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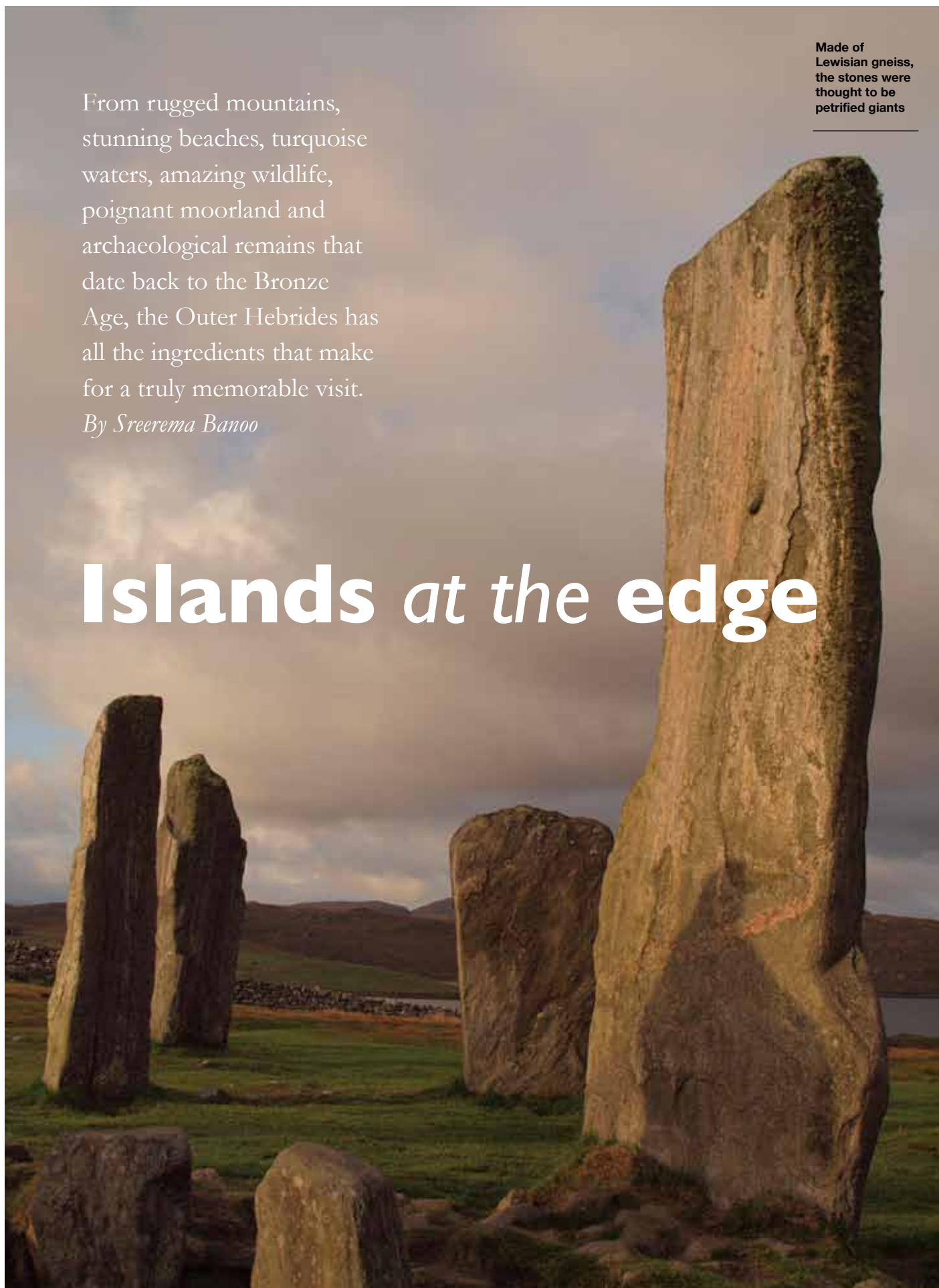


From rugged mountains, stunning beaches, turquoise waters, amazing wildlife, poignant moorland and archaeological remains that date back to the Bronze Age, the Outer Hebrides has all the ingredients that make for a truly memorable visit.

By Sreerema Banoo

Made of
Lewisian gneiss,
the stones were
thought to be
petrified giants

Islands *at the edge*



We arrive at the lighthouse mid-morning, and stepping out of our rental car, I zip my jacket up to my neck, pulling my beanie firmly over my ears as I feel the chill from the cold winds blowing in from the Atlantic. The sky is grey and there is a low mist hanging above the moody moorland around the lighthouse. Braving the winds, my travel partner Adeline and I make our way to the edge of the cliffs.

