



Teaching about Scotland

This is one of a series of units for teaching about Scotland in German Secondary schools. All the materials were created at Konstanz University by very motivated students in my Area Studies Scotland class, some with experience of teaching in a “Gymnasium“. The materials can be tried out as they are, or altered as desired. One basic idea behind them all is that both the teacher and the learners can develop the materials themselves, according to their own interests, and then even offer them to another class.

For some of these units printed information material is needed, for example ferry timetables, but if you don't have this, it is no problem to print it out from the Internet. Useful websites are given.

Island life

This is not a typical set of materials for use in school. It is an informal report on life on a Scottish island, based on personal experience as a visitor, and on interviews with islanders. It was written for the Area Studies Scotland course in 2010, by Sabrina Kraft.

The clarity of the writing, along with the warmth of the tone, make this text an ideal resource for teaching young people about life on a Scottish island. Better still, reading this text could lead them to think about it, and compare it to their own life.

The Isle of Barra - Islanders Between Beauty and Boredom

Acknowledgements

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1. Introduction

“I love living in a house overlooking an isolated bay. I can hear the seals cleaning their teeth below my kitchen window. It`s fantastic.“

This is a quote from 14-year-old Catriona who lives on the Isle of Barra. It sounds as if life on Barra is all fantastic. But is it? What does it mean to live on an island of the Outer Hebrides? This is what I would like to examine. I will take Barra as an example and will look at the advantages and disadvantages of island life. The main focus will be on the situation of children and young people on the island, with information on what they like about their island and what they dislike.

My interest in this small island of the Outer Hebrides arose during a one-week holiday there. I enjoyed my stay very much and I had the chance to talk to some lovely people who live on Barra. The islanders left a lasting impression on me and I wanted to find out how their lives differ from other people`s lives. For this reason I chose this topic for my term paper. It was not my intention to write an academic paper but a text that gives an authentic view of island life. Thus it contains people`s own thoughts, feelings and opinions about living on Barra rather than citations from books.

2. Some facts and figures

First of all some facts and figures on the Isle of Barra to give an idea of what the island looks like. Apart from Vatersay, a wee island linked to Barra by a causeway, Barra is the most southerly inhabited island of the Outer Hebrides, an archipelago off the west coast of Scotland. It is about eight miles long by five miles wide and it has a population of approximately 1,200 people.¹ Most of the inhabitants live in the main town Castlebay² which lies in the south of the island and has some hotels, a church, post office, school, grocers, supermarket, bank, doctor`s surgery, dentist, tourist information centre, swimming pool, petrol station and ferry terminal. Besides the ferry that takes passengers from Oban on the Scottish mainland to Barra and back once a day you can take the ferry from Stornoway on the Isle of Lewis which is the biggest of the Outer Hebrides and lies north of Barra. In addition there is the plane to and from Glasgow, a Twin Otter that lands on the beach on Barra.

The beaches and bays look more like the Carribean but the rest of the island looks very much like Scotland. There are hills which are not very high, and flat, fertile grasslands near the sandy beaches. This is called 'machair', which is a Gaelic word.

3. Boring Barra?

According to Andy Capper, a British journalist who wrote an article on Barra, it depends on you whether you regard Barra as a paradise of peace and beauty

1 Goodfrey-Faussett, Charlie. *Britain*. Bath: Footprint, 2004 (902).

2 Ibid.

or the most boring, barren place in the world.³ For me it seemed as if the people on Barra were content with their lives. Patrick, a lobster fisherman who lives on Barra, told me that he would never want to leave the island. “Of course it is not a picnic being a fisherman and being dependent on the weather and on the sea’s mood. Sometimes the sea can be really rough so that it is too dangerous to leave the shore and go to sea. It is hard to make a living here but the amazing view from my front door and the peace and quiet here on Barra compensates for a lot. Another great thing here on the island is that the islanders know each other, look after each other and help each other whenever someone is in need of help. For me it is a privilege to be part of a community with such a great sense of unity like we have on Barra.”

This is not only Patrick’s view of life on Barra but also Morag’s, who works in the local library in Castlebay. Morag feels as if the water around the Isle of Barra that separates them from the other islands and from the mainland makes the people on Barra belong together even more. “If you live on an island as small as Barra it feels like living in a big family. On Barra I feel isolated from the rest of the world but in a positive sense rather than in a negative one.” A big advantage of living on a small island like Barra seems thus to be the feeling of cohesiveness, which might not be so strong in other communities.

