

On the road: Isles of Scilly

This handful of islands strewn off the most westerly tip of Cornwall has long been known for its flower farms and silver-sand beaches, but food is making its mark here, too – look out for lobster quiches, crab feasts and local wines

Words CLARE HARGREAVES

There's trouble at **Troytown Farm** on St Agnes (troytown.co.uk). Gem, one of farmer Tim Hicks' 11 Jersey cows, has been munching the three-cornered leeks that grow in the hedgerows again, making her milk smell and taste of garlic. It's not an ideal flavouring for the ice cream the family makes for a living, so it's gone to the pigs. Lucky pigs.

St Agnes is the most south-westerly inhabited island of the Isles of Scilly, 28 miles off Land's End. Getting a more westerly scoop than this would mean carrying on to Newfoundland, though why would you? Happily, despite Gem's best intentions, there's still plenty of ice cream for me, and the folks staying on Troytown's beachside campsite, to try today. There's creamy strawberry, salty caramel and bestselling vanilla, similar in colour to the narcissi that once carpeted the island until demand ran dry. My favourite is rose geranium, flavoured from plants grown by Tim's brother. Apparently I'm in elevated company. When Prince Charles, Scilly's landowner, visited with Camilla, she was captivated by its lightly perfumed aroma, says Sue, Tim's wife who makes the ice cream, along with yogurt, clotted cream and butter.

The Hicks don't just do dairy, however. Walking across the rocky mile-long island, Tim points out his Red Ruby beef cattle, piglets and handkerchief-sized plots of early potatoes, which he reckons are every bit as tasty as the better-known Jersey Royals. All of it, plus the milk and other dairy produce, is sold at the farm shop.

Given the hefty cost of importing food from the mainland, Troytown's inspirational steps towards self-sufficiency make sense. It's also helping turn the Isles of Scilly into a destination known not just for its silver-sand beaches, balmy climate and gentle pace of life but, increasingly, for food. This September the archipelago celebrates this blossoming culinary culture with a **Taste of Scilly Festival** (visitislesofscilly.com/tasteofscilly) offering everything from pop-up beach barbecues to supper trips by boat and pasty-making masterclasses.

Given its tiny population (just 80), St Agnes has an impressive choice of restaurants. By day, Coastguards Café delivers crab sandwiches, cream teas and dreamy sea views, then in the evening transforms into **High Tide** (hightide-seafood.com), a bijou restaurant run by Kiwi Mark Eberlein. The latter is getting a reputation as one of Scilly's top places to eat, offering choices such as guinea fowl, or Scilly John Dory with scallops, samphire and St Agnes lobster bisque sauce.

For pub grub, snuggle inside the Turk's Head. If the weather's inclement, one of its hot chocolates with a kick of St Agnes brandy will sort you. The inn is by the jetty, so you can even pop over by boat from the principal island of St Mary's for supper, which adds to the adventure. It beats struggling home on the number 19 bus.

Arriving back on St Mary's, the island's main settlement, Hugh Town, feels hectic – there are even, shock horror, a few cars. I retreat to the 16th-century castle overlooking the town, built by Elizabeth I to keep the pesky Spanish »



PHOTOGRAPHS: ANTHONY GREENWOOD, GETTY IMAGES, VISIT ISLES OF SCILLY

OPPOSITE PAGE (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT): BRYHER LOBSTER; ST MARY'S COASTLINE; A LOCAL FISHING BOAT; TROYTOWN ICE CREAMS

at bay and now transformed into the **Star Castle Hotel** (star-castle.co.uk). Its star shape makes for characterful accommodation, including three dinky guardhouse rooms on the ramparts. Imbibe its history, and locally brewed Ales of Scilly beer, in its eccentric dungeon bar.

For fine dining, this is your place. Choose between the cosy, tapestry-clad dining room tucked inside the castle's granite walls, and the airy conservatory. Naturally, fish is king, including lobster and crab caught by the Star's owner Robert Francis. I follow a starter of saffron-infused local red mullet and dressed crab with a main of local turbot with a lobster tart. Local meat also gets a look-in, notably flavoursome free-range duck reared on nearby Salakee Farm (salakeefarm.co.uk).

Next morning I stop at **The Farm Deli** ([@thefarmdeliscilly](http://thefarmdeliscilly)), where

belonging to Munich-born Sabine Schraudolph, who caught the Scilly bug after holidaying here in 1995. "It's my grandmother's recipe," she says. "I use only Bramley apples, and peel each by hand." Sabine also offers this and savoury strudel at a takeaway outlet in town. It's housed inside a hairdresser's, so the locals nickname it The Hairy Strudel.

The iconic lunch spot is nearby **Juliet's** (julietsgardenrestaurant.co.uk), which for 36 years has been run by Juliet May, who moved here after marrying a Scillonian flower grower. You sit among the greenhouses on the couple's flower farm overlooking Hugh Town's beaches. I plump for a plate of crab and homegrown tomatoes, beetroots and leaves. There are scones and brandy fruit cake, too, and in the evening a more formal menu.

