huge arch cleaving through the centre of the island, Bearasaigh with the remains of dwellings and the hideout of the legendary pirate Neil MacLeod or paddling out to the wind- and wave-swept cliffs of Seanna Chnoc (Old Hill).

Description

If you launch at the fish farm west of the narrows between the two islands, please remember it is a working slip and be considerate when parking.

Which way you make your trip is up to you: there is a small amount of tide running under the Beàrnaraigh (Bernera) Bridge (NB 164 341) which can be used to your advantage as can the flow out of the loch on the ebb.

Before departing east, a short paddle in the opposite direction through the narrows to Bostadh beach will allow you to visit the reconstructed Iron Age house. In 1992 a severe storm altered the beach profile and revealed a village dating from about 400–800 AD. There was a hasty excavation and the remains were then backfilled, although the tops of the walls from two of the houses can sometimes be seen as the beach moves.

Heading back east you pass a headland with the remains of Dùn Stuigh, one of the island's ancient fortified dwellings. Paddling down the east coast you arrive at Loch Riosaigh; the Beàrnaraigh lobster pond can be seen on the east side of this loch. It is enclosed with a wall built

across the entrance to Tob Blar Meadha. The keep was built by Murdo Morrison of Circebost and is seventy-five yards from end to end, made remarkable by its tapering shape. The lobsters were caught and then brought from as far away as Breanish and the Butt of Lewis to be kept in the pond until ready to ship.

In the 1930s, Murdo's son wrote:

"I have myself, on one occasion, taken a lobster in a box across the Minch and by train to Glasgow. It had been fully 30 hours out of water but, when liberated from the box, was able, on being tapped with a stick, to jump some inches off the floor. How long could it go on living or performing its antics was not tested as it was mercilessly - or mercifully - put into a pot."

Continuing southeast, Circebost is located opposite Eilean Bhàcasaigh. It is home to a small fishing fleet that specialises in shellfish. In 1972 a processing plant was built at the pier; it is not the prettiest of piers but working ports hardly ever are.

At the southeast corner of Beàrnaraigh, turn west and enter Loch Barraglom. Sgeir Tindealan (NB 184 333) on the southern shore is a good place to haul out and have a break. Otters can often be seen working this shoreline.





Chapel Beach, Beàrnaraigh Beag | Mike Sullivan

You will now be able to see the Bernera Bridge, one of the bridges over the Atlantic. It was a major breakthrough in civil engineering as it was the first bridge made from pre-stressed concrete girders. When it was opened on 22 July 1953, over 4000 people walked across it. The *Stornoway Gazette* reported:

“On that day Bernera ceased to be an island and became part of Lewis. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say Lewis ceased to be an island and became part of Bernera.”

Either side of the bridge you will see strings of mussel farms where mussels are grown before they are harvested and sent off to the south of England and Europe. The tide runs at up to 2 knots under the bridge.

As you head out from under the bridge you are now entering the West Loch (Loch Ròg). Head up the Caolas Fuaigh, in which there is a tidal flow of up to 1 knot. There is a small fish farm slip for a break in Caolas Bhalasaigh; a foot bridge takes you over the entrance to Tòb Bhalasaigh. On the ebb, there is a small tidal rapid which can provide some entertainment. This Tòb has been designated a Marine Special Area of Conservation because it is a silled saline lagoon or fjardic loch.

The next stretch of coast only offers escape at Tobson and, being westerly facing, is exposed. Tobson offers a beautiful beach and rarely has more than a ripple landing on it. The coast from here up to Bàgh Chlann Neill has many caves which can be explored in the right conditions.

There is a scatter of skerries at the northwest corner of Great Bernera (Beàrnaraigh) round Siaram Bostadh. Once back at Bostadh beach, it is possible to go back through the gap to the slip or you can continue with a circumnavigation of Little Bernera (Beàrnaraigh Beag). Little



Bernera is a very fertile island and was able to support a small community in 1831, enough for the Edinburgh Gaelic School Society to establish a school there. In 1832, however, most of the islanders were resettled or 'cleared' and the school closed.

The northerly corner has a 1.5 knot tide running round the headland. Clearing this, you enter the shelter of a turquoise lagoon between Beàrnaraigh Beag and Cealasaigh, the Caolas Cealasaigh. This has a large shell sand beach, Tràigh Mhòr. On a sunny day you can imagine yourself on a deserted island in the South Seas. There is a plethora of islands, coves and caves to explore and, with a swell, there is always interest among the skerries.

