

St Kilda & the Hebrides – Islands on the Edge of the Atlantic

Naturetrek Tour Itinerary

Outline itinerary

Day 1	Embark Oban
Day 2	Lunga & The Small Isles (Canna)
Day 3	North Uist or Harris
Day 4/5	St Kilda
Day 6	Mingulay or Vattersay
Day 7	The Small Isles (Rum)
Day 8	Mull
Day 9	Return Oban

Departs

May, June, July & August

Focus

Birds, mammals and scenery

Grading

A/B. (See Page 5 for additional information)

Dates and Prices

See website www.naturetrek.co.uk (tour code GBR48)

Highlights:

- Visit the remote islands of St Kilda on an exclusive charter of the Hjalmar Bjorge
- Huge seabird colonies full of Gannets, Puffins, Razorbills & Common Guillemots
- Look for Otter, Minke Whale, White-beaked Dolphin & Grey Seal



From top: Hjalmar Bjorge, Puffins & European Otter)



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Introduction

Scotland is blessed with some of the most spectacular scenery and seabird colonies in the North Atlantic. Hundreds of thousands of Common Guillemots, Razorbills, Kittiwakes and Fulmars crowd towering sea cliffs alongside some of the world's largest gatherings of Gannets and Puffins. Whilst a small number of these colonies are accessible from the mainland, the very best are crowded onto small rocky islets and outposts far from land and only visited by the fortunate few.

Naturetrek is offering the chance to visit the most famous of Scotland's remote islands, St Kilda, aboard the 12-berth 'Hjalmar Bjorge'. This small and comfortable vessel was built to the highest standards for the Norwegian fjords and life in the high northern latitudes. Heated throughout, this cosy cruise ship is more than comfortable enough for our wildlife travels through the Gulf Stream-warmed waters of the west coast of Scotland. She has ample power to comfortably cruise the many spectacular islands and lochs of the Inner and Outer Hebrides, yet is small enough to anchor in remote and hauntingly beautiful places that the larger passenger ships are unable to visit. As part of our range of exclusive (full-boat) wildlife charters, this 9-day voyage will take you from Oban on the west coast of Scotland out amongst the islands of the Inner and Outer Hebrides and then, weather permitting, on to St Kilda itself. On this unforgettable cruise we hope to enjoy the cacophony of seabirds, plus huge White-tailed Eagles soaring overhead, and a variety of exciting mammals including Otter, dolphins, Minke Whale and perhaps even Orca. All this from the comfort of the 'Hjalmar Bjorge' and backed by some of the most breathtaking scenery in the British Isles.



Itinerary

Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather & other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Day 1

Embark Oban

Our holiday begins at Oban (or the nearby Dunstaffnage Marina). Here we will meet our tour leader and fellow wildlife enthusiasts, and board the Hjalmar Bjorge, around lunchtime, our base for the next 8 nights. We will depart Oban during the afternoon, heading west into the dramatic Sound Of Mull and exploring the coastline of Mull itself, looking for our first Hebridean birds and mammals.



Mull is the third largest of the Hebridean islands and one of the most spectacular. It is rugged, dramatic and blessed with a patchwork of forests and moorlands, high craggy summits and a glorious coastline. The tidal sea lochs are a favourite haunt of Otters and the moorland-covered slopes of the mountains are dotted with numerous Red Deer. As we make our way along Mull's beautiful coastline we will be scanning the ridgelines and hills for soaring

Golden Eagle and Peregrine, and we would hope to see our first White-tailed Eagles of the cruise. This dramatic raptor, the largest in Europe, is often likened to a 'flying barn-door'. They are usually to be seen scouring the hills and coastal bays for carrion from on high, always on the look-out for the remains of a seal or deer and almost constantly being harassed by the local Hooded Crows! Black Guillemot and Common Eider can be seen bobbing on the sea, along with Common and Grey Seals, and there's always a chance of a lingering Great Northern or Red-throated Diver. Our intended anchorage for the night will be in the blissfully quiet and tranquil Loch Sunart. Weather permitting, we will be able to sit out on deck and enjoy our first evening in our new peaceful surroundings – the top deck of the Hjalmar Bjorge will be an excellent place to base ourselves for the evening in order to search for Otters, which may be seen catching crabs and fish along the rocky shoreline

