Girton Travel Awards Report

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When I chose to do my dissertation in the north-west Highlands, I did so because it strikes me as the most beautiful place on earth. Beaches that are the stuff of dreams – miles of white sand and clear, green water, with not another soul on them; hills rising along the coast in the most unlikely shapes; great lumps of rock pushing through the earth that inspired me to study geology at school, and landscapes that led me to study geography at university. So this was my vision when I decided to do my dissertation on the North Coast 500 tourist route which now runs through this area. My vision had not stretched to the gala night out to which I was taken the evening I arrived – to discuss motorhome toilet waste disposal. Nor had it involved interviews in which, without fail, the issue of sewage and its disposal was raised every time. There we go.

My nights out improved as that first week went on – the motorhome waste disposal meeting safely passed, I went on to see Duncan Chisholm, the renowned fiddle player, and his pals perform to a packed Lochinver village hall, then, in the same venue, to a ceilidh celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of the Lochinver lifeboat. Looking around the hall on each occasion I found I’d interviewed a fair proportion of the audience, and as I was introduced to the people at the waste disposal meeting, I found I’d spoken with the majority of them already on the phone.

It did occur to me it was lucky I wasn’t trying to lead a secret life whilst I was away – I became aware one evening as I sat having my tea with a crofter that he was busy emailing updates about where I was and what I was eating to two other people, both of whom in return were updating him on my engagements for the rest of the week. And as I stomped around the village of Durness I was very aware there were people in most houses who, should they cast their eyes out the window, would know exactly who this windswept creature in her green anorak and laden down with rucksacks was, and probably had a fair idea of who I was on my way to pester next. This proved very useful sometimes – after a throwaway comment to someone I’d spoken with the night before, about how I was struggling to make any contact with the police, she hastened over at the lifeboats ceilidh to tell me the policeman was standing outside, which is how I came to conduct an impromptu interview with a policeman outside the village hall at 11pm on a Friday night. It didn’t feel hard to make contact with most of the key stakeholders – it was rare that I spoke to someone who held down fewer than three jobs, so when speaking with the countryside ranger, I found he was also vice chair of the community council, and a crofter; the Highland Councillor whose house I went to also ran the hotel in Durness, and was a crofter; there was the crofter-come-fisherman-come-tourist-minibus-operator, and then the man who ran a B&B who was also a bus driver and a fireman. There was one looping road at the edge of the village connecting a dozen crofts and B&Bs, and by the end of the week I had sat in the kitchen of nearly every house along it, drinking tea and discussing tourism. At quite an early stage, when I asked for more people to contact, I found myself being referred back to names I already knew, and by a later stage, I heard myself being told the same
stories, passed on from an earlier interviewee to the person I was currently interviewing. (More
difficult has been tracking down the office-based professionals – bodies like Highlands and Islands
Enterprise, VisitScotland and particularly – disappointingly but perhaps predictably – the NC500
company have proved elusive. Prince Charles – for his Castle of Mey and stated crofting connections
– is proving quite elusive too, but I hope for a response from Clarence House one day!)

When I visited Morocco’s High Atlas for my Easter geography fieldtrip, the remoteness, the conflict between traditional
subsistence farming and the increasing pressure of tourism, reminded me of nothing so much as the crofting counties of
north Scotland. My fieldtrip this time, while scarcely significant in terms of mileage (I travelled from Aberdeenshire to Durness,
and looped down to Lochinver, with a brief foray to Tain, clocking up about 580 miles), was challenging in terms of linking sparse
public transport – train as far as Inverness, then buses, minibuses, taxi, lifts from friends, walking over hill tracks from village to village when all else failed – and in terms of the sheer time it takes to travel on the notorious single-track roads, built over peatbogs in the nineteenth century and scarcely improved since.

