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Highland paradise: Scotland offers all the delights of Cornwall, without the crowds

By [Max Hastings](#)

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Britain is an overcrowded island. Yet one of its miracles is that it still boasts some of the most beautiful wildernesses on earth, where it is possible to walk all day without meeting another human being.

For more than 40 years, I have holidayed in northern Scotland, and I never cease to marvel at its glorious emptiness. My father called it 'God's country', and he was right.

Coldbackie in Sutherland boasts the sort of beach where the sand would be invisible beneath bodies and screaming children along many other stretches of coast. Yet my wife and I often stroll alone there with the dogs, gazing out upon an empty sea.



Family fun: Tongue offers the chance to enjoy a day on the water

Sutherland is a popular destination for German motor-cyclists, the odd Italian or French tourist. But, except for a few discerning families who own holiday crofts in the county, the British neglect its hills and lochs and coastline.

I guess this is because there are no theme parks, fast-food outlets or famous buildings to visit. But I can think of nowhere better to take children for adventures, to show them natural beauty, to walk, camp, barbecue and play with the sea.

Years ago when my own children were little, we rented a house there with a group of friends, from

which we made hair-raising forays to offshore islands in an old ship's lifeboat with a wildly unreliable outboard motor.

Modern Health & Safety commissars would have suffered breakdowns at the sight of us thrashing through the waves to a hazardous landing on the cliffs of uninhabited Seal Island for a picnic, then sometimes rowing home against the tide after the engine conked.

But we loved it, just as we revelled in the mussel-picking and loch-fishing and long hikes over the hills, carrying the smallest members of the party in rucksacks.

There is a charming, almost deserted little harbour at Skerra, from which a local fisherman took us out handlining for mackerel. The entire north coast is a joy for motoring, its single-track roads almost empty even in high summer, a spectacular new view around every corner.

The late MP, diarist and serial adulterer Alan Clark had an estate near Loch Eriboll where we occasionally visited him. I once suggested that he must find the clutter of old tanks and armoured vehicles a nuisance, stuck in the midst of his farmyard. 'They're not stuck', Alan responded defiantly. 'We drive them around'.



The simple life: Max and his wife Penny have always loved their adventures north of the border, so has Stanley the dog

In my young days, I was so besotted with the Highlands that I persuaded a piper to come and play of an evening in the garden of the house we rented, while we danced clumsy reels on the flagstones outside the front door. I threatened to wear a kilt, until friends' ridicule restored me to sanity.

This summer, breasting the hill that falls steeply down to the coast at Tongue, two hours' driving north of Inverness, my old conviction returned: here you will find one of the finest views in Britain.

Sure, it takes a while to get there. From the south of England, I reckon Perth is a six-hour drive, then five more to Tongue. But the other way is to fly Easyjet from Luton to Inverness and rent a car -

Arnold Clark offer rates as competitive as any.

We stayed at the delightful Tongue Hotel, where the food was unpretentiously delicious and the staff universally friendly.

A few yards down the road at the Ben Loyal hotel, much favoured by hikers assaulting the splendid mountain of that name, it is possible to hire boats on local lochs, to chase fish if the whim takes you, or just for the fun of the outing.

I have spent many happy hours casting a fly on the adjoining lochs Slaim, Craggie and Loyal. On Slaim, every few weeks somebody catches a salmon, and the little trout come pretty easily.

About now, some Mr.Grumpy will demand: 'Yes, but what happens if it rains?'. This is, of course, one reason why some holiday-makers stay away from northern Scotland.

If the heavens open, the nearest indoor amusements are in Inverness. But one consequence of climate change is that we have visited Sutherland and Caithness again and again in recent summers amid brilliant sunshine. Even last May, I came home with a tan.



Sun trap: Maybe it's climate change, but Max always seems to return from Caithness with a tan

It is probably true that anybody who resents wearing an anorak should stay away from the far north, but the West Country can be just as unreliable, and far more densely populated. The beaches of the north offer the same simple, unspoilt joys in the 21st century that Cornwall and Devon did for holidaymakers a hundred years ago.

Almost every child loves camp cooking and portable barbecues, messing about in boats in the approved manner of Ratty and Mole, and climbing hills.

I stay away from the west coast of Sutherland where the midges can be awful, especially at evening, but they are seldom a problem in the north.

A hour or two over the hills from Tongue, on the river Helmsdale, in a cleft beside the road lies Baile-An-Or, a traditional gold-panning site. Every summer, a few hopeful souls can be seen bent over the stream, searching for tiny nuggets, and every now and again somebody finds one.

If you follow the strath down to Helmsdale village, you can take the road up the east Caithness coast towards Dunbeath, soaring up towering cliffs, then dipping steeply into the valleys. I have travelled that way a hundred times, but never fail to thrill at the spectacle.

Some people find an oppressive melancholy in the northern highlands, born of knowledge of the notorious early 19th century Clearances, when thousands of the local clan families were forcibly removed by landlords, to make way for sheep.

Walking the hills south of Tongue, one often comes upon brilliant green grass patches in the heather, broken stones that mark places that were once communities and even iron-workings.

The historic sadness is real enough, but for me Sutherland has always been a place of happiness- as it might be for you and a new generation of children.

Nobody who cannot live without McDonalds should apply. But anyone yearning to escape the madding crowd will find it paradise.

Travel Facts

The Tongue Hotel has double rooms from £110 with breakfast, 01847 611 206, www.tonguehotel.co.uk

easyJet flies from London Luton to Inverness from £35 return, www.easyjet.com

Arnold Clark has car rental starting from £25, 0141 237 4374, www.arnoldclarkrental.com

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I'm going to be incredibly selfish here - please don't encourage people to come to this incredible place - it'll end up like the crowded tourist mess that is Fort William and that would be a tragedy

- Mrs , Brora, 17/7/2011 10:15

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Having been won over by the area for the past five years after stumbling on it accidentally, I can't agree with you more! To see the area remain unspoilt but attract enough tourism to keep it's communities vibrant is a fine balance, but one I sincerely hope it will achieve.

- Julia Matthews, Huntingdon, Cambs, 16/7/2011 16:09

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