Headline: Scotland’s islands more than window dressing

Deckhead: Natural beauty, history comes to life on country’s army of isles

It could be called the “Land of 1,000 Islands” and it wouldn’t be a stretch. That’s Scotland, the United Kingdom country that has more than 790 offshore islands – nearly 100 inhabited.

Island hopping isn’t a cliché in Scotland; it’s a sport. But these aren’t your typical isles. They’re home to rocky, weather-beaten coasts, white beaches, rugged mountains, heather-clad moorland and tranquil inland lochs.

Most of these islands share unique personalities. They have stories to tell anyone who’s willing to stop by and listen.

Whisky is synonymous with the Isle of Islay. Coveted by connoisseurs for its peaty, smoky flavor, it’s a rare treat. The island houses nine distilleries, including Lagavulin and Ardbeg, which translates from the Gaelic term for a “dark and mysterious place.”

The Laphroaig distillery offers “Water to Whisky Experience,” a 4.5-hour tour that includes visiting the water source and tasting from a selection of casks. The Gaelic term for whisky is “Uisge Beatha” or “water of life.”

The Isle of Lewis is home to Lews Castle that presides over Stornoway. It’s the largest island in the Outer Hebrides. The Standing Stones of Calanais date 5,000 years and centerpiece the ritual landscape. Winds rage around this northern headland, making it the windiest spot in the U.K.

Majestic cliffs and sea stacks populate Orkney’s coastline, including the striking Old Man of Hoy. Skara Brae is a 5,000-year-old village and the best-preserved Neolithic site in Western Europe. Skara Brae thrived as a community well before the building of Stonehenge or the Egyptian pyramids. Stone walls, passageways and stone furnishings – including beds and dressers – remain intact.

Skara Brae is part of the Heart of Orkney World Heritage Site. It’s joined by Maeshowe, a chambered tomb, the Stones of Stenness and the Ring of Brodgar. Guests can explore the Viking Cathedral that dominates the skyline of Kirkwall, Orkney’s ancient capital.

Scotland meets Scandinavia and the North Sea meets the Atlantic Ocean in Shetland. Partially submerged ancient hills formed archipelago’s series of islands. Thousands of sea caves, open sandy bays and sheltered sea lochs are onsite. Words from the Old Norse language are preserved not only in placenames but also in Shetland dialect that is used daily. Shetland ponies can be seen throughout the islands – grazing by roadside or on the heathery hills.

Cuillin – the isle of Skye – is famous for its breathtaking scenery. Dramatic sea cliffs and towering slopes define its personality. Named “Cloud Island” in Old Norse, it’s the largest of the Inner Hebrides and the most popular island with visitors. Mealt waterfall cascades 180 feet, highlighting gorgeous scenery. Neist Point Lighthouse stands watch over the island’s western tip near Glendale.

Scotland might better be name “Scotlands”. It’s a country blessed with history and an island waiting to tell a story.

Cutline: OLD COUNTRY – Skara Brae is a 5,000-year-old village on the Scottish island of Orkney. Image: Vincentco64. Adobe Stock.