Day 2

Treshnish Islands & Canna

Today we will make an early start to visit the Treshnish Islands which lie off Mull's west coast. These eight small rocky islets are volcanic in origin and are part of both the Loch Na Keal National Scenic Area and a 'Site of Special Scientific Interest'. Lunga is the largest island in the group but covers only 60 hectares. The Treshnish Islands will offer our first experience of a Scottish seabird colony and are home to over 2,000 pairs of Puffins, plus numerous Common Guillemots, Razorbills, Kittiwakes, Fulmars and Shags. Weather permitting, we will make a short landing on Lunga to enjoy the island's Puffins which are wonderfully confiding; any keen photographers in our group will be in their element! Lunga also has a small population of Corncrake, although they are somewhat more difficult to see! Note on our July and August cruises we may visit the nearby island of Coll instead of the Treshnish Isles, as the Puffins may have already left their colonies by this point. Coll is a beautiful island with pristine white beaches and, in July and August, is one of the best places in the UK to see Basking Sharks, the second largest fish in the world!



After soaking up the seabird spectacle of the Treshnish Islands we will head north to Canna, the westernmost island of the Small Isles archipelago, where we will overnight in a calm bay. On the crossing – which will take most of the afternoon – as well as enjoying the beautiful scenery, we should keep our eyes open for birds including Arctic and Great Skuas, Storm Petrel and Gannet, plus cetaceans such as Minke Whale, Harbour Porpoise, Bottlenose Dolphin and White-beaked Dolphin and, if we're lucky, even a Basking Shark. Depending upon the weather and sightings, we will hope to have time for an evening walk on Canna, enjoying the flora such as Yellow-flag Iris and Northern Heath Orchid and admiring the island's beautiful turquoise shoreline while scanning for such birds as Cuckoos, Golden Eagles and Northern Wheatears. We will also listen carefully for (and a lucky few may glimpse!) a Corncrake, which can be heard calling from within the dense cover of fields and iris beds. Should we not have time to land this evening (quite possible if we're experiencing lots of cetacean encounters!), then we will aim for a landing to following morning.

Day 3

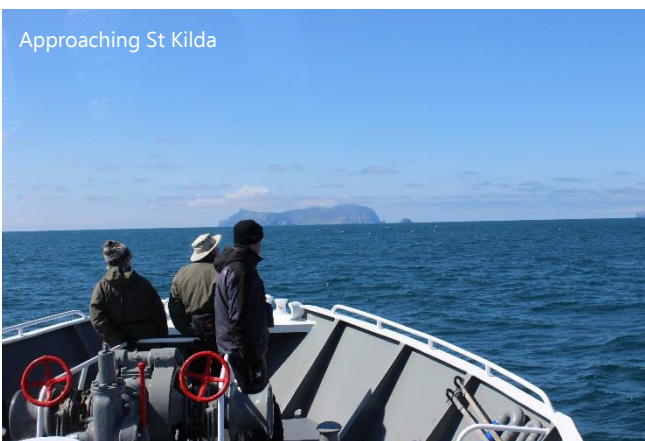
Leverburgh

Today we will continue north, sailing up The Minch (the sea between the Inner and Outer Hebrides), heading for Leverburgh (Harris). Enroute, we must keep our eyes open for cetaceans and pelagic birds, including both Long-tailed and Pomarine Skuas which will be heading north in May and early June. We will aim to anchor in Leverburgh's quiet harbour by late afternoon/early evening, ready for our push to St Kilda tomorrow. If the weather is not suitable, we will instead find a quiet anchorage in Lochmaddy (North Uist).

Originally called Obbe, Leverburgh was named after Lord Leverhulme, an English businessman who funded the construction of roads, piers and houses in Lewis and Harris in the 1920s. Landing on Leverburgh will provide another good opportunity to look for Otter, along with a pleasant evening stroll along the quiet country lanes and coastal paths.

Day 4

St Kilda



Approaching St Kilda

The crossing to the St Kilda group will take in the region of 6 hours and is subject to the weather and sea conditions. A variety of cetaceans are seen around St Kilda in the summer months between May to August. Minke Whale is the most frequently recorded species, and we may also see Harbour Porpoise, Common, Risso's and White-beaked Dolphins. Killer Whales, or Orca, are a possibility – pods of Orca sometimes remain around the islands for

several days or even weeks, most probably after the resident Grey Seals. Bottlenose and Atlantic White-sided Dolphins are also seen occasionally, but it would take a lot of luck to find a Humpback or one of the other larger species.

