

CICERONE

WALKING ON HARRIS AND LEWIS

30 day walks exploring the islands



Richard Barrett

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30 DAY WALKS EXPLORING THE ISLANDS

by
Richard Barrett

CICERONE

JUNIPER HOUSE, MURLEY MOSS,
OXENHOLME ROAD, KENDAL, CUMBRIA LA9 7RL
www.cicerone.co.uk

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Updates to this Guide

While every effort is made by our authors to ensure the accuracy of guidebooks as they go to print, changes can occur during the lifetime of an edition. Any updates that we know of for this guide will be on the Cicerone website (www.cicerone.co.uk/1145/updates), so please check before planning your trip. We also advise that you check information about such things as transport, accommodation and shops locally. Even rights of way can be altered over time. We are always grateful for information about any discrepancies between a guidebook and the facts on the ground, sent by email to updates@cicerone.co.uk or by post to Cicerone, Juniper House, Murley Moss, Oxenholme Road, Kendal, LA9 7RL.

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Front cover: Taransay – perhaps the best-known island in the Hebrides after the televised ‘Castaway’ series

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HARRIS

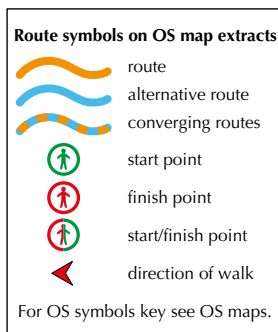
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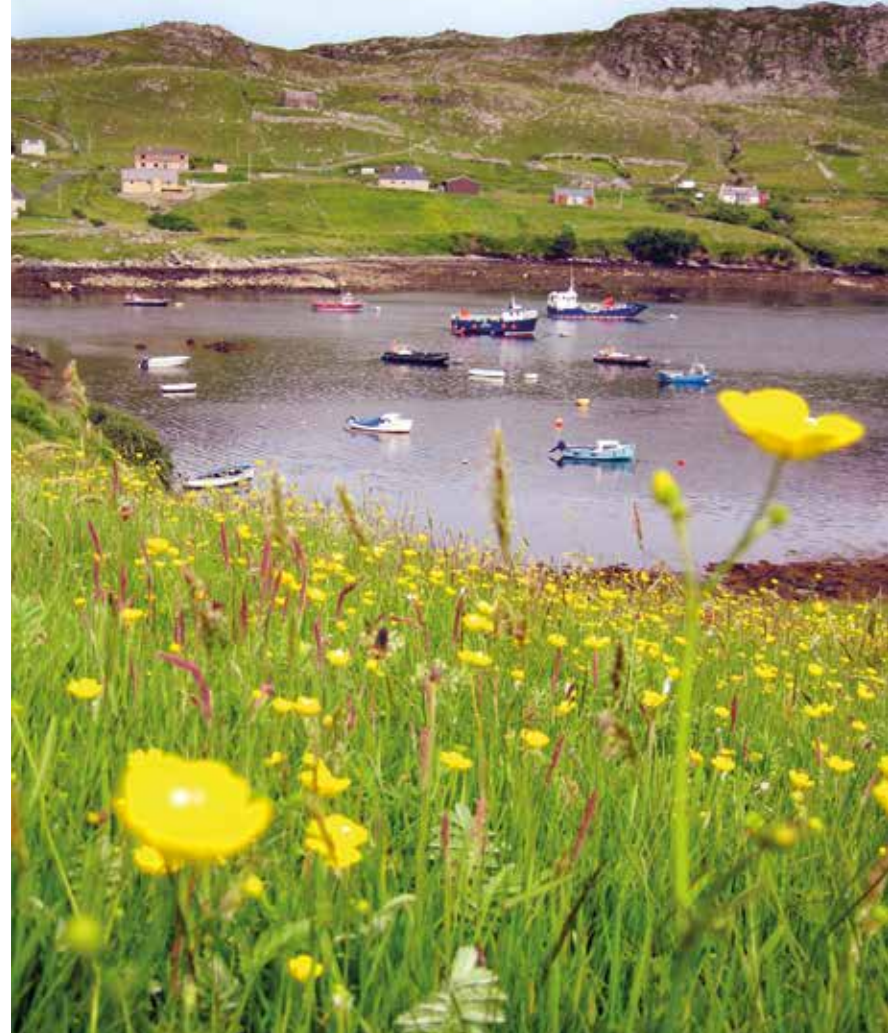
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The dunes of Tràigh Rosamòl with the Harris hills behind



