

# On the road: Mull

This rugged island off the west coast of Scotland is well known for its wildlife and mountain scenery. But its produce is just as spectacular – from langoustines and squat lobsters, to succulent Highland beef, cheddar-style cheese and homemade whisky marmalade ice cream

Words CLARE HARGREAVES

**T**here can't be many restaurants in Britain where you have to hail a ferry to get there by flashing a red card from the opposite shore. But **The Boathouse** on Ulva, just off Scotland's Isle of

Mull, is just such a place. I duly wave the card and, soon, I'm being whisked across a steely sea in a tiny launch to the black basalt rocks on which the restaurant's whitewashed croft perches ([theboathouseulva.co.uk](http://theboathouseulva.co.uk)). As we land, the whiskered head of an otter pops above the water, checking out the new arrivals.

Donald, our Captain Birdseye lookalike ferryman, is the father of Emma, who runs

The Boathouse along with her sister-in-law Rebecca. The shellfish that the restaurant is famed for is creel-caught off Ulva by Emma's two brothers who, like her, were raised on the island (current population: six). I navigate the Fisherman's Catch, one of the classiest shellfish platters I've eaten, with its salty oysters, fresh langoustines and squat lobsters (they look like fat, curly, peeled prawns). The supporting acts, from homebaked bread and oatcakes to hand-wrapped butters, are terrific, too.

Having tried in vain on other Scottish islands to nab local shellfish before the Spanish do, I'm impressed by how The Boathouse and numerous other places on Mull are harnessing their fantastic produce, from shellfish to meat and milk. I also

notice that virtually all the businesses are run by women. "Women here have the choice of low-paid, dead-end jobs or setting up their own business, so many decide to go for it," says Rebecca.

Back on Mull's west coast, I meet other equally enterprising female foodies. There's Brighton-raised Jeanette Cutlack, who makes her own haggis, which she serves with homecooked dishes in her front-room restaurant at **Ballygown** ([ballygownmull.co.uk](http://ballygownmull.co.uk)). And Caroline Macphail, a dental nurse who, at weekends, runs a takeaway van looking over **Loch na Keal** and, behind it, Ben More, the island's tallest peak ([facebook.com/lochnakealmealsmull](https://www.facebook.com/lochnakealmealsmull)). Caroline's brother catches her lobsters and crabs, as well as the meat for her top-notch venison burgers. "Cyclists can't »

believe their luck when they stumble across a food van in the middle of nowhere,” laughs Caroline.

More remote still is **Tiroran House**, a small country house hotel hidden in woods on the other side of Ben More ([tiroran.com](http://tiroran.com)). Pre-prandials offered by tartan-sporting owner Laurence Mackay include Tiroran’s own Whitetail Gin, made with foraged heather and sea kelp, and named after the white-tailed eagles that nest nearby (you can also buy it in Tiroran’s shop-café to take away; [whitetailgin.com](http://whitetailgin.com)). I kick off dinner with local Inverlussa mussels, following it with a main course of silkily tender fillet of Highland longhorn beef from Lochbuie. In contrast to many other Scottish islands, where it can be difficult to buy local meat, Mull has it aplenty, thanks to having its own abattoir.

Heading to the Ross of Mull, the island’s pinky granite southwestern peninsula, I pop into **Ardalanish Weavers**, a farm that sells both the meat

Iona, with its famous abbey (established as a monastery by Irish-born St Columba in 563), offers surprisingly decent food for such a tourist hotspot, with both **St Columba** ([stcolumba-hotel.co.uk](http://stcolumba-hotel.co.uk)) and **Argyll** ([argyllhotelliona.co.uk](http://argyllhotelliona.co.uk)) hotels using homegrown organic vegetables, and local seafood and meat in imaginative dishes. The Argyll’s fist-sized teatime scones, which you munch on the lawn running down to the sea, are legendary.

I dine back on Mull in an ancient croft that’s been transformed by Canadian-born chef Carla Lamont into the island’s top food ticket, **Ninth Wave** ([ninthwaverestaurant.co.uk](http://ninthwaverestaurant.co.uk)). Like most of Mull’s female food entrepreneurs, she relies on family – in her case, fisherman partner Jonny – to sustainably source seafood. Carla marries it with unusual flavours and ingredients, many gleaned during worldwide travels, while Jonny delivers it to the tables. Highlights are a signature warm crab soufflé-style cheesecake starter and a sarsaparilla cordial and chocolate cake pudding.



and the wool (the latter is woven into beautiful tweed) from its Hebridean sheep ([ardalanish.com](http://ardalanish.com)). Also worth the detour is **Crofter’s Kitchen** at nearby Kintra, where you help yourself to home-produced bread and veg, leaving the money in an honesty box ([ecocroft.co.uk](http://ecocroft.co.uk)).

I’m hungry for shellfish again, though, so I head for **The Creel** seafood bar beside the ferry for the isle of Iona ([thecreelisleofmull.co.uk](http://thecreelisleofmull.co.uk)). It is run by two more female foodie trailblazers, Nicola Fisher and Siobhan Cameron. Siobhan’s father nets their crabs and lobsters from his fishing boat – visit at lunchtime and you’ll spot him bringing them in. The Isle of Mull scallop and Stornoway black pudding rolls have already been snaffled by the time I arrive, so I plump for a squat lobster salad roll. Why these scrumptious crustaceans are normally discarded escapes me – heaps better than puny imported prawns.

Further east, Flora Corbett, one of the dynamic trio behind the **Mull & Iona Food Trail** ([mullandionafood.co.uk](http://mullandionafood.co.uk)), dispenses foodie delights of a humbler kind – ready meals, which she sells in the dinky shed that used to be the Post Office in sleepy Lochbuie. Try her lamb tagine, made with her farmer husband’s lamb. If you’re self-catering, she will deliver direct to your cottage.

