



WHERE The Inner Hebrides, Scotland

START & FINISH Tayvallich, on the mainland

DISTANCE 110 miles **WORDS** Alice Philippa Gore

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EASTER ISLANDS

In April, the Inner Hebrides can be chilly but they're still beautiful, as CTC member **Alice Philippa Gore** discovered on a short tour of Jura and Islay

The freezing air bites at my cheeks and reaches up behind my ears to claw at my head. I can't fully feel nine out of ten of my toes and I'm bracing myself rigidly against my handlebar, stiff fingers poised above the brakes. It's not the most comfortable of moments, but I'm charging down the hill with a grin and loving the view. Ahead, the road tumbles along the side of the island, picking an undulating path between the sea on one side and the rugged grassland on the other. Beyond, there's a stretch of water, and then a carpet of mottled snow and a backdrop of white mountains.

The all-seeing eye of Big Brother is surely far, far away from here. I'm surrounded by countryside and sea and air and space. There's hardly a house or person to be seen. This is Jura – a wild and rustic Scottish Hebride, but also the island on which George Orwell brought to life the power-driven, manipulated world of 1984. Somehow it doesn't quite fit. Jura has a population of fewer than 200 people, a figure far outnumbered by the 5,000 or so red

deer that give the island its name ('Jura' stems from the Viking name, Dyr Oe, or 'deer island'). One lonely road interrupts the deer territory, and doesn't even stretch the full length of the island. Most of its 142-square-mile area escapes the disturbance of human footfall, let alone invasive cameras and Party spies.

EXPLORING JURA

Jura was the first destination of a two-day tour that my sister, brother-in-law and I embarked on at Easter. I'm not a very accomplished cyclist (hence my freezing feet, which my sister smugly avoided with her overshoes), but I enjoy the occasional outing, usually in tow of my rather more active siblings. Taking advantage of the long Easter weekend, we had picked a route along Jura's lone road, across to Islay (via a distillery or two), and back to where we'd left the car near Lochgilphead on the mainland. We rode 110 miles, but this could be adjusted either way according to ferry options and routes around the islands, Islay in particular.

We were blessed with uncharacteristically beautiful weather that weekend: cold for Easter, but sunny and with hardly a drop of rain (or snow) to be seen. The clouds meandered across the sky so that the light constantly changed in that mesmeric Highland way, and visibility was fantastic. Although the mountains that I could see across the water looked close, I was told that they were all the way over the Kintyre Peninsula and on the Isle of Arran. The Paps – so often shrouded in mist – also stood stark and white against the rusty land and shifting sky. Even the deer appeared clearly before us. We came across them periodically, enjoying a brief moment of

IN THE PHOTOS

- 1) Heading north on Jura on the island's only road
- 2) The bay at Inverlussa, Jura
- 3) Jura distillery, Craighouse. Whisky is the industry here
- 4) The Paps of Jura dominate the island, rising to 785 metres

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startled eye contact before scattering them into the grass, sometimes under the watchful eye of a pair of proud and protective stags. This wildlife was a far cry from the bold urban foxes of my central London home!

The downside to cycling on Jura is that you are forced to backtrack along the road. After arriving in the main village of Craighouse, we ventured north as far as the road would allow us, following a promise of tea on the beach at the small bay of Inverlussa. Sixteen hilly miles later, we arrived to disappointment; a rather dour local lady informed us that tea was not yet being served for the season. Bereft of refreshment, we admired the view instead. It was well worth the sweat. Standing on a little bridge, I watched a river run beneath me before skirting the damp beach and merging silently with the distant blue water. Jura is home to some surprising bays and beaches. In bizarre contrast to the western wilderness of most of the island, even palm trees grow in places, nurtured by the passing gulf streams.

OVER TO ISLAY

Back on the bikes, we returned the way we had come. Far from being frustrated by this, however, I was pacified by the new vantage on our surroundings. Despite brief interruptions from drivers who waited patiently for us to pant our way past them at minimal miles per hour, it felt like we had the world to ourselves. Before we knew it, we were watching Jura disappear behind us as we crossed the short distance by ferry to Islay.

