

Circular One

Firstly welcome to the Mingulay expedition 1980. This circular is the first of three which you will receive between now and the summer. They will contain a great deal of important information which you should note carefully. If after reading then you still have unanswered questions, please do not hesitate to contact me directly.

The Site

The island of Mingulay lies about half a mile north of Berneray, the most southerly of the islands making up the Outer Hebrides. It is only a small island ($2\frac{3}{4} \times 1\frac{1}{2}$ miles) and is uninhabited. Although small the island is amazingly varied. On the east is a large bay of beautiful white sand covering over 48 acres at the head of which are the ruins of the old village. Just above this are flat fields where we shall be carping and a good stream close by. Surrounding the bay are three hills the highest of which is Carnan, 891 feet high. The west coast is very different from the east indeed. It is made up of very many cliffs which are often sheer and very high. The highest is Biulacraig, and is over 750'. It is very difficult to imagine anything that high, but if you look outside and find a tall tree (say 50' high) Biulacraig would be as high as 15 of those trees one on top of another. Go on try it.

The island is owned by local farmers on Barra who use it to raise sheep, but apart from the 1000 or so sheep there is a great deal of other wildlife there. Firstly there are rabbits - hundreds of them - and it is possible that rabbit pie may appear on the menu occasionally. The island also has a large bird population. Over 1% of all Britain's seabirds nest on this tiny island, and you will undoubtedly see Puffins, Kittiwakes, Fulmars, Cormorants, Shags, and possibly Razorbills and Guillemots. In addition there are of course thousands of Gulls and many other common birds. However there is also a good chance of seeing some birds of prey. Past expeditions have seen Golden Eagles, Peregrines and young, Buzzards and Kestrels. In addition Mingulay is a common stopping place for birds on migration route and you will commonly see huge flocks of rock and meadow pipits, twite and wheatear, just popping in for a short stay.

My favourite bird is definitely the Puffins. Unlike many other places Mingulay has thousands of them. They sit quite tame on the cliff ledges or on the sandy slopes, and you can get quite close to them. When we are there they will be nearing the end of the breeding season. They nest in old rabbit burrows and lay a single egg deep underground. In July the chick will have hatched and will be almost large enough to leave the hole. Until now the parent birds have been feeding it small fish brought in to the hole, but will desert it shortly, so that, driven out by hunger, the chicks will emerge at night and flap down the slopes to the sea. If we are lucky we may see this happening, as curiously they usually emerge together.

Interestingly, the numbers of puffins had been falling, but Mingulay like a few other sites now has a growing population. No one is really sure why this should be but some scientists think that the reason is connected with the fact that the seas round the islands are getting cooler and more food is available for puffins to feed to their young.

Travel

You will see from the enclosed timetable that the expedition runs from Tuesday 22nd of July until Tuesday 12 August, but that we do not arrive on Mingulay until two days after that first date and leave two days before the second date. Clearly setting to the Outer Hebrides is a slow business.

This is what will happen. Firstly you fill in the enclosed travel form and return it to Be. On it you must state which is your local railway station and where you wish to join the main party train. The SHS will then book all your rail, steamer and boat tickets, and send you the bill later. Rest assured that we get large discounts from British Rail and that this saving will be passed on to you.

The train terminates in Glasgow Central station, and the whole party then moves to Glasgow Queen Street Station where we catch another train to Oban. At Oban we pick up the food and equipment for our expedition and board a large brand new ferry boat, the 'Claymore' and set sail for the outer Hebrides.

The journey takes over five hours, and we arrive on Barra at ten to seven in the evening. On Barra the local school has been good enough to put us up and the following day we again set sail for Mingulay itself. This time the journey will be in a 50' boat 'The Boy James' specially chartered for our expedition. The journey should take about an hour and a half and we will be on Mingulay by lunchtime.

Once we have landed however the island is ours for 17 days, and just as soon as we have moved all the food and equipment round to the camp site and have the camp set up then you will be able to explore the island to your heart's content.

All these arrangements are quite tricky to make and it is important that you fill in and return the travel forms to do no later than May 7th.

As far as sleepers are concerned, I would recommend that if you are travelling from the South of England then these would be a good idea, on both the outward and return journeys. If you live in the North, I will leave the decision up to you.

There is no need for berths on the ferry.

Please note that once you have filled in the travel form, there is nothing else for you to do. Do not purchase tickets yourself, if you fill in a travel form.

