

Arran

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*"That certain night, the night we met
There was magic abroad in the air,
There were angels dining at the Ritz...."*

Do you remember the last line of that song?

Think of Vera Lynn and Bing Crosby to give an idea of why it was so popular. The line was *"And a nightingale sang in Berkeley Square"*.

If you are wondering what that has to do with Arran, a small island off the coast of Ayrshire, you deserve an explanation.

It is quite simple. Arran has been well sprinkled with magic and in some ways it is contemporary with the song. It doesn't seem to have passed into our era of seeking perfection and of widespread mistrust.

For example, there are flowers by the roadside; Bluebells, Campion, Foxgloves, uncoiling Bracken, tall May Trees and yellow Flag Irises in the damp patches.

The road meanders along. There are some road markings, some rough areas. It is all that is needed, rather than a mini-motorway with speed cameras. A trip round the island is about sixty miles.

The resident population is about 4,000 people, many of them young. Tourists come during most of the year, peaking in July and August, when the population reaches 12,000.

The ferries

Two ferries serve the island, both run by Caledonian MacBrayne. The main crossing is from Ardrossan, near Ayr and Prestwick, to Brodick, the main town on the island. This takes about an hour, and you can get a good meal plus beer from the Arran brewery on the trip. You are strongly advised to book for your car.

On our crossing we could see the silhouette of the island. In the north it is mountainous, but much more gentle in the south.



The other ferry is from Lochranza, where there is a distillery, open to the public. Try their 10 year old Arran malt. On this ferry you do not need to book, but the boat only takes about 10 cars, so turn up about 20 minutes before it leaves. This takes you to Mull of Kintyre.

On our trip, accompanied by a dolphin, we could see into Glen Catacol. It is a typical U-shaped glacial valley. At the time of the last glaciation, the sheer weight of ice expressed the shoreline. Later on, when the ice melted, the shoreline rose to its original position (the technical term for this is isostasy) and now there are two main levels of "raised beaches" just inshore from the present beach.

Particularly in the south, the beach is intersected by intrusions of volcanic rock that run toward the sea, rather like a breakwater. In one or two places they form natural harbours.

Along the shoreline we saw oystercatchers, eider duck, shags and a single gannet, possibly over from the nearby island of Ailsa Craig.

We visited an RSPB teaching centre and had a CCTV camera view of a hen harrier's nest. These are birds that nest in the heather, and there are about 20 pairs on Arran, which is probably more than in the whole of the rest of the UK.

Brodick

The town has a variety of shops. Brodick Castle is to the north of it, and in the gardens there you can see evidence of the warming effect of the Gulf Stream. There are Palm Trees, Cabbage Trees and Phormiums such as grow in New Zealand, a wonderful show of Azaleas and Rhododendrons, and tall, statuesque Echium Pininana, which bees love.

Among the shops, we visited the Arran-Kathmandu Trading Post! – where you should say the Nepali greeting *Namaste* when you walk in. The owner was selling jewellery, singing bowls and dresses, much as we do for Aschiana.

There is a small chocolate factory, where we saw hand-made chocolates being made from molten chocolate running into moulds.

In the museum there are so many things we knew or used as children. A cutter-binder for cutting and binding sheaves of corn used to be pulled by a horse, and we put the sheaves into stooks to dry. Binders were replaced by combine harvesters long ago. There was a Dolly-tub for laundering clothes, and a blacksmiths shop.

Since those days look what has happened. We have gone in for labour-saving devices that may be more efficient, but use more energy, and we now go to the gym for exercise!

The past

Looking further back, there are standing stones on Arran, and a large cluster of them on the Mull of Kintyre at Kilmartin. There are also stone circles and burial mounds.

All guesses and suggestions as to their use and age are welcome, but playing safe we can only claim that they are not natural. They are man made and this suggests that people have been in these areas for a long, long time.

Looking even further back in time we can see an area of geological magic on the east coast of Arran. Normally geological strata lie on top of each other rather like a pile of

newspapers. If you tip the newspapers, you see the edges rather than the front page. Much the same thing happens to geological strata.

In about a mile we saw Old Red Sandstone formed in desert conditions, limestone formed in underwater conditions, and New Red Sandstone again formed in desert conditions. On top were some round granite balls, a bit bigger than the bowls used in the game. These are volcanic in origin, completely out of place, and so are called 'erratics'. They came from the volcanic mountains in the north of Arran. Goat Fell is the highest of these, some 2,800 ft above sea level and said to be one of the finest viewpoints in Scotland.



Food and Drink

We had one really memorable fish dinner at Creelers in Brodick – with Australian Chardonnay and served by Australian waitresses. At Blackwaterfoot we had some good evening meals, draught Arran beer (the brewery makes four different kinds of bottled beer from Arran Blonde to Arran dark Premium), served to us by Czechs and where we met a Canadian who had come to Arran to see where his ancestors lived before they had been deported to Canada at the time of the clearances.

We could have gone quad-biking, helicopter flying over the island or carriage driving, or playing golf – there seems to be a course about every five miles – but we didn't.

A bit idle really.