

Coastal castles and beach bothies on Lewis and Harris

The Outer Hebrides now have places to stay that are as inspiring as the scenery. **Claire Sawers** heads north to a cosy hotel by the beach and a rustic lochside bunkhouse

The Outer Hebrides have always done jaw-dropping beaches, sea stacks and standing stones — but accommodation worth shouting about? Not so much. These days, however, Lewis and Harris have designer beach bothies

and upcycled shacks, a contemporary castle conversion and a quirky country house hotel. Last month I crossed the Minch for a closer look.

SCARISTA HOUSE, HARRIS
A former minister's house turned small hotel in a remote corner of south Harris, this Georgian manse gives a warm welcome with lots of chintzy details.

Come in soaking after wandering in the dunes, and husband and wife team Tim and Patricia Martin bring you baked treats and mint tea, freshly picked from the garden, to sip by the peat fire in the library. Rooms have worn Persian rugs, antique photo albums and ocean views.

There are three bedrooms in the main house and three more in a low-slung house at the back. Think antique sleigh beds covered in rose-patterned bedsheets, a Regency feel with heavy drapes and mustard-gold fabrics.

Breakfast can include smoked salmon from South Uist or Stornoway black pudding, and the team are up early baking bread for your toast. Dinner has a sense of occasion: it starts with canapés in the drawing room, often features local lobster, and ends with a Hebridean and Highland cheeseboard then petits fours. The furnishings are homely and the family spaniel and pug are often found looking for someone to play with.

As for location, it's spectacular. The vast white Scarista beach lies just across the machair and dunes; the turquoise waters of Luskentyre beach are a 20-minute drive away. Heading north, you'll enter a rugged, rocky landscape that doubled as the surface of Jupiter in Stanley Kubrick's 2001: A Space Odyssey. The Calanais Standing Stones are just over an hour's drive away and from April onwards you can take boat trips to St Kilda from Leverburgh Harbour. *B&B doubles from £175; three-course dinner £50 (scaristahouse.com)*

OTTER BUNKHOUSE, LEWIS
Dipping a toe into West Loch Roag near the hamlet of Miavaig, this modern larch-clad bunkhouse and neighbouring bothy share views with a pair of otters who often pop up by the front window.

The bunkhouse sleeps eight in one bunk room (the pandemic means you get the whole place to yourselves), styled with mismatched armchairs and Harris Tweed curtains, and has a basic kitchen and en suite bathroom. Twenty yards or so along the shore, the no-frills blue corrugated iron bothy has a double bed that almost touches the mini-kitchen. Neither is luxurious, but both are well kitted out, with loch-view decking where you can look for seals and dolphins.

Don't fancy cooking? The timber-and-

glass Uig Sands restaurant, overlooking the beach where the Lewis Chessmen were found, is ten minutes' drive away.

Otter Bunkhouse is open for exclusive use only, from £100 per night; Otter Bothy, sleeping two, costs from £75 (otterbunkhouse.com)

Claire Sawers was a guest of Scarista House and Otter Bunkhouse

FOUR MORE PLACES TO STAY

Beach Bothies, Lewis
Stay in one of two glass-fronted bothies above Kneep beach, opened last summer by the owners of the Scallop Shack in Miavaig. Teetering at the western edge

Gleneagles, Perthshire

For facilities on a grand scale, other places pale in comparison. Gleneagles runs like a well-oiled and beautiful machine, yet it is surprisingly welcoming; you are made to feel special from arrival. Activities include shooting, riding, fishing, gun-dog school and off-roading (there are even kids' Jeeps). It has a gorgeous spa and, in my view, Scotland's best suite of swimming pools.

Isle of Eriska Hotel, Ledaig

As you drive over the Victorian iron bridge, you enter a more tranquil world. Its 300 acres are a sanctuary for wildlife; the famous badgers come to the conservatory bar for their milk and peanuts. Two two-bedroom and five one-bedroom suites in a spa outbuilding are more contemporary, with private terraces and hot tubs. There is a nine-hole golf course and a great 17m pool and gym.



NATURAL RETREATS; LESLEY CHALMERS; OTTER BUNKHOUSE



Top: Lewis Castle near Stornoway. Left: Scarista House. Above: Otter Bunkhouse on West Loch Roag. Cover image: Oran na Mara

of Lewis, the bothies have views across terrace, sand and sea (£140 per night; sleeps three; thebeachbothies.co.uk).

Lewis Castle, Lewis
Lording it over a handsome park above Stornoway, this Victorian castle reopened in 2017 after a £19.5 million facelift. It has a museum housing some of the Lewis Chessmen, a restaurant and stylish one to three-bedroom apartments (from £485 for a three-night minimum stay; togethertravel.co.uk).

Oran na Mara, Harris
You'll have to book a year in advance,

but this ultra-modern thatched stone house is worth it. On the hillside above Scarista beach, the three-bedroom property has a peat-burning stove, Hypnos beds and Sonos speakers (from £2,962 for a one-week minimum stay; sleeps six; orannamara.com).

The Broch, Harris
Inspired by the Carloway broch on Lewis, the Broch is a Fred Flintstone-meets-Kevin McCloud stone tower with a turf roof and sweeping ocean views through a full-height window (from £643 for a three-night minimum stay; sleeps two; borvelodge.com).

