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SOUTH UIST (*Uibhist a Deas*), the largest of the Uists, is another island of contrasts. The east side is mountainous with a rocky coast

which is indented by several large sea lochs and faces the deep waters of the Minch. The Atlantic side has an almost continuous sandy

beach with dunes and machair land behind, giving way in turn to peaty moorland. The whole west side of the island is dotted with

innumerable lochs and lochans, many of which drain to the east.

There are many sites of archaeological and historical interest on South Uist. These include Neolithic tombs and settlement sites as well as Bronze Age houses and graves. There are Iron Age duns and wheelhouses, Viking houses, Medieval chapels as well as ruined castles and big houses. While some are signposted, most are not and many are in a state of disrepair or neglect.



Croic a Deas, Rubha Ardvue on the west coast looking south towards Kidonan



Loch Bee, looking southeast towards Hecla and Ben Mhor

The east coast of South Uist from the sea, with Ushenish, Ben Mhor and Hecla



SOUTH UIST

- South Ford
- Iochdar
- Loch Carnan
- Loch Bee
- Our Lady of the Isles
- Loch Skipport
- Loch Druidbeg
- Howmore chapels
- Flora MacDonald
- Kildonan Museum
- Kildonan church
- Loch Ainort
- Ormiclate Castle
- Bornish Viking houses
- Staneybridge standing stone
- Dun Altbrug
- Hekla & Ben Mhor
- Allt Bhogalair woodland
- Rubha Ardvue
- Dun Vulcan
- Reineval chambered cairn
- Lochboisdale
- Loch a Bhard cairn
- Calvay Island
- Kilphedar
- Hallan cemetery
- Pollochar standing stone
- Ludag
- Eriskay



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as a standby in case of problems with the undersea cable which supplies electricity from the Scottish mainland.

Our Lady of the Isles, by Huw Lorimer, (NF777408) was erected in 1957 to guard the island against any ill effects from the nearby Royal Artillery establishment. There is a marvellous view from here across the machair plain to the west coast and to the Atlantic Ocean beyond.

South Uist Missile Range was set up in 1957 to test tactical nuclear missiles as well as air to air and ground to air weapons. More recently pilotless drones have been operated from here, including the first to cross the Atlantic.

The Range is operated by QuinetiQ on behalf of the MoD and clients such as BAe Systems. It is based at RAF Benbecula with radars at Rueval and on St Kilda. Entry to the launching area is prohibited when red flags are flying. Plans to close the range in 2009 have so far not been acted upon.

Summer sunset from Loch Carnan

North Bay (NF748459), Ardivachar Point and nearby *Loch an t-Saile* are all good places to look for migrants. Greenland White fronted Geese also sometimes winter here. The nearby shop and workshop of Hebridean Jewellery at Iochar is well worth a visit.

Along the Iochar road a number of traditional thatched houses lie in various stages of decay. Some are now being renovated, but most are steadily reverting to nature. This whole area is lowlying and prone to inundation during storm surges.

Loch Carnan is the first of several long indentations in the east coast of South Uist. A diesel power station is now only used

North End The north end is dominated by Loch Bee, a large, shallow loch which is open to the sea at high tide, and thus slightly brackish. There is a large resident population of Mute Swans, many of which are non breeding. The outlet to the sea at Clachan (NF770465) is a particularly good place for waders and wildfowl.

Our Lady of the Isles on Rueval



Sheep at Iochar

Loch Druidibeg National Nature Reserve encompasses most of the habitats of South Uist, stretching from the Atlantic coast almost to Loch Skipport in the east. Apart from during the breeding season, when part of the reserve is closed, visitors have free access. There is a self-guided walk through part of the area. The Reserve is an important breeding site for Greylag Geese, which are resident here. There is a good example of a dun on the south side of the loch (NF778371).

Loch Skipport has a dilapidated pier from the Herring boom times. This is a good point from which to explore part of the remote and wild east coast. The summit of Hecla (606m) is a hard 4km tramp, while, isolat-

ed headland of Ushenish, is nearly 8km. The lighthouse here was first lit in 1857, and has been automatic since 1970.

The beautiful glacial valleys of Glen Ushenish, Glen Corrodale and Glen Hellisdale are well worth the effort of the long walk. In particular the 260m high sheer craigs of Coire Hellisdale (ON *Hellis Dale -Cave*

Valley) on the north-east face of *Beinn Mhor* (620m) are spectacular, especially early on a summer's morning.

Bonnie Prince Charlie spent several weeks in 1746 hidden in the Glen Corrodale area to evade the authorities. Prince's Cave (NF835313) is reputed to be one of his hiding places.

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churches, at Howmore. The oldest may be 13th century, although there are suggestions that this was a much earlier Christian settlement site. *Teampall Mor* (St Mary's) is quite large, 20m by 8m, and the east gable with two windows survives, while the other one is smaller and dedicated to St Columba.

