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Two's company: Tràigh na Beirigh beach in the Outer Hebrides could be mistaken for a Caribbean hotspot.



Paradise found in the Hebrides

Enjoy long, mild days away from the crowds on islands with abundance of history

British Break

By Adrian Caffery

THE sun was beating down on the wide stretch of pristine, white sands.

The still, turquoise waters looked so inviting that I just couldn't resist the urge to strip off and take the plunge.

Then reality struck. This may have been a kind of paradise – but it certainly wasn't a tropical one.

This wasn't Jamaica or Antigua. It was Tràigh na Beirigh beach in the Outer Hebrides – and the water was bloomin' freezing.



Deserted: The sun beats down on a beautiful Hebridean beach – but there's not a soul to be seen.

Tràigh na Beirigh was one of many seemingly undiscovered beaches that my wife Jayne and I visited on the Hebridean isles of Lewis and Harris during four days of unbroken sunshine in May.

We couldn't believe how blessed we had been with the weather but, appar-

ently, long (daylight can extend to 11pm at the height of summer), warm days are not uncommon.

Winters can be mild, too, thanks to a warm sea current known as the North Atlantic Drift, which originates in the Caribbean.

Anticipating rain, rain and more rain, we had

prosperous existence 100 years ago.

The lodge had a living flame fire, a large TV with full Sky package, a DVD library, a PlayStation and books that we were encouraged to take home if we didn't finish reading them in time.

Best of all, there was a whirlpool bath for two and a sauna where guests can close their eyes and pretend they are on that Jamaican beach, if it is pouring down outside.

The five-star property, one of several from Hebridean Luxury Holidays, had two double bedrooms and a mezzanine loft space off a minstrel gallery suitable as a play area for children.

Built in an environmentally-sensitive manner, it

booked five nights at a luxurious holiday home in a quiet street on the edge of Stornoway, the capital of Lewis.

Our timber-clad lodge, Metagama, was named after the ocean liner on which hundreds of islanders emigrated to North America in search of a more

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was contemporary in style, with an open-plan kitchen, lounge and dining room, yet homely with Harris Tweed furnishings and sofas.

Outside was decking with table and chairs and a barbecue to help holiday-makers take full advantage of those extra-long summer days.

If guests are able to drag themselves away from the lodge in the evenings, Stornoway has a choice of restaurants, including Chinese, Indian and Scottish (fish and chips!).

Indeed, the town surprises many first-time visitors with its range of facilities featuring shops you would find in most high streets, including a Tesco and a Co-op.

On a hill overlooking Stornoway is an 85ft-high war memorial in the guise of a Scottish baronial tower, its stature reflecting the scale of the tragedy that struck islanders on New Year's Day, 1919.

The Admiralty yacht HMS *Iolaire*, which was bringing sailors home at the end of the First World War, struck a notorious reef as it approached Stornoway harbour and sank.

Although the stern of the boat was at one point just 20ft from land, the men were weighed down in the water by their heavy uniforms and boots, 205 losing their lives.

With such a cruel twist of fate, it may come as a



A journey through time: Traditional blackhouses, Stornoway's war memorial (left) and Calanais Standing Stones (below).

surprise to learn that the Outer Hebrides is one of the most religious places in Britain.

The islands fall silent on Sundays. The swimming baths, many playgrounds and most shops remain shut while car-washing and the hanging out of laundry is frowned upon.

Although Sunday flights to Stornoway started six years ago, islanders were able to resist plans for a mainland ferry crossing on the Sabbath until July this year.

Just days after the start of the service, Stornoway was hit by a freak torn



ado which upturned cars and boats, leading some locals to claim it was a sign of God's displeasure.

I disagree. Surely, if it was the Almighty's doing, the twister would have whipped up a ferry, Wizard of Oz-style, then dropped it back on the mainland!

But no matter how many ferries bring holiday-makers to Lewis and Harris, those beautiful beaches will never ever get crowded.

Getting There

■ Flybe (www.flybe.com / 0871 700 2000) flies to Stornoway from Glasgow and Edinburgh. Caledonian MacBrayne (calmac.co.uk / 08705 650000) operates daily crossings from Ullapool to Stornoway (two hours 45 mins) and Monday to Saturday crossings from Uig in Skye to Tarbert in Harris (one hour 45 mins)

■ Hebridean Luxury Holidays (www.hebrideanluxuryholidays.co.uk / 0800 234 3271) will greet you at the airport or the harbour and can arrange car hire for your arrival. Lodge prices start at £500 for seven nights but short breaks are also available. All bed linen and towels are included, as is the cost of gas and electricity. Dogs are welcome for an additional, small cleaning charge.

■ For more information on the Outer Hebrides see www.visithebrides.com



Spacious: A Hebridean Luxury Holidays lodge.

LEWIS FACTFILE

LEWIS is the largest and most northerly of the six 'isles' which make up the Outer Hebrides.

Confusingly, Lewis and Harris to the south are one land mass, although the landscapes are very different with the former being mostly peat moorland dotted with freshwater lochs and the latter being quite mountainous.

The Outer Hebrides are separated from mainland Scotland by The Minch, a channel frequented by dolphins and whales (one swam right past our ferry!).

The friendly locals allegedly breathe the cleanest air in Europe. Most speak Gaelic as well as English.

Lewis is probably most famous for the Calanais Standing Stones, which predates Stonehenge and Egypt's pyramids.

The ring and lines of 50 stones, up to 13ft tall, are on a prominent ridge making them visible for miles around.

Visitors can delve into more recent Hebridean history at the 300-year-old Garryannan Blackhouse Village.

The traditional, thatched crofting houses were restored after the last remaining residents of Garryannan were moved out in 1974.

Other blackhouses are dotted around the islands.

Explore the homeland of Dracula

WITH the new sequel to Bram Stoker's *Dracula* due, fans of all things spooky may be inspired to visit Dracula's homeland – Transylvania.

Waiting to whisk passengers on a voyage of discovery of the region is the Danube Express' brand new Transylvanian journey.

Passengers will experience a Transylvanian journey very different to that of Jonathan Harker's in *Dracula*, with deluxe twin compartments offering lower beds and en suite shower and WC facilities, breakfasts cooked to order and delicious dinners served each evening. Travelling in the comfort of a gleaming hotel-on-wheels, passengers encounter stunning scenery and ancient architecture as they embark on a journey from Budapest to Istanbul.

En route guests explore Sighisoara, one of the best preserved medieval towns in Europe and rumoured birthplace of Dracula, and Brasov, home to Bran Castle, one of many locations in Romania linked to the Dracula legend.

Journeying through the Carpathian Mountains further highlights ahead of arrival in Istanbul include the ancient capital city of Veliko Turnovo.

The Transylvanian Journey includes an 8-day Fully Escorted holiday or a 4-day Journey only trip. The latter Journey includes three nights on board the Danube Express. The Fully Escorted holiday additionally includes air travel, two nights' half board accommodation in both Budapest and Istanbul in 4-star hotels.

Price: A Danube Express Transylvanian Journey costs £2,490 per person. An eight-day Fully Escorted holiday costs £3,390 per person. Prices based on two sharing a deluxe compartment.

Lufthansa voted best

TRAVEL professionals from around the world have voted Lufthansa "Europe's Leading Airline" in the 2009 World Travel Awards for the second consecutive year. The awards were announced in Obidos, Portugal following the largest ever poll in the World Travel Awards' 16-year history. More than 170,000 industry professionals cast their votes.