Fishing boats in the village of Grabhair in South Lewis



Looking south from the summit of Cleit Ard (Walk 8)

INTRODUCTION

Together Harris and Lewis make up the largest island of the 130 mile-long archipelago known as the Outer Hebrides or the Western Isles. They lie at the very edge of Europe and, other than St Kilda and a few other isolated mountain peaks rising from the ocean bed, there is nothing but ocean to the west at a latitude of 58°N until you hit the coast of Newfoundland and Labrador. During the dark winter months there are gales every third day; and the other two are simply windy! And with nothing in their way for thousands of miles, the Atlantic winds rattle ill-fitting doors and snatch carelessly pegged clothes from washing lines making the islands seem a desperate place to be.

Much of Lewis is black peat bog pitted with thousands of lochs and lochans and the interior of South Harris looks so 'lunar' that it stood in as the planet Jupiter for the filming of the sci-fi movie *2001: A Space Odyssey* back in 1968. It all makes for a seemingly unappealing and hostile place to go walking, especially when getting there will certainly take longer and could cost you more than a budget flight to the guaranteed warmth of southern Europe.

But if you're a dedicated walker, tired of the crowded hills and mountains of more accessible areas, coming to Harris and Lewis is a must. You will get solitude in abundance and won't have to go far off the few beaten



Taransay – perhaps the best known island in the Outer Hebrides after the televised 'Castaway' series



Past industry in Harris – the old whaling station at Bun
 `Abhainn Eadarra below Mulla bho Dheas (Walk 11)

tracks to have a summit or glen to yourself. Although ferries and flights to the mainland are frequent these islands maintain an air of remoteness. Disembark at Uig after a week on the Outer Hebrides and even Skye can seem busy and boisterous, totally geared up for tourism.

In spite of being part of the same landmass, often referred to as the Long Island, Lewis and Harris are very different. With fish farming, ship building and even software development the economy of **Lewis** is much less dependent on tourism. Outside of Stornoway, the only town, the traditional occupations of crofting, fishing and weaving are still prevalent with many islanders still having more than one occupation. Having seen parents and grandparents suffering from the boom-and-bust cycles of industries such as herring fishing, weaving and rendering seaweed for chemicals, Lewis folk are proudly self-reliant and know how to get along. They also know how to enjoy themselves and although the Sabbath is still strictly observed with no shop opening or newspapers (a Sunday ferry service only started in 2009), Saturday night on the town in Stornoway is just as noisy and boisterous as in any other small town.

Harris is a total contrast; even Lewis people talk about going there as if it were another country. In many ways it is – or at least it was. In the past the mountains of Harris formed a substantial natural barrier between

Lewis and Harris, and the sea rather than road was the main means of communication and transportation. It's easy to see why, despite being part of the same landmass, they have retained the names Isle of Lewis and Isle of Harris. Everything happened at the periphery where the land meets the sea and even today there are few landlocked villages anywhere on the island. The division was more than geographic. Until 1974 it extended to local government with Lewis being part of the county of Ross and Cromarty and Harris part of the county of Inverness. Together with the other islands of the Outer Hebrides they are both now part of Comhairle nan Eilean Siar – the Western Isles Council – headquartered in Stornoway.

Compared with Lewis, Harris has far less of most things that seem to count in the modern world. It has a smaller population with barely 2000 people compared with the 18,000 in Lewis. Having little industry other than agriculture, fishing and tourism, it is far less industrialised than its neighbour. And the lack of memorials to the land struggle or the staunch resistance to Lord Leverhulme that can be found in Lewis suggests that Harris folk are perhaps more tolerant and easier going. When much of the Spanish Armada was wrecked in storms as it circumnavigated Scotland in an attempt to escape Sir Francis Drake's fleet in 1588, some of the Spanish sailors are said to have ended up on Harris. Their Mediterranean genes

SO WHAT IS AN ISLAND?

You are probably still trying to reconcile the anomaly of having the two islands of Harris and Lewis on a single landmass. But what exactly does it take to make an island? The Oxford English Dictionary defines an island as a landmass surrounded by water. This sounds straightforward. However, Hamish Haswell-Smith, renowned sailor and author of the definitive *The Scottish Islands*, was faced with the dilemma of which to include and which to omit, as listing every little skerry would result in a work that would run to many volumes. He decided to limit himself to any piece of land that is over 40 hectares at high tide and completely surrounded by seawater at low tide so that you can only get to it by getting your feet wet or by boat.

