



Wild Globe Travel Consultancy

Tailored Wildlife, Wilderness and Adventure Travel Across the Globe.

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ISLE OF MAN

Date - May 2023

Duration - 6 Days

Destinations

Douglas - Grenaby - Derbyhaven - Langness Peninsula - St Michael's Isle - Castletown - Gansey - Port Saint Mary - The Chasms - Cregneash - The Sound - Calf of Man - Port Erin - Dalby - Dalby Mountain Nature Reserve - Peel - St Patrick's Isle - Ballaugh Currags - Close Sartfield Nature Reserve - Ayres National Nature Reserve - Ramsey - Laxey - Snaefell

Trip Overview

To some, the Isle of Man is known principally as the venue of the annual TT or Tourist Trophy motorcycle races and although many of the 350,000 or so tourists who visit each year are also aware of this ancient isle's rich history, which dates back some 8,500 years, relatively few recognise it as a possible wildlife destination. The opposite is in fact the case, certainly if you are interested in cetaceans, as this small island in the Irish Sea is one of the best places around the United Kingdom to encounter a variety of marine creatures, as well as a host of nesting seabirds. I used the term 'around the United Kingdom' intentionally, as the Isle of Man does not actually form part of the UK and nor is it a sovereign state. Instead, it is one of three Crown Dependencies, the other two being the Channel islands of Guernsey and Jersey, which basically means that it is the property of the British Crown, which is responsible for its good governance, while the United Kingdom remains responsible for its defence. In reality, the island governs itself from its own parliament, the Tynwald in the capital Douglas, but largely within UK constitutional law and its occupants are British citizens with the right to carry a British passport. The island itself is relatively small, just 52 kilometres from north to south and 22 kilometres across at its widest point, but for its compact size, it has a rugged, contrasting landscape, including some phenomenal stretches of coastline and the commanding Snaefell Mountain, which forms the highest section of the TT course. Whilst the late Joey Dunlop and



his nephew Michael Dunlop are the most successful riders at this historic event, with 26 and 25 wins respectively, the island's most famous son is probably Mark Cavendish, simply the greatest sprinter that cycling has ever known. In addition to his 2011 Road Race World Championship victory and a host of classic triumphs, Cavendish jointly holds the record of Tour de France stage wins with the legendary Belgian cyclist Eddy Merckx, who won the tour on five occasions between 1969 and 1974. Whilst entirely different maestros of the same sport, the Manxman and the Cannibal share 68 stage victories between them and Cavendish will no doubt look to make the record his own when he competes in a final tour before his retirement at the end of the 2023 season. Beyond the renowned biking event, which attracts visitors from all over the globe, the Isle of Man has an extraordinarily colourful history for such an apparently insignificant landmass and was first colonised around 6,500 BCE. Since then it has been invaded, conquered, settled and ruled by a succession of foreign powers, including the Anglo-Saxons in the late 600s and the Vikings towards the end of the 8th century. Even the Scots took a turn, with Robert the Bruce no less, taking the island from the English after besieging Castle Rushen at Castletown for several weeks in 1313. The island actually changed hands between these perpetually warring kingdoms on several occasions until the English finally prevailed in 1346, the same year that they routed the French at the Battle of Crécy during the Hundred Years' War, thanks largely to their superior archers. Castle Rushen remains one of the best preserved medieval castles in all of Europe and is also one of the most visited landmarks on the island. The impressive ruins of Peel Castle are another and I personally enjoy the rather austere landscape of St Michael's Isle, which is now a bird sanctuary and home to Derby Fort, a small but rather wonderfully constructed circular fortification overlooking the pretty bay. Other major attractions include the historic village of Cregneash, a living museum preserved in time and dedicated to a traditional Manx way of life back in the 1800s, and the Laxey Wheel, which, with a diameter of more than 22 metres, is the largest original surviving waterwheel in the world. Evoking a bygone age of more leisurely, luxurious travel, a 3ft narrow gauge steam railway gently transports its visitors between the capital Douglas and the southern resort town of Port Erin, whilst the equally languid Manx Electric Railway carries its discerning guests in the opposite direction along the spectacular coastal paths north to Ramsey. Opened in 1873 and 1893 respectively, both are reminiscent of a certain timeless Victorian splendour, but my own personal favourite is the Snaefell Mountain Railway, which was opened in 1895 and runs,

