

The Special Qualities of the Loch na Keal National Scenic Area

- Highly distinctive seaways and shores
- A voyage from enclosed sea loch to the open Atlantic
- Dramatic coast of basalt terraces and cliffs
- Views of an island-studded sea
- Islands and islet groups of astonishingly varied character
- A vast natural world, dwarfing human settlement
- World famous Staffa and Fingal's Cave
- The horizontal Treshnish Isles
- The instantly recognisable Dutchman's Cap

Special Quality	Further information
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Highly distinctive seaways and shores 	
<p>Loch na Keal, the major sea loch on Mull's Atlantic seaboard, is a place where ancient, horizontal lava flows have resulted in a highly distinctive landscape of coastline and seaways.</p> <p>There is a wide, outer loch divided in two by the island group of Ulva and Gometra and a narrow inner loch. This results in three distinct areas and, within each one, the scenery is composed of dramatic but complementary contrasts to north and south.</p>	<p>Loch na Keal (<i>Loch na Caol</i> – Loch of the Kyle, or Narrows.)</p> <p><u>Outer Loch na Keal</u> is bordered on its north by Ulva, to the south by the Ardmeanach peninsula's north coast. These two shores offer dramatic contrasts.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Ulva coastline is lower, made up of indented and weathered basaltic ridges and ledges, with off-shore outlying rocks and islets. Crags and rock-forms are smaller in vertical scale, with a greater diversity in form and vegetation than the opposing shores of • The southern coastline (Ardmeanach Peninsula) has a bold, dynamic, coastline of cliffs, stepping back and up in landslipped tiers, to unstable scree slopes. The slopes are bare and monumental in scale, studded with huge boulders. There is a distinct lack of trees and few human elements. <p><u>Inner Loch na Keal</u> is enclosed to the north and south by mainland Mull; its bayhead beach is backed by meadows and woodland.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Its north shores are steeply sloped with indistinct summits and scant pockets of scrubby woodland on the shores; contrasting with • The steep, cliffed and scree covered hill slopes to the south, sweeping up steadily to the distinct peak of Ben More, and the wind-pruned trees of the Gruline shore and Scarisdale Wood. <p><u>Loch Tuath</u> is enclosed by Ulva's north coast and by Mull's western seaboard at Kilninian. Loch Tuath gives a sense of intimate enclosure, with gentler hill slopes, that contrast markedly with the bold, rugged and wild character of outer Loch na Keal. Furthermore, they have a mixture of rough grazing and semi-natural woodland. The loch's shoreline is indented by a number of small bays into which hazel, rowan and alder-lined burns tumble swiftly. Waterfalls, such as Eas Forss, cascade over small precipices which echo the larger cliffs of the southern shore.</p>

• **A voyage from enclosed sea loch to the open Atlantic**

The area stretches from the sheltered waters of inner Loch Keal, through the archipelago of Ulva, Gometra and their outliers, to the outer Treshnish Islands, exposed to the full fury of the Atlantic Ocean. Although covering an extensive area, the seascapes, island and coastal landscapes are an indivisible whole.

To experience the area to the full, it is essential to travel through it by sea. Such an Atlantic voyage offers impressive and unique seascapes, together with beauty and wildlife specific to the Atlantic and Scotland's western seaboard.

Nowadays the islands appear remote and inaccessible, and this is appreciated as a modern quality. However this perception is very different to that of the past, when the sea was the main highway and islands were, for example, at the centre of the Lordship of the Isles. This is testified by the visible remains of the once strategically important castles on two small islands in the Treshnish group – Cairn na Burghe More and Beg.

• **Dramatic coast of basalt terraces and cliffs**

The high terraced hills across much of the NSA form a highly distinctive tract of land, with the coastal cliffs being particularly dramatic.

The ancient lava flows give a horizontal emphasis to the whole area. Geometric, strongly stepped profiles lead up and back from a rocky, steeply edged coastline to flat-topped summits.

Passage along the eastern shores of Loch na Keal is tightly confined to the narrow and spectacular coastal road. In the case of western Ardmearach, 'The Wilderness', there is no road at all.

There is little tree cover to break-up the exposed hills and slopes, woods only occurring in sheltered gullies and on a few steep slopes. It is absent from the outer islands.

