

Over the sea to Skye



Balmory-style houses line the shores



RYABAY

Darren Calpin takes a Hebridean road trip...

I'M IN GOOD company as I motor west along the scenic A87 towards the Kyle of Lochalsh: I have the grey-blue waters of Loch Alsh on my left, and a timeless Scottish folk song ringing around my head. The song in question is The Skye Boat Song, which describes how Bonnie Prince Charlie, disguised as an Irish woman, was rowed to the Isle of Skye to escape the pursuing British...

**Speed bonnie boat like a bird on the wing
Onward the sailors cry.
Carry the lad that's born to be king
Over the sea to Skye**

Of course, this most evocatively named of the (Inner) Hebridean islands is no longer a boat ride away from the mainland. Built in 1995, the majestic Skye Bridge now looming before me is not only far more efficient than

the ferries it has replaced, it's actually quite attractive, arching gently over the island of Eilean Bàn before crossing the water proper and easing into the village of Kyleakin on Skye itself. Though it takes only a few minutes to make the one-and-a-half mile journey, the crossing still feels special – as though you've discovered a shortcut to a once distant world

UNSPOILT BEAUTY

I continue west along the A87 with the aim of getting to Portree, the island's principal town. Aside from the odd village, the scenery is an endless parade of bucolic beauty. Tall trees and rocky outcrops do their best to draw my attention inland, but they have their work cut out trying pull my gaze away from the hauntingly beautiful snippets of the Inner Sound.

With the islands of Pabay, Scalpay and Raasay rising up from the eerily still waters, and the razor-sharp ridges of the jagged-looking Trotternish Peninsula brooding in the middle distance, keeping my eyes on the road is a challenge.

In no time at all, the scenery becomes more dramatic and it's now the interior's turn to take centre stage. The Cuillins Hills, Skye's rocky backbone, appear on my left hand side. The sight of waterfalls cascading right next to the increasingly wending road is just too much. So I stop the car at the side of the road and hike for a short while, following the banks of a babbling stream up toward the peaks, far, far away. It is so lovely. And so peaceful. For some reason I feel like the king of the world.



Darren dons his trusty walking boots

PORTREE AND BEYOND

Even kings need to eat, so I reluctantly get back in the car and point it toward Portree. The landscape changes once again at Sligachan as the A87 bends more than 90° back on itself and heads north through the heathland of Glen Varragil.

I've been told Portree is a charming little place but today, with so many tourists and luxury coaches filling its streets, I find it hard to warm to the place. In fact, it's so busy I can't even find a place to park.

I rashly conclude that this isn't for me and so, after a brief pitstop at a petrol station, I decide to head instead for the dramatic-looking Trotternish Peninsula.

The Trotternish isn't very far from Portree, little more than seven miles. However, the occasional need to pull in at passing places on the single lane stretches of road, coupled with the beauty of the jagged landscape, ensure progress along the A855 is enjoyably slow.

After passing the cobalt expanses of Loch Fada and Loch Leathan, I arrive at the car park for the Old Man of Storr.

Set on a steep rocky hill overlooking the Sound of Raasay, this 50m spike of rock is one of Scotland's most iconic natural landmarks. It looks moody and magnificent. I decide the 650m climb is probably going to take quite a bit of time and effort, so stuff all my waterproofs and a whole pack of sausage rolls into my backpack before lacing up my tired old walking boots once again.

I'm glad I did, as navigating The Sanctuary (the hilly green area in front of the rocks and cliffs) takes much longer than I initially thought it might. The gravel tracks from the car park quickly turn into dirt trails, many of which are dotted with bog-like wet areas that make progress slow and ponderous.

I decide not to stop and take in the views at intermittent points as it will only slow me down further, so press on.

'GIANT COUNTRY'

More than an hour later I finally reach the rocky outcrops most commonly used to admire the views and take photos of the Old Man. I'm a little short of breath and

– despite the pork overload – really quite hungry. This ceases to matter however as I turn to take in the vista. My stomach, lungs and limbs switch off and my eyes and heart begin to sing. "Wow!" I say aloud.

I've been fortunate enough to see some incredible views in my life but this may just take the biscuit. In the foreground, settled incongruously on the green folds, the Old Man and his weird-looking pals jut forcefully up towards the grey sky like ancient rockets on implausible launch pads.

Beyond them the hills roll away down toward Loch Leathan, Raasay, and the steel blue waters of the Inner Sound.

The Cuillins – a fearsome looking wall of imperious rough grabro – stand guard in the background. I can see for 30 miles and yet there isn't one man-made structure sight. It is, quite simply, sublime. I can understand now why Steven Spielberg chose this spot to be 'Giant Country' in the 2016 big-screen version of The BFG.

The sun is starting to set as I point my trusty steed back toward Portree, and my stomach >>

reminds me that a decent feed is long overdue. Happily, the vibe in Portree is completely different now. The streets are nowhere near as busy and a stroll around the quaint, cliff-fringed harbour, replete with colourful Balamory-style houses, is a real treat.

After demolishing a monster-sized serving of fish and chips with a frenzy that seems to unnerve some Japanese visitors seated nearby, I conclude this has been a truly wonderful day.

A CLOSER LOOK AT THE CUILLINS

I'm up early the next morning. I'll be leaving Skye today but I want to head inland and get a closer look at the Cuillins before I go. And so I head south, back along the same captivating stretch of A87 I came up yesterday. This time though, the giant, moody-looking jigsaw pieces are in front of me, dominating my windscreen.

After rounding Loch Ainort and waving adieu to Loch na Cairidh, I reach the village of Broadford, the point where I swap the reassuringly wide A87 for the B8083, the kind of undulating single track road that rewards and terrifies in equal measure.

As I weave my way around the menacing



The village of Kyleakin can be seen from Skye Bridge

PIXABY

mass of Beinn na Caillich (721 m), part of the Red Cuillin, I'm already starting to ingrain some pretty deep fingernail marks into my steering wheel.

Thankfully, the going becomes a little easier as I descend down past the picturesque crofting community of Torrin and work my way around the head of Loch Slapin. I stop and get out – and am hit rather abruptly by the brutal power of the landscape. There is just myself, the loch and the towering Cuillin peaks. It is deathly quiet; this is natural beauty at its most menacing

I jump back in the car and skirt south around mighty Bla Bheinn (928m). To me, it looks

like a slightly less aggressive version of Mount Doom and as such I think it might just be the most magnificent mountain I've ever clapped eyes on.

Eventually I reach Elgol, a small fishing village on the shores of Loch Scavaig that looks out over the kind of mountain backed seascapes you'd normally associate with Michael Crichton or Arthur Conan Doyle. Indeed, I find it almost impossible to look out over that dark expanse of water and take in the angular ridges and silhouetted slopes of the outlined Cuillins beyond without feeling like I'm about to enter some kind of mythical world. But Skye seems to have a real knack for doing that. [GTW](#)

Skye's iconic Old Man of Storr



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