These are some of the oldest in Europe – formed 3,000 million years ago, they rise to heights of 18-24 metres. Here, at the cliff's edge, sheep graze while down below birds hop from rock to rock at the shore's edge seemingly unperturbed by the waves crashing in, and on the choppy waters in the distance, a fishing boat chugs away.

We are at the Butt of Lewis, the northernmost tip of Lewis, an island in the Outer Hebrides. We had arrived four days earlier and enjoyed three glorious days of sunshine and warmth so it was perhaps fitting (and fair) that on the final days of our visit, we would experience another facet of the islands – and the unpredictable weather the islands are famous for.

We'd not seen the sky in two days, the mist hung low in the mornings clearing only slightly in the afternoons, there were occasional showers, and here in the north of Lewis where there is hardly a tree in sight, there was no refuge to be had from the cold Atlantic winds. It was difficult to believe that just two days before I was walking barefoot on the beach in my shorts!

Located some 40 miles off the northwest coast of Scotland, the Outer Hebrides, or the Western Isles, is an island chain that sits at the very edge of Europe. This is about as far west as you can get in Europe – the next stop westward being North America.

The Outer Hebrides is made up of more than a 100 islands, of which 15 are inhabited, including Lewis and Harris, the Uists, Benbecula and Barra, and smaller islands such as Great Bernera, Vatersay, Eriskay and Scalpay to name a few.

Lewis and Harris is the largest island (Lewis forms the northern part of the island, and Harris the southern part), and although it is in effect one landmass they are often referred to as separate islands. For a first-time visitor who is short on time, it's well worth focusing your visit on Lewis and Harris – from the magnificent sea cliffs of the Butt of Lewis to the rugged hills of Harris, there is much to see and do in these islands. Here are my top picks:

The picturesque and almost other-worldly landscape of Finsbay on the Isle of Harris



Head to the hills

The northern part of Harris has the most extensive and highest range of mountains in the Outer Hebrides – the ridges, glens and summits are said to be among the wildest in the UK. Here in north Harris is the highest summit, the Clisham (or An Cliseam in Scottish Gaelic) but even if you're not up to scaling the peak, there are plenty of trails and footpaths that take you to abandoned villages, medieval structures, and some of the finest beaches in the world.

Bottom:
Near the highest point of the Postman's trail

Below:
One of the islands in St Kilda that's home to large colonies of seabirds



Many of the trails and footpaths are well marked, and walks are as short as an hour to as long as seven to nine hours. Being novices to hillwalking, we engaged the services of local guide Chris Ryan, and he suggested the Postman's Trail, an ancient path that would take us through some fine scenery and at the same time also give us a great workout.

The trail connects the town of Tarbert with the small settlement of Rhenigidale on the southeast edge of Harris, and was for centuries the only way for the outside world – and mail – to reach Rhenigidale by land. In 1989 a mountainous single-track road was built linking the main A859 with Rhenigidale, and it was said to be the last Scottish settlement to be connected by road.

We're only doing part of the walk – the more challenging, and scenic section from Rhenigidale to Urgha. It's a mere 5.5km, but as Chris points out at the start of the walk, "this will be the longest 5.5 kilometres you will ever walk."

We could not have picked a more beautiful day to do this walk – it was sunny and there wasn't a cloud in sight. We had the hills on one side and the cerulean blue waters of Loch Trolamaraig on another, and flanking each side of the narrow trail were beautiful Scottish heather. It was like walking along a purple corridor.

The walk itself was easy in the beginning, allowing us to take in the sights that included the remnants of an abandoned settlement. But before long, our fitness levels were tested when the flat trail became a downhill path. A few zigzags eased the gradient before the path reached the sea at Loch Trolamaraig. Then came the most challenging section of the walk, a series of zigzags steadily climbing uphill.

The scenery though was well worth the effort – the panorama before us was composed of rugged hills, remnants of abandoned hamlets and of course that expanse of blue water. So clear was the day that we could see across The Minch and faintly pick out the Isle of Skye, the Shiantas and even the highlands of the mainland. I understood then why Chris recommended this walk, and why he believes it to be one of the most beautiful walks in the Outer Hebrides. That we only saw four other walkers on this trail also added to its appeal.

Powder-white beaches

If hillwalking is not your cup of tea, head to any one of the beaches on the west coast of Harris. The most famous – and deservedly so – of Harris' beaches is Luskentyre or Losgaintir with its huge expanse of powder-white beach of fine sand (that is best appreciated at low tide) and turquoise waters. Not very far away are the hills of Harris, which form a majestic backdrop to this stunning beach.

