



Crown Copyright

BARRA (G *Barraigh*, possibly ON *Barr-oy*, Broch Island, more likely after the 6th century Irish follower of Columba, Finbar, St Barr). This beautiful little island encompasses the best of the Outer Hebrides, and is often referred to as the *Hebrides in Miniature*. There is a wealth of archaeology, history and wildlife, as well as a thriving Gaelic culture.

Castlebay (G *Bagh a Chaisteil*) The harbour at Castlebay, the main settlement, is one of the best in the Outer Hebrides, and is

unique in retaining its castle. It was used as a base by Vikings and their descendants for many years. Trading, fishing, piracy and inter-clan warfare were all activities carried out from here.

The harbour was very busy during the Herring Boom of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In 1869 James Methuen, a leading fish merchant from the east coast, started using the harbour to land and process Herring.

Up to 400 boats fished out of

Castlebay during the short season, and over 2,000 people arrived to cope with the gutting, salting and packing into barrels. Fishing is still a major part of the Barra economy, and several boats work out of Castlebay. The larger vessels are based at Northbay, where the Barratlantic fish processing factory is situated. Most landings are exported fresh in large chiller trucks direct to the markets.

Today Castlebay is a lively little village, with a comprehensive range of facilities and services, including a

Castlebay with MV Clansman at the pier



Our Lady of the Sea with Castlebay and the Bishop's Isles from Heaval

new community school complete with swimming pool. The *Feis Barraigh* takes place for a week each summer, during which visitors and *Bharrachs* participate in the many musical and cultural events which are held.

Heaval (ON *Hvit Fjall*, White Hill, but the first part could also be ON *Haff*, Ocean, 383m), is the highest hill on Barra and dominates Castlebay. The statue of the Virgin and Child is sculpted from Carrara marble. Known as *Our Lady of the Sea*, it was erected in

1954.. The ascent to the statue and summit are a stiff, but rewarding climb from an old quarry about 1 mile northeast of the village. On a clear day all of the Bishop's Isles are spread out to the south and mainland Scotland stretches along the eastern horizon.

Dualchas, Barra Heritage and Cultural Centre, is next to the school and has interesting displays, old photographs and genealogical information as well as a shop and cafe.

The Street, Castlebay



BARRA

- Castlebay
- Kisimul Castle
- Dualchas
- Castlebay Bar
- Heaval viewpoint
- Tangaval
- Dun Mhic Leoid
- Halaman Bay
- Borve
- Craigston Museum
- Dun Bharpa
- Allasdale
- Aird Greian
- Northbay
- Ard Mhor
- Traigh Mhor
- Traigh Eais
- Eoligarry
- Scurrival
- Earsary
- Brevig
- War Memorial
- Sound of Vatersay
- Vatersay
- Uineasan
- Bagh Siar



Kisimul Castle from the pier on a calm midsummer evening

Kisimul Castle (ON *Kastali Holmr*, Castle Holm) probably dates back to Norse times, but the existing structure is no earlier than 15th century. The first mention of Barra in the sagas is when Onund Wooden-Leg is said to have arrived with five ships in 871AD and driven away the local chief, Kiarval. He then used Barra, no doubt Castlebay, as his winter base.

Onund had lost a leg at the sea battle of Hafsfjordr in 874 whilst fighting on the losing side against King Harald Fairhar. In summer he and his men went on Viking

cruises and overwintered on Barra. In about 900 he was in Iceland with other people from Barra.

Based on a small island, but with a very convenient fresh water spring, the site is ideal for defence, and was probably fortified long before the Vikings arrived. It may very well have been the site of a large Iron Age broch. It is said that Kisimul was the stronghold of the MacNeils since about 1040

The original Norse structure here was probably a 3 storey tower, perhaps similar to the Castle of

Oldwick in Caitness. Probably in the 15th century the tower and curtain wall were rebuilt. Internal buildings were also repaired or built anew. Later the curtain wall was heightened. It was abandoned in the 18th century. In 1795 the castle was severely damaged by fire.

Boats transporting salt for fish curing used its stones as ballast and some are said to have been discharged in Glasgow, where they were reused for street paving. Herring boats also used it in a similar fashion whilst heading for the fishing grounds.

