

a magical history tour

Would a trip to the *ancient sites* of the ISLES OF SCILLY deliver the hoped-for respite from the *noise and bustle* of the city?

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An antidote to modern city life, that's what I was after. Somewhere far from the whiff of traffic fumes, the dull hum of the computer and the sigh of exasperated commuters. Somewhere quiet, ancient, magical. A place to walk, breathe deeply and be still.

Everything I had heard about the Isles of Scilly suggested that it might be the place. At the risk of sounding like an old hippy, I usually head to an ancient site when I'm looking for a bit of peace and quiet. Our ancestors had a knack of erecting monuments on sites of exceptional beauty,

plumbing them into ley lines and aligning them with the paths of the sun and moon, so a visit to one usually guarantees a view at the very least. The Scilly Isles bristles with prehistory: 60 per cent of land is of archaeological importance and it boasts 83 burial chambers. An ancient site with a sea view and the tingle of otherworldliness was what I sought. But would Scilly deliver?

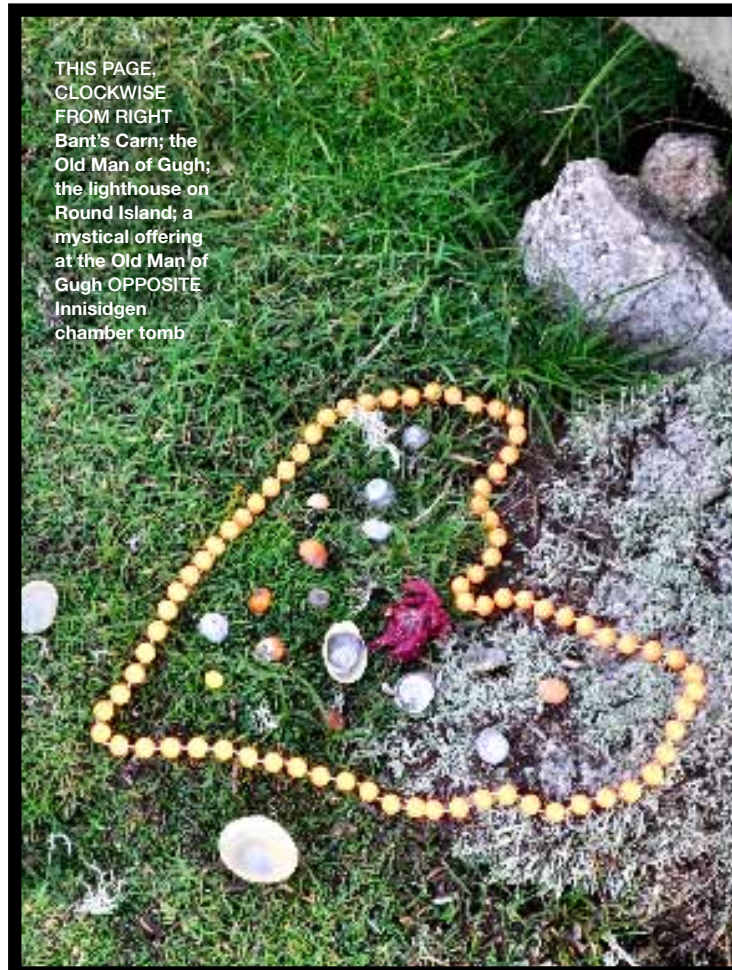
A drowned landscape

The trip starts promisingly as the light aircraft comes into land on St Mary's and I see the islands sprinkled over the ocean

below – little rocky outbursts fringed by swathes of white beaches and breaking waves. This is the 'drowned landscape' written about by historian Charles Thomas, who describes a time when the islands were part of the same landmass before sea levels rose and engulfed most of it. A time when the Ancients constructed their burial chambers on the higher ground, which became the islands we now recognise.