Luskentyre has been voted Britain's best beach and it's also said to be one of the top 10 beaches in the world. Part of Luskentyre's appeal is the lack of beach-goers and paraphernalia associated with top beaches around the world, and that can be explained by the climate. Ten degrees Celsius warmer, and Luskentyre and the other beaches of the Outer Hebrides would be cursed with tiki huts, cabanas and massive resorts and hotels, and hordes of tourists.

Instead, all we found were a handful of locals and holidaymakers strolling on the beach, and as for lodgings, all we saw along the coast were just a few holiday homes.

Apart from Luskentyre, other stunning beaches in Harris include Seilebost Beach, Scarista Beach, Northton Beach and Borge Beach.

If you're on Great Bernera, the one beach that's a must-visit is Bosta (Bostadh) Beach located to the north of this small island. Even on a gloomy day, one can appreciate the beauty of the sheltered shell sand beach and the grassy hills that keep it company.

Just a stone's throw away from the beach is a reconstructed Iron Age house, attesting to Outer Hebrides' long history of settlement. The site was only excavated in 1996 when a storm a few years earlier had exposed evidence of a Norse settlement buried beneath the sand. Under the surface, archaeologists found that the Norse buildings had been built on top of Pictish or Iron Age houses thought to date to 500-700AD.



The clear waters of Loch Trolamaraig, along the Postman's trail

Luskentyre deserves its reputation as Britain's best beach





An almost pastoral setting at the Butt of Lewis



The few structures that remain intact in St Kilda

A view of the main village of St Kilda



Relics of the past

If you're fascinated with age-old remains, then the Isle of Lewis will not disappoint. The most famous ancient relic is the Callanish Standing Stones, located in the village of Callanish (Calanais) on the west coast of Lewis. The stones, made of Lewisian gneiss are arranged in a circle (which holds a chambered tomb) with two parallel lines of stones forming an avenue about 80 metres long. In addition there are also single lines of stone to the east, west and south – forming the shape of a cross.

Archaeological excavation in the 1980s proved that the main circle was erected 4,500–5,000 years ago, and the chambered tomb a few generations later. It's been suggested that the stones served as a prehistoric lunar observatory, while in local folklore it's said that the stones were petrified giants who would not convert to Christianity. Whatever its purpose, there is no doubt as to its mystical quality – you cannot help but feel a sense of mystery and spiritual power of the site.

A 10-minute drive away from the Callanish Standing Stones lies one of the best-preserved examples of a broch, a type of fortification found only in Scotland. Dun Carloway (Carlabagh) Broch, believed to have been built around 100AD stands in parts almost 9m high, close to its original height. Part of its wall has collapsed, revealing the design of the broch – double-skinned walls with two tiers of internal galleries formed by flat slabs.

It's possible to enter the broch via a low entrance passage and though there really isn't much to see here what's interesting is the dry stone architecture – no mortar or cement holds the stones together.

Magical islands

If you're visiting the Outer Hebrides during the months of April to September, then a must-visit is St Kilda. A group of islands located in the Atlantic Ocean 50 miles west of Harris, St Kilda is owned and managed by the National Trust for Scotland and is one of only 25 locations in the world to be awarded the mixed status for natural and cultural heritage by UNESCO.

If you're lucky enough to visit, as we were (because chartered boat trips are weather-dependent), the visit offers a glimpse into the archipelago's extraordinary human history. St Kilda is thought to have been inhabited for at least two thousand years, there are traces of Neolithic sites and of a Norse presence prior to the settlement by Gaelic-speaking Scots.

The main island of Hirta was once home to Britain's most isolated community, who were completely shut off from – and unknown to – the outside world up until the late 17th Century. Life on St Kilda was a tough one – the people survived on seabirds, mainly gannets and fulmars, eating the meat and eggs, and using every part of the bird from the bones, which were made into needles to skins, which were turned into shoes. But by all accounts from the early visitors and missionaries, this was a community who lived simple but contented lives.

All that however changed as contact with the outside world heightened in the 19th and 20th Centuries – disease caused many deaths, but more than that, stories of a better life on the mainland and elsewhere encouraged many to leave. Those who were left behind found it increasingly difficult to live on St Kilda, as there were now fewer able-bodied people on the island. Towards the end of the 1920s, crops failed many times and the islanders were on the brink of starvation. And so on the 29th of August 1930, the 36 remaining islanders – at their own request – were resettled to the Scottish mainland.

Today, the main street of St Kilda still stands, giving visitors so accustomed to the latest mod-cons and gadgets, a glimpse into the life of this remote community. St Kilda is unique, atmospheric and beautiful, but what will make you weep is the inspiring story of its people and their ability to survive, and for a while triumph, over the harshest of environments.

Mysterious, mystical and totalling alluring, the Callanish Standing Stones is one of the most visited sights in the Outer Hebrides