There is a tall standing stone (NF770321) nearly 3m high above Stoneybridge, which can be reached by road leading to a water pumping station, from where there is a panoramic view of the westy-

side of the island. This is a good point to start a climb to the tops of Beinn Mhor, Beinn Corradail and Heda.

Duns Nearby, Dun Altabrug (NF769344) is quite well preserved and may be reached by its causeway from the loch shore. Other dun sites include *Dun Uiselan* (NF777454), at the north end, and *Dun Mor* (NF776415), north of Rueval. *Caisteal Bheagram* (NF761371) on Loch an Eilean, near Howmore is a small delapidated tower with several small windows which may be 14th century. There are ruined longhouses around the tower and the site may have been in use by Clanranald until the 17th century.

Howmore Chapels There are ruins of two chapels and two

The chapels are much smaller, and have inwardly-inclined door jambs and steep gables reminiscent of early Irish practice. A third chapel was destroyed about 1866. An armorial stone of Clanranald from this site is now in the nearby Kildonan Museum. This stone disappeared from Howmore in 1990, but was rediscovered in London in 1995.

Flora MacDonald, who helped with the escape of Bonnie Prince Charlie from the Western Isles, was born at Milton in 1722, the daughter of the local tacksman. There is a commemorative cairn on the site of the house which is said to be her birthplace (NF742269).

Ormidate Castle (NF740318) was built for Ailean, chief of Clanranald in 1701, and burnt down in 1715, due to a kitchen

fire, the day after its owner was killed at the abortive battle of Sherriffmuir. The gaunt ruin was never rebuilt, but its still standing gables attest to the quality of its construction, if not the success of its occupant.

Loch Einort almost splits South Uist in two, and indeed many of the machair lochs drain eastwards into it. At *Airidh nam Ban* (G Shieling of Women), there was once a nunnery. Later there was an inn here. This is a good departure point for exploring the surrounding hills.

Allt Bhogalair (NF800290) is a small river running off Beinn Mhor, in whose lower valley a small but very impressive native woodland persists. The steep-sided ravine protects the rich flora from grazing. Although mostly composed of Birch and Hazel, there is an amazing diversity of flora here.

This interesting site can be reached from the road which runs along the north side of Loch Eynort. A path runs across the moor for most of the way. The best times to visit are from May to August.



Thatched cottage with lazybed potato patch, Howmore



Howmore Church was built in 1858 and has a central communion table



One of the chapels at Howmore



Stoneybridge standing stone



Dun Altabrug is on an islet in a loch which is joined to the shore by a causeway



Caisteal Beagram on Loch an Eilean



Clanranald stone, Howmore



Memorial to Flora MacDonald at her possible birthplace near Milton



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interesting information about the life style of the people who lived here in the first centuries AD. The main floor of the original broch remains unexcavated. The site was occupied for several hundred years, perhaps from 200BC until 400AD.

There is much evidence of ancient habitations on the machair in this area. It seems to have been the main centre of population until late Norse times, when the people moved inland to the blacklands, the fertile area between the machair and the peatbogs.

An Iron Age wheelhouse was excavated in the area in 1952, and another more recently found example has been reconstructed at the Kildonan Museum, which is situated in the old Kildonan School, now renovated. Apart from its informative displays, there is a cafe and craft shop.

Norse Church On the west side of Upper Loch Kildonan (NF732283) there is a series of interesting ruins. These comprise of a large and impressive 12th century Norse church with a semi-circular apse at its east end and associated domestic buildings. There are also remains of several rectangular buildings on the nearby Eilean Mor, which is connected to the shore by a now-submerged causeway.

There are strong similarities between this site and Finlaggan on Islay; the base of the Lord of the Isles in the 12th century. Kildonan may have been an important Viking settlement and Eilean Mor could be the *Tingwall* or Norse parliament of

Archaeology Rubha Ardvule is the most westerly point in the Western Isles, and is an excellent place from which to watch birds on passage during migration times. Dun Vulcan (NF714297) is on the south side of the peninsula leading to Rubha Ardvule and was partially excavated during the 1990s as it was being steadily eroded by the sea.

The original broch was built directly on sand and partially collapsed soon after construction. The bottom 4m of the tower has been preserved under the shingle of a storm beach. Excavation revealed the first floor; the lintelled entry passage, collapsed stairs and internal wall galleries.

Detailed studies of the extensive midden have produced much



12th century Norse church at Upper Loch Kildonan

Iron Age broch and outbuildings at Dun Vulcan, Ruadh Ardvule



Looking south from Rubha Ardvule towards Barra

the Uists. The church also closely resembles the design of the one on the Brough of Birsay in Orkney.

