

The
Outer
Hebrides

Guide book

by CHARLES TAIT

Hebudes
INNSE Gall
Sudreyar
Na h-Eileanan an Iar
The Western Isles

The Outer Hebrides

Guide book

by CHARLES TAIT

The Outer Hebrides Guide Book
copyright Charles Tait 2012
Published by Charles Tait
Kelton, St Ola, Orkney KW15 1TR
Tel 01856 873738 Fax 01856 875313
charles.tait@zetnet.co.uk
www.charles-tait.co.uk

*This book is dedicated to the memory of my step-mother,
Jean Maxwell Tait (1913-1999)*

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be copied or reproduced in any form, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise (except for the purpose of bona fide review) without the prior written permission of the publisher. The author has asserted his right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1998 to be identified as the author of this work.

Text, design and layout copyright Charles Tait,
all photographs copyright Charles Tait unless
otherwise credited, old photographs from
Charles Tait collection
OS maps reproduced from Ordnance Survey
mapping with permission of the Controller of
HMSO, Crown Copyright Reserved MC
100035677
Printing by

ISBN 09517859 3 1

*Front cover: Allasdale, Barra; Water Lilies, South Uist; Rodel Church, Harris; Chessman replica,
Stornoway; Seilebost, Harris; Corncrake, Ness; Callanish sunrise, Lewis
This page: Traigh Iar, Harris*

Na h-Eileanan an Iar Hebudes, Sudreyar, INNSE Gall, Western Isles

CONTENTS

| | | | |
|-------------------------------|-----|--------------------------|--------------------|
| Welcome to the Outer Hebrides | 4 | The Uists | 128 |
| The Main Ancient Sites | 6 | North Uist | 128 |
| Nature and Environment | 8 | Berneray | 132 |
| Archaeology | 30 | Benbecula | 142 |
| History and Culture | 48 | South Uist | 150 |
| | | Eriskay | 162 |
| Lewis | 68 | Barra | 168 |
| Stornoway | 70 | Castlebay | 168 |
| East Lewis | 76 | Vatersay | 180 |
| West Lewis | 80 | Bishop's Isles | 182 |
| Callanish | 82 | Outlying Islands | 188 |
| North Lewis | 86 | Reference Section | 206 |
| Bernera to Uig | 98 | Transport | 206 |
| Harris | 110 | Accommodation & Services | 208 |
| North Harris | 110 | Bibliography | 214 |
| East Harris | 122 | Index | 218 |
| West Coast Beaches | 114 | Admiralty chart | inside front cover |
| South Harris | 118 | Western Isles map | inside back cover |



Callanish Standing Stones

THE OUTER HEBRIDES is a chain of over 200 islands to the west of northern Scotland, stretching 200km (130mi) from the Butt of Lewis in the north (58°31'N, 6°16'W) to Barra Head (56°46'N, 7°39'W) in the south. The islands are between 50km (30mi) and 100km (60mi) from the Scottish Mainland across the Minch and the Sea of the Hebrides. They cover about 3,070km² (1,190mi²).

The archipelago was referred to by Scottish Gaels as *Innse Gall*, Islands of Strangers, referring to the Norsemen who held sway here for nearly 500 years. The name Hebrides probably arose from the Greek *Hebudes* by mistranscription. Today, the Scottish Gaelic influence is strong, however the Norse heritage remains evident in many of the placenames and in the language.

About 26,500 people inhabit 15 of the islands, with the majority of

the population living in Lewis and Harris (about 22,000). The main town and ferry port is Stornoway with a population of about 9,000.

From mainland Scotland, the Outer Hebrides appear as a long series of hilltops on the horizon. When approached from the east they initially appear rocky and bleak, with many inlets and small islands. In contrast, on the west side there are many sandy beaches and attractive bays, with relatively few high cliffs.