Castlebay, Kisimul Castle and Heaval from the ferry



MacNeil coat of Arms



In 1937 Robert Lister MacNeil, the 45th Chief of the clan, bought much of Barra, including the castle. He carried out a major restoration programme largely using stones from the many jetties around the bay, themselves built using bits of the castle.

Archaeological investigations in the courtyard found animal bones and shells in large quantities. Pottery dating from the Neolithic to late Medieval times indicates that the island has been inhabited for a long time.

Since 2001 the castle has been in the charge of Historic Scotland, who leased it for 1,000 years. The rental is £1 and a bottle of whisky per year. It can be visited daily by a small ferry from April till September.



Castlebay from the ramparts



Kisimul Castle, Interior of the Hall



Kisimul Castle Courtyard

MV Lord of the Isles passing Kisimul Castle



CASTLEBAY HOTEL

Castlebay, Isle of Barra HS9 5XD
Tel: 01871 810223 Fax: 01871 810455
email castlebayhotel@aol.com
www.castlebay-hotel.co.uk



A warm welcome awaits guests at the Castlebay Hotel, which overlooks the picturesque harbour, Kisimul Castle and the beautiful island of Vatersay.



Tangusdale and Dun Mhic Leoid with Ben Tangaval in the background

Dun Mhic Leoid (erroneously called Sinclair Castle in the 19th century, NL648996) is on a small island on Loch Tangadale. This tower was originally three stories high and measures about 3m by 2.5m inside, with walls about 1.5m thick. St Columba's Well lies near the loch, marked by some white stones. Otters frequent the loch and nearby Loch na Doirlinn.

Doirlinn Head There is a fine walk south to Doirlinn Head, and onwards to the top of Ben Tangaval (333m, NL638991) from Halaman Bay. **Dun Ban** (G White Fort, NF631003) is a ruined broch, in a dramatic clifftop location. There is a fine view from the top of the hill.

Borve takes its name from the ruined broch, *Dun na Cille*



Rough seas breaking at Halaman Bay

Allasdale from Beinn Mhartaime



(NF647016), at the head of a small geo, *Port na Cille*. In the adjacent graveyard there are scant ruins of a little chapel, *Cille Bhrianain* (dedicated to St Brendan). A short standing stone is prominent near the gate onto the machair, which in Summer is a sea of wild flowers. Many waders breed here and Oystercatchers are particularly common.

West Beaches The beaches of Allasdale, *Traigh Hamara*, *Traigh Tuath* and Halaman Bay all have their own character. Whether on a calm summer's evening, or during an equinoctial storm, the scene is constantly changing, dynamic, yet peaceful. The beach at Allasdale, or Seal Bay, is an especially popular place for selkies to haul out, and thus also for viewing them.

There are several pleasant walks in the area. A coastal route along the cliffs from Cleit to Suideachan follows an old path and affords especially good views over the west of the island, and towards South Uist. **Beinn Mhartaime** (244m, NF664021), overlooks the attractive township of Borve, and offers outstanding views. Above Craigston, *Dubhairidh*, an old thatched cottage (G The Dark Shieling) has been renovated (NF673014) and is open to visitors in the summer.

Chambered Cairn Further up the hill to the north, the large and apparently undisturbed mound of *Dun Bharpa* Neolithic chambered cairn (NF672019) is prominent.

Several kerbstones are still standing, and the entrance passage can be seen, facing down the valley. There is another chambered cairn (NF677012) further up towards the saddle of the valley.

Wheelhouse There is an aisled wheelhouse dating from the early centuries AD inland near Allasdale (NF677022) which has outbuildings and an associated souterrain. This house is unusual in that most such dwellings in the Western Isles have been found in machair areas. This house sits at the top of a very attractive valley, well above the machair.

Broch Dum Cuier (NF664034), a broch which overlooks Allasdale beach, was excavated



Greain Head looking south over Allasdale to Ben Tangaval

in the 1950s and has now been shown to have been reused over a long period.

Barra Golf Course is nearby on *Aird Greain*. This unusual 9 hole course has fences around the greens to keep the sheep out! There are also great views to admire when you are looking for your balls.