Although a Viking Age settlement was found at Udal on North Uist, and a single house at Drimore on South Uist, typical Norse-style rectangular houses have until recently been notably absent from Western Isles discoveries. However, nine Viking houses have now been excavated near *Trollaskeir* (ON *Trollsker* Troll's Skerry NF724275) which date from the 11th century or earlier.

Of the several Neolithic chambered cairns on South Uist, the most spectacular is on the north side of **Reineval** (NF755259). This well preserved tomb overlooks the fertile coastal plain and lochs of Milton and Frobost. It is about 21m in diameter and 4m high with large kerbstones still in place while some of the orthostats of the entrance remain on the south-east side and the chamber may still be intact.



Norse houses at Bornish

Reineval, a Neolithic chambered cairn overlooking Daliburgh





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The road to Lochboisdale was only built in the 1840s during the potato famine, just in time to assist in the forced emigration of over 1,000 people to Canada. During the Herring Boom of the late 1800s and early 1900s the port's convenient location and sheltered harbour ensured that it was important for the landing and processing of the Silver Darlings.

Several small fishing boats still work from here today, landing large quantities of shellfish, including crabs, lobsters, plawns and scallops. Ro-ro services started here with the arrival of MV Iona in 1974. nowadays the large Calmac ferry MV Clansman runs a triangular route from here to Castlebay on Barra and Oban.

Viewpoints If time permits, the walk to the top of the hill to the northeast of the village, *Triuirebheim* (357m), is well worthwhile for the panoramic view. A shorter but steep climb leads to the summit of *Beinn Ruigh Choimnich* (280m), the hill which dominates the village. There are wonderful views over Lochboisdale from here.

Another easily reached viewpoint

Lochboisdale (*Loch Baghasdail*, ON *Kastel Vagr*, Bay of the Castle) takes its name from a ruined castle on Calvay, the small island which guards the entrance to Loch Boisdale. It may date from late

Norse times. Its substantial walls are nearly 2m thick. The ruins include a small tower, and foundations, all of which are reminiscent of similar structures in Caithness and Orkney.



Sunset over Lochboisdale from the ferry

White Water Lillies grow on many of the lochs here



Lochboisdale from North Glendale



Lochboisdale from the south with Beinn Ruigh Choimnich (280m) in the background

is from the top of *Aisgerbheim* (NF755237, 126m), which is easily reached by a track opposite the road to the golf course. There is a dramatic view over the loch-strewn area of Daliburgh and the machair plain from here.

Chambered cairn The cairn at *Loch a Bhard* (NF777215), off the road to Lochboisdale is well preserved, no doubt because of its remoteness. Situated at the north-west end of the loch, this site is well worth a visit, but beware the bog, burns and lochs on the way. It is about 26m in diameter and 6m high. Most of the kerb stones are still in place, and the corbelled roof of the chamber is undamaged.

Askernish Golf Course This 18 hole golf course on the machair

Lochboisdale Harbour



Lochboisdale in the 1880s during the Herring fishing boom

was first opened in 1891, and although on flat machair, it has been described as *second to none in the various elements which go to make up a really good course*. It was originally laid out by Old Tom Morris. In 1922 Askernish Faem was given over to crofting tenure which led to the course being partially abandoned in the 1920s.

It has now been fully restored to its original state using traditional design. Environmental experts have already hailed the Askernish as *"the most natural links course in the world: the dunes' natural contours form the fairways, no artificial chemicals are used in maintenance, and during winter months sheep and cattle graze the course!"*

Lobster boats hauled out at Lochboisdale





South Uist and Eriskay from the ferry to Castlebay on Barra

Kilpheder Near Kilpheder (G Peter Chapel, NF733203) another aisled wheelhouse was excavated in the 1950s on the machair. Built into the sand, its circular stone wall is nearly 9m in diameter, with 11 drystone radial piers each with a space or aisle separating it from the outer wall. The central hearth can still be made out, while the entrance passage runs in from the east.

A enamelled bronze brooch dating from about 150AD was found here. It may be of Roman origin. This is the only such excavated wheelhouse in the Western Isles which has not been back-filled, but it is in a sad state of neglect. The house was in excellent condition when cleared out, but without a roof is rapidly deteriorating.

Chapels Two chapel names, *Cille Pheadar* (St Peter), which is said to be between the shore and *Loch Liana Moire*, and *Cille Bhrighde* (Kilbride) in the old burial ground at the south end, recall early Christian activity.

Norse Settlement A large Norse settlement has been partially exca-

vated near *Sitbean Biorach* (G Fairy Hillock, NF730199). Five long-houses, together with outbuildings and middens were investigated. The site dates from the late 10th to the mid 13th century and revealed a wealth of artefacts. These include bone and copper pins, silver coins

and broken Steatite pots. Burnt grain, animal bones and other detritus from the middens and house floors has revealed much about life at the time.

