



Five go wild on
EAGLE ISLAND

OE editor **David Lintern** takes to the road with family and friends.



Descent from Ben More

FEATURE



Dramatic coastal scenery on the road to Ben More

As I write this, I'm sat in the driving seat with the sound of a crying child in one ear, and the sound of the sea in the other. Right now, my one year-old daughter is tired from our journey and stressed from being in an unfamiliar place. Soon though, she'll be asleep, and tomorrow she'll wake up in the tiny crofting hamlet of Uisken, on the Ross of Mull, with eyes full of curiosity and wonder. We'll have four days to fill with campfires, solar eclipses, wildlife spotting and lazy exploration. There really isn't anywhere in the world like the west coast of Scotland, and this time a shiny red campervan has got us here.

Children really are a blessing, and our little one is no different, but as any newbie parent finding their way will tell you, the everyday round of sleep deprivation, relay child care and shift work can feel like the most challenging thing you've ever done. With a newborn especially, there's a lot less time available, but neither my partner nor I have any intention of giving up on our passion for outdoor activities – we just need to figure out how to integrate naps and feeds with hills and trees. A campervan trip to the Isle of Mull in convoy with old friends offered the chance to address this, and to try something a little different. We were both curious to see Mull, and to see if van life was a viable way for our young family to plug back in to the great outdoors.

We'd never used a camper before, but Jerba Campervans came up trumps with a lovely long Volkswagen T5 conversion, which accommodated three of us, our usual outdoor kit augmented by high chair, nappies and several kilos of children's clothes and books, in comfort and style. The devil is in the detail with these things – they've made sure that the USB sockets stay live when the leisure battery is switched off, concealed the external electrics behind bespoke cutaways, and even sourced Ventile for the pop-up roof, a dense cotton weave used by the military and polar expeditions for its natural waterproofness. Jerba are outdoor enthusiasts themselves, and it shows.

As I familiarised myself with the vehicle, our friends arrived in the ageing second cousin of our shiny new T5. They have a tatty but charming T3, complete with original features like a cassette deck (remember those?) and top opening fridge. There's no CB radio, but as

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Admiring the ducks

we head out from Glasgow to meet the ferry at Oban early the following morning, it's definitely a Kris Kristofferson moment for me. Our mini convoy is complete.

A calm, misty crossing and a long drive past floodplains and inlets lets us slowly immerse ourselves in the unique atmosphere of the Western Isles. The soft greys, greens and browns of a landscape still gathering its strength after winter's grip. Mull is rightly famous for its wildlife, and in the summer months can be busy with visitors, but on our early season visit it felt relaxed and off-duty. We headed for a secluded spot a friend had mentioned, and managed to bump into Ben Dolphin, the regular wildlife columnist in these pages, who was on Mull for a week's break himself. This trip was already starting to feel like a very family affair – I'd better get the kettle on!

A fine rain put the dampers on our beach campfire later that night, but we still managed a BBQ before the weather got the better of us and we retreated inside. The rain stopped by dawn, and a cloudy start to the day allowed a partial viewing of the solar eclipse. It's so much better to be outside for these natural wonders – a rising involuntary concern as the light shrinks, the palpable sense of relief as it returns. Our daughter didn't seem too bothered by the damp or the eclipse, but thankfully her previous night's drama was all forgotten. Instead she loved watching the seagulls from the open back of the van, and waving at Uncle Tim and Auntie Claire through the window. Given the sometimes challenging weather conditions in Scotland, having a larger vehicle already felt like a practical solution to some of our new parenting niggles – she was free of the cold, wet and bugs, but still in a beautiful place.

A THIN PLACE

The weather cleared for another little boat trip, this time to Iona, a little island off the west coast of Mull. Iona is famous for its role as a place of pilgrimage for Celtic Christians, following the monastery established there by Irish nobleman Columba in 563. This early Christian outpost played a key role in converting the Picts from paganism, and became a hub for intellectual and artistic life for four centuries, before Viking raiders plundered its many treasures. It later rose in prominence again, and many Scottish kings are buried in the graveyard, perhaps even Macbeth! Even now, there's a subtle ambience at play here. It feels marginal, on the edge of the world. My friend Tim described it perfectly as 'a thin place'.

