



AllWays Traveller

The Scilly Isles, UK

Lingering days and lasting memories

There's something about islands that makes for a great vacation and it starts with contentment through containment.

Not being able to go too far, before splashing into the sea, does focus attention on the pleasures to be had at hand.

When travelling to relatively distant places, travellers tend to go into panic mode and, all too often, grab quick sight bites of one place before moving to the next.

On an island, or small cluster of islands, there are not too many places, which forces us to slow down. The 'well there's not that much to do so let's make the most of it all' syndrome.

And that's when the culture and character blooms. The people are friendly and so we make friends with them. And there we have it. A vacation of long and relaxing days

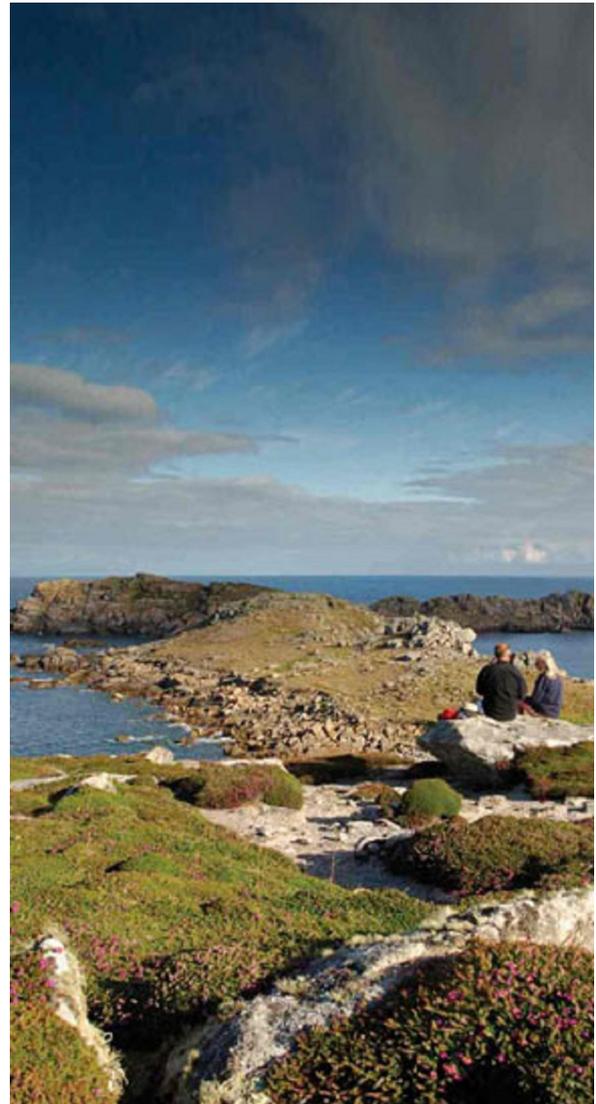
from which we return packed full with lingering memories and photographs that go well beyond postcard shots.

The Isles of Scilly (the tiny dots at the bottom of the pointed bit of the UK) are a wonderful example of how island life and island lives can totally captivate.

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A personal view

Sea views with absolutely everything

by Ashley Gibbins



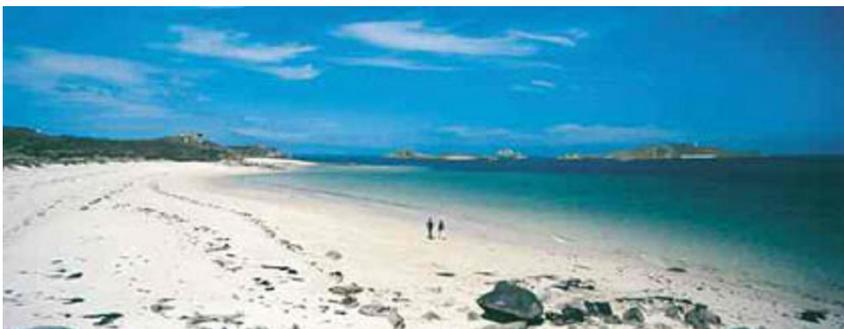
Four hundred years ago what is now the Dungeon Bar of the Star Castle hotel, on St Mary's, the Isles of Scilly, was considered the safest jail in the country.

During its time as a place of detention the 'hell hole' was the reluctant home of political detainees, pirates and any number of other brigands and blagards.

Sipping a pint of Scuppered, the Island's brew, I talked to George and Winifred who have been visiting Scilly, willingly and twice a year, every year for 43 years.

Although an extreme example, I admit, it is typical of the hold Scilly tends to have on its visitors.