as the name suggests, from the little seaside village of Laxey to the summit of Snaefell. The views on the climb are almost as impressive as they are from the top, where they say you can view either five, six or seven kingdoms, depending on your version of the legend. Certainly on a clear day Man, England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland are all visible and you can add the kingdoms of Heaven and Neptune depending on your ilk. Whatever your preference, the hiking up here is magnificent, as it is across much of the island to be fair, and this is one of the best regions in which to observe a mountain hare, as I did from my carriage on the way up. There are of course many additional tourist attractions on the island, including a wealth of museums and cultural sites, but I was visiting this time largely for the wildlife, which in some ways is very similar to the United Kingdom, but in others equally contrasting. To begin with, a lot of the animals that you would expect to see in Britain are entirely absent from the Isle of Man, including both native deer species, red and roe, red fox, red squirrel, badger, European mole and all of the voles. There are no snakes either, indeed, the only reptile on the island is the common lizard, and there are just three amphibians in all, common frog, marsh frog and the palmate newt, in comparison to the seven that occur on the mainland. There are no fossil records for most of these animals either, meaning that it is unlikely that healthy populations were hunted to extinction and perhaps the most obvious explanation concerns the fact that the Isle of Man was cut off from what is now Britain and Ireland around 8,000 BCE, as sea levels continued to rise following the end of the last glacial period or ice age. In contrast, the last land bridge between the United Kingdom and mainland Europe was not fully submerged for at least another 1,500 years, which would have permitted a variety of species to spread across Europe and inhabit the furthest reaches of the UK. It is the only theory that really explains the absence of quite so many species and interestingly, the skeleton of an Irish elk dug out of a marl pit near St John's back in 1897, has been carbon dated to approximately 12,500 BCE. So deer of one form at least were present on the island and this one was roughly the size of a moose, with antlers reaching up to three and a half metres in length, so basically the size of two full grown men. In the absence of so many common European species, the Isle of Man is home to relatively few terrestrial mammals, but it is one of the few places in the British Isles, which does actually include this Crown Dependency, where you can see three species of lagomorph in one comparatively small area, that is to say European rabbit, European hare and mountain hare. Mountain hares are absent from the majority of England and all of Wales and although they occur in most of Scotland, European, or brown hares as they are more commonly known, are in turn scarce across much of the Highlands. In contrast, there are only two carnivores, the native stoat and what many locals call a polecat, but is actually a domestic ferret, as a feral population of these tenacious little predators is apparently thriving, most likely as a result of the burgeoning rabbit numbers. This is also the case regarding another introduced species, I dislike the term invasive and try to avoid it where possible, the red-necked wallaby, a number of which escaped from the Curraghs Wildlife Park in the 1960s and have been living wild in one main region ever since, so for approaching sixty years. Although some locals object to their presence and a number have been deliberately killed over the years, the vast majority of the island's inhabitants appear to value these exotic and disarming creatures, as I know many visitors do, and I was therefore frankly appalled to read that a spokesperson for the Manx Wildlife Trust had recently suggested that it might be necessary to eradicate the entire population, as *'they could out compete other species'*. The fact that there are no other large grazing animals on the entire island to out compete, would appear to undermine what can only be described as an absurd contention, unless of course the trust is yet another organisation more interested in protecting wealthy landowners and their domestic animals at the expense of genuinely wild ones, introduced or otherwise. For me, these delightful and resourceful colonists represent a rare and special treat within a landscape distinctly lacking in major charismatic mammals and tourists the world over are always going to take more interest in authentically wild destinations and experiences, than many of these so called wildlife organisations appear to understand. This is particularly the case within the United Kingdom, and yes, seemingly the Isle of Man as well, which has one of the worst conservation records of the Western world and where the vast majority of wild species receive little or no meaningful protection.



As you would perhaps expect given our collective indifference over millennia, this lack of protection extends to our own waters, which we continue to fish at entirely unsustainable levels. Indeed, during the last two decades, Britain was responsible for the worst levels of over-fishing in all of Europe and regularly exceeds the scientific advice regarding sustainable fishing quotas by more than 20%. Despite this profligacy over the years, and its undoubted impact on a multitude of disparate marine species, much of which remains unclear, some areas around the UK continue to support a variety of cetaceans and other marine mammals. The Isle of Man is one such destination and has long been considered one of the best dolphin and whale watching spots in British waters, certainly south of Scotland. In addition to the resident grey and, to a far lesser degree, harbour seal populations, harbour porpoise, common bottlenose dolphin, common dolphin, risso's dolphin and minke whale can all be observed here as well as, again far less commonly, both