Ferries Connections are operated by *Calmac* with mainland Scotland. MV *Isle of Lewis* runs between Stornoway and Ullapool, while MV *Hebrides* connects Tarbert in Harris with Uig in Skye and Lochmaddy in North Uist. In the south, MV *Clansman* links Lochboisdale in South Uist and Castlebay in Barra with Oban. There are ferries between Harris and North Uist, and from Eriskay

to Barra. Berneray, Scalpay and Vatersay are served by fixed links.

Air links Loganair operates air services on behalf of Flybe. From Stornoway there are daily flights to and from Edinburgh, Glasgow, Aberdeen and Inverness. Benbecula has daily connections to Stornoway, Barra and Glasgow, while Barra has daily services to Glasgow and Benbecula. Other current flights are detailed in the Service Section.

The earliest written references to the islands are probably by Pliny the Elder around 70AD and Ptolemy in about 150AD. Pytheas the Greek may have visited Lewis in about 325BC during his voyage, when he established the latitude of the Stornoway area and may have visited Callanish.

The Norse sagas, which date from the 12th century, describe many events and people in the Hebrides,

but it was not until the late 17th century that detailed accounts began to be made about visits to the area. In more recent times many eminent people have visited the Outer Hebrides and a number have written in various terms about their experiences.

There are a number of distinguished local authors, and there is always a good selection of local books available in the bookshops, including many in Gaelic. The library in Stornoway has a fine reference section for those wishing to consult the many books which are out of print.

The landscape is beautiful, history everywhere, and there are many good opportunities to see wildlife. However there is another aspect of the islands which is perhaps the most important and rewarding to get to know, the local people. Do not hesitate to ask the way, or about things as you are sure to get a courteous reply.

If you are lucky you might get a few good stories as well! There is a saying in the Outer Hebrides that "When God made time he made plenty of it", which describes the



Loch Bee, South Uist - one of the largest of many in the Outer Hebrides

apparent pace of life in the islands rather well.

Maps Some of the places mentioned in this book are signposted, but many others are not. Signposts and maps may be in modern Gaelic or in various cartographers' spellings, so Ordnance Survey references are quoted for many sites of interest. Maps are invaluable on all visits. The Ordnance Survey 1:50,000 Landranger series covers the islands in six sheets, while the 1:25,000 Explorer series comprises nine sheets, and is recommended for all serious explorers.

Kisimul Castle, Castlebay, Isle of Barra



COUNTRYSIDE CODE

We are justly proud of our historic sites, wildlife and environment. Please help ensure that future visitors may enjoy them as much as you by observing these guidelines:

1. Always use stiles and gates and close gates after you.
2. Always ask permission before entering agricultural land.
3. Keep to paths and take care to avoid fields of grass and crops.
4. Do not disturb livestock.
5. Take your litter away with you and do not light fires.
6. Do not pollute water courses or supplies.
7. Never disturb nesting birds.
8. Do not pick wild flowers or dig up plants.
9. Drive and park with due care and attention - do not obstruct or endanger others.
10. Always take care near cliffs and beaches - particularly with children and pets. Many beaches are dangerous for swimmers.
11. Walkers should take adequate clothes, wear suitable footwear and tell someone of their plans.
12. Above all please respect the life of the countryside - leave only footprints, take only photographs and pleasant memories.

Notice: While most of the sites of interest are open to the public and have marked access, many are on private land. No right of access is implied in the description, and if in doubt it is always polite to ask. Also, while many roads and tracks are rights of way, not all are.

There are so many sites of interest in the Western Isles that it would take many trips to visit them all. However even on a short stay it is possible to observe human constructions from a wide range of periods.

The early settlers have left much evidence behind them, ranging from numerous chambered cairns, and standing stones. These include the well preserved cairn at Langass on North Uist, the enigmatic Steinicleit at Shader in Lewis and the spectacular standing stone settings at Callanish.

Neolithic, Bronze Age, Iron Age, Norse, Medieval and more modern sites are scattered from the north of Lewis to Barra Head. While some are signposted, most are not, making maps essential in many cases.

