

The Isle of Mull is an island in the Inner Hebrides, a few miles from the coast of western Scotland. On its northernmost point lies Tobermory, an adorable port town which is the setting for the BBC childrens program Balamory at the very south of the island, generations of Scottish kings are buried at Iona Abbey. Between its heralded tips are forty square miles of raw nature: tranquil lochs, moody glens and rugged marshland that are dashing even under grey skies. My family has travelled to Mull since the 1960s. My grandparents made friends in Tobermory after a chance trip away from the mainland, and came back with their four children year after year. In the seventies my mum worked at a pony trekking centre in her school holidays; in the eighties she and her three brothers had children of their own, and began /* TOPDOWN = FALSE */ to bring us to the island every summer. The adults would enjoy birdwatching and the beautiful landscapes - we had a safe place to play. And so Mull has become part of my history, too: the calls of curlews by the shores of its lochs, games of cricket with my brother on its sandy beaches. My uncles and cousins had plans this summer, but, true to a promise that I had made last winter out of hope rather than certainty, I found a week to drive to Scotland with my mum and gran for the first time in six years. My priorities had changed since the last time we had made the trip together: this year I had a camera under my arm instead of a cricket bat, and after a busy spring in a foreign city a long marshland walk sounded like heaven, not hell. But our holiday cottage, at Killiechronan on the shore of Loch na Keal, was just the same as it had been a decade ago, minus the sea shells in the chest of drawers and with new mugs in the kitchen. There are still ponies grazing the tall grass outside the cottages windows, the generation that mum had gone trekking with having been replaced by Balamorys four-legged extras. Across the loch, a pair of The Isle of Mull white-tailed sea eagles had built a nest in a tall tree, and each morning through a telescope we watched