



Words by JENNY ROWE

CRAFTY PEOPLE

Though it's known to many as the 'whisky isle', the people of Islay have far more diverse talents when it comes to producing local wares



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MARK UNSWORTH/WWW.ISLAYSTUDIOS.CO.UK

Just 10 minutes after arriving at Port Askaig on Islay by ferry, we embark on a hike from Bunnahabhain Distillery to Ruvaal Lighthouse, the most northerly point of the Inner Hebridean island. Trudging through the saturated peat bog is hard work, and a reminder of why Islay is renowned around the world as the 'whisky isle'. This wonderful but waterlogged landscape provides the building blocks for Islay's nine active whisky distilleries and their distinctly peaty products – it has done since the 14th century.

The Paps of Jura, shrouded by cloud, loom on our right, and as we hit our stride, we begin to appreciate Islay's other allures: its shaggy coastline, swathes of untouched countryside and the resulting variety of rare wildlife, such as choughs, that thrive here. The sun sinks low, crowning our surroundings with golden light, and the beauty of the so-called 'Queen of the Hebrides' comes into sharp focus. It is no surprise that a growing number of artists and makers are choosing Islay as their fount of creative inspiration.

Ceramic artist Rosemary Fletcher is one such resident. She was entranced by the Inner Hebrides from the age of seven, when she first heard the gripping tale of the Corryvreckan Whirlpool, the world's third largest, which lies just off the coast of Jura.

On a trip from London where she lived at the time, it was here that Rosemary first crossed paths with her husband-to-be, Donald, who quite literally swept her off her feet at a ceilidh held in the aftermath of a gruelling local fell race up

the Paps themselves. The couple have lived and worked at the Fletcher family farm in the north of Islay ever since. Here Rosemary runs Persabus Pottery, as well as offering self-catering and B&B-style accommodation to holidaymakers.

Rosemary's 'Saligo' and 'Killinallan' ranges are just two within her growing collection that have specific geographic influences. The latter, for example, is inspired by memories of long days spent on the beautiful eponymous beach, which is sheltered by steep sand dunes.

"Each piece has its own story to tell," she muses. "Stories of days spent exploring the craggy hills, a young family in ▶

TOP LEFT: Islay's rugged coastline and sparkling sea
BOTTOM LEFT: 'Port Charlotte from The Pier', by printmaker Jane Taylor
BELOW: Mark Unsworth's photography takes inspiration from Islay's natural and industrial world





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tow, going on ‘bear hunts’ through the peaty bogs and tussocky grass; stories of wild swimming in the refreshing turquoise waters, the gentle lapping waves carrying me ever so gently back to the shore.”

The glazing and firing process seals each vision into something tangible and, importantly, shareable. Through her craft, Rosemary is able to evoke a breath of the Hebrides in the homes of her customers all over the world, who are, in her words, part of the “wider Islay community”.

Down the road from Port Askaig, before you reach Bridgend, you’ll happen upon the Islay Woollen Mill, which also has global reach.

The mill was first established in 1883, then reopened by Gordon and Sheila Covell, who have run it ever since. They produce quality woven fabrics, such as tweed and tartan, using two restored Dobcross looms dating from the 1920s. Their cloth designs have featured in huge blockbuster films such as *Braveheart*, *Forrest Gump*, *Rob Roy* and *War Horse*; products made up of these fabrics remain popular with tourists.

Without the Hollywood hallmark, Rosemary’s pottery business relies on the support of locals as well as tourists, and this has been particularly true during the pandemic. Luckily, Rosemary is proud to report that the encouragement, praise and positivity she receives from the islanders seems limitless. She receives many one-off commissions, and, in normal times, local guest accommodation use and display her pottery by way of free advertising.

Likewise, Jane Taylor is a local artist and printmaker, who enjoys the tight-knit island community: “Islay is a friendly place to be. Whether you are on a bike or in a vehicle you will get the famous Islay hand wave or nod in acknowledgement of one person to another.”

After living in landlocked Oxfordshire and attending art school in Bradford, Jane fell in love with Islay. Her studio and shop is based at Islay House Square, which was first established by Walter Campbell in the 1790s as serving quarters for Islay House, where the Campbells of Cawdor lived until 1847.

Today, the square in Bridgend is a buzzing hub of like-minded Ileachs. Capturing the raw, elemental atmosphere of the island, Jane has developed ‘Celtic Creatures’ and ‘Wildlife’ ranges, but she is also inspired “by the architecture of the various whisky distilleries; their pagoda shaped roofs and whitewashed warehouses marked with large black lettering that can be viewed from the sea.”