Next stop is Tobermory, a fishing port on Mull’s north-east coast, whose vibrant houses horseshoe around the bay. It’s known for its whisky distillery, **Café Fish** restaurant ([thecafefish.com](http://thecafefish.com)), and the kids’ TV series *Balamory*, which was largely filmed there. But the star, for me, is the **Isle of Mull Ice Cream** parlour, where Kyle Morris uses milk from nearby Sgriob-ruadh Farm to make ice creams, including her bestselling Tobermory whisky marmalade ([isleofmullicecream.co.uk](http://isleofmullicecream.co.uk)). The veggie café at An Tobar arts centre in the upper town is another must-visit. >>



ABOVE (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT): REBECCA AT THE BOATHOUSE ON ULVA; SALEN BAY; WARM CRAB SOUFFLÉ-STYLE CHEESECAKE AT NINTH WAVE; BEN MORE; SCONES AT THE ARGYLL HOTEL. RIGHT (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT): HIGHLAND CATTLE AT ARDALANISH FARM; ISLE OF MULL ICE CREAM PARLOUR; NINTH WAVE LOBSTER; ISLE OF MULL CHEESE AT GLASS BARN

# EXPLORE

On the road above Tobermory I meet cousins Sally, who runs **Tobermory Fish Company**, which smokes and sells local seafood ([tobermoryfish.co.uk](http://tobermoryfish.co.uk)), and Helen Swinbanks, chef-owner of the restaurant opposite, **Hebridean Lodge** ([hebrideanlodge.co.uk](http://hebrideanlodge.co.uk)). Helen's food is stellar. I start with beetroot and Caorunn gin home-cured salmon and Tobermory Fish smoked trout, spiked with horseradish and dill, and progress to lamb from nearby Glengorm. The latter comes with a mini slow-braised lamb leg pie so good that it's a feast in itself, and Helen's Gaelic coffee knickerbocker glory makes an indulgent finale.

A few miles north is Sgriob-ruadh Farm, to where Jeff and Chris Reade moved their dairy cows from Somerset in 1979. First they sold milk, then switched to turning it into an unpasteurised, cheddar-style **Isle of Mull Cheese** ([isleofmullcheese.co.uk](http://isleofmullcheese.co.uk)). I meet Chris in the Glass Barn, the farm's café and farm shop, where granddaughter Lily sells Chris's cheese scones and sourdough bread, and the farm's cheese and pork. "Our cows eat draff, the

bakery ([dervaigbakery.co.uk](http://dervaigbakery.co.uk)). It's worth joining the line: sourdough is made from emmer, an ancient strain of wheat, and the cakes would not look out of place in a Parisian patisserie. It's no surprise to discover that Louise trained at Leiths and ran her own catering business. Be warned though, she bakes just three times a week and you'll need to put in your order in advance.

I finish my tour of Mull as I began – bagging a ferry to a restaurant. This time to **The Whitehouse Restaurant** across the Sound of Mull on the mainland, where I meet Jane Stuart-Smith ([thewhitehouserestaurant.co.uk](http://thewhitehouserestaurant.co.uk)). Just over a decade ago, Jane and Sarah Jones, who runs the shop next door, were wrestling with the fact that much of the area's produce was being exported and locals couldn't get their hands on it. So they opened a restaurant. In Easter 2010, after a chef failed to return after the winter break, they advertised for a replacement and managed to net Mike Burgoyne (ex Savoy, Claridges and Chez Nico) who has turned it into one of the Highlands'



residue of the fermented grains used to make whisky," says Chris. "It gives the cheese a taste that's unique to Mull."

Rounding Mull's rocky northern headland, the fairytale form of **Glengorm Castle** looming ahead is a sign to stop at its coffee shop and farm shop to sample a beefburger or pie from the estate's shaggy-haired Highland cattle ([glengormcastle.co.uk](http://glengormcastle.co.uk)). Equally satisfying is the carrot cake at the **Calgary Café and Gallery** ([calgary.co.uk/cafe](http://calgary.co.uk/cafe)), from where you can nip to the hamlet's shimmering sandy beach.

Next stop is **Dervaig**, which looks like a toy town with its solitary street of single-storey cottages. The queue outside one of them indicates its owner, baker Louise Paterson, is about to ring a bell signaling the opening of her

gastronomic stars. Drawing on his local larder, Mike produces flavours and presentation that are classy without being fussy. In my case a lunch of pressed oak-smoked mackerel and saffron potato terrine, followed by stag loin and offal with beetroot jam and blackberry wine 'gravy'; the meat is rosy, earthy and tender as butter. It's so good that I secretly pray I'll miss the ferry back.

## HOW TO DO IT

Clare stayed at Pennygate Lodge, a boutique b&b in Craignure with doubles from £120 ([pennygatelodge.co.uk](http://pennygatelodge.co.uk)). More info: [mullandionafood.co.uk](http://mullandionafood.co.uk) and [visitscotland.co.uk](http://visitscotland.co.uk). Follow Clare @larderloutUK, #olive travels.

ABOVE (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT): BEETROOT AND CAORUNN GIN HOME-CURED SALMON AT HEBRIDEAN LODGE; THE GLASS BARN AT SGRIOB-RUADH FARM; GLENGORM CASTLE; STAG LOIN AND OFFAL WITH BEETROOT JAM AND BLACKBERRY WINE 'GRAVY' AT THE WHITEHOUSE RESTAURANT; PENNYGATE LODGE IN CRAIGNURE; FRESHLY BAKED SOURDOUGH FROM DERVAIG

PHOTOGRAPHS: CLARE HARGREAVES