As you pass Gàisgeir and Seildeim on the east coast, you arrive at a small beach overlooked by the remains of a small chapel and graveyard. From here it is a short paddle back into the sound and return to the slip.

VARIATIONS

North and west of Beàrnaraigh Beag are the islands of Flodaigh, Fleisgeir, Bearasaigh, Seanna Chnoc (Old Hill), Campaigh, Cùl Champaigh and Màs Sgeir. All of these islands are worth exploring with much interest. This area has tide running between the islands and is open to the swells of the Atlantic. There are petrels nesting on these outliers.

Tide and weather

This area is subject to heavy ground swell as it is open to the west.





Iron Age house, Bostadh | Tim Pickering

Additional Information

This area is covered by Admiralty Chart 3422.

Neil MacLeod

In the 1600s, the pirate Neil MacLeod had his stronghold on Bearasaigh and from there harassed the gentlemen traders who plied the waters off the Hebrides. The island was a fortress as impregnable as Castle Kisimul in Barra and MacLeod was able to hole up there for several years. After much trouble, Ruairaidh MacKenzie ruthlessly lashed all of MacLeod's kin in a boat which was tied to a rock off the island at low tide, then prepared to allow the rising water to drown the occupants. Just before the drowning, MacLeod surrendered. Although he escaped again, he was recaptured and in 1613 hung in Market Square in Edinburgh.

Barra and Watersay

Introduction

This Island of Barra is often described as the Outer Hebrides in miniature. It has all the features and character of the Hebridean island group: stunning beaches, exposed coastlines, sheltered inlets, breathtaking views, diverse wildlife and fauna and much more. The economy of Barra is similar to other islands as it still relies on fishing and crofting as a main source of income. Tourism is also a main feature, with accommodation often being fully booked up all summer on the island.

Barra is easily accessed by air with direct flights from Glasgow (the airstrip is the large tidal flat at Tràigh Mhòr) and by sea on ferries from Oban, Eriskay and South Uist. The only other lifeboat in the Hebrides (the other is at Stornoway) is based here, which is always worth a visit for local knowledge and information.

Although Watersay is a separate island, it is now joined by a causeway making access easier for locals as well as tourists. This small island has a special charm all on its own and has two breathtaking beaches within a few hundred metres of each other. You can sometimes stand between them and watch heavy swell breaking on the west-facing beach while the east-facing beach is flat calm. There are significant concerns that erosion may result in this narrow isthmus being lost to the sea; plans are currently under development to prevent this.

History

The island was named after the 6th-century saint St Barr. It had a fairly quiet historical period after that, but was in time dominated by the Norse colonisation of the Hebrides. It eventually came under the control of the MacNeils from the early 13th century. You cannot fail to notice the ancestral home of the MacNeil clan as you arrive in Castlebay, as Kisimul castle sits proudly in the bay. There has been a fort of some kind on this skerry since the 11th century, although the present castle was not built until around the 15th century. It provides a stunning sight silhouetted against a Hebridean sunset, and is one of the few castles in Scotland you can actually circumnavigate.

Watersay is an extremely fertile island compared to other parts of the Hebrides, which explains a lot about the events of 1906 when a lone crofter built a makeshift house on the island and lit a fire thereby claiming the land to work. Others followed suit but were arrested and brought to trial. Known as the Watersay Raiders, they were eventually released after a public outcry. More land was purchased from the owner to allow more crofting to take place on the island.

Kayaking around Barra and Watersay

Barra is a very attractive destination as you can walk on to the ferry with your kayak, set it on the water in Castlebay and reach some superb camping spots within half an hour. It is also the



base for Clearwater Paddling, who guide trips in this area and also provide accommodation in a hostel in Castlebay.

The map might indicate that a full circumnavigation is possible, but conditions on the west side can sometimes be against you. Don't be fooled into thinking it is manageable because of its size; being in the Hebrides it is still exposed to the Atlantic and can provide some committing yet shorter trips.

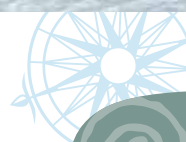
The east and northeast coastline of Barra has some deep inlets and small islands which are sheltered and interesting to explore. The islands within the Sound of Barra provide a fantastic set of options to explore and for camping. The west side has some classic beaches as well as some tricky headlands and exposed rocky coastline. There are also a number of shallow areas and skerries that catch the swell and create a few interesting breakers further off the coast. The good thing about this coastline is a lot of it can be accessed from the main road which goes round the island. Barra is also the launch pad to explore the Mingulay chain.

