

Kirkwall to Sanday

The sky fits over the sodden islands like a sheet of unpolished steel. We drive through relentless drizzle from Marwick Head to Kirkwall. The roads are empty, but the fields are full of grazing geese; pink-footed and Icelandic greylags. They are honking cull-survivors. Murmurations of starlings fling themselves across the grey sky like a speckled rash.

We drive to the plick-plack of windscreen wipers and the hiss of tyres on the slick road to join the trickle of traffic entering Kirkwall. A handful of people walk steadily towards the town centre; some with anoraks or umbrellas, but few have their shoulders hunched or their heads down. The weather is as it is in Orkney and Orcadians accept it as so. Jacketless lads strut along in the T-shirts and jeans they wear all year. I'm wearing so many layers I can hardly bend my arms.

At the ferry terminal we join the queue for Sanday. The names of the islands are on boards fastened to the tops of metal posts which stand along the harbour edge. Cars, vans and trucks are already in the line. Where did they come from? We park next to a van which advertises aerials and broadband, and behind a 4x4 containing the metal tubes for a polytunnel. Two cyclists swoosh past to the front of the line. They are a matching pair; identical electric bikes, yellow fleeces so luminous they are almost green and smiles of shared pleasure. She is tiny with a round face and has bright pink earrings dangling from the beneath her woolly hat. He is taller with a craggy face and heavy framed glasses which he takes off to wipe on his fleece.

A taxi pulls up on the quayside. Two teenagers emerge with rucksacks; the boy as thin as the girl is plump. They lift suitcases from the boot of the car and drag them over the rough red sandstone towards the foot passenger sign. Perhaps they had finished their exams and were on their way home to Sanday. There is no secondary school on the island so the children board in Kirkwall during the week and return home to the island at the weekend.

The passenger lounge of the ferry, 'Varagan', is furnished with brown plastic-covered benches, a coffee machine and a television screening a soundless sofa-time programme in 'Day-Glo' colour. The teenagers spread themselves and their belongings. The girl eats her way through a large flapjack and as she puts her feet on the seat in front of her a pasty doughnut of skin squeezes out between her T-shirt and jeans. The boy is like an etiolated stalk; his clothes would fit a small child. His skinny legs end in clown-sized plimsolls and his sockless ankles are blotched orange-blue. They exchange leery teenage looks and then forage in their rucksacks to bring out tins of cider and coloured straws. It is a 9am sailing.

I decide to go to the loo before the ferry sails to pre-empt the possibility of having to test out my aptitude for balance should the inter-island waters become turbulent. 'The Ladies' is a square metal room which boasts the usual facilities plus two wheel chairs, a broom and an ironing board.

As the ferry leaves harbour we go outside to stand in the mizzle on a narrow metal walkway. We form a quiet group with other travellers. No-one seems up for initiating conversation, but we are united by Gortex, squeaky over-trousers and a desire to travel beyond the mainland. The real commuters; those that island-hop for

their livelihood, sit in the cafeteria with coffee and Tunnock's caramel wafers, and read *The Orcadian*.

The ticket collector emerges from a thick metal door on the car deck below. He sports no waterproofs or hat and his oiled-wool sweater is criss-crossed with the leather straps of a ticket dispenser, cash satchel and a credit card machine. He clatters up the steps to join us.

'Good morning one and all. You've picked a grand day for it!'

His voice is rich with the islands' lilt. He checks the tickets of those who smugly booked ahead and suggests that those about to buy tickets may like to pay by credit card and preserve their cash.

'You're alright lad, I've plenty of cash. We're on us holidays!'

The man in the yellow fleece has the broad flat vowels of the West Riding. He holds up a fat brown wallet, grinning cheekily at the ticket collector.

'Aye, sounds as though you're from the south, sir!' says the ticket collector.