Greain Head The west coast of Barra is a series of curvaceous sandy beaches, backed by dunes and machair, interspersed by rugged headlands. From Greain Head (NF658047), above the Golf Course, with its abandoned WWII radio post, there is a particularly fine view southwards. A rough track leads to the top of the hill.



Dun Bharpa chambered cairn

Dun na Cille, Borve



ISLE OF BARRA HOTEL



Peace and tranquillity
Spectacular seashore location
Excellent cuisine - fresh local seafood
Comfortable, modern, family-run hotel
Self-catering cottage - sleeps six

Isle of Barra Hotel
Isle of Barra
Western Isles HS9 5XW
Tel 01871 810383 Fax 01871 810385
barrahotel@aol.com
www.isleofbarra.com/iob.html



Traigh Mhor or Cocklestrand is also Barra Airport

Barra Airport The north of the island is quite different in character to the south, with expansive sandy beaches, backed by sand dunes and machair. Barra Airport is unique in that it uses the large flat expanse of *Traigh Mhor*, or the Cocklestrand, as its runways. Recently Barra Airport has been voted as the 10th most spectacular approach in the world.

Operations are dependent on the tide, but the Canadian built Twin Otter aircraft which are used are eminently suitable for the job. There are daily flights to Glasgow and Benbecula at variable times. The beach is also the source of the wonderful cockles which may be found on local menus.

Cille Bharra (NF704074) overlooks Eoligarry and is said to be

Twin Otter at Barra Airport



dedicated to St Barr or Finbar, of Cork, whose feast day is 27th September. The church may also have connections to St Brendan. None of the three buildings visible appear earlier than 12th century, but it is likely that the original foundation was much earlier, perhaps 7th century.

An unusual grave slab is now in the National Museum in Edinburgh. The stone has a Celtic cross on one side and a runic inscription on the other to *Thorgerth, Steiner's daughter*. A replica of this 10th or 11th century stone is in the North Chapel along with three 16th century carved tombstones, probably commemorating MacNeils.

The door on the north wall of the church has inward-sloping

door jambs and windows similar to early Irish churches, strengthening its founder's probable Irish provenance. In early summer the precincts are enlivened by swathes of Primroses.

The graveyard is still in use and has an interesting range of memorials, from very ancient to modern. The author Compton MacKenzie, of *Whisky Galore* fame, who lived on Barra during 1935-1945, is buried here.

To the east of the church, *Traigh Cille Bharra* is another vast expanse of sand at low tide, stretching to the tidal island of Orosay. It is backed by the fertile machair plain of Eoligarry. **Eoligarry** was cleared in the 1840s to make one large farm. It

Thrift on the shore at Eoligarry



was eventually divided up into crofts again, many of which are still worked. The beaches here are vast areas of white sand. On a fine day the sea is a colour of turquoise giving a Caribbean feel to the place. The fields here are one of the best places to seek Corncrakes on Barra.

Dun Scurrial (NF695081) is dramatically situated on a rugged 50m hillock with stunning views over the west coast, *Traigh Scurrial* and the Sound of Barra. Parts of the walls and of the intramural galleries are visible. This Iron Age broch is one of several similar structures on Barra and the Bishop's Isles. Sites of such buildings are often indicated by the place name Borge from ON *borg*, castle.

Celtic/Norse grave slab at Cille Bharra



Traigh Eais and the west coast of Barra from Dun Scurrial



Swathes of Primroses in early summer



The beach at Eoligarry jetty

Cille Bharra has ancient chapels, gravestones from many ages and wild flowers





Otter and Salmon sculpture at the ferry terminal, Ard Mhor

East Coast The east coast of Barra is rugged with rocky bays, some with small sandy beaches and low cliffs. The sheltered inlet at Northbay has some of Barra's few trees, excellent places to find migrants in spring and autumn. Several passerine species breed here. There is a statue of St Barr

on an islet on the loch as well as a modern collage of the saint made with sea shells on the nearby St Barr's Church. In spring Gorse and Broom enliven the scene with their yellow flowers.

Ard Mhor There is a roro car ferry which runs between Ard

Mhor and Eriskay. Outside the terminal there is a fine sculpture of two Otters chasing a Salmon. This is a good place to look for these elusive creatures, which are usually seen in the gloaming.