Perhaps the most dramatic of all the Outer Hebrides monuments are the Standing Stones at Callanish. These megaliths and the adjacent smaller circles represent an immense amount of work for a Neolithic society and were clearly erected with a strong sense of purpose and reverence.

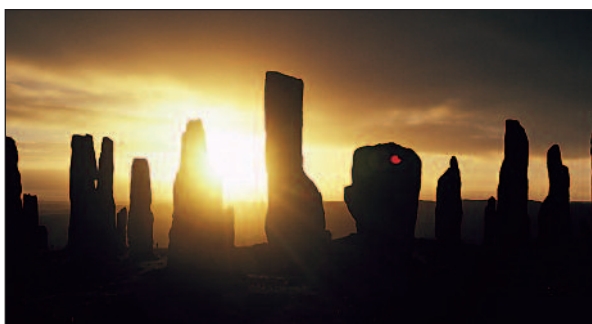
Dun Carloway is the best preserved of the many Iron Age brochs and duns in the islands. Its drystone walls have survived despite being used as a quarry for nearby blackhouses and shows the galleried structure typical of all brochs.



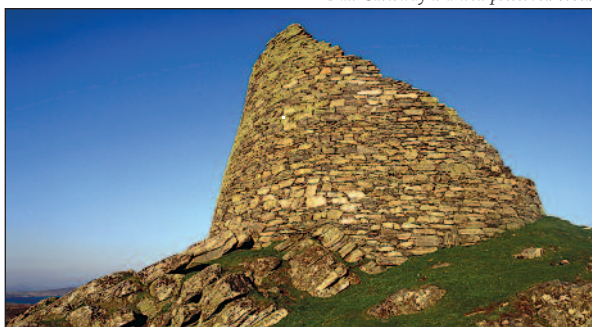
Langass chambered cairn is one of the best preserved of its type



Steinicleit is an enigmatic Neolithic ruin in north Lewis



Midsummer sunrise at Callanish



Dun Carloway is a well-preserved broch

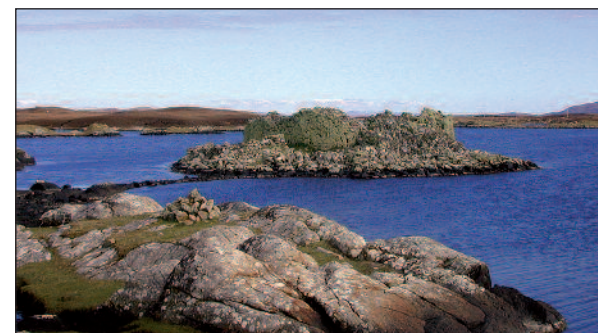
Duns and brochs form a class of domestic structure often termed as *Atlantic round houses*. There are many throughout the islands, but the best are probably in North Uist, especially Dun Sticir, near Otternish and Dun Torchuill.

Many are situated on loch islets and accessed by causeways. They were often occupied for long periods, from the Iron Age to Mediaeval times in some cases.

There are only a few remaining castles in the islands, and Kisimul Castle on Barra is the most dramatic. The castle at Stornoway was largely destroyed by Cromwell's troops during the Civil War. The remains now lie under the old ferry pier.

The Western Isles have many ancient chapel and monastic sites. Most are ruinous and remote. The best preserved Medieval church is the 16th century St Clement's at Rodel, Harris.

Throughout Scotland blackhouses were the standard domestic building until the 19th century. These apparently primitive dwellings had thatched roofs, and a central fireplace. The smoke escaped through the thatch which the human inhabitants shared with their livestock, much as in Neolithic times.



Dun Torchuill in North Uist is a ruined broch on an islet in a loch



Kisimul Castle, Castlebay, Barra



St Clement's Church at Rodel in south Harris has an elaborate MacLeod tomb

Blackhouse Museum at Arnol, west Lewis

