

LOST & FOUND

Absolutely Education stayed in the Old School House on the remote Scottish island of Eilean Shona and discovered a timeless wilderness that inspired JM Barrie's Peter Pan



AMANDA CONSTANCE





That house," blasted the colonel, in plummy tones, "is diabolical!" We had bumped into the colonel and his grandchildren on our first morning on Eilean Shona, the remote

Scottish island in the western Highlands that was our home for a week in the summer.

The colonel, whose family used to own the island, was referring to our holiday cottage, the Old School House, on the north-west corner of the island. His ire was directed at the house's location – the crofters' children who attended the school in the Victorian era lived on the south of the island. Their daily commute to school – done in bare feet – would have been across the Saddle, the pass over the island's mountainous interior, and back again. We did the same walk, albeit at a more leisurely pace, and with the luxury of shoes, in about three hours.

“Crofter’s children used to cross the mountainous Saddle in barefeet to get to school”

One of the popular local myths as to why the schoolhouse was built so far from the population it served is that the landowner at the time didn't like children and built the school out his way. With over 100 people living on the island at the end of the 19th century, that's a lot of cold feet every winter.

Thankfully, the island's current owners, Vanessa Branson and Robert Devoreux are no child haters. Their own four children grew up with Eilean Shona as a second home, since the couple – who are now divorced – bought it in 1995. In recent years, Branson has opened up the cottages for rent. The Old School House, renovated in 2013, is the most recent addition to the island's portfolio.



It is a beautifully sealed stone building designed by Victorian architect Alexander Ross which sits in a natural bowl in the landscape with huge views across the north channel of Loch Moirdart. In a state of near ruin, Branson – the sister of Virgin tycoon Richard Branson – peeled the house back to its shell and had it completely renovated.

It is now a spacious, open house, with white clapboard walls, grey wooden floors and light streaming in through large windows. In the evening, the setting sun blazes through the westerly window bathing the whole ground floor in golden light. Due to modern conveniences such as double-glazing, super insulation and two wood burning stoves, the house manages to be airy without being draughty and never felt damp, a considerable feat in this misty, damp corner of Caledonia.

Branson and Devereux have always run Eilean Shona in an eco-friendly way. The School House is off-grid, the fridge, cooker and lighting all run on gas. Heating comes from the wood-burning stoves and water from the island's own reservoir. The water is peaty, soft and yellow; it is quite an experience to sink into a steaming hot yellow bath. (It is almost exactly the colour of urine.)



Left
The Old School House
Right
The light, open kitchen
Below
The gas-lit bathroom



“The Old School House has the same gas lamps as Buckingham Palace”

The house manages to be pared back, in keeping with its Highland surroundings but also luxurious. Branson and Devereux know a thing or two about art and hotels – between them they’ve run galleries and art collectives, opened hotels, been at the helm of Soho House and the Frieze Art Fair (Devereux), and opened the fated Riad El Fen and founded the Marrakech Biennale (Branson). The interior of the school house reflects this wide experience: it has a simple Shaker style but there are quirky details: Moroccan art, rugs and accessories – a legacy of the time Branson spends in Marrakech every year. And attention to luxurious details: furniture that would be more at home in a West London house than the traditional Scottish croft, thick fleecy towels to swoon in and Egyptian-cotton bed linen – plus the comfiest beds we’ve ever slept in. Even the gas lamps are top notch: Paul Waddington, the island’s manager, told me proudly that they are the same as the ones in Buckingham Palace. To light an elegant gas lamp, see the glow and hear

the faint hiss of gas is a romantic thing and our eldest quickly took on the job of lamp lighting in the evening.

But as lovely as it is, the school house will only ever be a poor second to Eilean Shona itself. The island, just off the west coast of Scotland, is an hour and a half’s drive from Fort William. It is two and a half miles long and one and a half miles wide with 1500 acres of hill and moorland and 600 acres of woodland, including 300 acres of ancient and rare pine trees. The centre of the island rises to a dramatic summit and the ever-changing shoreline is full of coves and rocky inlets. At the south-east corner is Shoe Bay, at high tide an inviting place of pristine, turquoise water and at low tide, a bowl of clear white sand. There are no cars on the island and only one stony track. It is still the same wilderness that so inspired JM Barrie when he rented the island in the 1920s as a summer bolthole. It was here that he wrote the screenplay for the 1924 film adaptation of Peter Pan.

Eilean Shona is a natural paradise: there are red deer, sea otters, rare red squirrels and even rarer pine martens on the island. We saw many seals and a glimpse of a red stag but little else as our five-year-old struggles with volume control and our every movement was announced to Mother Nature long before we actually arrived.