Northbay has for long been Barra's second harbour. The Old Harbour is very sheltered and still used by small fishing boats. Aird Mhidhinis is the main base of the fishing industry on the island. It has a deep water pier and the Barratlantic fish factory. Whitefish, prawns and Scallops landed here are trucked daily to the mainland.

Balnabodach is today a string of houses along the roadside above Loch Ob just south of Northbay. Near the shore the remains of earlier houses dot the landscape. Loch Ob itself is very sheltered and accessible from the sea by a narrow channel nearly 400m long.

During excavations, a Bronze Age arrowhead and large quantities of Iron Age pottery were found here. Flint scrapers and knives as well as pumice tools were also present. The dun on Loch nic Ruadhe just up the burn may have been contemporary with this occupation.

Northbay has a very sheltered inner basin



Later, blackhouses were built here, perhaps beginning about 1750. Pottery, a clay pipe, broken tools and a copper thimble were among the artefacts discovered. In 1851 potato blight caused famine on Barra. 450 people were shipped out to Canada that year, including those from Balnabodach. They were soon replaced by families evicted from Borve on the west side.

Earsary The road winds through a series of townships with wonderful names, including Earsary (Earsairidh), Skallary (Sgallairidh) and Bervig (Breibhig). Apart from the modern houses there are many ruined blackhouses, most of which date from the 19th century clearances.

There are fine views of the east coast of Barra, the Minch and Skye from the hill to the south of Brevig, on the northeast flank of Heaval. The east side of the island is quite different from the west, with its rocky inlets and lack of sandy bays. It is worthwhile to walk or cycle rather than drive and not be in a hurry.

Mosaic on Northbay Church



Scots Pines and Gorse at Northbay



Cottage at Ardveenish, Northbay



Small boats at high tide, Earsary

Earsary with Muldonaich in the background





Sound of Vatersay and the causeway from below the War Memorial

Barra War Memorial was dedicated in 1993, to commemorate those from the island who gave their lives in WWI (71) and WWII (44). Most were in the Merchant or Royal Nany, although some were in the Army.

It is situated on the new road to Vatersay overlooking Castlebay and the Sound of Vatersay.

Allt Chrisal During the building of the new road an archaeological survey of the route and its environs

was undertaken. A surprising range of sites were discovered ranging from the Neolithic to the 18th century. Most are in the small valley of *Allt Chrisal* (NL643977), a burn which runs off Ben Tangaval into the Sound of Vatersay near the northern end of the causeway.

From about 3400 to 1800BC there was a settlement on two levelled areas just above the road. Hearths, pottery, flint tools and a saddle quern were found, as were several stone burial cists. The pottery was Grooved Ware type. A rectangular oven in the floor may have been a kiln to fire the pottery.

About 400m east, a small heel



Bronze age curved wall and hearth

Neolithic fireplace



Neolithic heel shaped cairn



shaped chambered cairn may have been the communal burial tomb for the settlement. This type of cairn is unusual in the Outer Hebrides, but common elsewhere.

Higher up there is a small circular stone hut, which is probably from the Beaker period, as nearby a small cist had a nearly intact beaker in it. It may well have been used to drink ale made from barley.

The most dramatic building is an Iron Age wheelhouse, which lies up the slope to the west of the stream. The walls, piers and central fireplace can all be made out. It is unusual as, apart from the one at Allasdale, most such houses so far found in the Western Isles are built into sand dunes, not free standing as here.

The most recent occupation in the area was in the 18th century, when a blackhouse with outbuildings, including a byre and kiln, were built near the Neolithic house. There are also remains of lazybeds nearby. This site was only occupied for perhaps 40 years. It is said that a plague of rats from a nearby wrecked ship drove the people out. There was evidence of rats' nests in the foundations of the house.

Iron Age wheelhouse, uphill from the Neolithic site



Barra War Memorial was dedicated in 1993



Castlebay from the War Memorial



Lewisian Gneiss rocks exposed in road cutting at the War Memorial

Bronze Age house





Crown Copyright



Sunset from Bagh Siar

VATERSAY (ON *Vatrs-oy*, Wet or Watery Island?) was joined to Barra by a causeway in 1990. Prior to this a small ferry ran across the Sound of Vatersay. Cattle were swum across behind small boats. The island was bought in 1910 by the Congested District Board after a series of land raids in 1906 by crofters desperate for land. The island was then divided into crofts.