I head to the harbour at Hugh Town on St Mary's to meet Katherine Sawyer, local archaeologist, who runs the 'Cruise in the Past' boat trips to the uninhabited islands

THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT: Bant's Carn; the Old Man of Gugh; the lighthouse on Round Island; a mystical offering at the Old Man of Gugh OPPOSITE: Innisidgen chamber tomb



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of St Helen's, Tean and Round Island. The boat sails across the sea, which sparks with sunlight, and Katherine points out Bant's Carn burial chamber on the St Mary's coastline; the ruins of a hermitage on St Helen's, once a major pilgrimage site; the remains of a chapel on Tean, and the lighthouse on Round Island – a popular destination for Victorian ladies' excursions. We disembark at Bryher and I head to the other side of the island to see my first cairn. Modest, remote and with wraparound views of the island, it's a place to pause (someone has left an offering of limpet shells, proof that mystical things are afoot) and a promising glimpse of things to come.

Moments of stillness

The view of Bant's Carn burial chamber has whetted my appetite and the next morning I head off to find it. The path starts at Hugh Town and rollercoasters along the shoreline, dipping into sandy bays and rising through pine woodland until it reaches the Iron-Age settlement of which the chamber is a part. The Carn sits into the hillside overlooking the sea, presiding over the ancient ruined village from beneath its beetle-browed capstone. There is no doubting its solemnity but for me its proximity to the path and its carefully managed site mean it doesn't feel magical or remote enough, so I walk on.

Beyond a stretch of blindingly white beach that feels secret and glorious, I come to the two chambered tombs at Innisidgen. Scrambling up to the upper tomb, sitting on its licheny roof and looking out towards the other tomb and the sea beyond delivers a

moment of stillness, only interrupted by the squawk of a gull and the splash of the sea on rocks. Scilly is working its magic.

Billy Idol makes an appearance

In the Isles of Scilly Museum in Hugh Town later that day, amid stuffed birds and Harold Wilson's old macintosh, I find a replica of a standing stone on St Martin's. 'That's Billy Idol. We call him that because of the moss on his head,' says the attendant. 'Like a mohican.' This is reason enough to go to St Martin's, so the next day I clamber aboard a boat and head for the archipelago's third largest island.

The lady at the museum told me I would find Billy if I headed for the Daymark, a large red-and-white-striped navigational aid that resembles a lighthouse, on the eastern side of Chapel Down. Setting off from the Higher Town harbour, I walk past homes selling agapanthus bulbs from their gates, across heathery moorland with the Daymark always in sight. Billy Idol hunkers down in a gorse bush, a mere two feet high, with a rough carving suggesting a face and shoulders. He is undoubtedly cool but not what I'm looking for. I walk back along the coast and the sweep of Great Bay to catch another boat, this time to St Agnes, the last inhabited landfall before America 3,000 miles away.