History and whisky unite these two islands, yet both are more pronounced on the somewhat more hospitable and temperate Islay. Standing stones and Celtic crosses punctuate the rolling landscape as a reminder of the island's long human occupation. More recent history is marked by the eight working distilleries on the island.

Other juxtapositions of man-versus-nature and old-versus-new struck me on Islay. Being close to the mainland, it is a relatively well-developed island with a population seventeen times that of Jura (approx 3,500). >



DO IT YOURSELF

> **By car:** Lochgilphead, where we parked, is about two hours from Glasgow via the A82 and A83. **By rail:** the easiest option is probably to take the train to Ardrossan, then take ferries to Arran, the Kintyre peninsula, and then Islay, cycling in between. For details of ferries to various Hebridean islands, including 'Hopscotch' tickets that let you make several journeys, see the CalMac Ferries website, calmac.co.uk. The direct ferry from Tayvallich (on the mainland) to Jura runs from April to September; see jurapassengerferry.com. It's also possible to fly from Glasgow to Islay via British Airways: ba.com

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“Clouds meandered across the sky so that the light constantly changed in that mesmeric Highland way. Visibility was fantastic – I could see the Isle of Arran”



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As such, it has what can reasonably be called a town (Bowmore), supports the required infrastructure, and attracts greater numbers of visitors than its neighbour. This makes it an easier place to tour around than Jura, with better roads, services and some extra options for entertainment. However, the island also retains a remoteness and rawness that you rarely find on the British mainland. Cycling through the centre of the island early on Easter Sunday, I was struck by the image of a lone figure battling against the wind in peat bog, cutting turf by hand and stacking it up to dry.

GETTING INTO THE SPIRIT

It felt only right to end our trip to Islay by sampling its best-known beverage: the spirit of Islay in more ways than one. Bruichladdich, Bowmore, Ardbeg, Laphroaig... a veritable alcoholic litany that trips over the peaty tongue of the island. Now I don't yet have hardy enough taste buds for whisky (I took the breathe-deeply-and-go-for-it approach), but I could at least appreciate the flavours through the burn. And indeed it did a good job. A mile from Port Ellen on the south of the island, the beautifully-set Laphroaig distillery is a great place to look out and enjoy the sense of space and freedom before hopping on the ferry back to the mainland.

A wee dram is also good preparation for snoozing your way across the water. Those few sips just rounded off the satisfied tiredness that follows a good dose of exercise and a faceful of fresh air and wind. The wild remoteness of Jura and Islay drifted away behind me and the relatively busy mainland drew closer. The land of the real Big Brother approached – but at least my toes were warm. ☺

IN THE PHOTOS

5) Sunset on Islay. With more roads and amenities, it's easier for touring than Jura

6) Kennacraig on the Kintyre peninsula. You can catch a CalMac ferry from here

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FACT FILE JURA AND ISLAY

Where: Inner Hebrides, off the west coast of Scotland.

miles from the end of the road to George Orwell's house.

When: From April to September gives the most flexibility with ferries and the likelihood of best weather.

I'm glad I had...
Companions.

I wish I'd had...
Thermal overshoes. A better appreciation of whisky.

Distance: 110 miles, with room for manoeuvre.

Conditions: Challenging in places and hilly enough to be interesting, but overall surprisingly gentle. Jura was more strenuous, but rewards your efforts.

Where to stay: There are various options on Islay. We stayed at a characterful and affordable place called the Lochindaal Hotel. A warning, though: the cheaper rooms are above the bar, which gets noisy at night.

Start/finish: Tayvallich, approximately 10 miles from Lochgilphead.

Bike advice: Surfaces on Islay are definitely better than on Jura, where a hybrid or touring bike would be recommended at the least. Given time and a mountain bike, you could cycle the further four

Getting there/back: Tayvallich to Craighouse (Jura): £20 on the boat. Must be booked in advance but they take bikes at no extra cost; Feolin (Jura) to Port Askaig (Islay) (free in that direction as they assume it's the second leg of a return journey); Port Ellen to Kennacraig (£6.30 one way).