The rain pimples the sea like a pewter plate as The Varagan bustles out of the harbour between the uninhabited island of Gairsay to the West and Shapinsay to the East. Shapinsay is a flat island loosely scattered with dwellings and sometimes called the Garden of Orkney because of its fertility. It boasts the grand Balfour Castle, Mor Stein and the Broch of Burroughston. It is so close to the mainland, separated only by the narrow waters of The String, that some orcadians view it as a suburb of Kirkwall. All the islands we pass are subdued under the weight of sky that seems not so far above our heads, but as we sail into open sea, pencils of sun penetrate pinch-holes in

the cloud to silver the wave tops. Stevenson lighthouses and lairds' castles sit smartly on the ends of islands; well-chosen spots with an eye across the waters.

The wind cuts a slice between my sleeve bottoms and glove tops and I begin to taste the oily smell of diesel fumes so I return to the passenger lounge leaving my husband in conversation with the man-in-the-yellow-fleece-from-Yorkshire. They will have a lot to say to each other; both coming from God's Own Country. I sit very still staring out at the horizon which alternates its position above and below the hand rails as the Varagan stomach-heaves onwards.

There is little conversation in the room; discreet whispers, odd comments beneath the pound and pulse of the engine. Maps are unfolded, held up, turned round and refolded, and guidebook pages flipped and consulted. People move in and out of the passenger lounge strung about with binoculars, cameras and extra lenses, drawn by the desire to record each gliding, diving bird, each skerry-lolling seal, and every dip and thrust of the wet green islands, they point and peer, scan and click. Not me, I can't cope with the stuff hanging round my neck weighing me down and holding me to account for 'Seeing It All.'

It is the journey I want; the never-ending possibilities that come with travelling on water which stretches away over the curve of the world, taking your imagination with it and always enticing you to go a little further. I write a few words which I will stitch into sentences when I get home. Mostly I sit, look about me and think about these islands. I am always at home on this archipelago, which is not my home in the sense that it is not where I live, but it is somewhere I feel I can just be. I travel light. I don't think of the material 'stuff' I have left behind. I am liberated.

The cider-drinking schoolchildren have their ears plugged and their eyes glued to their phones. The boy holds his tin of alcoholic apple juice in one hand and rests his face in the other like a baby. He caresses his cheek with his thumb as he licks around the top of the tin, poking his tongue dangerously into the plectrum shaped hole.

I turn back to the salt-rimed window and the untrustworthy horizon. Shags fly past in tidy formation a hair's breadth above the sea. The Varagan is moving at a business-like lick; this is no cruise. The seascape changes with each onward throb of the engine. The sea has grown and half- waves meet from each point of the compass; rise, collide and break up into cappuccino froth before disappearing into the dour sea. The ferry rolls and yaws; I'm glad I went to the Ladies. But the clouds are beginning to pull apart like grubby lumps of sheep's' wool revealing enough blue sky to make a sailor a pair of trousers. Further North, Shapinsay's red-earth cliffs are collapsing onto the island's edges. Blockhouses from the Second World War still guard the water with sightless square eyes.

An announcement; the cafeteria is closing in five minutes.

The ferry pushes on to the accompaniment of the snoring aerial fitter. An insistent ring tone wakes him, but it's not his phone so he goes back to sleep. Open-mouthed snores, the sucking of cider-air from near-empty tins and still the soundless gurning of television presenters with their blue-white smiles.

The sun makes a break for it and so do I. I re-zip and re-Velcro and go outside. The horizon is a slash of gold between the egg-blue sky and the sea's metallic heft. Up through Eday Sound, past Linga Holme, Links Ness and Little Linga; whales' backs of virescent land emerge from the boisterous sea. White shafted-wind turbines

rise from the land like latter-day standing stones and their furious rotations provide electrical self-sufficiency for all the islands. White-winged gulls soar and cry their freedom above the fish farms below. Salmon are not shoaling fish; they are predisposed to a solitary existence and explosive plumes of foam disrupt the surface of their circular prisons as they swim in vain hope of escape from the crowds. In contrast their close relative, the naturally shoaling Arctic Char thrive on their communal swimming with barely a ripple.

Another announcement; will all passengers please return to their vehicles.

Aerial fitters and polytunnel suppliers are in their vans, engines running impatiently. Tourist couples sit neatly in their cars and rearrange their maps and guide books in touristic order, prepared to see 'Everything'. We rumble over the gangplank, passing the pair of yellow fleeces who wave as they power up the road on their electric bicycles smiling their matching smiles.