Spilling off the ferry in freshening winds as the setting sun kissed



The summit of Ben More



Shipwrecked on the road to Craignure



Golden hour waterfall

THE ART OF GENTLE ADVENTURING

• **By road:** We used a luxurious Cromaty long wheel base camper from <http://www.jerbacampervans.co.uk/>. Jerba both rent and sell their conversions from their base in North Berwick near Edinburgh, and are the only recognised Volkswagen conversion company north of the border. They convert around 40 vans a year, and are the only company in the UK offering custom work. Our van was immaculate, with everything hand fitted and finished to a superb standard.

See our camping special in this issue for more tips and tricks for camper van success.

• **By water:** From the mainland to Mull: Regular ferries from <https://www.calmac.co.uk/> run from Oban to Craignure on Mull. The journey takes 46 minutes, and it is worth booking ahead. Note that longer wheelbase vehicles are charged at a higher rate than cars.

• **From Mull to Iona:** No booking required, and only a 10 minute crossing from Fionnphort on the Ross of Mull. No vehicles allowed unless by special permission. Timetables for both ferries are at: <https://www.calmac.co.uk/calmac-winter-timetables>.



granite pink, we made for 'camp'...or rather, a place to park. Out of season, many of the campsites are closed, including a very picturesque Fidden, so we drove inland until we found a safe harbour for our convoy of two. Van life clearly works best with less gear and more organisation than we were able to bring to bear on this trip, but with our kit explosion duly brought under control for now, we settled down in a beautiful spot with good friends and good beer.

A HIGH PLACE

Our unplanned drive stood us in good stead for a walk up Ben More the following day, but not before a crafty early morning swim in a salty sea loch. We weren't alone – the curlews and oystercatchers kept us company. On thin and winding roads suspended high between cliff and sea, a second sea eagle sighting. These huge, white tailed raptors were successfully reintroduced to the west coast in the 1970s after 70 years of extinction. There are now 35 pairs of 'flying barn doors' (they really are that enormous) on Mull – we saw so many on the west coast, we almost got blasé about it...almost!

I'd wanted to tackle the full round of Beinn Fhada and Ben More, but with a cheeky monkey in my backpack, the scramble over A Choich just wasn't worth the risk. Far better the simple way, handrailing alongside a lively stream bejewelled with delicate purple birch branches and onto the northwest ridge, to emerge from an inversion and arrive at the summit in bright sunshine. We loitered above the clouds for a good while, the sea and other mountains on other islands drifting in and out of view, before returning in more golden hour magic to a quiet night at the foot of the mountain we had just climbed. Staying in a cottage or B&B would have entailed another drive, but in the vans, mobility wasn't a problem. As long as we found a place off-road to park up safely for the night, that was home. Having a bed on wheels was proving a really versatile and dynamic way to explore the island.

THE EDGE

The following day we headed north again past a sea loch and a lone otter, ramshackle crofts nestled in weather-beaten dwarf oak stands,

MORE ON MULL

Mull <http://www.isle-of-mull.net/>
Iona <http://www.welcometoiona.com/>
Iona Abbey <http://bit.ly/1CQ0QUE>

Food and fuel

There are small general stores at Craignure, Fionnphort, and a bigger (but still small) supermarket at Salen. There are small petrol stations in or nearby these three. The bright lights of Tobermory offer a variety of gift shops and eateries, but definitely recommended are:

Tobermory Bakery Tea Room for coffee, quiche and cakes:
http://heycafes.co.uk/02064542/Tobermory_Bakery
Les Routiers awarded Fish and Chip van: <http://www.tobermoryfishandchipvan.co.uk/>
The Tobermory Distillery: <http://tobermorydistillery.com/>

towards a coastal walk overlooking the scattered Treshnish isles far out to sea, and a cave used for whisky smuggling. The weather and scenery couldn't be more different. This was wild coastal walking under steep black cliffs on grassy flatlands, a landscape reminiscent of Pembroke or north Skye. We found the cave eventually, plus the huge still for brewing up moonshine still intact among a 21st century salad of plastic bottles. On our return, the village of Crackaig, left in ruins after its inhabitants were stricken with typhoid. An atmospheric, cloudy day, a place where human life is more tenuous, where the land meets the sea.

Arriving at Calgary Bay for our final night of camper van magic meant we were perfectly placed for a white sand beach walk in the morning, and visit to the island's only town, Tobermory, before catching the ferry home. We barely scratched Mull's surface, and will definitely go back. But, we did circumnavigate a hugely diverse and beautiful island in our mini mobile home, which was a fun and practical way of sharing our adventure with new family and old friends. The campervan life may have just won another convert. ☺