



The Rabbit Isles



The appeal of islands, especially uninhabited islands, is one of those things that grows as you get older. I would love to emulate the man who has slept on all the 162 larger Scottish islands but somehow I don't think it's an ambition I'm likely to achieve.

One of the best ways of visiting an island is by sea-kayak. When you're really experienced (which I most certainly am not) a sea-kayak is one of the most seaworthy boats ever to take to the water, and can happily cope with conditions up to force eight gale – though my limit is force three to four! To build up experience takes time, the best way to learn is to join a local club of which there are two excellent ones in Caithness, the Pentland Canoe Club and the Caithness Kayak Club, which will provide all the equipment you need until you've reached the stage of wanting to buy your own boat.

Spending a night alone on an uninhabited island is not, however, a thing many people have done. After my first season of sea-paddling, the friendly Rabbit Isles, near Tongue, provided a good challenge for a novice kayaker. To



Primroses on the Rabbit Isles



A view to Sgeir an Oir, Rabbit Isles



Sunset over the Kyle of Tongue



Looking across the islands to Ben Hope



A tricky landing on Sgeir an Oir

paddle the shortest way across from Talmine would be just too easy, instead I'd set off from the old pier opposite the House of Tongue, near the causeway. There would be about three miles to paddle, all quite near the shore and so pretty safe for someone with my basic level of skill. It was, though, October, which meant quite a swell coming into Tongue Bay even though the forecast was for light winds.

Late on a lovely autumn afternoon I unloaded the boat from the car and carried it down to where the old,



A view from Sgeir an Oir

seaweed-covered slipway entered the water. This manhandling of a heavy boat is perhaps more hazardous than the paddling! I stowed camping gear and food into the watertight compartments, donned wetsuit and buoyancy aid and paddled off into the sunshine and rippling water. Just a gentle swell was coming down the Kyle, the tide was flooding in, which was against me but in

the event of any serious mishap I wasn't going to be swept out to sea.

The scent of the sea mingled with that of yellowing autumn leaves as I paddled below wooded slopes, behind me Ben Hope and Ben Loyal basked in early evening sunshine. Ahead, a line of breakers warned that things were not going to stay quite so placid. Where the open sea of Tongue Bay meets the more



Orkney – an empty beach on the Isle of Sanday



A lonely Orkney isle – sea kayaking lets you visit places like this.



On Graemsay, Orkney

the rest of the paddle past Ard Skinid, across the choppy channel and round the first island, to beach the kayak on the second isle where the only footprints on the pristine sand were those of an otter.

sheltered waters of the Kyle, the swell foams and breaks on various sand bars and spits, earlier I'd spied out the sea from Coldbackie and reckoned that I could avoid the worst. Now the tide had risen further and the area of confused water had moved so as to block my route round the end of the sands below Ard Skinid. The swell was growing bigger and there were breaking waves ahead.

The shore was near and, if I couped it, the waves and current would take me onto the beach in a minute or two.

Otherwise I'd never have tried it on my own. I didn't though want the ignominy of capsizing with, no doubt, half a dozen pairs of binoculars trained upon me from the roads and houses which look across this very visible stretch of water! With waves of up to six feet breaking over me from two directions at once it was the most difficult sea I'd yet been out in... and it was with great relief that after a couple of hundred yards I was through the worst and just had to cope with a big smooth swell. Soon this too subsided and I could relax and enjoy

There was just time for a quick look round the first island before the narrow spit of sand which joins the two was submerged by the rising tide, with breakers coming in from the west. With barely an hour of daylight left I made a quick exploration of the second isle before setting up the tent above the shore as dark fell. Both islands are quite gentle, with a lot of blown sand and marram grass, otherwise rock outcrops and boggy patches and tussocks and thistles. There are rocky shores and some low cliffs and geos, in spite of the



Eilean nan Ron, loch and sea-arch

RALPH'S SECRET NORTH



The cliffs and moors of west Hoy are one of the wildest and least-visited places in the North. This scenery is near the Candle of the Sneuk.

name I never saw any sign of rabbits. Something, perhaps otters, makes faint trods across the islands, or maybe it was the two wild sheep with long unkempt wool enjoying life having missed years of rounding up and dipping and clipping. A big black segmented beetle became, unknown to me, wrapped up in the tent when I later packed up... and subsequently bit me when I tried to remove it back at home.

Cloud was moving in, settling down over the darkling mountains and obscuring the last of the sunset. A strip

of orange lights gleamed incongruously across the bay from Coldbackie. My desert island was hardly remote!

As the tide flowed and ebbed overnight I listened to the changing sound of the sea, just breakers when the spit of sand was submerged, then two different sets of waves washing in as the tide went out, the smaller waves on my side hissing onto the sands. The light wind, only force three when I'd set off, had now as forecast almost completely dropped away.

The morning dawned calm and grey, patches of mist clinging to hillsides above the sea. With the tide high again I paddled back across to the first island, landing to explore properly. A very quiet, peaceful place, save for the remains of two buzzards, quite likely poisoned, by the cairn marking the highest point. Of the two islands, this one seemed more feminine with grassy slopes and even some low scrubby willow, the other masculine with more in the way of cliffs and rocks. Both are delectable spots on a fine summer day.