



FLYING VISIT

Barra Island's idyllic scenery, secluded beaches and wealth of wildlife, make it a wonderful place to fly to and explore

WORDS *Andy Jarosz*



A handful of visitors waits with their cameras poised at the end of the small car park, staring out over the wide stretch of beach beyond a low blue wooden fence. A small plane emerges from the clouds and the hum of its propellers grows louder before it touches down on the beach. It splashes through the tidal puddles as it taxis across the sand, coming to rest a few metres from the gathered crowd.

BEACH LANDING

Barra is the only airport in the world where scheduled flights land on the beach. The soft sand of Traigh Mhor allows the fat-wheeled Twin Otter planes to land at low tide, with flight times determined by the tide tables. On a typical day the plane will arrive from Glasgow, make a short trip over to nearby Benbecula, then return around an hour later before taking off for Glasgow again. If no flight is due, the airport serves as a popular spot for locals to gather cockles.

Such is the spectacle of the beach landing that visitors to Barra inevitably come to the airport, even if they have arrived by sea. There is also the option of experiencing the beach take-off and landing by grabbing a standby seat on the one-hour round trip between Barra and Benbecula (£35).

EXPLORING BARRA'S HISTORY

While the plane might be a major draw for visitors today, it is the waters that surround Barra that have long been its lifeblood. Barra was an important hub of the North Atlantic herring industry in the late 19th century and, at its peak, over 600 boats would fish from the island. Castlebay Harbour was said to be so busy that when the boats were in you could walk from boat to boat for over a mile all the way to the neighbouring island of Vatersay without getting your feet wet. Men and women would work in and around the bay, fishing, curing and packing the herring in the many stations along the coast. The industry dwindled rapidly after the First World War and today a few ruined remains of the old herring stations can still be found along the waterfront in Castlebay.

Just as the sea has provided for Barra, it has also taken away. Fishing has been and still remains one of the principal industries on the island and the often stormy seas extract their inevitable cost; the words 'lost at sea' can be seen on many a gravestone in Barra's well-tended cemeteries. As testament to the danger of the Atlantic waters, there is a memorial on Vatersay to the 350 people who lost their lives on the island's rocky shores in 1853 when their

OPPOSITE A flat-wheeled Twin Otter plane on the beach airstrip at Barra's Traigh Mhor Beach (BELOW)





ship the *Annie Jane* broke up in a storm as they were leaving for a new life in Canada.

Barra's most striking landmark sits just off its southern shore. Kisimul Castle, for many centuries the seat of the MacNeill clan, dominates the harbour with its imposing stone walls. Access to Kisimul is via a small boat that operates in the summer months from the nearby jetty. Visitors can wander around the 15th-century castle that was once the working home of the clan chiefs and now serves as a ceremonial meeting place for the worldwide members of the Clan MacNeill.

ISLAND BEAUTY

The real joy of Barra is in making the most of the outdoor activities that the island offers. For those with plenty of energy to burn, the 383m summit of Heaval is a

brisk climb from Castlebay and the reward from the top is a magnificent view over the bay and the islands beyond. For a more leisurely stroll, Vatersay can be easily explored using the roads and deserted hillside paths; a four-mile walk will cover most of the island. Carrying rain gear is advisable even on a sunny day, as the weather can change without warning.

The roads of Barra are perfect for the casual cyclist, with very little traffic along its 13-mile circular road. The airport is a short diversion from the main road; it's worth leaving bikes outside the terminal building and heading over the dunes to the stunning expanse of Ersary Beach, while the café at the airport serves up hot drinks and snacks when a flight is due. There is only one steep hill just outside Castlebay and, for those touring

the island in a clockwise direction, the final mile is an exhilarating downhill run.

There are those who say a visit to Scotland is not complete without a round of golf. The nine-hole golf course at Cleat is the UK's most westerly, although some folk suggest that playing here is closer to crazy golf than the serious variety. Each green is guarded by an electric fence to keep the livestock away, while the surrounding dunes provide a formidable challenge. The third hole boasts what is claimed to be the world's largest natural bunker.

BOAT TRIP TO MINGULAY

Donald MacLeod has spent most of his working life in the waters around Barra and on calm summer days takes visitors out in his boat the *Boy James* to the

ABOVE LEFT An abandoned cottage on Vatersay ABOVE RIGHT Kisimul Castle is locally known as the 'Castle in the Sea' BELOW Sheep on Vatersay's deserted coastal path. The leisurely four-mile route covers most of the island OPPOSITE FROM TOP TO BOTTOM The 'Otters' sculpture by Iain Brady at Barra Ferry Terminal; Our Lady Star of the Sea church in Castlebay; a dramatic natural arch on Mingulay





NEED to KNOW



GETTING THERE

Barra is an hour by air from Glasgow (flybe.com) or five hours by CalMac ferry from Oban (calmac.co.uk). A local bus meets arrivals at the airport or a taxi can be booked through Robert Stewart (01871 810012).



GETTING AROUND

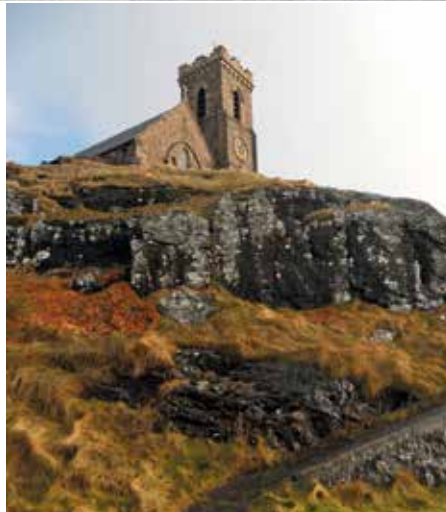
Rob Daley at Barra Island Tours offers tailor-made itineraries. (01871 810255, facebook.com/BarralandsTours). Cycle hire is available from John MacDougall (01871 810284), while you can explore the coast in a kayak with Clearwater Paddling (clearwaterpaddling.com). For more information on outdoor experiences in Barra go to visitscotland.com/natural.



WHERE TO STAY

Craigard Hotel in the main town of Castlebay has comfortable en-suite double and twin rooms for £110 per night, including a full Scottish breakfast (01871 810200, craigardhotel.co.uk).

abandoned island of Mingulay. The windswept island was home to a small population until 1911 when the few resident families found a lack of access to essential facilities made their continued life on Mingulay impossible. The ruins of the old settlement remain, but it is the bird life that attracts many visitors, with razorbills, guillemots, kittiwakes and over 2000 pairs of puffin making their homes in the sheer cliffs at the west of the island. In favourable conditions Donald takes visitors around the southern tip of Mingulay and up its western side, passing through a dramatic natural arch between the sea stacks and the island's towering cliffs.



MAJOR EVENTS ON BARRA

Barrafest music festival takes place in July and attracts talented musicians from the Western Isles and beyond. Meanwhile, in the annual Barrathon held in May, runners from far and wide compete in a 13.1 mile race around the island. Extreme exercise on the Saturday morning is followed by a traditional ceilidh in the evening, with runners and their families joining in the party.

While many folk come to Barra to experience one of these annual celebrations, others just want to enjoy the island's beautiful natural surroundings. Whatever the motive, Barra offers a refreshing escape from life on the mainland and it's no surprise that many visitors return to the island year after year.

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