By early afternoon, if the weather is clear, we will be able to see the silhouette of St. Kilda on the horizon. Although it may look tantalising close, it is still several hours away, giving us plenty of time for more wildlife spotting. Your tour leader will be monitoring the seas closely from the bow or the wheelhouse for any wildlife that may show up and you are very welcome to join them ... the more eyes the better!



Village Bay, St Kilda

By late afternoon, we will slowly sail into Village Bay (Hirta), welcomed by the chorus of thousands of Fulmars, Kittiwakes, Gannets and auks. Once anchored, we will go ashore and be greeted by the warden (a part-time resident) who will brief us on the history of the islands. We can then explore the abandoned houses along Village Bay, and visit the small, yet fascinating, museum which details the lifestyles of the Kildians and their remarkable self-sufficiency. After a couple of hours on shore we will make our way back to the Hjalmar Bjorge, and can enjoy sitting out on deck surrounded by the towering, imposing cliffs of the bay, ready for our time on shore tomorrow.

Day 5

St Kilda



Stac an Armin

For many the undoubted highlight of this cruise will be our time exploring the St Kilda group, Britain's first World Heritage Site designated for its spectacular seabird colonies and amazing scenery, including the highest sea cliffs and stacks in the British Isles (the cliffs at Conachair are 425 metres high!). The St Kilda group is the eroded remains of huge volcano and made up of three main islands Hirta (the largest of the archipelago), Boraray and Soay. They are home to half a million pairs of breeding seabirds including the second largest Gannetry in the world (recently demoted in favour of Bass Rock!) with over 60,000 pairs, whilst the 60,000 pairs of Fulmar represent the largest colony of that species in Britain. Most remarkable of all, 25% the British Puffin population - an incredible 150,000 pairs! - nest on St Kilda, as do 90%

of Britain's Leach's Petrels some 45,000 pairs. Only on St Kilda does this rare petrel nest together with Storm Petrels and Manx Shearwaters. The island also attracts weary migrants and so we need to keep our eyes open for lost passerines and refueling waders. Last, but not least, this is also the home of the St Kilda Wren, a distinct sub-species.

St Kilda also has a fascinating human history to discover. The islands were populated by the unique and hardy 'Kildians', who due to poverty and starvation (caused by the influx of visitors) were forced to leave the islands in the last century. The last permanent inhabitants were voluntarily evacuated in 1930 and all that remains today is the ghostly buildings of an abandoned village where the houses are still relatively intact and lots of stories and folklore about life on St Kilda has been preserved. Today the islands are all uninhabited, with the exception of a few military personnel and scientists. The dramatic and foreboding landscapes here will keep the photographers amongst us more than entertained, although we must keep our fingers crossed for good weather; the seas around St Kilda can be notoriously fickle!



NB – If adverse weather or sea condition prevent a crossing to St Kilda then we will spend Days 3 and 4 of the cruise further exploring the more sheltered waters of Inner and Outer Hebrides and enjoying the abundance of wildlife to be found there. The final decision concerning destinations and landings will be made by the skipper of the Hjalmar Bjorge.

Day 6

Mingulay or Watersay



After a 2-night stay at St Kilda we will spend the morning sailing around the famous stacs, surrounded by noisy rafts of Common Guillemots, Razorbills and Puffins on the water. Mesmerised by the thousands of Gannets wheeling above our heads, we will also watch out for the ominous dark shadows of Great Skuas, which patrol the colonies hoping to steal food from unsuspecting birds. By late morning we will begin our journey

back towards Oban and, if conditions allow, we will anchor for the evening off Mingulay, which is the second most southern island of the Outer Hebrides, 12 miles south of Barra. Abandoned by its last inhabitants 100 years ago, it is now owned by the National Trust of Scotland. The history of the island stretches over seven millennia, and the final families cast off for neighbouring Watersay in 1912, leaving behind their village homes (whose foundations still stand as a reminder of a way of life lost to the unceasing onslaught of the Atlantic elements). While no longer a permanent home to Hebridean islanders, Mingulay still provides a rich habitat for birdlife, with the towering 250 metre Carnan cliffs providing protected breeding grounds for Fulmars, Common Guillemots, Kittiwakes, Oystercatchers, Puffins, Razorbills and terns.

If the weather is unfavorable, we will instead anchor in the calm bay on the east coast of Vatersay, just north of Mingulay, an equally beautiful spot to spend our evening!

