

The lure of Fair Isle

Leon Schulz was so enchanted by the Scottish island that he ordered one of its celebrated sweaters to give him a reason to return

▲ Malcolm's Head towards Fair Isle South lighthouse. The keepers left for the last time in March 1998 when it became automated, the last in Scotland to be so



◀ Left: boats old and new adorn the landscape, an everyday scene familiar to most Fair Isle islanders

Fair Isle sweaters have devotees as diverse as the Prince of Wales and the glamour model Carmen Electra. Fashion chains such as Whistles and Zara offer Fair Isle-inspired woollens. But how many people who love the multi-coloured knitwear have visited the island, which lies like a green stone between Orkney and Shetland and lends its name to the garment? Very few, I hazard. Their loss.

The sweaters are now imitated to such an extent that 'Fair Isle' could mean many forms of colourful sweater. The island itself, however, remains unique; it is only here that the original hand-framed and hand-finished woollen masterpieces are made in the traditional way.

I decided I'd like to become the proud owner of a real Fair Isle and collect it in person by sailing to the tiny island, situated where the Atlantic meets the North Sea. It turned out that I had to sail there twice: the first year, I found out that the sweaters are made to order and they were unfortunately sold out a year in advance. I took this as an opportunity to leave my measurements and plan another voyage. My sweater became number 18 out of 20 made that winter and is worth every stitch of the £200 it cost.

The first time I came from the north like the Vikings used to, crossing the North Sea from Norway to Lerwick on Shet-

land. From Lerwick it was a short 40-mile leg south to Fair Isle. No sooner had we found our way into the narrow entrance between the rocks, than fog and darkness closed the door behind us. Any attempt to exit or enter had become impossible. It was strangely quiet in the bay, as so often in fog. The only boat in the harbour, we moored alongside the concrete pier, knowing that no other boat would dare to enter. Had we come to the end of the world? It felt like a mystical place, for sure.

A safe haven

The following summer I came from the south, sailing through the English Channel and north via Ireland and the Hebrides. In the face of relentless gales with storm force winds that had been predominant during the entire season, I chose to avoid the notorious Cape Wrath on the north-west corner of Scotland and opted for the calm and comfort of the Caledonian Canal, enjoying a sunny trip through the heart of the Highlands instead. From Inverness it was a day's sail north to Wick, the last outpost on mainland Scotland. I crossed the Pentland Firth to Kirkwall in Orkney and reached Fair Isle on the third day after leaving the canal.

Fair Isle has only one properly safe harbour, North Haven. South Haven, which looks tempting in northerly winds, is not advisable owing to a rocky bottom with poor holding. The third harbour on Fair Isle, called



◀ Left: Regina Laska, Leon Schulz's Hallberg-Rassy 46, which he sailed to Fair Isle, but opted to go through the Caledonian Canal rather than round the aptly named Cape Wrath. Above, one of the handmade sweaters for which the island is renowned



▲ Above: the fog that often envelops Fair Isle adds to its air of mysticism. Left, the *Good Shepherd IV*, the island's ferry and one of its lifelines. Right, 'The Ferry' – as it is known – docked at North Haven, the island's safest harbour

South Harbour, is foul with rocks and must be approached with extreme caution.

So, if swell and weather makes the entrance to North Haven impossible, sailors must be prepared to do as the cruise ship did when we first tried to visit Fair Isle: it just went on and left Fair Isle to its usual tranquillity.

Great expectations

With great expectations and much better weather this time, we entered the North Haven, as we had done the previous summer, holding the conspicuous rock that forms part of the breakwater in transit with the hill called Sheep Rock in the far distance.

Once inside the natural harbour we were surprised to see so many boats all flying different ensigns: UK, Norway, Germany, the Netherlands and even Switzerland! We moored alongside a beautiful 1936-built wooden Norwegian gaffer and astern of the HR40, *Regina*, which I had once owned and sailed to the Caribbean. What coincidence, chancing upon my old boat in this remote place. She is owned by a Swiss couple on their way round the world.

No sooner had we moored *Regina Laska* than my Fair Isle knitter, Hollie, turned up in her 1980s car, which had not passed its MOT on the mainland and which, as a result, she had been given as a gift from a friend in Shetland. It had been lifted by crane onto the small deck of *Good Shepherd*

IV, which the islanders call The Ferry, and shipped over to Fair Isle.

You don't need an MOT on Fair Isle. The car serves Hollie for transport on the only road there is, stretching from the southernmost end of the island, where most of the 57 inhabitants live, to the harbour with the adjacent bird observatory, lying some four kilometres to the north.

