



The Way of the Gull

Rudolf Abraham and family enjoy a superb family hiking trip around the coast of the Isle of Man.

The rough, grey sandstone slopes very gently towards the cliff edge, before falling in a sheer drop some 140m to the churning sea below, where kittiwakes and other gulls sluice through the air, and white foam sucks at the base of gigantic sea stacks. A light sea mist is hovering just offshore, but for now the sun is out and it's beautifully warm, the blue sky streaked with a few white clouds, and the gorse-covered headlands studded a brilliant yellow.

This is the Raad ny Foillan, or Way of the Gull – the Isle of Man's spectacular coastal footpath which makes a complete circuit of the island in around 160km, taking in some of the most alluringly rugged and beautiful coastal scenery anywhere in the British Isles. Tall cliffs and headlands, rocky coves and grassy footpaths edged with gorse, are interspersed with great swathes of golden sand, and the coast is dotted with castles and follies.



It's an excellent route for family hiking – the wildly dramatic scenery is consistently interesting, challenging in places but still straightforward enough for kids, without ever being even remotely dull. The rocks are something like a living geology exhibit, and the wildlife is fantastic, from grey seals lounging on the rocks and peregrines, arctic terns and Manx shearwater darting about the cliffs, to basking sharks cruising through the water, just below the surface. Add to these the tail-less Manx cat and four-horned Manx Loaghtan sheep, not to mention 100 or so wild wallabies bouncing around in the north of the island (descendents of a pair that escaped from a wildlife park there back in the 1970s) and you have a fairly exotic mix!

We're on the stage of the Raad ny Foillan between Port St Mary and Port Erin, near the southwestern tip of the island, and have stopped at The Chasms – a labyrinthine mass of sandstone, its surface gradually splitting and fracturing, as sections move imperceptibly towards the point at which they will one day break off and crash into the sea below. There are clear paths between the fissures and gullies, however with good reason signs warn hikers in no uncertain terms to stick to the trails. My daughter, eight years old, is sitting on a warm patch of rock, at a parentally-enforced safe distance back from the cliff edge, hugging her knees and admiring the view of the Sugarloaf – that's the big sea stack off the eastern headland, which is a nesting site for kittiwakes, razorbills and guillemots.

From The Chasms we continue along the cliff tops above Spanish Head, then down towards the road end and café at The Sound. Here we clamber down onto the contorted rocks overlooking Kitterland – a

small, low islet poking up above the waves, its shoreline strewn with grey seals basking on the rocks – and the Calf of Man beyond, its southern shore ringed by steep cliffs. The Calf is one of the Isle of Man's best birdwatching spots, and a breeding site for Manx shearwater. The sandstone rocks at The Sound – fantastically twisted, and coloured with patches of lichen and tiny clusters of flowers – form part of the heady geological cocktail known as the Manx Group, formed on the seabed around 485 million years ago. They're also of course great to clamber all over – my daughter told me she'd have happily stayed here all day.

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About a day's walk north of The Sound, at the wonderfully remote-feeling beach at Niarbyl, a streak of white rock constitutes a rare glimpse of the so-called Iapetus Suture – a remnant of the Iapetus Ocean, which existed over 400 million years ago between three paleocontinents, in an area now covered by the Atlantic. Beyond Niarbyl, the Raad takes a turn through a short, thickly wooded gorge, passing beautiful waterfalls cascading over mossy rocks, and cool spray drifts across us as we stand on a walkway bridging the gorge.

The trail climbs up above the cliffs again, with a view of Peel Hill and Corrin's Tower ahead, which we reach after branching inland slightly and ascending gradually. From the tower we follow a long sinuous path downhill, with a magnificent view out over the ruins of the Viking-built Peel Castle, sprawling across St Patrick's Isle, which is linked to the mainland by a short causeway above Fenella Beach. A path leads around the outside of the castle walls, the far side of which make a good stargazing spot at night, with relatively low light pollution – it's one of 26 registered Dark Sky Discovery Sites on the Isle of Man. Arriving in the late afternoon however, we opt for an early dinner and a pint of Okell's at the Creek Inn instead.