Equally exquisitely located is **Dibble and Grub** (dibbleandgrub.com),



there's more meat on offer, from the farm of owner Jon May. There's St Agnes chocolate and Veronica Farm fudge (using Troytown milk and butter) from Bryher, and St Martin's SC salt, too. The highlight is its stellar quiches made on site by cook Kerry Bond. Rock up early to grab a slice of Kerry's lobster quiche or quiche lorraine, as they disappear in minutes.

A walk through gorse-studded lanes takes me to Holy Vale, a magical spot at the island's centre, which the Star Castle's Robert Francis has planted with vines. He produced his first wines in 2014 and hosts evening vineyard tastings. But I'm here for the blowout option: a lobster and Holy Vale Vineyard chardonnay lunch. "My son thinks I'm barking mad," Robert grins as we tuck in. Whatever the state of Robert's sanity, as gastronomic experiences go this is hard to beat – and the wine pleasingly drinkable.

Dessert is apple strudel at the **Kaffeehaus** (scillyguesthouse.co.uk)

a tapas hangout inside a former fire station (hence the name – remember the children's TV series *Trumpton*?) bang on Porthcressa beach. Or if you're in a fishy mood and want to eat with the locals, head for The Galley restaurant, above the chippie on Hugh Town's main street. My crab and smoked salmon tian starter is a triumph.

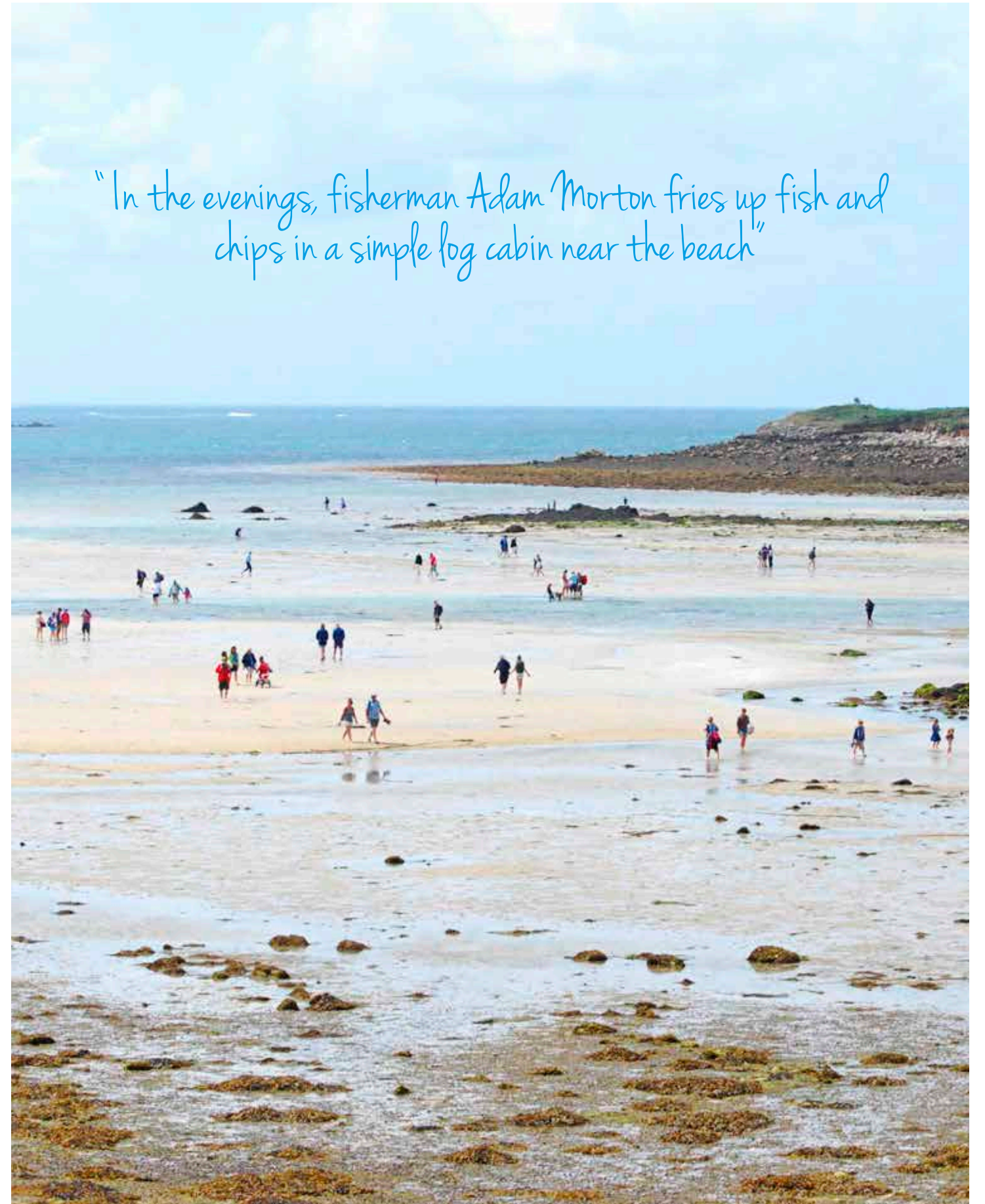
The other islands – locally dubbed the "off islands" – have a smattering of cafés and restaurants. Well-heeled Treviso boasts the **New Inn** and the **Ruin Beach Café** (for both see tresco.co.uk). Wilder Bryher is home to Atlantic-lashed **Hell Bay Hotel** (hellbay.co.uk), which in summer runs a pop-up Crab Shack inside a barn. Seated at communal tables, guests feast on local crab, mussels and scallops.

