

## TRAVEL BLOG - HEBRIDES ISLANDS

The Hebrides are an island archipelago of varied and evocative landscapes lying off the north west coast of Scotland. Here, carved by the wild Atlantic, sheer cliffs, volcanic columns and rocky mountains meet sweeping beaches and bluer-than-blue waters home to some of the richest marine life in the world. In May, I went there as part of a personal project to explore coastal habitats and responsible wildlife tourism in the UK and, for the first time in a long time, to explore someplace closer to home.

It's something we're all guilty of: neglecting our doorstep in favour of faraway lands. In the coastal town of Oban, I met a man who, in all his years living in the Hebrides, had not once visited the nearby Isle of Skye - one of my dream destinations - but expressed far greater interest in places like California, Australia, and further still. In recent years my own travels have taken me further and further afield. But now I was about to discover not one, but a collection of hidden gems in my own corner of the world.

We chartered a boat with a team of marine biologists from Basking Shark Scotland for the week. On our first day out we drifted off the Isle of Coll, where seals darted through kelp forests, sprawled on rocky outcrops under the sun, and the water was as clear as glass. It looked almost Mediterranean (although certainly didn't feel like it)! The following day we just about spotted the first minke whale of the season, the crescent arc of its back slowly rolling into the deep. I was awed by white tailed sea eagles - with a wingspan of up to 2.5 metres, the largest bird of prey in the UK - and delighted in the sight of porpoises playing near the wake of our boat and otters drifting on their backs.

Every summer between May and October, the Hebrides becomes home to the largest hotspot of basking sharks in the world. At 7-10 metres long, these are the second biggest sharks in the ocean after the whale shark. They are also one of only three plankton eating sharks worldwide, straining them out of the water with a mouth up to a metre wide. Being elusive and having a large migration pattern, these sharks haven't been studied as extensively as others. But, every year, without fail, the waters of the Hebrides become the best place in the world to observe this magnificent creature.

We visited a little too early to get in on the basking shark action, but my wildlife highlights were unforgettable nonetheless. Firstly: the Isle of Lunga, a site of special scientific interest due to the vast number of seabirds that come here to breed. There were puffins *everywhere*. These birds have so much character, I could sit and watch them for hours. Lunga is also home to an enormous guillemot colony. I couldn't believe how many of them were in one place; my eyes struggled to adjust to the sheer number of them as I watched their sea stack waver before me like television static. My final wildlife highlight: free-diving alongside two seals, whose curious, puppy-like faces bobbed in my peripheral vision every time I resurfaced.

I reflected that it was nice to see a natural environment so populous, but the truth is that there is still shade to the spectacular beauty of the Hebrides.

Lunga, for example, appears healthy at first glance, but its seabird population has declined over the years. This is mirrored even more dramatically in other seabird colonies around the British coast due to reduced fish populations and global warming.

One day, head marine biologist Shane Wasik took us to a beach named TrÀigh Cadh' an Easa. Exceptionally exposed, facing the Atlantic coast bare with virtually zero obstruction all the way to Canada, it was more like a garbage buffet than the sandy paradise the word 'beach' conjures. Nets, crates, ropes, bottles - you name it, it was all there. Shane explained that despite best efforts from locals to conduct regular beach clean ups, the waste would continue to appear, ceaseless. What plastic waste washes up is further degraded by waves until they become marine micro plastics, an invisible menace ingested by all organisms in the food chain. Buoys have washed ashore; their ID indicates origins in Newfoundland. With such an enormous amount of waste coming across from other countries, travelling the Atlantic to ultimately end up here, there is only so much applying local effort to an international problem one can do.

So what realistic solutions do we have? Having frequently felt helpless myself, this was one of the concerns I addressed with Shane. His response? Advocacy, innovation, and lifestyle change. (The first two directed more at big corporations; the latter for the individual.) This was echoed by Vasco Bull, a zoologist on the team, the following day.

“I can tell you right now,” he says, “that every single one of us working in the [conservation] industry has, at some point, gone through a period of depression. Every single one.”

We were discussing the scale of “the problem”. I had just described the level of anxiety I and many others feel around it - what is the best way a single person can *really* help?

“Be kind to yourself” was not what I had expected to hear in response. Sure, we could all do with being a little kinder with ourselves - but how is that relevant to the climate crisis? Isn’t centering the self in the face of something so great, well, selfish?

“What I mean,” he explained, “is that there are a lot of people who barely have the time or means to take care of themselves, let alone the environment. They have enough to worry about as it is.” But, he went on to say: if we could be kinder to ourselves - making time for our own well-being, caring about our health - we might then become better positioned to maintain the space and ability in our lives to actively help protect, and genuinely want to protect, the environment too.

I hadn’t ever considered that. As for his other tips?

“Fight with your wallet. Watch where your money goes. Don’t buy something if you know it came from a bad place.” He added: “when you buy cheap - somewhere, someone is having to pay”, and “spend more on less.”

When I pointed out that sometimes the cheapest options are the only ones some people can afford, he acknowledged it but pointed out that “a lot of us spend more than we realise on things like alcohol, cigarettes - you might find that if you cut back on those things even just a little bit, you can then afford more sustainable options in other areas of your life.”

Final words of advice included the classic “reduce, reuse, recycle”. When asked about diet, his response - “you don’t have to go vegan, just try to eat sustainably” - came with advice to UK citizens to download the Marine Conservation Society’s

app “Good Fish Guide”, which advises users on the sustainability of local restaurants and supermarkets and which fish are good to eat.

In my time spent gliding through kelp forests, sailing past cetaceans, and exploring exposed, polluted sections of shoreline, I witnessed both the destruction of human activities and the beauty and strength of our oceans. The Hebrides faces challenges in the future, being at the sharp end of a changing climate to which there is often no single, easy answer. What *is* clear, however, is that our ecosystems are fighting - and we need to support that fight.