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ISLE OF ARRAN

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OFTEN REFERRED TO AS
SCOTLAND IN MINIATURE, THE
ISLE OF ARRAN IS FULL OF
CULTURE AND CHARACTER.
HUGH FRANCIS ANDERSON
EMBARKS ON A JOURNEY TO
REDISCOVER ITS CHARM.



Raindrops beat gently at the salt-strewn windows, white peaks form atop the crests of the waves below, and the clouds, ominous and heavy in the fading light, lie low over the mountains ahead. I'm approaching the Isle of Arran for the first time in over a decade; my mind is awash with the familiarity of youth.

As a child, I have only the fondest of memories of the Isle of Arran. For two weeks every August, my family and I would stay at The Shieling, a small fishing cottage in the village of Corrie on the island's eastern shore. Here, I would regularly bathe in the brisk Atlantic water, I would roam aimlessly around the glens, woodlands and mountains nearby, and I would while my evenings away looking over the Firth of Clyde with a copy of Ransome's *Swallows and Amazons* in hand. They were the most magical of days. And while I still spend time in Scotland today, Arran has evaded me since those long summers of yesteryear. In fact, Arran is one of the few large islands that has evaded most, yet it has more to offer than one might initially think. With the sturdiness of the Maserati Levante S as my steed, I set out to rediscover my childhood citadel.

Alighting the ferry in Brodick, Arran's 'capital', it feels like coming home. Across Brodick Bay, I see the tower of Brodick Castle rise above the canopy of the Scots pines that adorn its fringes. The feathers of onyx cormorants furl in the north-westerly breeze, and on one of the many boulders that jut out of the water, a grey seal observes the island before it. It is exactly how I remember it. Though instead of heading north towards Corrie, I take The String road that cuts across the island towards Blackwaterfoot and Machrie. To my right, Goatfell, Arran's highest mountain at 874 metres, is still concealed by low-lying cloud. Further north still lie the rolling glens of Sannox and Lochranza, and to my left, the dense forest and farmland of Lamlash and Whiting Bay. But for now, at least, I'm headed for Dougarie Estate, my home for the next couple of days. ➔





Originally built in 1865 for the 11th Duke of Hamilton as a sporting lodge, Dougarie is now home to the Gibbs family. Covering 25,000 acres on the north-easterly quarter of Arran, Jamie Gibbs inherited the estate from his late father in 2017. Today, Jamie's approach to growing the sporting endeavours of the estate in a sustainable way is not only commendable, but in keeping with the refined nature of the Arran I know. Here, like much of Scotland, golf plays a pivotal role. I meet head greenkeeper David Jeffery, who shows me around Dougarie's Machrie Bay Golf Course, with uninterrupted views across to Kintyre. Although there are seven courses on the island, it is the course at Dougarie that excites most. "Currently we're at nine holes here," says David, "but we're in the planning stages of expanding our course to 18 holes, along with a new clubhouse and cottages for guests too. This will hopefully bring more and more people to the island."

Indeed, the population of 5000 is certainly small for Arran's 167-square-mile area, yet its popularity in recent years has seen a marked rise. David tells me that during the summer months, Arran receives as many as 25,000 visitors. And there are numerous reasons for this. As one of these summer visitors, I asked my own mother why we visited Arran; it was on the

recommendation of a friend whose mother-in-law lived in Corrie and was "wonderfully mad" alongside the wildness of the island that, with two young boys, "should not be missed". Truly, Arran's landscape is wild. With the Highland Boundary Fault dividing the island, the difference between lowland and highland terrain is astonishing, and explains how it has assumed the title of 'Scotland in Miniature'. For this reason alone, Arran must be seen to be believed.

David points out Dougarie Lodge away in the distance and I continue my journey along the western shore. Once at the lodge, I meet Steve Hauge, the estate's-then gamekeeper, and journey east across Glen Iorsa, rising gently to Loch Iorsa that lies at its centre. As we follow the winding dirt track, Steve points high into the glen. On the hill, a fine royal stag raises its head and inspects us. "The climate here on Arran is so good that the stags all grow big heads; we've lots of royals," notes Steve. "We're down for 25 stags per season, and the same number of hinds." Dougarie also boasts Arran's largest driven pheasant shoot, yet under Jamie's conservationist orders, these are kept to controlled, sustainable levels, with only 10-12 driven days in the season.

Arriving at the loch, we're met by boatman, underkeeper, greenkeeper and Arran's only ghillie, John Knox. "The river and loch have a good mix of salmon and sea trout," he says as he steps into his waders. "It's lovely up here. On a good day, when the water is perfect, you're pretty much guaranteed to catch something at the tail-end of the loch." As if by magic, John bags a fish in just two casts; it's always a tantalising moment to witness. John then invites me down to see the estate's old boathouse – built in 1885, its Norse-design is a striking vision on the coastline. While built for launching, it also doubled as an impressive space to host guests, and once welcomed King Edward VII. And it's from here that some of Arran's best inshore fishing is had. "One party that was over for about two weeks came out on the boat with me and caught quite a few lobsters," says John. "It's mainly pollock, mackerel, crab and lobster that we catch here; we caught more pollock last year than ever before."