The west side of Vatersay is short but committing as well as exposed with no landing except the main west beach, but this can get dumpy in surf. If conditions are right then it is an excellent exposed rocky and cliffy coastline to kayak round.





Sound of Barra



33

Sound of Barra

No. 33 | Grade B | 27km | 5 hours | OS Sheet 31

Tidal Port Ullapool

Start ▲ Àirdh Mhòr (NF 721 038)

Finish ○ Àirdh Mhòr (NF 721 038)

HW 52 minutes before HW Ullapool.

Tidal times The tides in the Sound of Barra are unusual, flowing in and out at the same time at both ends, rather than flowing through.

The NW stream running S of Eriskay, into the Sound of Barra, starts 5 hours and 20 minutes after HW Ullapool. The SE stream from the Sound of Barra starts 50 minutes before HW Ullapool.

Outside the east end of the Sound of Barra, the tide sets NE and SW at the same times.

Max Rate Sp Tides in the Sound of Barra run at up to 2.5 knots. NE and SW of the Sound, the rate is 1.5–2 knots.

Coastguard Stornoway, tel. 01851 702013, VHF weather every 3 hours from 0110.



Barra airport | Robert Emmott

Introduction

This is a diverse and atmospheric trip which also allows you to return to your departure point without backtracking. It will take you into remote rocky inlets, isolated fortified islands and romantic historical beaches steeped in history. You may also find the odd bottle of whisky in some windswept sand dune.

This trip takes you to seven separate islands and you can choose which ones to explore. Dreamers should walk along the east Eriskay beach, Coilleag a Phrionnsa (Princes beach). This is where Bonnie Prince Charlie first set foot on Scottish soil in 1745 after he had sailed from France. What a place to land *en route* to fulfilling his destiny to become King. After the decisive battle at Culloden, he was probably wishing that he had stayed in Eriskay for the quiet life.

It is rumoured that there are still many bottles of whisky hidden in Eriskay, liberated from the SS *Politician* which foundered northeast of Eriskay in 1941. Although much of it was consumed, there were also many bottles hidden. In some cases, however, the memories were a bit short and not every hiding place was recalled.

Description

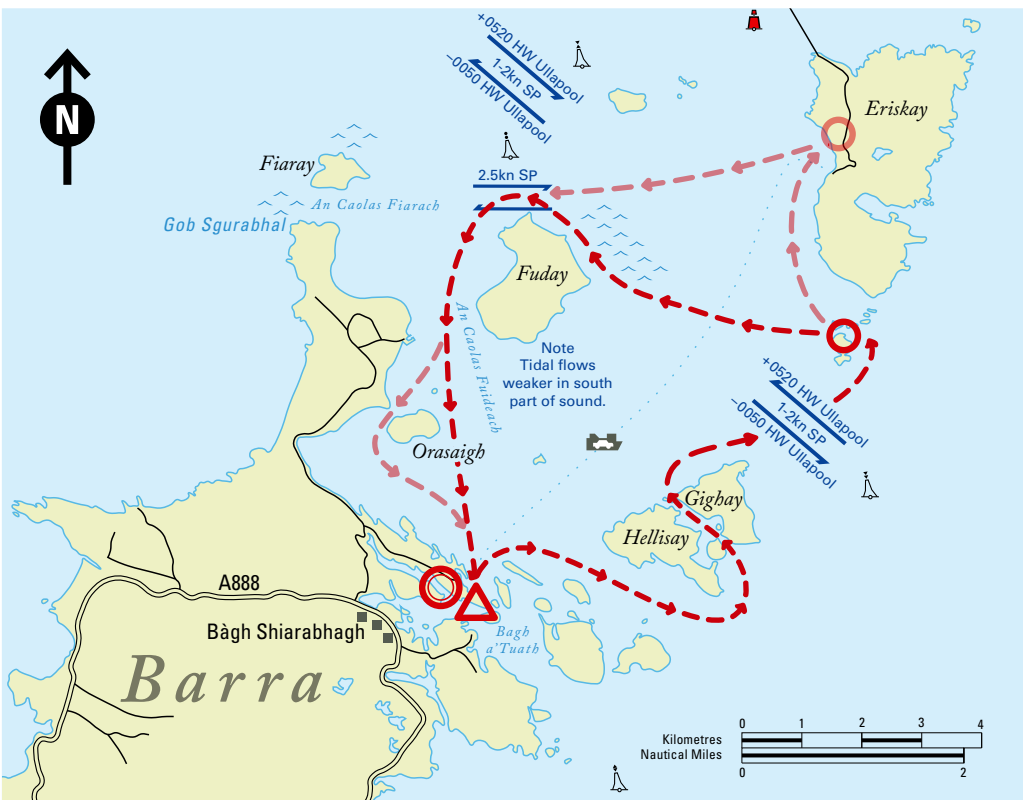
There is good parking and access at the ferry slip at Àirdh Mhòr. A good tea and snack shop can be found in the ferry waiting room (summer only). Set off from here and head east out to the east end of Hellisay. There is a narrow channel which splits Gighay and Hellisay which is worth paddling through. You will often see eagles around this area and it is a very sheltered channel.