In Jane’s opinion Barra is the most beautiful spot on earth. Jane is the landlady of a guesthouse in Castlebay. Her Bed&Breakfast overlooks the bay with Kisimul Castle. She loves living there. She doesn’t travel a lot but she meets people from different parts of the world who come to stay in her B&B on Barra. After fishing, tourism is Barra’s second biggest source of income.⁴ The island offers lots of things to do, for example tourists can go hiking in the most stunning scenery, fishing, kayaking, surfing, they can visit two museums on the island or play golf on the most westerly golf course of the United Kingdom. There are also boat trips to the neighbouring uninhabited islands. For Jane it is a big advantage to live on an island where other people like to spend their holidays. For her this little island is like a paradise.

This is what three grown-up islanders think about the Isle of Barra but what about the children who live there? Do they appreciate the peace and quiet or the beauty of the island or being part of a community? 7-year-old Colin is one of the children who likes living on Barra a lot. He likes the island and the sea. In his free time he likes playing with his friends and his Xbox and playing at the computer. One of his favourite free time occupations is going for a walk along the coast with his dog, Kayley. Colin’s family goes to the mainland three or four times a year in the holidays. His favourite holiday destinations on the mainland are Inverness and Cornwall. He enjoys being on the mainland. He always has a great time with his parents, his brother and his two sisters, he says, but when the holiday is over they are happy to come back home to Barra. To get to the mainland and back Colin and his family usually take the ferry. A few times they took the plane but Colin prefers the ferry. “The plane is quick and easy access to the mainland but it is more fun to be on the ferry.”

3 http://www.viceland.com/int/v13n1/htdocs/welcome_uk.php

4 <http://www.viceland.com/int/v13n1/htdocs/they.php?source=db>

The passage takes about 5 hours. Sometimes the sea is very rough and this reminds him of Hollywood films. Very often some of Colin`s friends are on the ferry as well and they have great fun playing games and exploring the boat. He says that he would not want to live in a big town or city like Glasgow or Edinburgh because everything is so busy there. Colin is used to island life and he grew up without the bright lights of a city. He does not feel cut off from the rest of the world because there is a good connection to the mainland. There is the ferry and the plane, but he sees that the islanders are very dependent on those. “If the ferry and the plane stopped tomorrow, this would be a very, very bad situation for us.” But Colin is not too worried about this. “The ferry does not break down very often.” He enjoys the peace and quiet of Barra and he does not miss the things that a city like Edinburgh has to offer and Barra has not.

Just like Colin, Iain is very happy on Barra. He is 17 years old and he knows already that he will become a farmer on Barra and that he will raise his children there. His father is a farmer. He rears cattle. Iain and his brother Mark want to take over their father`s farm. They help him whenever they can. Being a farmer is not an easy job. You have to get up early in the morning and you have to work hard. Iain says that he wants to be a farmer because he likes nature a lot. He loves being outside and he loves animals. “There is so much free space on Barra. The whole island is your garden. It is not crowded with people but you are not too lonely either. It is just right. I get on really well with the others. We know each other and there is always a helping hand if you need one. Another positive thing about everyone knowing each other is that there is hardly any crime on the island. No one would want to harm anyone else and as the people who live here do not have a lot of money they do not have expensive things that might tempt others to steal them. I think that people on Barra do not belong to the consumer society. Teenagers do not need a new mobile phone or laptop or game console whenever there is a new one available. There is another thing that makes me stay here. The air on Barra is so clear and unpolluted. As we don`t have a lot of cars on Barra and only a few factories there is very little pollution. When I visited Edinburgh once I stood by the road and I felt I could not breathe. It is so terrible there with all the buses. We have very special things here on Barra which the people are proud of. We have the only airport where the plane lands on the beach, we have remote white sandy beaches and we have a cinema on wheels. Once a month Screen Machine comes to Barra.” Screen Machine is a big lorry which can transform into a proper 80 seat cinema. The lorry tours the remote islands of the Hebrides which do not have a cinema.⁵

There are children who see the situation differently. Whereas youngsters like Colin and Iain could not imagine a life better than the one they are leading on Barra, others feel isolated and cut off from everything. For Feargus life on the Isle of Barra is rather boring. He complains about spending his youth on the small island of the Outer Hebrides. 15-year-old Feargus would definitely prefer to live in Edinburgh. “There are far more things to do in Edinburgh than here on Barra. You never meet new people here because you know everyone who lives on Barra. We do have a youth club but it is always the same guys

