

Scottish Islands **EXPLORER**



**The Chaotic Scot
trailblazes across isles**

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weather on
Isle of Eigg

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landscapes of
North Uist





Street scene on the Isle of Iona



Cattle on the Beach, Kerrera

Cover Story

The Chaotic Scot trailblazes across isles

By Katie Macleod

“There’s nowhere else I would rather be on earth than on a Scottish island.” For Kay Gillespie – better known to her 50,000-plus followers as The Chaotic Scot – island hopping isn’t just a passion, but an integral part of her job of exploring Scotland.



Kay Gillespie...a Selfie on the Isle of Arran

As the Edinburgh-based writer behind the award-winning travel blog The Chaotic Scot, Kay shares her Scottish travels with the world through immersive storytelling on her website and social media platforms. She also creates custom travel itineraries for visitors to Scotland, runs the online gift shop Dreaming of Scotland, and is the main writer for the latest edition of the iconic Lonely Planet Scotland guidebook, where she focused on the Southern Highlands and Islands.

It is the Scottish islands which have captured Kay’s heart, though. The first island she visited was Skye, in 2010, and she has now been to 64 of them so far. One of her favourites remains Iona, which got under her skin in 2015, during a quick island-hopping day trip to Mull, Iona, and Staffa.

“There was just something really special about that place, and I felt it before I even got off the ferry. It was palpable, the beauty and the serenity and the peace that kind of washed over me when I got there. I remember feeling quite emotional when I had to leave.” She’s returned many times since, following in the footsteps of those who’ve taken the pilgrimage route to Iona since the 7th century. “For me, Iona is like medicine for the modern world,” says Kay. “I feel like I make my annual pilgrimage there just to reset.”

Kay adds that she feels as if she is “on a lifelong mission to get to as many islands as possible,” a mission that began when she took on a “30 before 30” social media challenge in an attempt to visit 30 Scottish islands before



Mara Fish Bar, Isle of Arran

she turned 30. “There is a beauty there in all weather,” says Kay of the islands. “For me there’s something special about each and every island, and I don’t think I’m ever going to tire of discovering that. I go to the islands for adventure, but I also go for complete relaxation.” Her next island adventure will see her sail around Mull on a week-long trip on the Provident, a 1924 Brixham Trawler that’s part of the national historic fleet, where she hopes to visit some new islands to add to her growing list.

The region Kay knows the best is Argyll and the Isles, and if people are looking for an island-hopping itinerary without a car, this is the area she often recommends. The lack of a car is one of things that make Kay’s travels around



Isle of Iona



Holy Isle from Isle of Arran



CalMac ferry, Isle of Iona

Scotland particularly unique: she doesn't drive, and travels almost exclusively on public transport – and often solo, too. "I always say to people figuring out timetables and my itinerary is my favourite kind of problem solving," she explains. It's all part of the adventure, as Kay finds that travelling by public transport gives her a more local experience than rushing from one destination to the next in a car.

While some islands are trickier to navigate by public transport alone, there are plenty that she suggests for a car-free adventure. Barra is one of them ("You can do the famous flight and beach landing, and there's a local bus which comes to the airport and takes you right in to Castlebay"), while the Small Isles are also an easy car-free option, as visitors can't take vehicles on the ferry. "Islay is another great island if you don't have a car, because if you're going for the whisky anyway you probably shouldn't be driving!" she laughs.

For the holidaymakers who book travel planning sessions with her, driving in another country can be a cause of nerves, so Kay's wealth of knowledge comes in handy. Her itinerary planning services developed organically as readers began to reach out to her for more tailored travel advice, and they soon became an in-demand part of The Chaotic Scot business. The classic itinerary most first-time visitors go for takes them to Edinburgh, Skye, Inverness, and Glencoe, although Kay always offers slightly less touristy spots along the route that people can opt for if they're interested, like hopping over to Raasay during a trip to Skye, for example.



Puffin, Isle of Lunga



Portnahaven, Islay

Kay's unbridled enthusiasm for travel in Scotland is enough to make anyone want to book a holiday immediately, whether they live there or not, but it's an enthusiasm that came about completely by chance. "I always say my love for Scotland happened by accident," explains Kay. It was after being offered a job as a Scottish tour guide for Haggis Adventures in 2010 – which she very nearly turned down – that Kay first fell in love with her home country.

"I very reluctantly said yes, and I went off on my assessment tour. It was a three-day tour into the Highlands and up to Skye, and I will just never forget seeing it all on that first trip. I couldn't even believe it was my own country. I'd been far more interested in foreign adventures... and when this was all revealed to me on that first tour, I just knew I was on to something, and wanted to share it with as many people as possible."

That split second decision to take the job changed her life. Kay began her degree in Tourism and Marketing Management at Edinburgh Napier University later that same year, and launched *The Chaotic Scot* in 2013, after being inspired by hosting a group of high-profile international travel bloggers on a tour to the Highlands. "I hung up my tour guiding microphone at that point, and I always say I found a new way to take people around Scotland through the blog."

Kay may have originally set out to help people in Scotland discover what's on their doorstep, but in the process, she attracted a global audience, fell in love with island-



Tobermory, Isle of Mull

hopping, and became an expert on exploring the country via public transport. She prioritises "slow travel," both for herself and her readers and clients, encouraging people to take the time to appreciate the landscape, culture, and history of the locations they visit. "My advice is that Scotland is best enjoyed at a slow pace, and that you will potentially miss out by trying to do too much."

"It was never my plan to fall in love with Scotland. I would never have known that that was the path I was going to take," says Kay. "I've always loved to write, and I've always loved to travel, and I knew I wanted to do something that combined the two, but the missing piece of the puzzle was my subject, and that was Scotland, and I found that by chance by taking that job as a tour guide. I can't imagine ever doing anything else now."