An Island of Contrasts

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 dunns 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.

South Uist:
- South Ford
- Iochdar
- Loch Carnan
- Loch Bee
- Our Lady of the Isles
- Loch Skipport
- Loch Druidbeg
- Howemore chapels
- Flora MacDonald
- Kildonan Museum
- Kildonan church
- Loch Ainort
- Ormicleate Castle
- Bornish Viking houses
- Stanebridge standing stone
- Dun Altabrug
- Hekla & Ben Mhor
- Allt Bhogalair woodland
- Rubha Ardvule
- Dun Vulan
- Reineval chambered cairn
- Lochboisdale
- Loch a Bhrap cairn
- Calvay Island
- Kilphedar
- Hallan cemetery
- Pollochar standing stone
- Ludag
- Eriskay

Drone from Our Lady of The Isles on Rueba

Lobh Be, looking southeast towards Hecha and Ben Mhor

The east coast of South Uist from the sea, with Ubenish, Ben Mhor and Heka
**South Uist - Uibhist a Deas**

**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 breeders. The outlet to the sea at Clachan (NF770465) is a particularly good place for waders and wildfowl.

**Our Lady of the Isles on Ruaival**

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

Along the lochar 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 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 (NF7777408), 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 Qinetiq on behalf of the MoD and clients such as BAe Systems. It is based at RAF Benbecula with radars at Ruaival and on St Kilda. Entry to the launching area is prohibited when red flags are flying. The long term future of the Range remains in doubt.

**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. During the breeding season part of the reserve is closed, but otherwise 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 Heda (606m) is a hard 4km tramp, while the isolated 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 cliffs of Coire Hellisdale (ON Hills 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 (NF855513) is reputed to be one of his hiding places.

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**Orasay Inn**

Superb sea and mountain views - peace and tranquility - conveniently situated for exploring the Uists and Benbecula

"Finally don’t forget to eat some seafood. The scallops, in particular, are enormous, and one of the best ways to enjoy them is as part of a seafood platter at the Orasay Inn, on South Uist. Clean, functional and home to one of the best chefs on the islands." (Sunday Times)

All rooms are centrally heated, with full facilities. Deluxe rooms have sofas and patio doors to a private decked area with outstanding views.

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Owned and managed by Alan & Isobel Graham
Assuring you a warm welcome and the best of attention
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 west side of the island. This is a good starting point to start for climbing Beinn Mhòr, Beinn Corradail and Hecla.

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 Uisdan (NF777454), at the north end, and Dun Mor (NF776415), north of Ruaival. Caisteal Beagrain (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 churches, at Howmore. The oldest may be 13th century, although there are suggestions that this was a much earlier Christian settlement site. Temple Mor (St Mary’s) is quite large, 20m by 8m and the east gable with two windows survives. The other is smaller and dedicated to St Columba.

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 at Milton which is said to be her birthplace (NF742269).

Ormiclate Castle (NF740318) was built for Ailean, chief of Clanranald in 1701. It was 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 Ainigh nam Ban (G Shieling of Women), there was once a nunnery and later there was an inn here. This is a good departure point for exploring the surrounding hills.

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

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Memorial to Flora MacDonald at her possible birthplace near Milton

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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 the Uists. The church also resembles the design of St Peters Church on the Brough of Birsay in Orkney, which may be contemporary.

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

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 causeway which is now submerged.

There are strong similarities
The road to Lochboisdale was built as recently as 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, prawns and scallops. Roro 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 Departing from outside the school, the 8km return walk to the top of Trìuaireabhéinn (357m), the hill to the northeast of the village, is well worthwhile for the panoramic view. A shorter but steep climb leads to the summit of Beinn Ruigh Choimich (280m), the hill which dominates the village. There are wonderful views over Lochboisdale from here.

Another easily reached viewpoint is the summit of Aisgerbhéinn (NF755237, 126m), which can be accessed via 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 Bhàrpa (NF777215), off the road to Lochboisdale is well preserved, no doubt because of its remote position. Situated at the northwest 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 was first opened in 1891. 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”, having been originally laid out by Old Tom Morris. In 1922 Askernish Farm was given over to crofting 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!”

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Kilphedar Near Kilphedar (G Peter’s Chapel, NF733203) an 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 discerned, 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.

Norse Settlement A large Norse settlement has been partially excavated near Sithean Biorach (G Fairy Hilllock, NF730199). Five longhouses, 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.

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

Cladh Hallan, the cemetery near Loch Hallan (NF734219), has a 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 common in the isles.

Pollchar 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 of Barra, 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 beach and dunes. The public 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 and agriculture are limited in scope and intensity. This means that angling for Salmon, Brown and Sea Trout remains excellent on the island. The same conditions are of course also beneficial to wildlife in general.
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, this was like “Manna from Heaven” to the islanders.

The ship was beached in shallow water and much of the cargo salvaged, but the islanders succeeded in “liberating” a large proportion of the whisky, 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 said “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 Compton Mackenzie, then living on Barra, was released by Ealing Studios in 1949. It used Barra for much of the location work, and remains a favourite comedy over 50 years later.

Directed by Alexander MacKendrick, it was Ealing’s most profitable film.

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” moulded into the bottle. It is rumoured that samples still come to light even today during house renovations or clearances.

ERISKAY

ERSKAY (ON Eriske-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 Haven, Haven) and Acaimedd Mhor (G Big Harbour).

Bonnie Prince Charlie made landfall here in summer 1745 from the French ship Le Dutillet, on the beach on the west side which is still called Càileag a’Prionnsa (G The Prince’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 may be similar to those used by the Picts and Scots in battles.

Haun. 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.

There are pleasing views over the Sound of Eriskay and South Uist from Beinn Sronian (185m) and over the Sound of Barra from Beinn 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.

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 roro ferry terminal at the south end of Càileag a’Prionnsa provides a car ferry connection with Ardmore at the north end of Barra. It operates every day including Sunday.