Fed by the Gulf Stream, the west coast of Scotland is a comparatively warm and very moist climate. Trees wore beards of

“In the mossy dells we could almost hear the whoop of the Lost Boys”

moss and lichen, and thick, bouncy beds of brilliant green moss carpeted rocks, roots and crevices. Heather blazed purple across the mountainsides and flowers bloomed. Insects and bugs were in abundance, in numbers you just don't see in our pesticide-rich Home Counties. There were clouds of butterflies, crane flies and bumble-bees plus slugs, slow-worms and caterpillars; many which we had never seen before and some we don't ever want to see again: the dreaded midges and the odd tick.

As a holiday destination, Eilean Shona remains a choice for the fairly hardy. And while the staff are brilliant and helpful, you are expected to get on with it yourselves, which suited us just fine.

When we arrived on the island, after an exhilarating whizz across the loch on a RIB, our luggage and vast amounts of shopping were taken on a trailer pulled by a quad bike (one of only two motorized vehicles on the island). We had to walk the 40 minutes around the island to the school house. This became our daily commute to 'town' as we jokingly called it. The main hub of the island is around the jetty, the impressive main house which sleeps up to 24, most of the other rental cottages, plus the shop (part of a barn, open for 2 hours a week) and the village hall (another barn, but with electricity and WiFi) are all here.

The stony track to the school house traces the island's north-easterly edge, lapped by the brown, clear waters of the north channel of Loch Moidart. It was an ever-changing scene, the tidal shift here is often up to five metres and the view was always different, depending on the time of day. Out of 'town' we walked past the lily-pod covered lake, built in Victorian times to feed the old saw mill, past the rusting tractor, a popular stopping point, through ancient pines trees and mossy dells where



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activitiesabroad.com

BACK TO NATURE, SLOVENIA

Stay in a panoramic glass mobile home near the shores of lake Bled. There's hiking, swimming and kayaking on the lake plus visits to the spectacular Savica waterfall and the wilderness of Pokljuka forest. Mobile home from €80 a night, sleeps four.

save-hotels-resorts.com

CYCLING, AUSTRIAN TYROL

A self-guided cycling holiday with Saddle Skedaddle starting in Fügen (closest airport Innsbruck, 40 minutes' drive) is along quiet cycle paths in the Tyrolean valleys. Kids will love the Black Hole water slide at the Zillertal Thermal Baths. Seven days from £525pp half-board including route guidance, bike hire £70 a week.

skedaddle.co.uk

ROCK CLIMBING, SPAIN

If your kids love the climbing wall back home, try them on the real thing on the sunny Costa Blanca, where the limestone sea cliffs and mountain crags provide a perfect and varied learning setting. Rock and Sun sailors holidays to level and age - for younger children one morning session a day is often enough. From £699pp a week self-catering, including transfers and guidance for adults and children aged 7+.

rockandsun.com

were could almost hear the whoop of the Lost Boys. The track then sweeps down by the loch where at low tide we picked barnacle-covered mussels for the pot. And just as small legs were beginning to fire, the track sweeps around a big corner and there, hidden in the hills is the Old School House, entirely alone and facing its own private bay.

There is little chance for boredom on the island. We walked, scrambled and climbed up and down heather and bracken covered hills; swam and snorkeled in the freezing but glorious water; went kayaking in the loch and took the speedboat to Shoe Bay; caught endless crabs, collected shells, sunbathed on huge granite rocks, beach-combed and discovered endless exciting rock pools.

And living in the school house was an education in itself for the children. When you have to light a fire for hot water and boil a kettle on a gas hob for a hot chocolate, you learn about energy consumption very quickly. And no electricity meant no screens so imagination and creativity got to work instead and in the evenings we read and played epic games of Monopoly.

The lack of digital connection was bliss. My phone had no service anywhere on the island, apart from on one random rock in the loch when it suddenly connected with the world and pinged at me demonically. We felt much further away from the world than we have when camping in France or staying in villas in Greece.

On our last evening, driven to distraction by three children play fighting I shouted at them to get outside and defy the midges. The next thing I knew they were scaling the rockface near to the house - led by our five year old, like a nimble mountain goat, shrieking with excitement.

Do not visit Eilean Shona if you like your entertainment organized. If you want cocktails brought to you on a sun lounger and your kids in kids club. This is a place for doing nothing in the best possible way, for exploration and discovery away from the modern world. It is rugged, wild and free. We hope to return to Neverland many, many times. ☺

A week in the Old School House on Eilean Shona costs £1,250

For more information or to make a booking visit: eileanshona.com

Absolutely Education travelled courtesy of THE CALEDONIAN SLEEPER

Tickets (one way) are from £40 (seated) £80 per person (second class) and £150 per person (first class)

Call 0330 0600500 for information or visit: sleeper.scot