Aside from the beautiful colours of the gorse along this stretch of the Raad, my overriding memory of plant life on the Isle of Man will always be the amazing amount of wild garlic. I've never seen so much of the stuff, growing profusely along roadsides and carpeting the forest floor. I could have collected sackloads, and it had me dreaming of wild garlic pesto for the whole trip.

While the southern coast is all rugged cliffs and coves, the northern tip of the island has huge stretches of sand and shingle beach, tapering to a point at the lighthouse at Point of Ayre. This part of the island is home to Ayres National Nature Reserve, with its unusual lichen heath, orchids and rich birdlife – it's the island's only breeding spot for little terns, and you can also see species such as linnets and golden plover, as well as Manx shearwater shooting past on their way back to the Calf.

If you can tear yourself away from the compelling coastal trail, there are plenty of other footpaths and hiking routes further



inland, including the Isle of Man's highest peak, Snaefell. There are also excellent some cycle trails to explore, including challenging off-road routes such as the Witches Barrel and Southern Comfort, and the easy, family-friendly Heritage Trail which follows a former railway line between Douglas and Peel – not to mention rock climbing, coasteering, horse riding and more.

However, it's the sea kayaking which really gives the coastal hiking a run for its money, from short paddles to extended multi-day trips, on waters which on a good day, despite being in the middle of the Irish Sea, can be as calm and as smooth as glass – a chance to see the island's amazing coastal scenery, and associated wildlife, from a whole new angle, up close. So the following morning, after kitting up with Adventurous Experiences at their base in St. Johns, we drive over to Peel, where a rack of brightly coloured sea kayaks awaits us in the car park.

We set off from the mouth of Peel Harbour – after our instructor has rescued a Labrador puppy which has managed to swim out to sea and strand itself on a rock – pushing off into the shallows at low tide. We've only gone out a short way when we meet our first grey seal, the top of its broad grey head poking up above the surface, large eyes glistening as our red kayaks glide past, and seagulls dip and splash in the water, searching for fishing scraps. We turn north and then west around the breakwater, then leaving the still waters of the harbour behind we paddle around the western side of St Patrick's Isle, passing dark, jagged rocks slung with seaweed. We spot more seals in the open water here, while a couple of them watch us quizzically from the rocks. There's some light cloud and sea mist rolling in, and it's decided that we should pull in at Fenella Beach, dragging our kayaks out of the gently lapping sea, onto an arc of sand strewn with scallop shells.

We spend our last morning on the Isle of Man back on the Raad, filling in a gap in the route by doing a short half-stage, and finishing by racing down grassy slopes towards Port Erin. A cluster of sea kayaks is making its way around Bradda Head, appearing tiny below the massive cliffs. Then after a final, excited paddle on the beach (the eight-year-old) and a flute of the rather heavenly local rhubarb bubbly (the forty-somethings), it's time to head for the airport and our flight home. Though it's not without a pang of regret – that I'm not in one of those kayaks rounding Bradda Head, or on the Way of the Gull, far, far above them.



The sea kayaking, on waters as calm and as smooth as glass, is a chance to see the island's amazing coastal scenery and wildlife up close.



Isles for everyone

Easyjet (www.easyjet.com) fly to the Isle of Man (the airport is at Ronaldsway, near Castletown) from London, Bristol, Liverpool and Belfast, and The Steam Packet Company (www.steam-packet.com) runs ferry services from Heysham, Liverpool, Belfast, Dublin and Birkenhead to Douglas. Local bus routes cover much of the island (see https://www.gov.im/media/1361198/isle_of_man.pdf), otherwise you can book transfers through the reliable Powerwheels (www.powerwheels.im).

There's a handy pdf of the Raad ny Foillan, broken down into 12 stages, which you can download for free from the tourist office https://www.visitisleofman.com/dbimgs/Raad%20ny%20Foillan_web.pdf. For sea kayaking contact www.adventurousexperiences.com. If it's a quiet walking and cycling holiday you're after, you may find that the two-week stretch around the annual TT races (late May/early June) is best avoided.

There are plenty of places to stay along the coast while walking the Raad – see the Isle of Man Tourist Office website www.visitisleofman.com.

Find out more about the Isle of Man's wildlife and geology at the Manx Wildlife Trust (www.manxwt.org.uk), Manx Birdlife (<http://manxbirdlife.im/>) and Manx Geology (<http://manxgeology.com/>).