⁵ <http://lifeonlewis.blogspot.com/>

you meet there. We do not have discos here or rock concerts or other things that are normal for young people on the mainland. If we want to go shopping for clothes or have a burger at McDonald`s we can`t just get on a bus or on a train that takes less than an hour to the nearest bigger town. We have to get on a ferry which takes 5 hours to the mainland. I love the water but there is definitely too much of it around Barra.“

Catriona can understand both sides. “On the one hand Barra does not have plenty to offer for teenagers but on the other hand there are many things that other places on the mainland do not have to offer.“ Catriona tells me that sometimes she finds it really hard to live on Barra. Her friends on the mainland can go shopping whenever they feel like it or they can go to McDonald`s to have a burger if they don`t like what is in their lunchboxes. Nevertheless, most of the time she is really happy to live on Barra. She loves the scenery and does not just take it for granted. “The majority of people on Barra have a stunning view out of their windows and have the sea in front of their doors. Some overlook white sandy beaches or isolated bays. This is something that you cannot have if you live in a big town.“ Very proudly Catriona tells me about her kayak. “I’ve got one. It is yellow and I can go kayaking whenever I want. It takes me less than 20 minutes to get ready and to jump into the kayak. It is only a short walk to the water and I can carry the kayak on my own. This is one of the advantages if you live here. You don`t need to pack your kayak and your things into a car and drive miles to the water but you can just walk. I spot otters or seals everytime I go kayaking. A few times I even saw dolphins. I guess I am really lucky to grow up here on Barra. Some of my friends on the mainland have never seen otters or seals, let alone dolphins. Not outside a zoo anyway.“

Catriona`s opinion on tourists sounds rather harsh. “I know that tourists are important for Barra and that they bring the money, but sometimes they can be very annoying. Some of them treat us like animals at Edinburgh Zoo or they look at us as if we were from Mars. They think we are different from them because we do not live like they do. They think they have to feel sorry for us because we do not have a tube or double decker buses or shopping malls, cinemas, Starbucks, theme parks or whatever they have. The picture that most of the people on Barra have about the people on the mainland is not that good either. We think that they cannot sit still for a minute and do nothing. They cannot just watch the waves. There is always something that distracts them from doing nothing. They are busy watching television or bowling or shopping or going to the cinema. They are always busy and planning what they will do next.“

4. A tourist's view of the island and its inhabitants

Although it seems as if non-islanders have a bad reputation on Barra, I was warmly welcomed. Before I went there I was warned. “Sabrina, you will not be able to understand a single word the people say. They are weird, grumpy folk and on the Western Isles there is even more rain than here on the Scottish east coast.“ I had the worst fears but they did not prove true. Except for one

rainy day I had good weather all week and I met some lovely people who spoke the same English as I speak. In fact the people on Barra were very hospitable and obliging. The only day I was unlucky with the weather was the day it started to rain when I went for a walk. I looked for shelter where I could wait the rain out but there was nothing suitable and I did not want to take shelter under the roof of a house. Then I saw an elderly lady inside a house knocking at her window. She waved me over. I went there and she opened the front door and invited me into her house to shelter from the rain. I gratefully accepted the offer. She made tea and we chatted until the rain stopped and the sun came out. The lady told me that she had never left Barra and that she did not want to leave it anymore. I will never forget this day. The grey-haired lady, Hannah was her name, was only one of the lovely Barra folk I met.

5. Conclusion

What makes life on Barra for one person really special, makes it boring for another one. People are different and have their own tastes. One person could not imagine a life better than the one they lead on a small island off the Scottish west coast, another might be very unhappy about being unable to enjoy the things that people on the mainland can enjoy everyday, for example simple things like a cup of coffee at Starbucks. I found it really interesting that many of the children I talked to would never want to leave Barra, which is very important for the survival of an island like this. Some of the advantages they see are the fascinating scenery, the unpolluted air on Barra, the easy access to water, and the community spirit. Although the island is not crowded, people are not lonely either. They know and help each other. In addition, crime is very low. As a disadvantage of island life some islanders see the lack of entertainment. Feargus, for example, would like to go to a rock concert or to the pictures more often. I can see that there are things that make life on Barra difficult and not as convenient as life in a big town, but still it seems as if the majority of the people who live on the Isle of Barra are happy with their lives. I think that otherwise there would not still be about 1,200 people living on this island off the west coast of Scotland.

Literature:

Goodfrey-Faussett, Charlie. *Britain*. Bath: Footprint, 2004

Websources:

http://www.viceland.com/int/v13n1/htdocs/welcome_uk.php (downloaded on 20th November 2010)

<http://www.viceland.com/int/v13n1/htdocs/they.php?source=db> (downloaded on 20th November 2010)

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