'Coastal cliffs are particularly distinctive. Here the basalt cliffs are surrounded by a fan of rocky scree and the flat terraces at the foot of the cliff are strewn with large boulders which have broken away from the sheer rock faces above. The islands to the west also have the typical stepped profile, but here the terraces are crisply defined, with sharply eroded flat surfaces and vertical cliffs.'
Environmental Resources Management (1996)

'Along the whole eastern horizon was Mull, a fine skyline indeed, topped by the shapely cone of Ben More. Between us and Mull were Gometra and Ulva and Little Colonsay, and as we gazed we were impressed once more with the characteristic features of this country of the west side of Mull. The cliffs are sheer, then there is a little flat; then another steep slope and cliff and another flat on top of that.'
Fraser Darling (1952)

On the Ardmearach peninsula, coastal cliffs, scree and a series of basalt terraces rise up to 492m (1704 ft.). The southwest part of the peninsula (designated SSSI) provides one of the finest continuous sections through the early part of the sequence of lava flows which built the main cone of the Mull volcano. This is where McCulloch's Tree – the famous fossil tree – is found. Each lava flow (there are between 25-30) is marked by a sequence of cliff and terrace – a key site illustrating this is Aird na h-Iolaire.

• **Views of an island-studded sea**

This is essentially a broad, island-studded seascape with an abundance of islands of different shapes, sizes and character, although all reflect the horizontality of the lava flows from which they are derived. Innumerable skerries pepper the whole bight with eye-catching shapes.

The principal islands are:

- Eorsa.
- Inch Kenneth and Samalan Island.
- Ulva, the largest and its sister island Gometra.
- Little Colonsay.
- The Treshnish Isles – Fladda, Lunga, Bac Mòr and smaller isles.

<p>Views of the islands are shared from many vantage points within Loch na Keal and Loch Tuath. Views from the various islands to others in the group, and views back to the mainland are distinctive, and clearly bounded.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The unique and magical island of Staffa.
<p align="center">• Islands and islet groups of astonishingly varied character</p>	
<p>The islands and islet groups have surprisingly varied characters:</p> <p>Eorsa is smooth and green, and the historic Inch Kenneth is encircled by serrated reefs and skerries.</p> <p>Ulva, the largest island, is the most green and lush. It is low-lying and settled, with a mixture of pasture, policy woodlands and rough grazing. The transition from land to sea is fragmented and vertically less challenging than other of the Mull and island coasts. Yet nevertheless, at close hand it still gives dramatic drops onto turbulent seas.</p> <p>Gometra and Little Colonsay both have distinctly shelved coastlines.</p> <p>The more distant Treshnish Isles are a chain of horizontal, basalt islands which form a very distinctive island group. They are important landmarks, particularly Bac Mór, the Dutchman's Cap.</p> <p>Staffa is world famous for Fingal's Cave and its basalt columns.</p>	<p align="center"><i>Merrily, merrily goes the bark On a breeze from the northward free So shoots through the morning sky the lark Or the swan through the summer sea The shores of Mull on the eastward lay And Ulva dark and Colonsay And all the group of islet gay That guard famed Staffa round.</i></p> <p align="center">(Sir Walter Scott, The Lord of the Isles, canto iv, verse X)</p> <p><u>Eorsa</u> is a green island, with smooth rounded slopes and a cliffed west coast, with an attendant island – Samalan. Eorsa once belonged to the Priory of Iona. It is a compact island in the centre of Loch na Keal, with dramatic views from the east coast of Ben More and the cliffs along the Ardmeanach peninsula. The west shores are high cliffs that become lower to the east. Eorsa served as a natural barrier across Loch na Keal during the First World War when the loch was used as a deep-water naval anchorage.</p> <p><u>Inch Kenneth</u> is an anomaly in the group as its rocks are sedimentary and it has exceptionally fertile soils. Like Eorsa it is very green. Its hazardous, outlying low-lying islets, drying rocks, reefs and skerries, appear as a series of serrated teeth alongside the island, encircling it – except for its west, cliffed side. It has a distinctive profile.</p> <p>Inch Kenneth's name is said to derive from St. Cannoch, a contemporary of St Columba, and on the island there are ruins of a 13th century church. It is said that Kings of Scotland were buried here if storms prevented passage to Iona.</p> <p><u>Ulva</u>: East Ulva's basalt plateau is low-lying and settled, with a mixture of pasture, policy woodlands and rougher grazing. The coast has numerous low stepped headlands, islets, outlying rocks and skerries leading down and into the sea.</p>
<p align="center">• A vast natural world, dwarfing human settlement</p>	
<p>Within this vast, natural landscape, ranging from the heights of Ben More to the distant Treshnish Islands, settlement is sparse. Where houses do occur, they are dwarfed by the mountainous and sea-dominant scene. The eye is swept down from the hills, along the coastline of Loch na Keal and out to sea.</p> <p>This increases the drama and accentuates the feeling nature is</p>	<p>At the eastern end of the NSA lies the massif of Ben More, rising to 966m.</p> <p>Settlement is confined to small linear groups on the Kilninian coast, Gruline and Gribun. Ulva is lightly settled, as are Gometra and Inch Kenneth. The Treshnish Isles and other inner isles are now uninhabited.</p> <p>It should be noted that in the past there was a larger human population, with the west coast of Mull well populated before clearance. Even though many of the earlier townships were converted to crofting settlements during the clearance phase in the early 19th century, the ruins of many townships can still be seen – around Loch Tuath in</p>