Having developed a working list of 165 islands to document, map and occasionally paint with his charming watercolours, the opening of the Scalpay Bridge and the causeways that link North Uist to Berneray and South Uist to Eriskay led him to reduce his list to 162, where it has remained since. Who knows how the population on the Isle of Skye, perhaps the most famous of Scottish islands, feels about being excluded from the list? Perhaps Hamish has to use an alias whenever he anchors in Portree harbour?



Looking down the fjord-like Loch Seaforth that divides Harris and South Lewis

are supposed to give the indigenous population a darker complexion and an easier manner than the blond, blue-eyed Lewismen, many of whose ancestors came from Norway. Who knows? It is also said that the Gaelic spoken in Harris has a softer lilt to it than that spoken in Lewis. Certainly everything else about the place seems to have a similar charm. But don't dismiss either. Harris may have higher hills and a greater number of beaches, but Lewis has more prehistory, more tourist attractions – and ultimately many more hills.

known since the late 19th century as Lewisian gneisses. The name describes a series of metamorphic rocks formed by intense pressure and temperature over a period of 1500 million years. Most of these gneisses started off as igneous rocks, such as granites and gabbros, formed by the cooling and crystallisation of magma nearly 3000 million years ago. These original rocks were then destroyed when they were buried, reheated and subjected to great pressures in the earth's crust, eventually forming the metamorphic gneiss complexes we see today.

Lewisian gneiss is characterised by narrow, alternating bands of contrasting colours. The paler bands, which are typically pale grey or pink, are made up of crystals of quartz and feldspar, whereas the darker green and black bands are largely made

GEOLOGY

The main islands of the Outer Hebrides and the north-western part of the Scottish Highlands are made up of some of the oldest rocks in Europe,



Lewisian gneiss below Sron Godamull

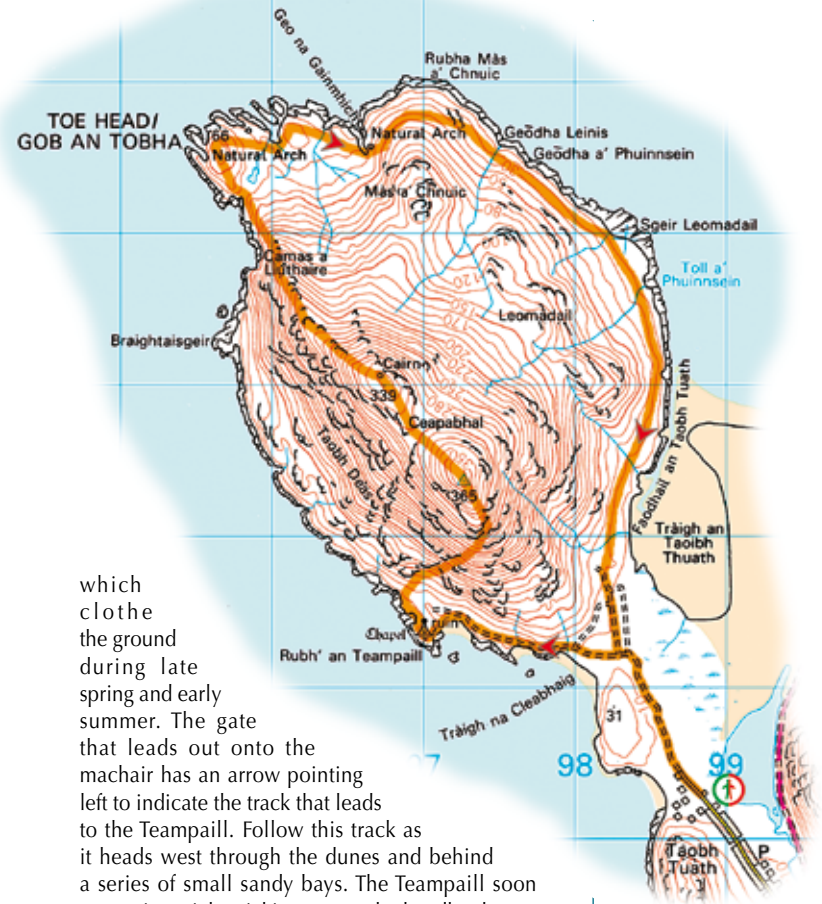
WALK 1

Ceapabhal and Toe Head

Start/Finish	At the road end in Northton, (NF986904)
Highest point	Ceapabhal 368m/1207ft
Climb	612m/2004ft
Distance	14km/9 miles
Time	4½–5hr
Map	OS Explorer 455; OS Landranger 18
Refreshments	The Temple Café in Northton opens every day including Sundays in Summer