Day 7

Rùm

Today we will sail east, back across The Minch, heading for Rùm. During the crossing we must still keep our eyes open for a variety of cetaceans as well as the usual abundance of seabirds and breathtaking coastal landscapes of the Outer Hebrides. Silhouettes of Red Deer will likely be seen high upon the rugged ridgelines of Rùm and the surrounding islands, and, with luck, perhaps a Golden and White-tailed Eagle circling over the hills in search of carrion. We will find a quiet anchorage for the evening.

Day 8

Loch Aline or Loch Spelve

Today we will sail south-east, passing the vibrant and colourful town of Tobermory as we sail down the Sound of Mull, the rugged and breath taking hills of Mull off our starboard side, with the beautiful mainland off to our port. We will anchor either in Loch Aline (mainland) or Loch Spelve (south of Mull) for the evening, where we will enjoy a final night on board. Both lochs offer good opportunities for birdwatching and spotting Otter, and are an idyllic place to be anchored for a final summer's evening in the Hebrides.



Day 9

Disembark Oban

This morning we will complete our journey back to Oban where we disembark the Hjalmar Bjorge before lunch (typically around 12:30 hours) and, with the memories of dramatic sea cliffs and raucous seabird colonies still fresh in our minds, begin our own journeys home.

Images courtesy of Shutterstock, Paul Stanbury, Julie Marshall, Sara Frost, Northern Lights & Menno Scefler

Grading

Grade A/B. Day walks only and even these are optional. A degree of agility is required to get in and out of the small landing craft (zodiac tender) which is used to get ashore, but there are always crew and the Naturetrek tour leader to lend a hand if necessary. Please be aware that there are few footpaths on these islands and the terrain can be steep and rough. Shore excursions will be by zodiac – a rubber, inflatable landing craft – and a mix of wet landings (directly onto a beach) and dry landings where a dock or pier is available. It is also important that you are able to get up and down the fairly steep staircases inside the Hjalmar Bjorge. Should you require additional information on the above please give the Naturetrek office a call on 01962 733051.

Please remember that you are travelling in remote areas without quick access to sophisticated medical facilities, so we would ask you not to join the tour if you have a life-threatening condition, need daily medical treatment or have difficulty walking. Whilst we do not have an age limit on any of our cruises, we would ask anyone over the age of 75 years to obtain a doctor's note before departure to confirm that they are fit to travel on this holiday.

Weather

The weather will ultimately dictate the route of our cruise. Whilst we hope for calm and sunny conditions, the weather in the north Atlantic can be a little unpredictable at times and it can be choppy on some of the crossings between islands. Late May – August is often blessed with sunny and mild conditions in Scotland, but you should also expect, and prepare for, overcast breezy conditions with rain at some point on the cruise.

Food & Accommodation



All food is included in the price with the exception of meals in Oban/Dunstaffnage. For this cruise Naturetrek has exclusively chartered the 'Hjalmar Bjorge' which will take a maximum of 12 guests. The vessel offers one twin cabins, plus five twin cabins, all with shared facilities. All cabins have comfortable mattresses, essential for a good night's sleep, and have their own sink. There are also two shower rooms with toilets and an additional toilet nearby.

All cabin linen and towels are supplied. There is a wonderful deck saloon where we dine and view the spectacular Hebridean wildlife. The bridge of the ex-Norwegian rescue vessel is equipped with the best navigational aids, a high foredeck for wildlife spotting and an aft deck for relaxing, she is the perfect vessel for our 9-day cruise around the islands.

Meals are served in the dining deck saloon which is the social hub at all times of the day, while the outdoor decks and the wheelhouse are also popular gathering places.



