

The new shooting star

The tiny Hebridean island of Muck is the latest must-try destination for guns who are serious about their shooting

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Blink and you might miss it because the Isle of Muck is miniscule – just two miles by one mile. Yet this tiny speck of wind-blown Hebridean rock amid a sea of raging tides off the north shore of the Ardnamurchan peninsula is punching way above its weight when it comes to field sports.

This year, all 20 shooting slots were booked out, and there's already a waiting list for next year. Just four low-key seasons into life as a commercial enterprise, it's clear that Muck is already becoming the sort of shoot in which the only entry is via dead men's shoes.

If word has clearly spread, it's little wonder. First of all there's the whole experience of going out to an island by boat, an achingly beautiful journey of an hour and a half from Arisaig that stokes up the anticipation and expectations.

When you arrive, it's via a tight little harbour and a small quay where half the island's population of 39 awaits you. From there, you drive for ten minutes down the only road on the island, a mile-long single-track sliver of tarmac that takes you to the other end of the 1500-acre island and the start point for the shoot.

Accompanying us was man mountain Toby Fichtner-Irvine, who cut an unmistakable figure on the quay when our boat pulled in, and continued to stand out as he charged up

Right: A high pheasant on the Beinn Airein drive on the Isle of Muck is targeted by three Aberdonian guns.





and down hills in his shirt sleeves and waistcoat while the rest of us dressed to keep out the Hebridean winds. He is the man who was responsible for setting up the shoot four years ago after he married Mary, his teenage sweetheart from their days at Rannoch School and the daughter of the island's owner, Lawrence MacEwen.

There have been shoots on the neighbouring small isles of Rum and Eigg, but all have failed. Yet Fichtner-Irvine, who hails from Aberdeenshire, immediately recognised the scope for a shoot on Muck. Like Coll, Canna and Tiree, the island is low-lying so the really bad weather keeps on going until it hits the hills: Rum, Eigg and Skye to the north and Mull to the south all get more than twice as much rainfall as Muck.

The island is also unique in that it has no resident raptors and virtually no other predators either, which explains why the place is hooching with duck, geese and woodcock, plus a sprinkling of pigeon and snipe. And when it comes to putting down pheasants and partridge, once the birds are on the island there's no prospect of them leaving, so 80% of the 4,000 birds put down each year survive to be shot.

The place is also blessed with almost perfect shooting topography. There may be relatively few trees, but the gently sloping bracken-covered hills combine with the stiff winds to



produce drives from which the birds soar overhead. Further inland there are lochans thick with duck which are shot sufficiently regularly that the birds fly hard and straight, rather than circling dismally.

The faster, harder and higher the birds fly, the better, of course, but all of that can be replicated elsewhere. What cannot be replicated is Muck's epic backdrop. As we stood on the pegs at the first drive on a beautifully clear day, Eigg and Rum rose majestically behind us, with Canna just visible and the Cuillins of Skye brooding darkly in the background.

For many years I shot on the Isle of Cumbrae in the Firth of Clyde, with Arran, Little Cumbrae and Bute as our views. Like Muck, we shot over the whole island, and I thought nowhere could be more scenic than the pretty little island my wife still calls home. It turns out I was wrong.

But if Muck is blessed with many natural advantages, the shoot is also the product of hard work from the whole community. On shoot days, virtually every resident is involved, with a dozen beating and Lawrence's wife Jenny – who comes from the even smaller island of Soay – producing one of the most delicious shoot lunches I've ever been lucky enough to eat.

It helped, as well, that I was shooting with an outrageously entertaining group of six Aberdeenshire farmers who had known 'Tobias' since he was a babe in arms. They shot as hard as they drank, consuming more Rusty Nails than the whole Scottish building industry, and making more wisecracks than Ruby Wax on crack. They know their shooting too, which is why they've already booked in for next year.

Our 120-bird day consisted of five drives, of which the first, Beinn Airein, was definitely the best, with pheasants that soared high and fast, and bullet-like partridge which hugged the contours of the hill. Wesley Simpson was the pick of the bunch, and was prolific on the Fang Mor duck pond, where he downed a large percentage of the bag of 40 mallard.

The remaining drives were The Bonnie Road, Godag and Middle Wood, with the final bag of 128 birds consisting of 66 pheasants, 20 partridge, one pigeon, 40 mallard and a solitary snipe. My fellow guns reckoned that on two of the later drives the birds were significantly lower this year than in the past, which just made me wish I'd been there last year.

Actually, we were lucky to get out at all this year, with the boat from Arisaig having to be

'Behind us, Rum and Eigg rose majestically, with Canna just visible and the Cuillins of Skye brooding darkly in the background'

Clockwise from top left: (from l-r) Our man mountain of a host, Toby Fichtner-Irvine, the Editor, Edward Johnston, Norman Duguid, Wesley Simpson, George Farquhar, Bruce Morton and Jim Mair; he shoots, he scores – the Editor hard at work; young beaters Archie Fichtner-Irvine and xxxxx xxxxxxx; getting stuck into the raspberry gin and strawberry vodka.



Clockwise from top left: The laird, Lawrence MacEwan; trailer boys; the birds; a fine lunch; waving goodbye to our host; the editor and photographer.

delayed by a day due to storms. Fortunately this meant that we got to stay at the superb Arisaig House, which recently reopened as arguably the West Coast's poshest B&B (with a restaurant). Suitably refreshed, we bobbed over the next day and found in Muck a remarkable place.

The guiding influence behind the whole island is Lawrence MacEwan, a famously knowledgeable landowner who cares deeply about his island and its inhabitants, and whose shovel-like hands speak of a life of hard labour. He has pushed the farm, and in particular the use of native breeds, and has overseen the development of tourism which sees 50-70 day-trippers sit down for lunch each day in the summer. The place is a happy and unusually democratic island community: when MacEwan was thinking of putting in a fish farm every islander got a vote (it was passed unanimously).

There are constant reminders that you're on a remote island, including the fact that as the generator stops dead on midnight, so do the lights. But a new community centre has just been built and a lodge and five houses are planned for the north end of the island to supplement the existing B&B and the Port Mor Hotel, where the guns stayed, which is basically one half of the Fichtner-Irvin's home. This turned out to be a good thing, with Mary's cooking living up to the high standards set by her mother.

It was, all in all, a revelatory experience. Good shooting, great craic and a unique cultural experience – what more could you possibly want from a weekend's sport? 



FIELDFACTS

The Isle of Muck is reached by passenger boat from Arisaig or by CalMac ferry from Malaig. The crossing takes one hour and twenty minutes. The cost for an overnight stay and 120-bird driven day is £550 per gun (max eight guns), plus booze and the boat crossing. Tel: 01234 56789; www.website.com