A cursory glance at the map may suggest that this is a short, half-day route of easy walking and a modest peak. However, the climb is nearly 400m straight up from sea level and other than traversing the machair at the start and end of the walk, the going is difficult all the way. This is ‘yomping’ territory – either striding across knee-high heather or negotiating peat bog. However, do not be put off. The walk includes a mix of history, natural sea arches and stunning views over the Sound of Harris – and possibly out to St Kilda on a clear day. The return route looks out on to the brilliant white sands of Scarista beach and the Northton saltings which are home to many waders, including golden plover during the winter months. All of this makes the walk a miniature gem.

Rather than take up customer spaces at the café, park considerably along the road. Walk north-west to the end of the road then carry straight on along the track for 800m to a gate where paths go off in different directions. These pastures are part of the machair, a low-level coastal plain that runs along much of the Atlantic coast of the Outer Hebrides. It is formed by the wind blowing fine sand that is high in shell content onto the boggy acidic grasslands. This results in a rich fertile pasture able to support livestock and a multitude of wild flowers



which clothe the ground during late spring and early summer. The gate that leads out onto the machair has an arrow pointing left to indicate the track that leads to the Teampaill. Follow this track as it heads west through the dunes and behind a series of small sandy bays. The Teampaill soon comes into sight sticking out on the headland.

TEAMPAILL

Standing beside the remains of an older dun, which probably provided much of the materials, the present Teampaill or chapel dates from 1528 when it was built by Alasdair Crotach, Chief of the MacLeods in the same year that

he built the church at Roghadal. The roof would have been thatched with reeds from the nearby stream and the interior whitewashed with lime-rich shell sand. Being accessible for those living on the rich western coastal machair and the then populous islands of Pabbay and Berneray to the south, it served as the parish church for the whole of Harris before falling into disuse in the early 16th century.

It is best just to take it slowly and enjoy the view over the islands in the Sound of Harris and hills of North Uist beyond.

East ridge of Ceapabhal

There is no obvious path to the summit of Ceapabhal and any ascent is going to be arduous. Follow the coast line to the west to a stile across a stone wall. Cross this and then strike out up the hill following a band of pinkish rock that rises left to right across the hillside. This is hard going and anyone who is not a trained athlete will need frequent rests to recover their breath. ◀

Following this rock band leads around to the main ridge and eventually to easier ground that leads directly to the summit of **Ceapabhal**, which means 'the bow-shaped hill' in Norse. There is a trig point and a cairn marks the summit a few metres to the north. At 368m this is a modest hill, but the views are memorable. Taransay and the



white sands of Tràigh Losgaintir and the other beaches of South Harris lie to the north-east; the now uninhabited islands of Ensay, Killegray and Pabbay and a multitude of smaller islets are scattered across the Sound of Harris to the south with Berneray and North Uist beyond. Four kilometres offshore just to the west of Pabbay lies the small island of Siolaigh, a haul-out ground for Atlantic seals. If it is particularly clear look for the Cuillin of Skye, 80km to the south-east, and the island of St Kilda, 72km away to the west.

Head off north-west to cross a boggy bealach (Gaelic for pass or col) and gain a second cairned summit marked with a spot height of 339m. Continue heading north-west, keeping to the drier and easier walking along the ridge on the left until you reach the flatter ground at **Toe Head**. The return route takes you clockwise along the coast and if you want a diversion, you could visit the natural sea arches around the headland. ▶

Unless it has been dry for some time, the going can be quaggy all the way until **Sgeir Leomadail**. The word 'quaggy' probably describes much of the low-level

Ceapabhal and Taobh Tuath (Northton) from the summit of Creaval

There are four sea arches in total, but only two are marked on the Landranger series of maps.

terrain of Harris and Lewis better than any other. The word ‘boggy’ suggests that you run the risk of getting your feet and lower legs plastered in mud or black peat and in certain areas this can undoubtedly happen. But for the most part, the underlying layers of peat and moss mean that the ground is just springy and yielding (quaggy). It is best to move fast across such terrain, because if you stand still for too long, you are sure to sink into it and get a wet foot. But the views of the Harris Hills and the prospect of wildlife more than compensate for the possibility of a sodden sock.