Arriving for a four-day stay, and more used to fast paced city life, I thought I would be easily done in two. Two days later I was wanting to stay for 10.



Because I quickly slowed into second gear, warmed to the welcome of the islands and became smitten by the beaches, that befit the Caribbean, and the 60 miles of protected paths and tracks.

It was a real pleasure being busy doing nothing - well relatively little. And that's undoubtedly the key to enjoying the Isles of Scilly and a benchmark as to whether this is the place for you.

The facts

The Isles of Scilly



Scilly or the Isles of Scilly (but not the Scillies or the Scilly Isles) are a string of islands forming an archipelago some 28 miles off Lands End, the south-western tip of the UK's Cornish peninsula.

Designated an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty, the isles are known for their bird life, particularly Puffins and Storm Petrels and the number of rare migrants that have ornithologists flocking to Scilly.



While its Gulf Stream location makes for a temperate climate with frost and snow rare it is also exposed the Atlantic winds, which can see spectacular winter gales lashing the islands.

Five inhabited islands



Five inhabited islands - but with a total resident population of not more than two thousand and over 1,600 of these living on St Mary's - and any number of smaller uninhabited islands and rocky outcrops.

Days spent bobbing on the small boats that ply the islands in order to stroll down quiet country lanes (the main roads on these islands), along deserted beaches overlooking crystal clear water or across heather covered hills. And always with those stunning sea view.

Spending longer than would have ever considered possible enjoying morning coffee or afternoon tea in little cafes or enjoying another pint of Scuppered with the locals in one of the 10 pubs.

Again with that inevitable sea view.



And evenings spent lingering over dinners that have locally caught fish high on the menu before taking a look of the moon shining on the bay before retiring. The other prerequisite for a stay on Scilly is a wardrobe that combines shorts and tee shirts with sturdy comfortable shoes and warm and wet weather gear.

And finally a willingness to embrace the changes in weather and temperature that each day of your stay might bring.

If the sun shines the Isles will be as glorious as any beach holiday but if the winds blow and the rain arrives they turn to be a truly bracing and dramatic experience.

Both will be memorable.

The Scilly shrew

Scilly is also home to a shrew that bears its name and is found nowhere else.

Tourism now accounts for 85 per cent of the island's income with visitors attracted to the island environment, favourable summer climate, relaxed culture and good transport links by sea and air to the UK mainland.

The islands



Scilly comprises five inhabited islands and 134 smaller islands, islets and rocky outcrops.

Of the largest islands :

St Mary's (pop 1,600)

St. Mary's the largest of the Isles has, in the harbour dominated Hugh Town, its main settlement, the one supermarket serving the Isles and the main tourist information centre.

While Hugh Town was sold to the islanders by the British crown in 1949, the rest of the island belongs to the Duchy of Cornwall.

The island became the home of British Prime Minister Harold Wilson and his final resting place after his death in 1995.

St Mary's has the Isles main air and ferry port.

Tresco (180)

Tresco, the second largest island, is an area of contrast with rugged granite outcrops, heath land of the exposed north coast and mainly shell beaches in the east and south.

The villages of New Grimsby and Old Grimsby are situated in the centre of the island, where there is a shop and post office, an art gallery, a pub, and a hotel.

A real star turn



Robert Francis and son James have been running the Star Castle hotel since 2003 and have, in that time turned the Grade I listed building, into one of the finest family run hotels anywhere.

This Star Castle was built as a lookout in 1593, on the orders of Queen Elizabeth I, following the Spanish Armada of 1588 and when the islands were fearing another Spanish invasion.

The Francis family have refurbished of the main building and added chalet accommodation for those looking for more space and sea views.

The hotel's gardens provide the two restaurants with its fresh vegetables and the catch of the day is just that as Robert balances his time as hotelier with that of fishing boat captain.

In years to come, Robert's vineyard - the islands first - will provide his restaurant and others with the Scilly vintage.

www.star-castle.co.uk

Islands ahoy



Getting from island to island

Tresco Gardens

The sub-tropical Tresco Abbey Gardens were created, in 1834, by Augustus Smith around the remains of the 12th Century St Nicholas Priory.



The gardens contain a unique collection of plants, many of which are too tender for outdoor cultivation on the British mainland.

Tresco Abbey Gardens flourish in the warm Gulf Stream climate and are regarded by botanists as one of the most interesting and varied botanical experiments in the world.

St Martin's with White Island (140)

St Martin's, the northernmost populated island, has three main settlements - Higher Town, Middle Town and Lower Town - in addition to a number of scattered farms and cottages.

There is one hotel, St Martin's On The Isle, and one pub.