"It would have been a shame to scrap it, don't you think, Leon?" Hollie greeted me from the pier. We hadn't met for a year and yet it felt as if we were old friends, who had been parted for only a week or so.

"As long as I can brake in front of all the sheep, there is nothing wrong with this car!"

Hollie pointed out the many lambs that are too young to understand that the road had not been built for them and that it would be wiser to give way to the few cars there are on the island.

The sheep here are of a very special island breed called Shetland sheep, which can withstand the harsh environment. I wondered if the people were of a similarly special breed to live here on this rock on the edge of the Atlantic.

Like liveaboards

It's difficult to explain why I have fallen in love with Fair Isle, but I think it is a combination of the nature, the colours, the people and the mystical atmosphere. Anyone who has been

“ The sheep are bred to withstand the harsh environment. The people are a similarly special breed to live here on this rock on the edge of the Atlantic ”

here once most likely wants to return. Some even decide to stay for good. Nobody I have spoken to living on Fair Isle today can imagine moving away. It is an easy island to fall in love with.

The lifestyle is probably not unlike living on a cruising boat, after all. There seem to be many similarities between sailors, liveaboards and islanders. The inhabitants of Fair Isle may seem to live an alternative life compared with city people, but they do not regard themselves as 'alternative'. They demand the same modern amenities as their mainland cousins, but prioritise the luxury of living a free and simple life in a small community with low expenses. And do we not all share the same thoughts when we move on board, living on our own boats?

There is a school on the island, a nurse, a shop, internet connection, electrical power, water and even a small museum. What else do you need for a simple, happy life? The *Good Shepherd IV* sails to Shetland three times a week during the summer and once a week in the winter, taking a maximum of 12 passengers – weather permitting.

For instance, Hollie could not get to her grandmother's funeral because of fog and even the small



◀ Left and above left: two inhabitants of Fair Isle. The birds, such as this puffin, vastly outnumber the humans, of which odd-job man Deryck is one of only 55



◀ Left: the end of a long yarn as Leon is fitted with his unique sweater by Hollie, above, who takes orders a year in advance

“ The ferry is pulled ashore each night as it would be too dangerous to leave her in the water in case it blows a gale, which happens more often than not ”

aircraft could not take off from the grass strip in the middle of the island. When this happens, there is nothing to do other than to bring out the instruments that most islanders seem to play, especially the fiddle, sit in front of the peat fire and leave the dark days of winter outside.

At 2330 each night the power is switched off, when the diesel generators have done their duty for the day. Power was, by the way, introduced to Fair Isle as late as the 1960s. If a gale is whistling around the doors, you might be lucky in that the wind generators continue to produce power – if they are not broken down, that is, which has been the case since January.

One man, many jobs

Deryk, who as well as looking after his sheep, working on the ferry and being part of the fire brigade, also acts as the wind farm engineer, explains that he has been trying to get the wind generator back in order for quite some time now. The problem is that it is so old that spare parts have not been available for decades and so every item has to be rebuilt by the innovative people of Fair Isle.

“Diesel power is so expensive, so I really have to get this mill going soon again,” Deryk said while he was washing off the hull of the *Good Shepherd*.

The ferry is pulled ashore each night as it would be too dangerous to leave her in the water in case it blows a gale, which happens more often than not. I think this says a lot

about life amidst the relentlessly harsh climate of Fair Isle.

Deryk continued to tell us about his home, explaining that the island was once owned by Dr George Waterston, the eminent ornithologist, and was acquired by the National Trust for Scotland in 1954, shortly after the renowned bird observatory was established. Such is Fair Isle's reputation for recording birds that bird watchers and lovers come from all over the world.

Hollie and Deryk met at university in Newcastle and they were in their late twenties when they decided to work as 'birdies' for a year or two at the observatory here. That was 16 years ago. “As long as you are flexible, resilient and resourceful you can have a great life here with a very low cost of living and the children living close to nature in a wonderful island community,” Deryk explained while I recognised more and more similarities to families living aboard their boats for the same reasons.

He has no thoughts of leaving. “Who would then look after the wind generator, keep *Good Shepherd* in mint condition, work as a fireman and control the airspace?” This reminded him that he had to leave immediately for the airstrip to “take down the plane from Shetland,” as he described it. As his four-wheel drive car was already rolling he called out: “Did I tell you that I am the relief airfield controller on the island as well?” And off he drove up the top of the green hill where I could barely make out the orange windsock. Soon I could hear the propeller noise of a small

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aircraft winding itself down toward the green grass of Fair Isle. It's a busy place, after all, I thought, smiling to myself.