Eventually the heather and peat bog gives way to pasture and walking becomes easier. A gate in a wire fence marks the first sign of a path that leads out across the fields above the sands and back to the starting point. Sgarasta across the bay was the childhood home of Finlay J MacDonald who wrote about family life there in the 1930s in his trilogy of books *Crowdie and Cream*, *Crotal and White* and *The Corncrake and the Lysander*. From May to September the children of the village went bare-foot, and on reaching the lush pasture of the machair you might wish to treat your feet and do the same.

WILLIAM MACGILLIVRAY (1796–1852)

Now recognised as a founding ornithologist and a fine bird illustrator in his own right, during his lifetime William MacGillivray was more famous for providing the narrative that accompanied John Audubon’s famous *The Birds of America*.

MacGillivray had a hard life. He was illegitimate; his father – an Aberdeen-educated army surgeon from Inverness – was killed in the Napoleonic Wars, and at the age of three young William was sent to live with his uncle Roderick at Northton. He received a remarkable education at the school at Obbe, since renamed Leverburgh, where he learned Latin and Greek. But when he wasn’t deep into his books, he was engrossed in the wildlife of South Harris.

Following in his father’s footsteps, he too went to university in Aberdeen, walking the 180-mile journey back to Harris for the longer vacations. His fascination with natural history inspired him to want to see the collections of

the British Museum, so in 1819 he set out and walked there too, covering a wandering route of more than 800 miles in less than two months. On the way he kept records of everything of interest and drew unfamiliar plants in his notebooks, but he only stayed a week before returning to Aberdeen by sea.

He returned to Northton in the summer of 1820 and married a local girl, Marion McCaskill, before returning to Edinburgh to become Conservator to the Royal College of Surgeons. He was a prodigious writer, illustrator and natural historian, perpetually busy but never achieving the commercial success required to keep his large family. He died in 1852 having spent his final years as the Regius Professor of Civil and Natural History at Aberdeen. Many of his illustrations are now in a collection at the Natural History Museum in London.

The ways of the early natural historians, such as MacGillivray, may not fit with our modern ideas of conservation and ecology, as much of their research involved killing things and cutting them up. In his *Descriptions of the Rapacious Birds of Great Britain* published in 1836, MacGillivray remembers a boyhood adventure on Ceapabhal when he used a live white hen as bait to entice a golden eagle into the firing range of his bird hide. ‘I fired, and received a serious contusion on the cheek, the gun having been overcharged. Impatient to know the result, I raised the roof on my back, forced myself through it, and running up to the place found the eagle quite dead, the whole shot having entered its side. So this is all, I thought, an eagle is nothing wonderful at all.’ Not yet a naturalist, he had no use for the bird and it was allowed to rot on the dung heap. The hen fared better; he records that it lived to rear a brood of chickens.



• 30 day walks from 4 to 22km • easily accessible from Stornaway or Tarbert • walks include An Cliseam horseshoe, the stone circles of Calanais and Butt of Lewis lighthouse

With high hills that sweep down to white sandy beaches beside the Atlantic, Harris and Lewis provide one of the last remaining refuges for walkers looking for spectacular scenery in a remote setting. Maps of the area show few footpaths but this guide offers a selection of full days in the high hills and wilderness areas and shorter, lower-level walks visiting world famous heritage sites and antiquities.

Routes include challenging hill walks include classic horseshoe routes, traverses and ridges as well as shorter walks that visit historic, cultural and geological sites.

The guide includes 30 day walks from 4 to 22km, including the high level An Cliseam horseshoe and low level walks to the stone circles of Calanais and Butt of Lewis lighthouse.



- challenging hill walks include classic horseshoe routes, traverses and ridges
- shorter walks visit historic, cultural and geological sites
- lists all the 'Marilyns' on Harris, Lewis and St Kilda
- OS mapping, route summaries and Gaelic index

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