I stayed in quite the variety of places – my first two nights were in

| Achmelvich Beach Youth Hostel, near Lochinver; the next three in the spare room of a local prawn fisherman I know in Lochinver; the following two huddled in a one-man tent in the teeth of a gale on the Sango Sands campsite in Durness, which clings to a cliff-top and overlooks a beach, onto which the largest waves I have ever seen were crashing... | waving of the B&B owner’s dog. Another B&B followed, then for a final week I was in a holiday home – back in Lochinver again – with my mum, which was very fine. I ate remarkably well – one crofter sat me down to venison from a stag he’d shot himself, another fed me salmon, fresh from one of the finest salmon rivers in Scotland. One didn’t inquire too closely how he came by it. The prawn-fisherman was given lobsters by a friend so returned from work that evening to cram them into a pan, chain-smoke until they were ready, then take a hammer to their shells and offer me a plate of lobster and chips. I got grapes grown in a crofter’s polytunnel, langoustines (from the prawn-fisherman, unsurprisingly, to precede the lobster), and rarely did 48 hours pass without consuming chips (which is very much my kind of fieldtrip...).

In Durness I explored the ex-cold war huts which house Balnakeil craft village, a haunt of John Lennon; went into Smoo Cave – Britain’s largest sea cave – where the volume of water plunging the fifty feet into the pool below was phenomenal, greater than I had ever seen on visits in previous
summers – and befriended the resident cat in Cocoa Mountain (the chocolatier behind the world’s finest hot chocolate). When at Achmelvich, I discovered what is reputedly Europe’s smallest castle, and scrambled inside – space enough for one small hermit. I’d tried twice in previous visits to find it, but never had, so was delighted to finally get a proper look! On a day-trip from Lochinver to Tain, where I was interviewing MP Jamie Stone, I went to watch the salmon leap at the Falls of Shin, and later that day, before interviewing a local newspaper editor over a plate of fish and chips, went to Dunrobin Castle – a highlight on the North Coast 500. I found myself chatting with people about the NC500 as I made purchases in shops, ate breakfast in B&Bs, or stood in Lochinver tourist office clutching my NC500 guidebook. And it did seem likely that they’d be rolling their eyes at me in the Lochinver Fishermen’s Mission cafe as I pitched up there with my notebook for the third time in a day for yet another cup of coffee and yet another interview…

I typed up my interview notes in a range of odd places – on a selection of beaches, standing up from time to time to paddle in the icy North Sea, or inspect the shells that had been washed up; in the lee of a wall of Britain’s most north-westerly graveyard as the rain hammered down around me; and I conducted a phone interview with the Caithness, Sutherland and Ross MSP, she sitting in her parliament office at Holyrood, whilst I sat atop a cliff-edge on Achmelvich Beach (the only place I could get phone signal), watching seals bob about in the sea beneath me and praying the rain would hold off at least until we’d finished the phonecall.

As well as seals, I watched two otters catching and eating fish, so close I could hear them crunching, and many red deer, one eyeing me from a few feet away as I walked back one evening in the dark; of course, heilan’ coos, and endless sheep, generally on the roads, sometimes being rounded up from a beach back onto the single-track road by a sheep dog – and about as many sheep dogs as interviewees. More surprisingly, given it was north-west Scotland, I also met a field of llamas on the way to Stoerhead lighthouse, and had an interview with a ranger interrupted by someone phoning him to discuss the unexpected appearance of a raccoon in a local’s garden. During my time away, I also saw the world’s most northerly palm trees.

I cannot think of a better place I could have done my fieldwork – the most sparsely populated part of Europe, the continent’s ‘last great wilderness’. The hills, the lochs, the rocks, the sea and the beaches here that I have been visiting all my life are spectacular – the opportunity to spend a month doing fieldwork here is something I am extremely grateful for. I was delighted by how willing people living here were to be interviewed for my dissertation – nearly everyone I contacted was keen to speak, even if it was mainly to vent about how motorhomes have been emptying their toilets… I live in hope that one day I might be able to live and work in this part of the world. In the meantime, I am exceptionally glad to have been able to spend September doing research here, and greatly appreciate Girton College’s support in this, thanks to the generous Dorothy Tempest Travel Award.