Cromlix House, Dunblane

A long-established country house hotel taken over by Andy Murray's family (who come from Dunblane). Managed by ICM Group, it was modernised tastefully and reopened in 2014. It has all the mod cons you'd expect, though there is a rather corporate feel overall. There is no spa, but it does have tennis courts, fishing lochs and 3,000 acres of wooded estate to wander. Private chapel, open fires, nice terrace.

Glenapp Castle, nr Ballantrae

Relais & Château luxury in South Ayrshire. From the oak-lined cloakrooms at the discreet main entrance (it's the first right turn after the village; there's no sign and you access via entryphone), you sense opulence enveloping you even before you reach the lounges. There is excellent, considerate service and top-notch food. The interiors are impeccable, the rooms beautiful, the suites enormous.

Knockinaam Lodge, Portpatrick

A historic Victorian house nestled on a cove. The Irish coastline is the only thing on the horizon, apart from fantastic service and food. Winston Churchill was once very comfortable here too. Superb wine (especially French) and understated foodie fabulousness.

Taken from Scotland the Best by Peter Irvine (£15.99, HarperCollins)



DOWN ON THE FARM

The Coastal Carriage at Down on the Farm, which offers family-friendly agritourism breaks in Aberdeenshire

A one-way ticket to off-grid without going off the rails

No phone? No problem. Plug into nature in a converted rail carriage on the northeast coast, says **Gillian Furmage**

I was prepared for an "off-grid" adventure right up until I discovered my cabin had no electricity. In other words, nowhere to charge my phone. The jolt of panic told me all I need to know: after too many hours poring over multiple screens, I seriously needed this weekend.

I was staying in a converted vintage rail carriage at Down on the Farm in Aberdeenshire, a family business offering what is an increasingly popular holiday in Scotland: the agritourism break.

The carriage accommodation had no electricity, no TV and no wifi. What it did have was a view of rolling fields, giving way to steep cliff faces and the Banffshire coastline. On my visit you could see across the water to the Sutherland hills. The only sounds were the whisper of the wind and the distant mooing of cattle.

I'll admit I was nervous about going "unplugged". But after settling into the cosy cabin, getting the wood stove going and cooking up some pasta, I sat outside, tucked into my dinner and forgot all about scrolling through feeds or checking Whatsapp.

While the cabin was charming, with its cutesy interior, tartan furnishings and electric fairy lights, the practicalities of the no-frills experience were less appealing. The "bush shower" involved boiling water on the hotplate, filling up a bag and then using a pulley system to lever it up to the ceiling. At best it got me slightly damp, and I emerged still smelling like the men's shower gel I had hastily and mistakenly picked up en route to the farm. It felt like a lot of effort for not much reward.

As for the outside composting toilet, that was a cross between my first experience at Glastonbury and an aerial assault course: try not to breathe through your nose and whatever you do... Do. Not. Look. Down. The carriage comes with its own vintage potty — a godsend, I'd wager, if you

don't fancy heading out in your PJs on cold winter nights.

After a restful night thanks to the thick countryside darkness, it was time for my tour of the farm. The owners, Carole and Matthew Short, make an impressive team, running the 200-acre farm and accommodation — they also have self-catering Hobbit houses and shepherd's huts — with no outside help or staff.

The tour started with a cup of tea and shortbread while Carole and Matthew openly and honestly discussed the realities of farm life. It's tough, and all-consuming, but the passion emanating from the hosts was palpable.

The farm has breeding cattle and 130 Dorset Horn ewes, which can breed more than once a year, so guests can experience lambing even outside of spring. As my visit was in mid-September, I was able to enjoy one of the final lambing experiences of the year and even held a silken, inquisitive day-old lamb.

After an informative, friendly and thorough tour, which included bottle-feeding a spirited young calf called Bruce, I felt more certain than ever that I'm not cut out for farming — it's not so much a job as an entire lifestyle, running deep in the Short family bones. I decided that exploring the surrounding coast with fishing villages and golden beaches was more my speed.

Twenty minutes along the coast, Crovie is the local showstopper. Built at the base of a sea cliff on a narrow ledge, it is one of the best-preserved fishing villages in Europe. It is impossible to use your car in the village, so residents returning from their weekly shop must park near by and use a wheelbarrow to transport goods home.

Just around Troup Head RSPB reserve, whose towering cliffs are home to mainland Britain's largest gannet colony, Pennan is another village with seaside cottages tucked in by the cliffs, where tourists rock up for selfies in the phone box that starred in the 1983 film *Local Hero*.

After being buffed by the sea air at Cullikhan beach — the site of Hell's Lum, an ominous collapsed sea cave that looks ready to drag you to the underworld — it was time to go to Fraserburgh for fish and chips before heading home.

Back in the city, screen time creeping back up again, I'm looking for my next digital detox escape. No wifi? No problem. But next time I'll be sure to pack emergency dry shampoo.



Need to know

Gillian Furmage was a guest of Down on the Farm (downonthefarm.net) and Visit Scotland (visitscotland.com), which has links to farm-stay holidays across Scotland. One night in Coastal Carriage costs £75.



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Country house hotels
Peter Irvine