Standard Cabin



Dining area



Afternoon tea



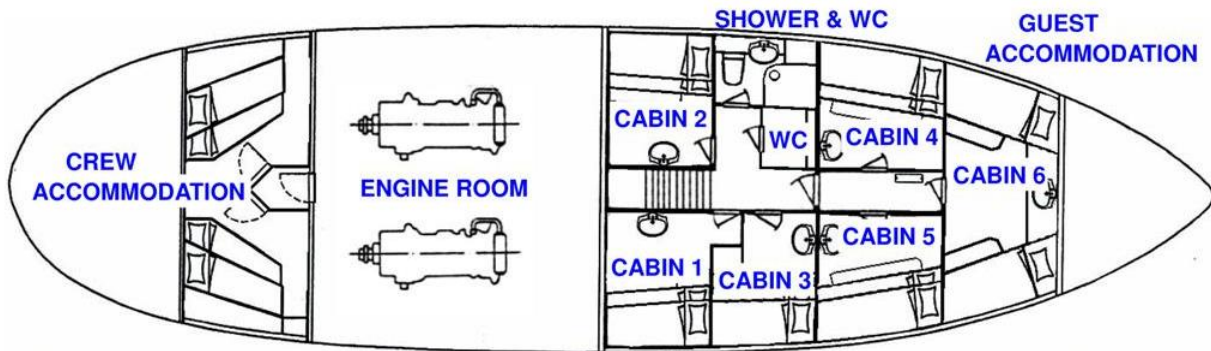
Bow Cabin

On your cruise there will be a maximum of 10 guests on board, plus one Naturetrek naturalist, the captain and two or three additional crew, and everyone will very quickly get used to living together in close proximity, and develop the kind of warm camaraderie that is only ever found on boats. The berths provide an excellent night's sleep, showers are hot and the food on board is delicious; what else could you ask for! Well, perhaps you might like to relax in the dining deck saloon and watch the ever-changing scenery slip past, join the skipper in the wheelhouse, watch for wildlife on the observation deck or enjoy a book or a pre-dinner aperitif on the aft deck!

Upper Deck



Lower Deck



Cabin upgrade supplements

There is one bow cabin, which has two lower bunks and is available at an additional cost of £200 per person for our 2024 cruises. There are no single cabins aboard this vessel.

Extra expenses

The following additional expenses are not included in the cost of the holiday: travel to Oban, meals in Oban/Dunstaffnage, on board drinks (please ensure that you have some cash available to pay for these at the end of the cruise), tips for the Hjlmarr Bjorge crew (allow approximately £30 - £40 per person), laundry, souvenirs and other items of a personal nature.

NB - Please note that Naturetrek reserves the right to impose a fuel surcharge on this cruise should fuel prices increase significantly and the boat operators request an additional payment.

Departure dates:

We offer a variety of departure dates for this popular cruise ranging from May through to August and as such, the wildlife we expect to see will likely differ a little from month to month.

May & June departures – These departures should be particularly good for those keen on seeing colonies of breeding Puffins, Common Guillemots, Razorbills, Gannets and other seabirds which will be a hive of activity, with adults coming and going from their nests and out to sea regularly to take advantage of the bountiful food available. Migrants will be heading north in May and the resident cetaceans will be around.

July & August departures – By mid-July, seabird chicks will be leaving their nests and accompanying their parents out to sea (we will likely see Razorbill, Guillemot and Puffins on the sea, including chicks!). Plankton levels will be higher in July and August than in May and June, and so we would expect to have a higher chance of more cetacean and Basking Shark encounters on these trips. We would also expect the weather to be slightly more settled at this time of year, although, Scottish weather is famously unpredictable!

Travel Information

By Train

There is a train station in Oban, with the main connection being from Glasgow.

By Bus

You can take the bus Oban from either Glasgow or Edinburgh. The bus station is near the centre of town.

By Car

If you come by car, there is a secure car park in Oban that can be pre-booked. Stoddarts offer secured undercover parking or outside secure parking at a per night rate. Tel: +44 (0)1631 564176 or +44 (0)7799 692072.

Email address - john.stoddarts@btconnect.com

Accommodation in Oban

If you arrive the night before the trip, or want to stay the night at the end of your trip, then we suggest the following hotels:

Convenient for Oban Station (5 – 10 min walk away):

Royal Hotel

Argyll Square, Oban, PA34 4BE
01631 563 021

<https://strathmorehotels-theroyaloban.com/>

Premier Inn Oban

Shore Street, Oban, PA34 4NT
0330 135 9041

www.premierinn.com/gb/en/hotels/scotland/argyll/oban/oban.html?cid=GLBC_OBASHO

The Palace Hotel Oban

20 George Street, Oban, PA34 5SB
01631 562 294

<https://palacehoteloban.co.uk/>

Perle Oban Hotel

Station Road, Oban, PA34 5RT
01631 700 301

<https://perlehotels.com/oban/>

Ranald Hotel

41 Stevenson St, Oban, PA34 5NA
01631 562 887
<https://theranaldhotel.com/>

Whiskey Vaults Hotel

3 Tweeddale St, Oban, PA34 5DD
01631 566 722
<https://www.obanwhiskyvaults.co.uk/>

Alternatively take a look at options on www.tripadvisor.co.uk

How to book your place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk, or alternatively complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please call us on 01962 733051 or request one via our website. Please stipulate any special requirements, for example extension requests, at the time of booking.

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