

The Telegraph

A road to nowhere and the best beach in the world: Why my family keeps returning to Wester Ross



Red Point, our “best beach in the world” CREDIT: GETTY

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“Stop,” says my wife. “A roadblock.” Our little rental car draws to a halt as five tiny lapwing chicks emerge from a tussock and, one-by-one, totter across the tarmac after their mother. Their father swoops overhead, his shrill peeee-wit! proclaiming that wildlife has right of way up here.

I love driving Scotland’s west coast. Our journey always starts in Inverness, fresh off the sleeper from Euston, but it’s not until we turn left on to the Wester Ross Coastal Trail that the adventure really begins. Gentle farmland gives way to wild hillsides and dark lochans, mountains loom closer and, as the road narrows to single track, I keep one eye on the bends and one on the ridges for eagles.

We’re on my favourite drive – a road to nowhere. Following the coast south of Gairloch, past the scenic bays of Shildaig and Badachro, the tiny settlements peter out and trees yield to an ever bleaker-looking blanket of bog cotton. Ahead lies a dead end: not a promising prospect, you might think. But excitement mounts as we rattle over the last cattle grid, because beyond that dead end lies Red Point, our “best beach in the world”.

We’ve been family-holidaying in this wild corner of the Scottish coast for years. Sometimes it’s May half-term, sometimes summer; sometimes a rented cottage, occasionally a hotel; sometimes with friends or cousins, sometimes just us. But every year a similar routine. And every year Red Point is a must.

Parking at the end of the track (two other vehicles today: an outrage!), we gather packed lunches, beach gear and binoculars and tramp out across the fields, over the dunes and down to that great empty crescent of sand. At our backs are the glowering peaks of Torridon; across the bay to the southwest loom the craggy contours of Skye; and beyond that, the flat pastels of the distant Outer Hebrides. We dump our bags at the foot of the dunes. No footprints, bar fresh otter tracks. The piping of an oystercatcher carries with breath taking clarity.



The road to Torridon CREDIT: GETTY

In toddler days, Red Point meant sandcastles for my daughter and hand-held paddling in the limpid shallows. Now, mid-teens, and with a friend in tow, it's sprawling on a rug in the dunes or wandering out to the point, locked in earnest conversation. This is not the Riviera – those clouds might gather at any point – but the sand is better, the sun feels like a personal gift and the wilderness guarantees enough exclusivity to trump any Caribbean hideaway.

Each of the stunning beaches in these parts has its own character – and, for us, its own history. At postcard-perfect Mellon Udrigle, looking back across Gruinard Bay, firm sand means beach cricket and Frisbees. A cove to the south is our hunting ground for cowries, the whole family taking to hands and knees on the tide line as though searching for pearl earrings on a gravel path. Auntie Fiona is a dab hand.



Postcard-perfect Mellon Udrigle CREDIT: GETTY

And every beach means a walk. At Mellon Udrigle – worth mentioning again for the name alone – we generally meander up on to the headland to eat our sandwiches and scan for seals. One year, we found the bay detonating with diving gannets and watched a minke whale join the fishing party from below, its long gleaming body and hooked dorsal fin periodically breaking the surface.



The village of Shieldaig CREDIT: GETTY

That's the thing about wildlife in these parts: you just never know. A hike in the hills may produce red deer bounding up the slopes or a distant soaring golden eagle – or, for younger eyes focused at a lower level, newts in a trackside puddle or the undulating fur ball of an emperor moth caterpillar. But don't expect the wildlife to perform on demand. Once, hell-bent on finding eagles, I returned from a day's sweaty hike with nothing to show but bog-sodden trousers. Then, at the village shop on the way home, arms full of bread rolls and breakfast cereal, I watched a huge white-tailed sea eagle drift straight overhead, heading back to where I'd been. You're trying too hard, it seemed to say.

Wildlife or not, the walking is always superb. Each year, eschewing online options (Wi-Fi can be elusive), we fish out our dog-eared Walking Wester Ross and navigate our way around old favourites. Flowerdale, behind Gairloch, leads us upstream beside a stepped succession of cascades where dippers dash across the torrent; the Tollie Path crests a shoulder of mountain for stirring views of Loch Maree; the Fairy Lochs walk leads to three lonely lochans, where the wreckage of a Second World War Wellington bomber lies strewn across the bog, and red-throated divers wail eerily from somewhere beyond.



The Wester Ross coast CREDIT: GETTY

So what about the notorious midges? Yes, you'll certainly make their acquaintance – but the beaches are generally fine; just avoid the tree line on windless days. And the weather? Yes, it can rain. But what's a British summer holiday without some indoors time? Cottages come with books, board games and new kitchens in which to whip up something questionable. And last year, trapped by foul weather in Badachro, we watched a pine marten peering in at our rain-streaked cottage window.

In my experience, the bad weather is rarely relentless. What's more, summer days are long, so there's time to execute plan B, and even C, and still return to plan A when the sun comes out later. A rain-sodden morning can lead to a glorious evening beach picnic and a sunset stroll along the headland. At 11pm, the local cuckoos and skylarks are still at it.

Who knows what 2019 will bring? For a couple of years, we've been braced for teenage reluctance – a forsaking of the west coast pilgrimage for rival plans back home – but it hasn't happened yet. Meanwhile, it's been two summers since I saw an otter. There's always a new Munro to tackle. And whatever happens, there'll be haddock and chips and a post-hike pint at the Badachro Inn. That's more than enough for me.