<p>dominant, impervious to humans and their actions.</p>	<p>particular. With the loss of population, much of the vegetation has returned to a more natural character.</p>
<p><i>Location-specific qualities</i></p>	
<p>• World famous Staffa and Fingal's Cave</p>	
<p>Staffa is world famous and has long inspired artists, writers and composers. Uninhabited, isolated and remote, it is readily accessible by boat. On arrival, basalt columns both straight and curved, some of the most impressive in the world, dominate the view. Fingal's Cave penetrates the cliffs, disappearing into the darkness, with the sound of the swell echoing back from far inside.</p> <p>The island provides an all-round experience. Visitors walk beneath the columns, perhaps surprised to see such regularity sculpted by nature, and then enter the cave itself.</p> <p>Thereafter they can climb to the top of the island, walk the length of the plateau and get excellent close-up views of puffins and other seabirds. It is also the centre of a wide and grand vista across the sea to Coll and Tiree, the Treshnish Isles, Ulva, the Ardmearach Peninsula, Ben More, the Ross of Mull, Iona and Dun I.</p>	<p>Staffa's natural importance is recognised through the designations of National Nature Reserve and Site of Special Scientific Interest.</p> <p>Staffa is characterised by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A sense of remoteness, but at the same time readily accessible by boat (weather permitting). • Impressive examples of regular basalt columns, with cliffs over 40m high, riddled with extraordinary sea caves. • A natural paradise for breeding seabirds. They accentuate the larger, natural world, wherein humans are visitors, with the isles left to the birds on departure. • On the island's plateau, a feeling of 'floating on the sea', with grand panoramas in all directions. <p>Fingal's Cave, 83m long and 23m high, is the best known sea cave. It is:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Easily accessible, and visually and atmospherically spectacular. • A natural, geological, wonder of the world, said to be the only sea cave in the world formed entirely out of columnar basalt. • Associated in legend with Fionn MacCool (Fingal). • Renowned at home and abroad. <p><i>'Artists, authors, poets, musicians and royalty have all visited the island and helped establish Staffa as an integral part of the Grand Tour. The first recorded visit was by the scientist Joseph Banks in 1772... Many of those who followed Banks helped to immortalise Staffa – in music through Mendelssohn's Hebrides Overture or in paintings such as Turner's Staffa, Fingal's Cave...'</i> National Trust for Scotland (2004)</p> <p>Poets such as Keats, Wordsworth, Tennyson and Sir Walter Scott recorded their impressions and Queen Victoria wrote about it in her journal.</p>
<p>• The horizontal Treshnish Isles</p>	
<p>The Treshnish islands are an isolated, uninhabited, undeveloped chain of islands, and a natural paradise for breeding sea birds. Their horizontal profiles and vertical cliffs, comprising the remnant of an ancient lava flow, are particularly distinctive.</p>	<p>Some of the eight main islands in the group are rarely visited due to difficulty in landing and access, for example Cairn na Burgh Mor and Beg. The islands are designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest.</p> <p>Lunga (<i>langr-oy</i>, Old Norse longship island), is the largest of the Treshnish islands at 81 hectares. Cruachan ('conical hill'), a rounded hill of 103m (338ft) is the highest point. There is a ruined village, situated on a plateau below Cruachan, last occupied in 1857.</p>

<p>Cruachan, the summit hill of Lunga, provides a magnificent panorama of the surrounding islands and seas.</p> <p>Although nowadays seen as remote, in the late medieval period, the castles on the adjacent small islands of Cairn na Burgh More and Beg were strategically important, being a seat of the Lordship of the Isles, granted to the Macleans of Coll.</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>The instantly recognisable Dutchman's Cap</i> 	
<p>Of the Treshnish Isles, Bac Mòr, the Dutchman's Cap, is the most notable. With its domed summit rising from the centre of a flat, vertically-sided platform, it has perhaps the most distinctive profile of any island in Scotland. As a highly prominent landmark, it assists with navigation over a wide area.</p>	<p>Bac Mòr (<i>the big bank</i>) is an eroded volcanic cone rising to 86m, encircled by a grassy rim of lava. It is only possible to land in the quietest of sea and weather. There are the remains of shielings there.</p>

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