Vatersay Bay The road leads eastwards to sheltered Vatersay Bay with its lovely sands. The community hall is at the north end of the beach, which is one of the finest of many lovely such stretches of sand in the Outer Hebrides.

Ammie Jane *Bagh Siar* (G West Bay) was the site of the wreck of the brig, *Ammie Jane* of Liverpool on 29th September 1853. She was bound for Quebec with 450 passengers and 45 crew when she encountered a severe storm in the Atlantic. The crew could not make sufficient repairs to make the ship manageable and she grounded on rocks in Bagh Siar.

In one of the worst maritime disasters of the 19th century, 348 people were drowned, and were buried in pits at the top of the

beach. There were 102 survivors, including the captain, because when the ship broke up the fore-deck and poopdeck acted like life rafts. There is a poignant memorial to the disaster above the beach.

On the south side of Vatersay, *Bagh a'Deas* (G South Bay) faces south over Sandray. There is a particularly fine view from *Heillanish* (NL633935), the low headland to the west of the beach.

Archaeology On the north side of Vatersay, *Dun a' Chaolais* is a large ruined broch which commanded the Sound of Vatersay. The entrance and intramural spaces can still be made out.

Dun Vatersay (NL626947) is another ruinous broch on a knoll to the west of the village. It com-



Collapsed broch entrance

Dun a'Chaolais Broch, overlooking the Sound of Vatersay



Catalina memorial



Vatersay Bay faces east

mands fine views over Bagh Siar, Vatersay Bay, and the north part of the island.

Chapel On the east side, on the small island of Uineasain (NL665957), the ruined chapel of *Cille Bhrainain* is on a hummock above a lovely sandy beach facing Castlebay. There is another fine beach at *Caragrìch* on the way to this chapel site. A side road leads to Uidh for part of the way to this idyllic corner of Vatersay.

Catalina On 18th May 1944, an RAF Catalina on a training flight from Oban crashed into Heishival Beag above the east side of Vatersay Bay. 3 of the crew were killed but the other 6 survived. There is a memorial at the roadside along with some remaining pieces of the aircraft.



Vatersay from Dun Vatersay



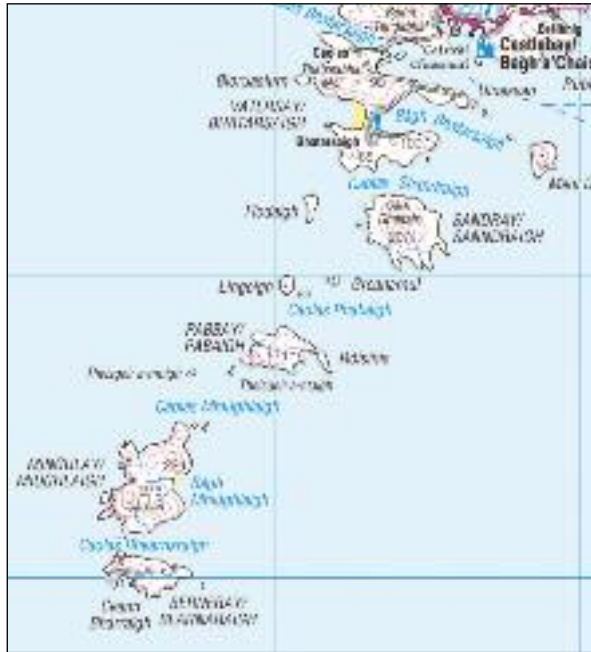
Bagh a'Deas from the west end

Bagh Siar on a misty day



Annie Jane memorial, Bagh Siar





Crown Copyright

The string of islands to the south of Barra was known as the *Bishop's Isles* because during Norse times they were part of the Bishopric Estate. Each is different, with its own character, although all have been uninhabited since the early 20th century.