Wool and birds

"Sheep, wool and birds is what unites the island, if you don't work remotely via internet," Hollie explained.

She is one of the dozen official knitters on the island. "I do 20 sweaters during the winters plus hats, gloves and bags. During summers I am so busy with all my other jobs: I work remotely via the internet for a small nature tour company, Shetland Nature, organising holiday tours and I plan the cruise ship visits to the island as well. Also I am the secretary of the school and I look after all the sheep, of course!"

The thought sprang to my mind that this could be an ideal place for a young family who wish to live on small costs with their children growing up in a safe and child-friendly natural environment, with the parents working internationally by means of the internet. It is a dream that many people with busy and stressed lives hanker after.

Just like living on a boat, Hollie's work is planned according to the weather. When there are three days of no rain, all the children would be gathered so that Hollie and her husband could paint the house. Three consecutive days without rain had yet to happen that summer and if it didn't happen this year at all, there would always be another year, Hollie reckoned.

What cannot be postponed, however, is the sheep shearing. Again, all the children are gathered together and the entire island helps to harvest the valuable wool by clipping the sheep by

◀ **Left: *Regina Laska* at anchor in the Fair Isle twilight. Leon Schulz says most people who visit the island want to return, enraptured by its scenery and the relaxed, simple nature of everyday life**

hand, as it has always been done. The wool is sent to Shetland where it is spun and dyed to the beautiful Shetland wool we know. Back on Fair Isle the treated wool is turned into the famous sweaters bearing the island's name. A true Fair Isle has no more than one or two colours on each row with an average of four colours used throughout. A block of pattern is never repeated in the same garment. Electric machines are not used in any part of the process and the sweaters cannot be compared to the cheap imitations found in stores around the world.

Down the years

The Fair Isle patterns have a long history. In former days it was important to know to which island a drowned fisherman was to be brought back to if a body was found floating in the sea, so each family had its own unique patterns.

Hollie pointed to the floor in her house where a beautiful carpet from Afghanistan was lying decoratively and which somehow had found its way around the globe to Fair Isle.

"In the olden days, islanders used to trade fresh food, water and the famous Fair Isle sweaters with sailors making landfall on Fair Isle on their onward journeys. In return, the islanders received goods they carried on board, such as, maybe, this carpet from Afghanistan.

"Patterns could also have originated from the Vikings who were settling the Orkney and Shetland islands for hundreds of years. Nobody knows."

When comparing the old carpet from Afghanistan with the traditional patterns used by Hollie in her knitting, I wondered who was inspired by whom. The patterns on the carpet and Hollie's knitting looked very similar; both very old and traditional.

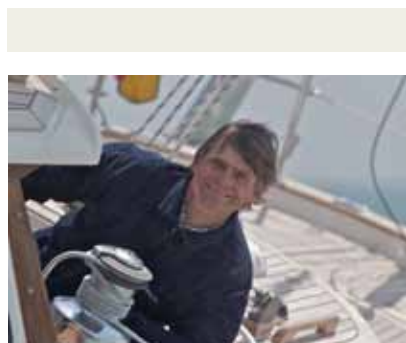
I tried on my new Fair Isle sweater – the first true tailor-made piece of clothing I have ever owned. It fitted snugly and I really liked the traditional pattern, checking carefully that no more than two colours had been used in each row and that no block of pattern had been repeated throughout the garment.

Cyndy from Australia, one of my charter guests aboard *Regina Laska*, tried on a hat and ordered a sweater for herself as well, number 19 out of 20 to be made during the following winter to be ready the next summer. I asked Cyndy if she would return next year to pick it up, but she just laughed: "For an Aussie, it is too cold to sail to Fair Isle two years in a row!" She preferred her new Fair Isle to be sent to her by post.

What Cyndy possibly did not know, yet, is that a Fair Isle sweater is not only stylish and will never go out of fashion, but is also knitted for the cold winter days on Fair Isle and keeps you truly cosy.

I decided I would definitely return again – especially when I feel I need to experience the warmth of the people and its original Fair Isles.

In the meantime the pattern on my sweater will turn my thoughts back to Burkle House, Fair Isle, where Hollie once sat during stormy dark winter nights, knitting it. Beguiling and starkly beautiful, it is a fair isle, indeed. **YW**



Leon Schulz sails his Hallberg-Rassy 46 *Regina Laska* six months of the year, offering RYA sail training from Start Yachting to Yachtmaster Prep Courses, specialising in cruising to remote places in safety, comfort and style. www.reginasailing.com