I, however, am braving the morning boat-catchers' rush hour to travel to St Martin's, the most northerly of Scilly's inhabited islands. As we approach »

ABOVE (FROM LEFT): STAR CASTLE HOTEL AND LOBSTER AT HOLY VALE VINEYARD, BOTH ON ST MARY'S; A CHEF AT WORK AT CRAB SHACK ON BRYHER

PHOTOGRAPHS: CLARE HARGREAVES, VISIT ISLES OF SCILLY

"In the evenings, fisherman Adam Morton fries up fish and chips in a simple log cabin near the beach"



EXPLORE

the jetty in Higher Town, the shimmering seas are so turquoise and the beaches so white that I have to pinch myself to believe I'm not in St Kitts.

My hosts are Jason and Sarah Poat who run **Polreath** (polreath.com), a handsome three-storey guesthouse in a large garden of sub-tropical plants. This place, I discover, is a true foodie find. There's Jason's focaccia for lunch, homemade scones and carrot cake for tea (they run a tearoom, too), and for supper, whatever Keith, the local fisherman, has brought in earlier in the day. Today it's grey mullet, which Jason cooks en papillote with ginger, lemon zest and garden-grown fennel. Venison stew and mash follow, then a wonderfully moist and sticky ginger-and-porter pudding that's caressed with butterscotch sauce and a sprinkling of almond brittle. Apparently Jason's curries, dished up

(@sevenstonesinn), 20 minutes' walk away in Middle Town. The views from its terrace are mind-blowing, as is the eclectic assortment of antique settles inside. Food is simple but wholesome – I try a plate of pearl couscous with roasted veg and halloumi. Many ingredients are local, including salad leaves, new potatoes and carrots cultivated a few yards away by grower Ian Metcalf. But what really makes this place are Dom and Emily Crees, the most relaxed hosts ever. "We camped here for our honeymoon and heard the pub was for sale," smiles Emily. "We joined forces with Dom's parents and bought it."

On my last evening I dine at the **Karma St Martin's Hotel** (karmagroup.com) overlooking the pristine beaches of Lower Town. Part of an Indian-owned chain, its atmosphere – and prices – are a world away



under the glasshouse vines and open to non-residents, are just as good.

Higher Town has other tasty offerings. **The Island Bakery** (theislandbakery-stmartins.com) makes breads, cakes and obligatory pasties, based on a Cornish recipe. "It was in a Women's Institute recipe book that our local fisherman brought in," says owner Barney McLachlan, as his fingers deftly crimp pasty edges to make it look like rope.

In the evenings, fisherman Adam Morton fries up fish and chips in a simple log cabin near the beach. Adam catches the fish (usually pollack), while his brother grows the spuds, so it's deliciously sustainable. And, judging by the hordes arriving just as I visit, massively popular – booking is essential.

There's an equally strong community vibe at the **Seven Stones Inn**

from the laid-back Seven Stones. But my charred sea scallops with red pepper purée, and pan-fried turbot (both locally caught) are good. And the blood orange sunset, which I nip outside just in time to catch, rounds it off perfectly.

HOW TO DO IT

Return fares on ferries from Penzance to St Mary's cost from £39.50 (islesofscilly-travel.co.uk). Double rooms at the Star Castle Hotel cost from £244, half board (star-castle.co.uk). Double rooms at Polreath cost from £137 on the same basis (polreath.com). More info: visitislesofscilly.com. Follow Clare on Twitter and Instagram @larderloutUK, #olive Travels.

ABOVE (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT): PICKING SAGE FLOWERS IN POLREATH; BARNEY MCLACHLAN OF THE ISLAND BAKERY ON ST MARTIN'S; SEAFOOD FOR SALE ON ST AGNES; VIBRANT SCALLOPS AT KARMA HOTEL RESTAURANT ON ST MARTIN'S; THE SEVEN STONES INN; SC SALT AT THE FARM DELI, ST MARY'S

PHOTOGRAPHS: JASON POAT; CLARE HARGREAVES; VISIT ISLES OF SCILLY