Cladh Hallan, the cemetery near Loch Hallan (NF734219), has a



Weaver's Castle, a pirate's haunt on Eilean Leathan

Iron Age aisled house at Kilpheder



16th century carved grave slab, perhaps originally from Howmore, or more likely associated with the ruined church on this site. It is typical of many such monuments in the Hebrides and may well have been carved by monks on Mull. The coastal location of the cemetery is typical in the isles.

Pollochar overlooks the Sound of Barra, and an isolated monolith (which may have been moved) stands sentinel here on the shore (NF745144). This was perhaps a seamark to the western approaches to the Sound, which needs careful navigation to avoid its many skerries and sandbanks.

The picturesque southern shore road leads to Ludag, and then *Bagh Mor* with its expansive sandy

16th century grave slab at Hallan



The beach at Kilpheder with mist rolling in from the sea

beach and dunes. The road ends at South Glendale, but a track leads across the moor to North Glendale and the south side of Lochboisdale.

The extensive lochs, streams and sea inlets of most of South Uist

remain unpolluted. Activities such as fish farming are limited to Loch Carman. This means that angling for Salmon, Brown and Sea Trout remains excellent here. The same conditions are of course also beneficial to wildlife in general.



Pollochar beach facing west towards the Atlantic

Standing stone at Pollachar





There are pleasing views over the Sound of Eriskay and South Uist from *Beim Scrien* (185m) and over the Sound of Barra from *Beim Stac* (122m). Most of the houses are near the harbour at Haun, as is the pub *Am Politician*, which is easily recognised by its Harrison Line flag outside.

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ERISKAY (ON *Eriks-oy*, Eric's Island) is a delightful small island on the north side of the Sound of Barra, and now joined to South Uist, near Ludag, by a causeway. Fishing is the main occupation here and boats are moored at *Haun* (ON *Havn*, Haven) and *Acaiseid Mhor* (G Big Harbour).

may be similar to those used by the Picts and Scots in battles.

The large church at Haun was built by Father Allan MacDonald, at the end of the 19th century. He was also a noted Gaelic poet and scholar. The altar base is formed from part of a lifeboat lost off *HMS Hermes* in WWII and washed ashore. The church bell is from the WWI German battlecruiser, *SMS Derfflinger*, scuttled in Scapa Flow in 1919.

Bonnie Prince Charlie made his landfall here in summer 1745 from the French ship *Le Dutillet*, on the beach on the west side which is still called *Coileag a'Prionmsa* (G The Price's Cocklestrand). He then proceeded to Arisaig on the Mainland after evading an HM frigate.

The island is colourful with wild flowers in summer, especially where the sheep cannot reach. Eriskay ponies also graze some of the land and this helps enrich the flora. These ponies are said to descend from the native Scottish ponies and

The famous *Eriskay Love Lilt* and many other traditional songs and folklore were recorded in the early 20th century by Marjory Kennedy-Fraser and others. These promoted the island and helped preserve in print much that was hitherto passed on orally.

The ro-ro ferry terminal at the south end of *Coileag a'Prionmsa* provides a car ferry connection with the north end of Barra. It operates every day including Sunday.



The causeway from Eriskay to Ludag was opened in 2001

Coileag a'Prionmsa and the ferry terminal to Barra



Memorial to Bonnie Prince Charlie



WHISKY GALORE

On 5th February 1941 the 8,000 ton Harrison Line ship *SS Politician* accidentally hit a submerged rock off the east side of Eriskay. She was carrying general cargo to the United States which included about 21,000 cases of malt whisky. Given wartime shortages and the slow response of the authorities, whisky as like manna from Heaven to the islanders.

Although the ship was finally beached in shallow water and much of the cargo salvaged, the islanders succeeded in "saving" a large proportion, which was hidden in all manner of places on Barra, Eriskay and South Uist. Fishing boats from as far away as the east coast were also rumoured to have replenished their stores.

The Customs & Excise men did finally arrive. Several people were arrested and convicted, though without the cooperation of the local police. The film *Whisky Galore*, based on the book by author Compton MacKenzie, then living on Barra, was released by Ealing Studios in 1948. It used Castlebay and Barra for much of the location work, and remains a favourite comedy over 50 years later.

SMS Derfflinger bell



The *SS Politician*, which went aground off Eriskay in 1941



With apologies to Winston Churchill

The remains of the wreck can still be made out at low tide on a sandbank near Calvay Island, and several bottles were recovered during the laying of the electric cable from South Uist by divers. Samples of *Polly bottles* as they are referred to can be seen at the

pub along with newspaper articles and other memorabilia. Genuine articles have *No Resale Without Federal Approval* on the bottle. It is rumoured that samples still come to light today during house renovations and the like.



Whisky Galore poster



A *Whisky Galore* Polly bottle

Altar in St Michael's of the Sea from *HMS Hermes*

