



The Barvas bus, Lewis



Interior of the Barvas bus
showing watcher's bedroom door

Lewis and Harris

Furthest from home – furthest from anywhere – the little Barvas river runs out into the sea on the north-west corner of the Isle of Lewis, in the Outer Hebrides. A lonelier or more desolate stretch of coastal land could hardly be imagined: mile after flat mile covered in the rough grass known as machair, with never a tree in sight. But the river itself is keenly valued by fishermen, for it yields an average annual catch of more than 170 salmon and grilse.

In 1703 the antiquary Martin Martin reported that every year the natives maintained an ancient custom of sending a man to cross the stream early on the first of May, to prevent any chance of a woman going over it first. If that happened, they believed, it would hinder salmon coming into the river all year round – so I hoped that my arrival one grey, overcast evening in the middle of July would not cause any mid-season dip in the number of fish migrating up the estuary.

To my delight, I found that Barvas boasts a fully mobile fishing hut, in the form of a green, single-decker bus parked on a slight rise, from which there is a commanding view of the estuary and the sea. The vehicle has been comfortably adapted to its new role: the seats down one side have been removed to make way for kitchen units, the rear end is partitioned off and furnished with two beds, and the remaining seats have been turned to face toward the sea.

Here, during the season, watchers are on duty every night, keeping an eye on the pool. They count the fish coming in on high tides, to give fishermen some idea how many might be in the pool. Here, too, fishermen take refuge in bad weather and fortify themselves against the Hebridean storms, contemplating the elements through the long line of windows.

When I arrived, two watchers were already on post, and soon the local ghillie, Angus McLeod, turned up with a pack of seven assorted dogs, which raced wildly about the flower-studded grass. Angus told me that the ruin which we could see in the distance across the estuary was the remains of a stone cottage which locals set alight one day, after the unwelcome owner had incautiously gone to town in his pony and trap.

Over a drink in the lodge, my hosts explained – among much other fascinating information – why there are no graveyards inland. The dead have traditionally been buried in the sandy soil beside the sea, rather than in the peat which covers much of the island – for the lack of oxygen in the

The Barvas