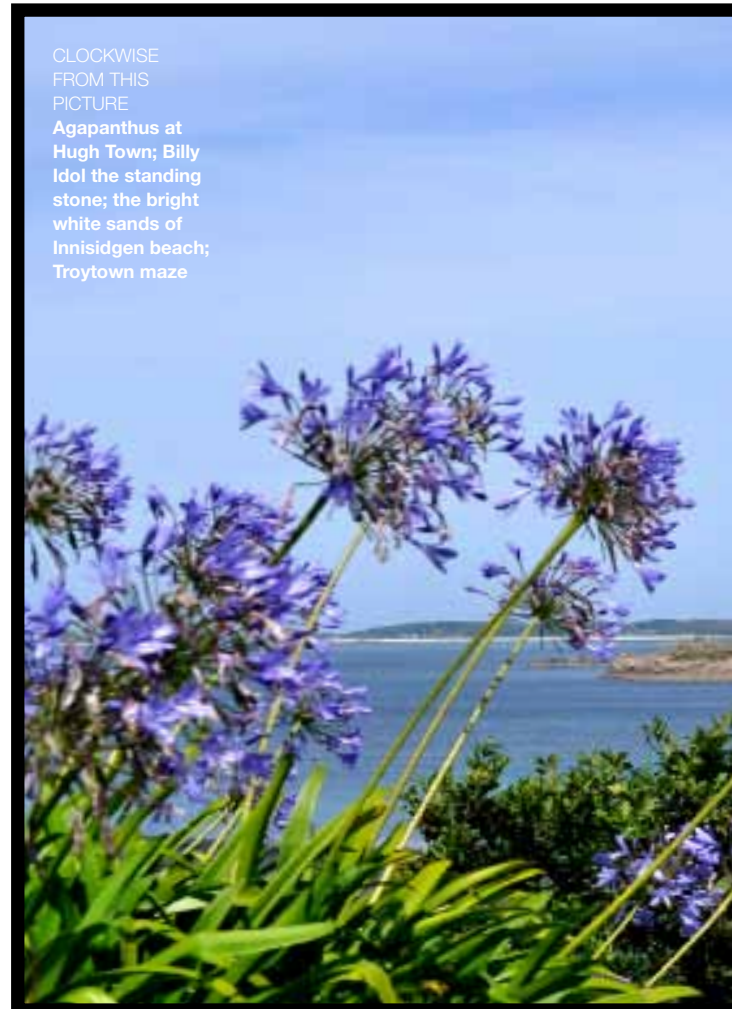
An old man and a maze

The purpose of the supper boat to St Agnes is to take its passengers to the Turks Head pub to enjoy a pint of local ale and a fish supper. Fortunately for me, the timing also coincides with low tide, which means I can cross from Agnes to the tidal island of

Gugh. As the others saunter to the bar, I stride resolutely over the sand bank and head for Obadiah's Barrow, another prehistoric burial mound (I am getting blasé now), then on to the Old Man of Gugh. I can see this standing stone tilting precariously in the distance and my path towards it, through a soft landscape that drifts and dips to the sea, feels like a pilgrimage. Time is short – the boat leaves in two hours – so I pay my respects to the Old Man and walk back over the sandbar to the centre of St Agnes in search of my final ancient site: the Troytown Maze.

The light is fading as I approach Troytown, so I walk carefully past tents pitched on one of the country's most remote and appealing campsites, and on along the shoreline. The flat pebble maze was rumoured to have been built by Amor Clarke, a lighthouse keeper, in 1795 to protect sailors by ensuring a fair wind, but I like to think of it as more ancient than that. Some say it was built on the site of an older maze as part of a ritual landscape and is 'live', ie connected to lines of energy. This is the theory I favour as the sun sets over the craggy Western Rocks and the wind whispers softly overhead. I enter the maze, follow its path to the centre, and sit and wait for the sun to set. I don't know whether it's the ley lines or tiredness from the walk, but I feel as peaceful as it is possible to be. And I don't know whether the maze has the tingle factor, but I do know I've found that tranquil place I was looking for.

For more travel features, see coastmagazine.co.uk. Where is your favourite peaceful spot by the sea? Let us know on Facebook or Twitter.



CLOCKWISE FROM THIS PICTURE
Agapanthus at Hugh Town; Billy Idol the standing stone; the bright white sands of Innisidgen beach; Troytown maze



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NEED TO KNOW

GETTING THERE

By plane: The Skybus (skybus.co.uk) flies from Southampton, Bristol, Exeter, Newquay and Land's End to St Mary's. One-way adult fare from Land's End, from £67.50.

By helicopter: British International Helicopters

(islesofscillyhelicopter.com) operates flights between Penzance and St Mary's, and between Penzance and Treco. Return adult fare, from £179.

By boat: The Scillonian III ferry sails from 30 March to the end of October from Penzance to St Mary's. One-way adult fare from Penzance, £42.50.

Island hopping: St Mary's Boatmen's Association

(scillyboating.co.uk) operates frequent and reasonable trips to all the islands. Also try Bryher Boats and St Agnes Boating (st-agnes-boating.co.uk). Cruise in the Past with Katherine Sawyer costs £12 and is operated by St Mary's Boatmen.

WHERE TO STAY

The Star Castle, St Mary's (star-castle.co.uk). Once a fortress, this formidable star-shaped building is now a hotel offering elaborate but skilled evening meals and breakfast as part of its room rate, from £96 per person per night.

Troytown Campsite, St Agnes (troytown.co.uk). One of the most romantic campsites in Britain, right on the beach looking out to the Western Rocks and spectacular sunsets. Unreachable by car (the owners pick you up from the ferry), it is as far from the madding crowd as it can possibly be.

RECOMMENDED READING

Ancient Scilly by Paul Ashbee; *The Isles of Scilly* by Rosemary Parslow; *Exploration of a Drowned Landscape* by Charles Thomas. For more information, see simplyscilly.co.uk.