Next, head over to the Stack islands just south of Eriskay. Landing is possible on the northeast tip of Eilean Leathan, which you can climb to view or explore the ruins of Weavers Castle. The name is thought to come from the term *reiver* which loosely translates as sea traveller or pirate, and not because weavers used to live there. This castle was another stronghold of the MacNeils and also of a pirate wrecker Breabadair Stache who was eventually killed by soldiers. You can see why this would be a top spot for a pirate to stay.

From here, head directly for Princes beach on Eriskay (NF 786 105) and explore or rest as you desire (but don't dig too many holes looking for whisky). There is a shop in Balla where you can stock up on provisions.

Head west now over to Fuday, where landings can be made on the north and west sides if desired. The return to Àirdh Mhòr can be made round the east or west of Orosaigh depending on the tide. It can be very shallow on the west side at HW but can provide you with a gorgeous paddle over the sand if the tide is in. This is the east end of the Barra airfield, which is rich in cockles.

There are many camping spots on the islands in the Sound of Barra so this can easily be paddled as a multi-day trip.





Sound of Barra, skerries and sand | Chris Denehey

Tide and weather

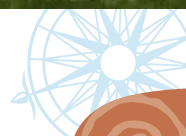
The tides have increased in the Sound of Barra since the causeway to South Uist was built, so you can expect flows off some of the islands in the sound to reach around 2.5 knots at springs. If there is a strong north-westerly or south-easterly, then conditions can become difficult. There is a considerable fetch in both directions and, as it reaches the narrow channels, it can force up a difficult sea (especially if running against the tide). The trip has a couple of open crossings but they are short; you can get a good idea of the conditions before committing to them.

Additional information

There is a shop and post office on Eriskay (NF 786 118). On Barra, the nearest shops can be found in Castlebay. You may also be able to make use of the ferry to and from Eriskay to get back to your starting point if, for whatever reason, you can't paddle back.



Vatersay East Coast



34

No. 34 | Grade A | 18km | 4–5 hours | OS Sheet 31

Tidal Port Ullapool

Start  Castlebay (NL 664 982)

Finish  Castlebay (NL 664 982)

HW 45 minutes before HW Ullapool.

Tidal times Between Orasaigh and Eilean Caragraich, W going stream begins 1 hour and 15 minutes after HW Ullapool and E going flow begins 5 hours before HW Ullapool.

Max Rate Sp 0.5 knots (tides less significant since the causeway was built).

Coastguard Stornoway, tel. 01851 702013, VHF weather every 3 hours from 0110.

Vatersay East Coast

Introduction

This is probably one of the shortest trips in the book, but should in no way be overlooked. This trip takes a route around a stunningly beautiful sheltered bay in Barra and on the east side of Vatersay. You can be sure of protection from the swells affecting the west coast and will only have problems in easterly winds or stronger winds from all directions.



Front Cover – The sun sets over Little Bernera | Mike Sullivan
Back Cover – Surf landing, Carnas na Cille, Lewis | Douglas Wilcox

Outer Hebrides Sea Kayaking

SEA KAYAKING AROUND THE ISLES & ST KILDA

Fàilte (welcome) to the Outer Hebrides. This chain of islands lies about sixty kilometres off the northwest coast of Scotland. Paddle here and you will discover a rich culture and history unique to these islands.

With over 2,000km of coastline to explore, the paddling offers something for everyone: miles of white-shell sand beaches, magnificent cliffs rising from the sea; exposed and committing headlands, crossings, sheltered sea lochs, and some of the most isolated islands in Europe.

This is a practical guide to help you plan your own voyages, with useful maps and colour photographs throughout. Each trip is described with distances, times and tidal information, and is accompanied by anecdotes about local history, geology, scenery, seabirds and sea mammals.

ISBN 978-1-906095-09-3



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Turas math (have a good journey)

(First published as *The Outer Hebrides*.)

