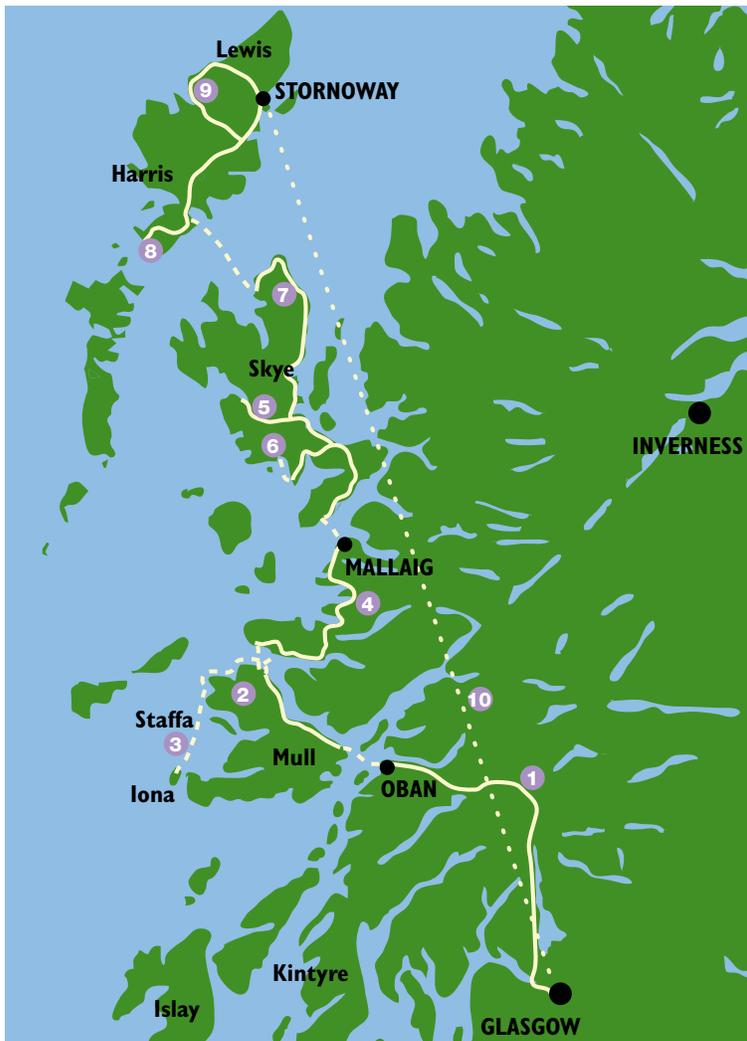




Isle of Staffa

From the Isle of Mull to the Western Isles Hiking the geology and scenery of Scotland's Atlantic edge



1. Glasgow - Isle of Mull
2. Calgary Bay and Crater Loch
3. Isles of Staffa and Iona
4. Isle of Mull - Ardnamurchan - Isle of Skye
5. Isle Oronsay, Talisker Distillery
6. Loch Coruisk
7. Trotternish peninsula - Isle of Harris
8. Isle of Harris
9. Isle of Lewis, Calanais standing Stones and Dun Carloway
10. Isle of Harris - Glasgow

This trip takes us along Scotland's west coast, a unique seascape, wild and exposed, dominated by the archipelago of islands that make up the Inner and Outer Hebrides. The rocks tell the whole story, going back 2.7 million years, as you travel from the Isle of Mull in the south, along the western edge of Highland Scotland, to the Isle of Lewis in the Outer Hebrides, sometimes along the mainland coast, but more often across beautiful and fascinating islands. Sculpted by the sea these islands have varied coasts, with high cliffs, sea lochs or fjords, sandy or rocky bays, caves and arches – always something new to draw you on around the next corner.

Highlights

- Tobermory, Mull;
- Boat trip to and walk on the Isle of Staffa, with its basalt columns, and Iona with a visit to Iona Abbey;
- Hike to the Old Man of Storr, Skye
- Boat trip and hike to Loch Coruisk on Skye;
- Luskentyre bay, Harris;
- Visit to the Callanais Standing Stones on Lewis.



Honeycomb weathered sandstone, Isle of Skye



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The Old Man of Storr, Skye

Geology on the edge

Edges are immensely important in geology because it is there that continents have repeatedly met and parted, on each occasion leaving the trace of their tectonic dance written clearly in the landscape. The Lapetus Ocean margin sediments that became the Caledonian folds of Argyll or the broken crustal slices of the Moine thrust seen in Sleat, for example. But, dominating all other landscape features along this route, we find the volcanic trace of the creation of a brand new edge – the coast of the newborn North Atlantic that opened to a symphony of lavas and intrusions that have given us the mountains and moors of Mull, Staffa and Skye. Basalts, Gabbros and Granites are everywhere along the way, not excluding our finish point. The rigid gneisses of Lewis and Harris were at the edge of early North America (Laurentia) to resist the impact of early Europe (Baltica).

History on the edge

And so with the people. Always on the edge, the Scots of the Gaelic highlands long jealously guarded their independence from central authority, whether in Edinburgh or London or elsewhere. In this they were aided by difficult agricultural conditions and remoteness.

Isles of Mull, Staffa and Iona

The underlying geology of Mull truly dominates the landscape. Steep cliffs of lava, like those of Staffa, dominate northern Mull, while the high mountains of the south expose the roots of a huge volcano that erupted 60 million years ago. In marked contrast are the low-lying rounded knolls of pink granite and the welcoming sandy beaches of the Ross of Mull. Just a short distance across the Sound of Iona, some of the oldest rocks in Scotland form the low, craggy hills of Iona. The mountains show the effects of glaciers that covered the area during the Ice Age and all around the coast are signs of changing sea levels that followed the melting of the ice in recent geological time.

Ardnamurchan peninsula

The Ardnamurchan peninsula is also a land shaped by volcanic activity with the remains of three volcanic centers and multiple Tertiary igneous intrusions into the Moine Schists.

The Isle of Skye

The largest and most northerly of the islands of the Inner Hebrides. Its name is probably derived from the Norse words 'ski' (cloud) and

'ey' (island). Skye has 3 main geological areas:

1. The south-east has some of Britain's oldest rocks in the form of 2500 million year old Lewisian gneiss overlaid by 800 million year old sedimentary rock, mainly Torridonian sandstone.
2. The Cuillin, being the remnants of a solidified volcanic lava reservoir some 60 million years old. Just south of this there are deposits of limestone.
3. The north of the island is composed mainly of lava flows, which have been built up to a depth of around 2000 feet and since eroded. In the north east the underlying sedimentary rock has collapsed under the weight of the basalt, tipping sideways to form landslips which are still moving.

Isle of Harris and Lewis

Harris and Lewis are joined and are part of the island chain of the Outer Hebrides. The predominant rock here is Lewisian gneiss, a metamorphic rock up to 3 billion years old. About 2 million years ago, the Ice Age came to these islands and glaciers formed the iconic cnoc-and-lochan landscape seen today. The landscape is incredibly diverse, with its dramatic, rocky east coast in sharp contrast to the golden sands and fertile machair of the west coast with the centre of the isle of Lewis is a peat covered plateau.



Calanais Standing Stones, Lewis



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