Whisky isn’t the only spirit distilled here, though. Next door to Jane’s workshop is Nerabus Gin, the first and only company solely dedicated to producing gin on the island.

Though some of Islay’s whisky distilleries have branched out into gin production on the side, former forensic scientist Dr John Gow and his wife and business partner Dr Audrey Gow have focused all their energy and expertise on their Hebridean gin recipe, which was lovingly developed over a number of years using a single still in their kitchen.

Its juniper base combines with herbs, spices and an infusion of wild Islay heather to create a unique dry gin character. Though it can be shipped internationally, the couple’s new visitor centre and shop at Islay House Square allows Audrey to tell their story and market their gin alongside the wares of other local makers, such as Oa Artisan, who hand-knit hats and snoods from alpaca wool. In return, Nerabus has garnered the support of some of the most established and high-end establishments on the island.

The Machrie Hotel & Golf Links, which won Scottish Hotel of the Year 2020 at the Scottish Hotel Awards, serve Nerabus G&Ts with a sweeping view over their prestigious golf course and private beach.

Within Islay House Square, you’ll also find the Mackinnon’s Marmalade deli and Islay Studios, an art gallery curated by Mark Unsworth, who moved to the island from the West Midlands in search of a slower pace of life. This he found in abundance. With nowhere to rush to or from, Mark found that he could spend more time thinking about the composition of his photography work. Of course, it helps that Islay offers such a solid foundation: “With the prevailing weather coming from the west and straight over the Atlantic Ocean, the air and light quality is as pure as can be,” Mark explains. “This makes for clear skies and some magical ▶



ABOVE: You’re more likely to bump into a herd of sheep or deer than a person on Islay and Jura
TOP RIGHT: A milk bottle vase, part of Persabus Pottery’s ‘Misty Isle’ range
BOTTOM RIGHT: One of the Dobcross looms used at Islay Woollen Mill

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ABOVE: One of The Machrie Hotel's many stylish, cosy lounges

sunsets, without haze. This is a total inspiration for me.”

Alongside his own photography, Mark showcases the Islay-themed work of other artists and craftspeople. He echoes the words of fellow creative Rosemary when he says that shopping local (even with the internet’s interference) is the done thing on Islay. However, it’s not just a show of loyalty, it’s also practical: “Ultimately, Islay is an island, so getting goods or services away, such as going to Glasgow, is a costly affair in terms of both time and money.”

Plus, the ‘whisky isle’ has a trump card to play when it comes to keeping its economy afloat. Out of its nine whisky distilleries, seven are owned by global conglomerates. Mark explains that if these distilleries were on the mainland, then all of their sourcing could and would be randomly spread throughout the UK or beyond. “When Bruichladdich distillery reopened in 2001, for example, they had a policy of trying to support local business wherever possible. They still do this, and other distilleries have slowly followed suit,” he continues. “I don’t think a global brand would support individual contractors like this anywhere else.”

It’s clear that though these independent businesses have the local community to thank for much of their success, the island’s historic whisky credentials still play their part in keeping its enterprising spirit alive. Yet, far from being a one-trick pony, Islay has well and truly diversified, and when you can visit, you’ll see for yourself why so many artists and craftspeople make it their home and the dynamic subject of their life’s work. **S**

ISLAY’S CRAFT TRAIL

PERSABUS POTTERY

Visit the studio or order hand-painted pieces online. persabuspottery.com

you can sample and buy some Islay-distilled gin too? islayginltd.com

PERSABUS FARM

Stay in the farmhouse or in a self-catering cottage on this working farm. persabus.co.uk

THE MACHRIE HOTEL & GOLF LINKS

Nerabus Gin is served at the Scottish Hotel of the Year 2020. www.campbellgrayhotels.com/machrie-islay-scotland/

ISLAY WOOLLEN MILL

Buy traditional tartan and tweed as seen on the big screen. islaywoollenmill.co.uk

MACKINNON’S MARMALADE

Pick up marmalades, jams, jellies, chutneys and other local produce for your picnic here. mackinnons-marmalade.business.site

JANE TAYLOR

Many of Jane’s linocut prints are inspired by the isle’s whisky distilleries. islaywhiskydistilleryprints.co.uk

ISLAY STUDIOS

View some of photographer Mark Unsworth’s framed work in his small gallery. islaystudios.co.uk

NERABUS GIN

Why stick to whisky when