humpback and fin whale. Although they are not being encountered in such high numbers in recent years, perhaps as a result of the conservation issues already touched upon, basking sharks are also seasonal visitors and one was spotted towards the north of the island during my stay. Given these rich waters and a coastline of approximately 160 kilometres, including stretches of vertical cliffs, ideal for nesting purposes, the Isle of Man is also recognised as an outstanding birding destination, particularly in terms of seabirds. Manx shearwaters, terns, gannets, kittiwakes, storm petrels, skuas, shags, guillemots, little auks and razorbills are just a few of the species commonly encountered here and I was fortunate enough to spot an Atlantic puffin during one of my boat excursions. Sadly, that was more or less where my luck ran out, at least regarding marine sightings, and I missed most of the cetaceans that the area is famous for. There is clearly no point going into a massive amount of detail or attempting to second-guess exactly what went wrong, as wildlife watching is a capricious mistress and these things occasionally just happen. I was admittedly visiting fairly early in the season, but sightings still occur in mid May and within a few days of my departure, groups were again encountering risso's dolphins and minke whales. I took five boat tours in all, three group tours around the Calf of Man, a small island just off the southwest coast, and two extended private charters, when I realised that the group trips were aimed more at general tourists and were unlikely to be productive, other than for a few porpoises and both species of seal. Although obviously disappointing, it is the utterly unpredictable nature of wildlife viewing that makes the activity so compelling and, as is usually the case when something goes wrong, I did enjoy a fair degree of success elsewhere. Within about fifteen minutes of driving off the ferry, and having already spotted a rabbit, I was watching three European hares gambolling in the afternoon sunshine without an apparent care in the world and completely unaware of my presence. Despite the later sorry developments, it was actually an unbelievably auspicious start, as three hares are considered



highly symbolic in various cultures and depictions, usually circular, in which the hares appear to chase each other, have been discovered all over the world and date back to the 6th century. Whilst the third of the island's three lagomorphs would prove slightly more challenging, I had enlisted the assistance of a local guide to help with the search for a mountain hare and we were eventually successful at the site recommended by him, but only after a fairly long evening vigil and a great deal of scanning. In fact, such was the distance, even with binoculars, that I initially thought I had seen a bird sitting on a grey rock with its wings outstretched. It was only when I looked again and noticed that its wing appeared to be permanently extended, that it occurred to me that they were not actually wings, they were ears and I was finally staring at a mountain hare. Fortunately, given my eyesight at least, we had much closer views of two more of these distinctive hares on the hike back down, including one that we inadvertently flushed from its hiding place at a distance of certainly no more than three metres. The wallabies, it has to be said, were a great deal easier to locate and I visited them both during the day and at night at two sites, Ballaugh Currags and the Close Sartfield Nature Reserve. I especially enjoyed my first afternoon stroll at Ballaugh Currags, which has been designated a Ramsar Site as a Wetland of International Importance. The wallabies are slightly more difficult to observe here, but the reserve is tremendously scenic and these remarkable creatures appear even more resplendent in the thick green moss and dappled sunlight of the broken canopy. I sincerely hope that they are left alone to enjoy life in peace, both for their own sake and for the ecology of the island, as apart from a few rodents and a couple of hedgehogs, which I moved out of the road to safer locations, I did not observe another mammal species on land for the duration of my six-day stay. There are a few more of course, but not many and I fail to accept that it is suddenly necessary to persecute an animal that has survived in the wild for around sixty years without causing the slightest harm. I would certainly not return to the Isle of Man if they do begin culling their wallabies and I hope that the islanders themselves have got far more sense than their wildlife experts appear to have.

No.	Species	Scientific Name	Notes
01	Red-necked Wallaby	<i>Notamacropus rufogriseus</i>	Several encounters at Ballaugh Curraghs and the Close Sartfield Nature Reserve.
02	Western European Hedgehog	<i>Erinaceus europaeus</i>	Two individuals on the road at night.
03	European Hare	<i>Lepus europaeus</i>	Three in a field near Douglas and two pairs in the north of the island.
04	Mountain Hare	<i>Lepus timidus</i>	Three at one mountain site overlooking the east coast and one on the Snaefell Mountain Railway ascent.
05	European Rabbit	<i>Oryctolagus cuniculus</i>	Abundant and commonly observed.
06	Brown Rat	<i>Rattus norvegicus</i>	Three individuals, two at night and one during the day near the Ayres National Nature Reserve.
07	Long-tailed Field Mouse	<i>Apodemus sylvaticus</i>	An individual crossing and then briefly running along the road beside the car.
08	House Mouse	<i>Mus musculus</i>	A single animal running across the road at night.
09	Grey Seal	<i>Halichoerus grypus</i>	Observed at several locations, including colonies at the Sound and Langness Lighthouse.
10	Harbour Seal	<i>Phoca vitulina</i>	Just two clear sightings on all five boat tours.
11	Harbour Porpoise	<i>Phocoena phocoena</i>	Eight in all, including a pair and one observed from shore.







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