SANDRAY (ON *Sandr-oy*, Sandy Island) is named for its huge sand dunes on the east coast below Carnach. There is a galleried dun unusually situated at about 100m (NL637913) on the south east ridge of *Cairn Galtar* (207m), and a chapel, *Cille Bhrighde* (NL652919) next to the old settlement site, which is now buried by sand.

PABBAY (ON *Papa-oy*, Monk's or Culdee's Island) has a beautiful white sandy beach on the east side, at *Bagh Ban*. (G White Beach). The settlement was inland from this, and extensive ruins remain. A steep mound nearby has many grave markers, but may originally have been a domestic midden.

Pabbay Stone from an old print



Sandy beach and dunes on the east side of Sandray

Sandray and the Sound of Sandray from Vatersay



Bagh Ban, Pabbay

The Pabbay *Pictish* stone, has flower and V-rod with crescent symbols, and has been re-erected nearby. The stone has a later primitive cross at the top. Another simple cross slab is face down in the grass. The remains of a chapel lie

about halfway towards the shore, mostly buried in the sand dunes. On the slope above, an Iron Age house similar to those at Bosta on Great Bernera lies excavated. Above Bagh Ban and facing across

the Sound of Pabbay, there is a small, but well preserved galleried dun, *Dunan Ruadh* (G Red Fort NL613877). There is a stunning 270 degree panoramic view from this vantage point.



Small cross slab on mound



Dun Ruadh gallery and stairway



Iron Age house



Sound of Pabbay with Dun Ruadh on the right

Dun Ruadh is a well preserved Iron Age dun or small broch





Mingulay Bay from the south, it is very exposed and never had a pier

MINGULAY (ON *Mikil-ey*, Muckle or Big Island) is the largest of the Bishop's Isles. The high cliffs up to 215m high on the west side, with spectacular caves, stacks and precipices, are home to many breeding seabirds in summer. The 150m high natural arch at Gunamul and the immense geos are especially impressive from a boat. Rock climbers also favour these Lewisian Gneiss cliffs.

The main settlement of ruined blackhouses, field walls, cultivation

strips and a burial ground lie above Mingulay Bay. A chapel, dedicated to St Columba, is now engulfed by sand. The large and incongruous Chapel House, built in 1898, is now ruinous but the Schoolhouse, built in the 1880s, is in good repair. There never was a pier because Mingulay Bay is subject to swell most of the time. Landing is best done on the rocks to the north or south of the lovely sandy beach.

There are good views from **Macphee's Hill** (224m) in the

north, **Hecla** (ON *Hekle*, comb, or *Hekla*, cowl, 219m) in the south and the highest hill, **Carnan** (G Heap of Stones, 273m). Macphee's Hill is named after a boy who was abandoned on the island after a plaque had wiped out the inhabitants. He survived for over a year on his own before the land was resettled. Mingulay was finally abandoned in 1912 after being populated for several thousand years. There are many pre-historic sites including many from the Iron Age and earlier.

Builacraig and Bagh na h-Aoineig, Mingulay



150m high natural arch, Gunamul



Barra Head is 190m high and often covered in mist

BERNERAY (ON *Bjorn-oy*, Bjorn's Island), or **Barra Head**, is the most southerly of the Western Isles. Its dramatic 190m cliffs are topped by Barra Head lighthouse at *Sron an Duine* (G Fort Headland). The remains of the Iron Age dun at the lighthouse protect a small area surrounded by rocks, right on the edge of the cliffs.

Sadly this dun was partially destroyed during the building of the lighthouse, which was first lit in 1833 and automated in 1980. Barra Head was the final waypoint for sailing ships westbound for the USA and Canada, which is one of the reasons for the construction of the lighthouse here.

Barra Head lighthouse



Another dun, **Dun Briste** (G Broken Fort, NL548806), on the north-west tip of the island, overlooks the Sound of Berneray. The landing place is on the northeast side below the old settlement. It is only exposed to the northeast, Shelter Rock and Maclean's Point

protect it from the tide and swell otherwise. There is an old graveyard to the east of Maclean's Point, with ancient gravemarkers, but nothing remains of the chapel which once stood there. A chaly-beate (iron bearing) well halfway up the hill provided water.



Midsummer sunset down the Sound of Berneray

Sron an Duine Iron Age fort

