

"GROWING up gay in a remote place, you do begin to think you're alone - especially in my youth, because the internet hadn't quite taken off then. The web is so important nowadays, both for accessing information and for making contacts - so you know you're not alone. Even though we're part of the UK - with its shift in attitudes and legal advances - you can still feel cut off over the water on these Isles."

may be aware of each other through our common sexuality, the web and hearsay, but that's about it."
 "I'm not really interested in gay scenes per se anyway. I occasionally meet up with a friend of mine over in Glasgow and go out there, but I'm not fussed. I once snogged a guy I was seeing in The Heb club here in Stornoway. We were both very drunk and copped-off on the dance floor. Apparently, you

paper even ran an item suggesting we'd shut due to homophobia - untrue!"
 "I've never had any trouble because of my sexuality. That said, I don't shove it down anyone's throat but if they ask me then - yeah - I tell them. I'm out to family, friends and those that ask. I'm totally out at my nursery; and more or less out at the radio station - although I've never discussed my sexuality on air and can't think why I would - unless some big local issue flared up, then I would."
 "It's a highly religious community and you have to be sensitive to that. The Churches have a very big stranglehold

THE ONLY GAY IN THE VILLAGE?

Gay people don't just live in big bustling cities. In search of 'the only gay in the village' QX visits the Outer Hebrides, off the North West coast of Scotland, amongst the most isolated parts of the British Isles. 31-year old Glenn from tiny Stornoway on the Isles of Lewis - male nursery nurse, part-time local radio host, creator of a now sadly defunct local LGBT support website and just about the only out queer in the Western Isles - shares his experiences exclusively with QX.

"The only real form of gay community that I have seen here has been through the internet, especially with websites such as Gaydar. To hook up - whether for friends, sex or to find someone special - online is the way now. I met my first boyfriend through a website. Plus, there are a few outdoor places where guys can meet in and around Stornoway." [see 'Extreme non-scene' feature page 14]

"So one way or another, I know lots of other gay guys round about but only a handful of us are 'out'. My first ex and myself are - plus a mutual friend is too, but only to close friends. This is such a tight community most guys are scared about what people will say and how quickly the gossip will spread."

"I've had three proper ex's up here, although one of them's moved away. Of the other two, one I still talk to; and the other - well, he doesn't talk to me. Only once - almost by accident - did several of us local gay guys meet up together; but there's no regular organised LGBT social group up here. We

could see us at it on the big screen upstairs - or so I was told by one of my nursery parents I later bumped into! No problem. Not sure I'd have done it without the booze though - my boy kept mixing my drinks."

"www.gayhebrides.co.uk' [now defunct] started off with about three or four of us local gay guys - good intentions - but we didn't have the time to maintain it. We never really got that much feedback but I think it provided a valuable service. When it closed down, I had to read the news out on my own local radio station! One national news-

on the way things move up here. I don't really follow a specific faith - I'm agnostic - and tend to believe that religion rules many people's lives and can repress them in many ways, not just their sexuality. Up here, we're stuck in a time warp and things change - but at a snail's pace."

"A decade ago, the children's play swings in the park were chained up on Sundays - not now! Pubs, restaurants and petrol stations are now opening on Sundays! My radio station still doesn't broadcast live on a Sunday - we've an automated service - but we will some day."

"Many things, including sexuality, have been repressed here for generations but people's attitudes are gradually changing and gays are starting to feel more confident about being a little more open in public. But the transformation will happen in 'Lewis Time' - extremely slowly."



REACH OUT HIGHLAND
 (www.reachouthighland.org.uk): **Inverness-based organisation providing support, advice and friendship to gay and bi guys throughout the Scottish Highlands & Islands. Call 01463 711585 or email gheb@reachouthighland.org.uk in the strictest confidence.**



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KABARET'S PROPHECY ALSO WON 'NO 1 COCKTAIL BAR' IN THE INDEPENDENT'S 50 BEST, JANUARY 2005.

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SCOTLAND'S pro-gay tourist authority, VisitScotland, swiftly deleted a "family run" Highland guest house from its records recently, after its owner branded a gay couple "sexual deviants" whilst (alas still legally) refusing them a double room because of their "perversion". Chucking this rotten apple has - not surprisingly - helped ensure a warm gay welcome in even the remotest of peaks or glens.

EXTREME NON-SCENE: THE HEBRIDES

the madding crowd, plucky gay explorer ADRIAN GILLAN makes his Great Gay Getaway: fab as a queer solo detox or remote romantic retreat.

And you can't get much more remote than the Outer Hebrides, off the North West coast of Scotland. In many ways, more Scandinavian or Gaelic than Scottish - though falling fully under UK and Scottish laws - the Outer Hebrides have struggled more recently with the influence of the Free Presbyterian church, who abhor Sunday openings. Rest assured: all accommodation in this feature is completely gay-friendly.