Organisation of the Camp

Accommodation on Mingulay will be under canvas. We will have two large marquees, one for storing food and the other for cooking and eating in. You will sleep in large (13 x 8') Icelandic tents which have plenty of room, for all your gear and sleeping bags.

Each Icelandic will be looked after by one of the Assistant leaders and each day in turn, one tent (4-5 boys) will be responsible for all the cooking, washing up, carrying water for the whole day. Your 'duty day' will come round every five or six days and between duty days you will be free to do what you like, while someone else does the cooking and cleaning.

If you would like to bring your own small tent for small expeditions away from the main camp, then that will be fine.

Activities and equipments

The SHS provides everything you will need for the expedition. We provide food, camping equipment, tents, plates, cutlery etc. etc. There is even a hose pipe to bring water to the camp and Calor gas driers to dry out clothes if you get wet.

In addition we will have four canoes, climbing equipment, project gear for natural science projects and an 8 man inflatable boat with a powerful engine for fishing, boating and as a rescue boat for the canoes.

Don't worry if you can't canoe or climb or sail or fish; we don't expect you to be experienced and will have assistant leaders along who can help and instruct you if you want.

The SHS has very few rules. But there are strict safety rules which I will be sending out with the next circular. However safety apart, you will be able to do exactly as you please for 2½ weeks. No one is going to force you to go walking or learn how to canoe or climb, but you will be encouraged to try out some of these things. After all there isn't much point in coming all the way to Mingulay and then doing nothing.

Attached to this circular is a list of recommended equipment. I would add little to this, but say that if you want to economise you could omit the rucksack and bring a carryall instead. But I would not recommend that you save any money in buying boots or a good sleeping bag. If you cannot afford a down sleeping bag (and I know they are very expensive) bring along a Terelyene one and a good thick blanket as well. Even in Summer the Scottish nights can be quite cold and you should have plenty of warm clothes.

Communication on Mingulay

Mingulay is a very remote island. In the unlikely event of an emergency, it would normally be very difficult to get a doctor to the island. As a result the expedition will have a doctor on it and we are taking a powerful radio transmitter for emergency contact with the coastguard. If necessary a helicopter can be landed on the beach to take off injured people. Naturally we do not expect such emergencies but I include this information to set you minds at rest. Should there be an accident, we have made plans to deal with it.

As far as post is concerned, it will be possible for letters to reach the island on the boat which brings our fresh bread and, I will give you the address for the expedition in the next circular.

Tetanus injections and visits to the dentist

These are important. Before you come you must have had a course of three tetanus injections which your GP will be able to give you. In addition, the nearest dentist to Mingulay is over 90 miles away, and you should have a check up a couple of months before you go.

Incidentally if you have any information which the expedition doctor should be aware of, please write to me so that this can be passed on. In particular he will need to know if you have any allergies and if you are taking a course of tablets just before or while you are on the expedition.

Books and Maps

The SHS will provide maps on the expedition, but you may like to have your own. The SHS can obtain cheaply copies of the 1:10,000 map of Mingulay known as 'Parts of NL58 SW, 58SE and 57NE, and you will be sent an order form for this map to obtain it at a discount through us.

Before the next circular I would recommend that you try and find out a little more about the Hebrides and about Mingulay in particular. Perhaps the best single book is 'The Islands of Western Scotland' by W.H. Murray published by Eyre Methuen, which you should be able to get from your local library.

If you are interested in birds, I would strongly recommend you buy a copy of 'Highland Birds' by D. Nethersole-Thompson published by the Highlands and Islands Development Board at Bridge House, Bank Street, Inverness. This glossy paper back has plenty of excellent colour pictures, and informative interesting text. It is also remarkably good value and the HIDB will be able to tell you the price including postage direct from them.

Finally.....

That's all from me for the present. There is much more I want to tell you about Mingulay and I will include information about the history of the island, project work we plan to do and give you details of the assistant leaders who will be coming along on the expedition, in the next circular.

In the meanwhile don't forget:

1. Complete the travel form and return it to me by May 7th at the latest.
2. Make sure you have had your tetanus injections and seen the dentist.
3. Go to your local library to get books out on the Hebrides.
4. And write to me telling me your interests and what you want to do on the expedition. I look forward to hearing from you.

• With best wishes,

Nick Deeley

P.S. There are still vacancies on Mingulay and Colonsay, so do persuade your friends to join us.