Bryher (92)

The 327 acre Bryher is the smallest of the five inhabited islands. Off the southern end of Bryher is the uninhabited island of Samson.

St Agnes and Gugh (70)

St Agnes, the southernmost populated island, joins the island of Gugh by a tombolo, or sandbar, called the Gugh Bar, which is exposed only at low tide.

The two islands together have the smallest population of the Scilly archipelago, with 73 residents recorded in the 2001 census

Getting from island to island

Getting from island to island on Scilly is by the boats that go from one to another at scheduled times.

The trip from one to another takes between 20 and 30 minutes and the views are breathtaking.

There are 15 or so passenger boats that work from St. Mary's through the St. Mary's Boatman's Association, which provides the main passenger service between the islands, including circular trips to view the seals and seabirds.

Trips vary according to the time of year and the weather. In addition, several smaller independent boats run a more personal and individual service, such as Tom Fortey.

Everyone knows Tom (as everyone tends to know everyone else on Scilly). Tom, who came to Scilly from Gloucestershire 20 years ago (for a wedding) and stayed, runs daily boat trips aboard the 31 foot Calypso for parties of 12.

These go to and around the islands with Tom taking trips to the out of the way places, uninhabited islands.

When asking fellow guests at my hotel where they were going they replied "out with Tom". When I asked where, I was told "wherever he wants to take us because it's always good."

A twitchers paradise



Scilly is also a magnet for birdwatchers.

To begin with the blackbirds, thrushes and finches seem so much friendlier than on the mainland.

It is also the only place in England where Storm Petrels breed (nocturnally and underground).

October becomes frantic when the fanatic twitchers arrive to exploit the islands' status as the first landing spot for many migrant birds, including extreme rarities from North America and Siberia.

And a rare ant

There are several sites of the Red Barbed Ant on Scilly, a native species on the brink of extinction.

The Zoological Society of London has taken 25 colonies from St. Martin's to a captive breeding programme, which will eventually be used to re-introduce the species on the mainland.

Other interesting facts



In a league of its own

The Islands are home to the world's smallest football league with the Garrison Gunners and Woolpack Wanderers playing themselves in league and cup competitions during the season

Walking on water

On equinoxial tides with high barometric pressure it is possible to walk between the islands of Tresco, Bryher, St. Mary's, Samson and St. Martin's

The first radio transmission

Marconi transmitted the first wireless signal between the Coastguard Tower on St. Mary's Scilly and Porthcurno in Cornwall in 1895.

And the world's first SOS message was transmitted in April 1910 from the SS Minnehaha, which ran aground on Scilly rock after a transatlantic voyage.

Longest war

The Three Hundred and Thirty Five Years' War (1651–1986) between the Netherlands and the Isles of Scilly is the longest ever war and the one with the fewest casualties.

It extended by the lack of a peace treaty for 335 years, without a single shot being fired, until peace was finally declared in 1986.

The pilot gigs



Scilly is the home of the World Pilot Gig Championships, which attracts over 100 gigs to the islands every first May bank holiday weekend. Crews come from across the world to race the 36ft long wooden boats made of Cornish Elm.

Let the train take the strain

For those looking to get to Penzance, for a flight or ferry to Scilly, the Night Riviera Sleeper train, operated by First Great Western, is a really quite exciting and romantic way to do it.

The train travels overnight 6 nights a week (Sunday through to Friday) from London Paddington and gets into Penzance early morning and with an easy transfer to the ferry or helicopter terminals.

The Night Riviera offers a standard level of accommodation in all berths with either single or twin occupancy. Interconnecting doors are available for families.

www.firstgreatwestern.co.uk

More information

www.simplyscilly.co.uk

Getting to Scilly

By sea

The Scillonian has daily sailings from Penzance, Cornwall to St Mary's.

The trip provides a two and a half hour mini-cruise to Scilly taking in the Cornish Coast taking in sites such as Minack theatre, Lamorna Cove, Tater Dhu Lighthouse and Land's End.

www.scillonian.co.uk

By air

Fixed wing flights to Scilly leave from Southampton, Bristol, Exeter, Newquay and Land's End.

www.ios-travel.co.uk

The 20-minute helicopter service, operated by British International Helicopters flies from Penzance to St. Mary's and Tresco.

www.islesofscillyhelicopter.com

By rail to Penzance

First Great Western operates regular rail services from London Paddington.

Staying on Scilly

Most visitors will stay on St Mary's, which has the highest concentration of accommodation and amenities.

Of the other inhabited islands, Tresco is run as a timeshare resort, and Bryher and St Martin's each has a hotel.

There are also campsites, B&B's and self-catering available on the islands.

www.simplyscilly.co.uk/site/stay-on-scilly



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