LEWIS

THE Isle of Lewis, together with adjoining Isle of Harris - 55 miles long and 30 miles at their greatest width - form the largest island in the Outer Hebrides. It has a declining population of approximately 20,000, a third of whom live in main settlement Stornoway, on the north east coast.

In a single day, you can witness a magical kaleidoscope of history, nature and wildlife - from dramatic cliffs and barren peat moor; through mountain passes via lochs and breathtaking beaches; to ancient standing stones and brochs, plus the odd fleeing otter or playful seal.

Start off at main settlement **Stornoway**

(population 6,000). Spy families of seals lolling and basking in the small harbour; stroll through the hilly Castle Park grounds for fine views back across the bay; and grab a bite at trendy, modern eatery **HS1** (Cromwell Street). If you're late in town on a weekend, you might check out the main nightlife at **The Clachan** bar (North Beach; Tel: 01851 703653) or **The Heb** club (South Beach) - best apply the same coy dis-

The Outer Hebrides, or Western Isles: literally - as well as metaphorically - are amongst the most isolated parts of the British Isles. Far from

cretion you would at any straight venue in central London. But you've probably come up here to avoid noisy clubs! That said, horny, harmless men have been known to loll around in the car park behind Euroclean; or along Castle Park paths after dark.

Stay the night at **Doune Braes Hotel** (Carloway, Isle of Lewis; Tel: 01851 643252; www.doune-braes.co.uk), a short drive over, on the west coast, just south of tiny Carloway: an utterly gay-friendly hotel near major archaeological sites, with bar, lounge and restaurant (open Sundays). Doune Braes is ruled by the friendly, feisty Eileen MacDonald and her team of dogs - prime movers behind Sunday opening on the islands, still prayed against in certain die-hard pews.

Refreshed, head north and you'll soon stumble upon **Dun Carloway** (www.historic-scotland.gov.uk), one of the most miraculously-preserved broch towers (fortified homesteads) in Scotland, whose poetically-proportioned dry-stone walls date back to around 500BC, the same age as the Parthenon in Athens, and scarcely less archaeologically important. No entry fee, no guards or gates: just chewing, knowing sheep, and stunning views across an inland bay!

Gorged on human history, head right up to the enticingly-named **Butt of Lewis** with its Phallic lighthouse on the Isles' northernmost tip. Witness raw Atlantic

breakers crash against cliffs whose folded strata expose Lewisian Gneiss, some of the oldest rock in the world, dating back 3 billion years - almost as ancient as the very Earth!

Heading back south again, stop off for a timeless moment at low-key and only recently exposed **Steinacleit Stone Circle**, dating back to around 2500BC. Warmed up, pop back past Carloway - and yet further back in time - to Lewis' undisputed man-made glory: the famous **Standing Stones of Calanais**, dating back beyond 3000BC - older than Stone Henge.

HARRIS

AFTER the abundance of moorland on Lewis, you'll by now be yearning southwards to Harris - "high heart of the Hebrides" - via mountains and lochs, like mini great Italian lakes. Having crossed the peaks, as you briefly bypass Tarbert onto South Harris, you suddenly encounter beach after expansive beach of fine shell-crushed sands, webbed out in snow-white arcs to your right.

A little out to sea, you see the sand-fringed island of **Taransay** (www.visit-taransay.com), location for BBC series *Castaway 2000*. Weather-permitting, take a boat over! Continuing south, **Scarista** is as good a Harris beach as any to lay your towel. Lavish yourself with 5-star self-catering at nearby **Blue Reef Cottages** (www.stay-hebrides.com), complete with Jacuzzi and sauna.

And so down to generally unlocked, beautifully proportioned, atmospherically carved, 16th Century **St Clement's Church** at Rodel, on the southernmost tip of South Harris. Continue round, on the single-track road, along the haunting and heart-achingly barren rocky eastern coast of South Harris - location for film classic *Space Odyssey 2001*.

Follow this ring-of-a-road round to end up back at **Tarbert** (population 1500) - second largest settlement in the Isles after Stornoway. Settle into **Harris Hotel** (Tarbert, Isle of Harris; Tel: 01859 502154; www.harrishotel.com): a recently renovated mid-Victorian mansion with bar and fine restaurant (open Sundays) overlooking a neat lawn and Tarbert harbour itself. Peter Pan creator J.M. Barrie stayed here in the 20's. His signature initials - carved on the dining room windows - can still be clearly seen.



▶ **TRANSPORT:**
British Airways (www.ba.com) - From most main Scottish airports, flights in cute little twin-prop planes take 45-60 minutes to Stornoway, the main town on Lewis
Mackinnon Self Drive (www.mackinnonselfdrive.co.uk) - Main hire car firm on Lewis & Harris - the only way to get around.

▶ **USEFUL LINKS:**
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