As the clouds release their armouries, John invites me to his home nearby to show me some of his other work; painting. A copy of Dante's *Inferno* lies beside an ageing chaise longue while brushes, oils and canvases cover almost every corner of his quaint cottage. One painting even depicts a young David Jeffery walking along the coastline beside the golf course; he and John are old school friends. A man that appears to breathe island life, John has an impressive ability to capture the essence of Arran, its landscape, its people and its majesty.

The following morning, a desire to see the Arran



of my childhood comes to the fore, so I continue my journey along the winding coastal road from Machrie and loop the entire northern tip of the island. Without another vehicle in sight, and with the rising light dancing off the water across Kilbrannan Sound, I ask myself the always-rhetorical question that many have asked in the past, and many more will in the future: “Can this really be Scotland?”

Arriving in Corrie just 40 minutes later, I see the woodcarver and sculptor Marvin Elliott outside his workshop. As a child, I remember Marvin’s work with fondness; his hand-carved seal affixed to a boulder on Corrie’s beach always fooled me. Inside, the evidence of decades of creation lies scattered in perfect imperfection. Sketches adorn the walls, wood shavings cover every inch of the internal space, and a miniscule wood-burner furiously consumes Marvin’s offcuts. Marvin shows me one of his largest creations, a Viking longboat that lies beside his humble studio. He then takes me into the vast cave system that runs deep into the cliffs behind, a space that offers yet more workspace for the sculptor. But why Arran? After his career in the military, Marvin was searching for somewhere peaceful to live, somewhere he could work and somewhere close enough to the mainland for him to see his family. Indeed, as I continue across Arran, I meet more than one local who claims the same motivation for moving here; it appears Arran is one of the last attainable frontiers.

Outdoor pursuits here on Arran are also some of the finest I have experienced. The hikes through Glen Rosa and Glen Sannox, the climb to Goatfell, across The Saddle, and onwards to Cìr Mhòr, the Matterhorn of Arran, all fill me with nostalgia. To the south, the Clauchland Hills boast sublime forestry trails that offer panoramic views of Lamlash Bay and the Holy Isle, once home to a 13th-century monastery. Further on still above Whiting bay, the double-cascade of the Glenashdale Falls sits rather poignantly in my childhood mind; I still remember the delicate scent of moist foliage and pine warming under the midday sun. And further still the chambered cairns of the Giant’s Graves. Curling the southern end of Arran, the uninhabited island of Pladda can be seen, and past that Ailsa Craig, a sanctuary for both puffins and one of the world’s largest gannet populations. Approach Blackwaterfoot on the west coast and you’ll find the King’s Cave. One of a succession to be found around the island, it is the King’s Cave that I remember with fascination, for it was this cave that Robert the Bruce is said to have retreated after defeat in the 14th century, and where he famously said, “If at first you don’t succeed, try, try and try again,” later emerging to regain power once more. While the cave systems are also important to Arran’s geological wonder, it is up on the north shore, near Lochranza,





that aspiring geologists make a pilgrimage to witness Hutton's Unconformity, a series of rock formations that helped establish the theory that the earth was, in fact, eons old. And it is also here in Lochranza that my circumnavigation brings me.

The Maserati reverberates across Lochranza Bay, where Lochranza Castle, a 13th-century hall-house, sits at the tip of a serpentine promontory. Further inland, an impressive number of stags graze unperturbed on the golf course. It is in Lochranza that I find the Isle of Arran Distillers, where Arran-native and tour guide Pam Duncan offers to show me around.

At just 24 years old, the distillery marked the first legal dram of whisky created on Arran in over 160 years, and it's clear to see how one of Arran's newest ventures has also become its most successful. "Hal (Harold) Curry was our founder, and the whole idea was to merge Scottish whiskies," says Pam. "He wanted to mix the strength and depth of character of the traditional Islay whiskies with some of the sweeter and softer characters of the Speyside whiskies." As we continue past the stills, Pam points out of a window to a small trail that leads away from the distillery into Glen Catacol and up to Loch na Davie, the distillery's water source. "Loch na Davie is spring fed, so it's naturally filtered through granite. It's even been proven by Glasgow University that it's one of the softest and purest waters in Scotland," comments Pam. "That's why we're here."

HRH Queen Elizabeth II officially opened the Visitor Centre in 1997, with the first cask drained the following year. Its success has been so strong that it is now completing a second location, the Lagg Distillery, near Kilmory, on the island's southern tip. Here, a range of peat whiskies will be distilled, and there's even rumour of a small orchard for apple brandy too. And they've done it all under independent ownership. As Pam notes, "We're one of only 15 out of 130 distilleries in Scotland who are still independent."

So, with a bottle of The Arran Malt in hand, I bid farewell to Pam and make my way to the coastline once more. On this, my last night, and with the air balmy and the sky clear, I build a fire on the western shore and enjoy a dram with a filet of flame-grilled Dougarie-shot venison under the fading light. Here, I feel awakened to the magic of the Arran that so inspired me as a child; the landscape, the people, the energy. There's something almost ethereal about this island, as if you're at the edge of a bountiful new frontier, and it's a very nice place to be. *SSJ*