



Knowing Where You Are and the Beginning of Iona's Story

Bless to me O God

The earth beneath my feet.

Bless to me O God

The path on which I go.

Bless to me O God

The people whom I meet.

O God of all gods

Bless to me my life.

- Carmina Gadelica

As you were planning this pilgrimage adventure, you no doubt studied a map of Scotland and eventually put your finger on the very small island off the southwestern tip of the mountainous Isle of Mull that is Iona. It's easy to miss being only three miles long and a mile-and-a-half wide. You may have wondered right away how and why such a small place carries so much weight historically and spiritually. Iona has a legacy and a power that far exceed its size—and you know that the spirit of this sacred isle has called you here on pilgrimage.

The following is an introduction to the island's main features and places of interest, the road you will travel often, and the paths you will follow as you are drawn to Iona's more remote hills and beaches. In the next chapter I'll take you further in, giving you a sense of the rich layers of Iona's complex legacy, its people, and its future. In the final section of this small guide I've included practical information and further details about your pilgrimage journey.

First you have to get there. From home, wherever that is, you will head for Glasgow, where you may want to spend time visiting its many historic churches, especially if your spiritual roots or present religious affiliation is with the reformed tradition of John Calvin, John Knox, and Scottish Presbyterianism. From here you'll catch the train or bus to the seaside town of Oban, a three-and-a-quarter-hour trip through one of the most scenic parts of Scotland. The route will soon leave the city and begin to wind through the glens and along the sea lochs, stopping at the villages of Dalmuir, Dumbarton, Helensburgh Upper, Garelochhead, Arrochar, Ardlui, Crainlarich, Tyndrum Lower, Dalmally, Loch Awe, Taynuilt, Connell Ferry and finally, Oban. You'll note that the station signs are first in Gaelic, for throughout Scotland the Gaelic place names have prominence over English, part of the effort to bring back fluency in the indigenous language of the Scottish people.

When you arrive in Oban you'll be in the heart of this busy tourist town that sweeps along the curved bay where the working fishing boats are docked, along with visiting tour boats and the occasional historic sail or steam boat. Most likely you'll want to spend a night in Oban to rest, and perhaps take a day to enjoy the sites and shops of this interesting town. You may want to climb the steep hillside to MacCraig's Tower, an unfinished monument built by a wealthy citizen in the 1890s to give work to the unemployed, one of the more interesting if perplexing of Oban's tourist attractions. The view over the town and the Sound of Mull from the tower is spectacular and well worth the climb to the hilltop.

From Oban you'll catch the Caledonian MacBrayne ferry to Craignure on the Island of Mull, a forty-minute crossing. Here you'll catch the bus to the village of Fionnphort on

the southwest side of Mull and the ferry to Iona. The trip across Mull takes about an hour depending on the number of cars, lorries, bicycles, and sheep on the one-lane road. The journey is another feast for the eyes, carrying you further away, and “deeper in,” as the saying goes. Mull is a vast landscape of mountains, valleys, crags, and meadows, a wild place, loved by hikers, mountain climbers, botanists, bird watchers, and archaeologists. If you come in springtime you’ll see from the window of the bus the meadows of bluebells, gorse, daffodil, primrose, and rhododendron, and the frisky new lambs in the fields. If you visit later in the year, the landscape will be covered in the bright pink and purple of heather. Once lined with standing stones, the road across Mull is still called the Pilgrims Way. Not that many years ago, pilgrims to Iona made their way along this route by foot or horse carriage, and not with the comforts of ScotRail, Caledonian MacBrayne, cars, or Bowman’s buses.

Mull carries its own special enchantment, too often missed by those of us intent on getting to Iona. But on a night by the fire in the pub in Buinessan, a young or old “Mull man” might remember and break out with a verse from the poetry of Dugald MacPhail, the famed Bard of Mull:

*The isle of Mull is of the isles the fairest,
Of ocean gems 'tis the first and rarest;
Green grassy island of sparkling fountains,
Of waving woods and high towering mountains.*

But it is to Iona you are going, and once at Fionnphort you are almost there. This is as far as the bus or car will take you. As you wait for the ferry you’ll no doubt be in a queue with travelers of all ages, including those on one of the many “Highland and Islands” holiday tours. The ferry across Iona Sound runs frequently, taking about ten minutes if the weather is good, longer if the wind is up and the currents are strong and the boat must head north or south with, or against, the wind.

On first sight from Fionnphort or from the deck of the ferry as you approach the concrete ramp at Ronan’s Bay, Iona is not dramatic in the ways you might expect from a place of such renown. There’s nothing to suggest that this is where the light of faith and learning beamed out over the centuries, nor any sense of this being *the* sacred and mystical isle where God is waiting for you. What you encounter first is a rather flat, rocky island with no remarkable geographic features and little that catches your eye other than the gray mass of the twelfth-century Benedictine abbey and the long row of stone houses by the jetty. But Iona will reveal itself to you in varied layers, the more to encounter the longer you are here.

You'll soon discover that though a scarce mile across the channel from Mull, Iona is distinct in many ways from its larger inhabited Hebridean neighbors—Coll, Tiree, Skye, Islay, Barra—and the smaller uninhabited rocks of the Treshnish Islands—Flada, Lunga, the Dutchman's Cap, and Staffa. Its landscape is a mixture of heathered moors, rocky cliffs, fertile meadows, farmland, and sandy shell beaches. Its highest point is a mere 332 feet above the sea. Yet, geologically Iona is from a far older period than the nearby islands, with rocks on its western and southern shores dating back an astonishing 2.8 billion years. In contrast, rocks on the eastern, northern, and middle of Iona are young, only a few million years old, and consisting of what a geologist friend calls mixed-up rock, formed over the eons as the geological shifts and upthrusts pushed parts of Mull on top or under parts of Iona. It is from Iona's intriguing reputation as one of the oldest places on the planet, as well as from a certain deceptive nature of the landscape, that the mystique of the island has grown. Given Iona's northern latitude, the light from the sun is never directly overhead. The landscape is lit from the side and the edges, adding a luminous beauty to the island which explains in part why artists, photographers, and writers, as well as pilgrims and mystics, come time and again to the "jewel in the Hebrides."

Much of Iona is a very lovely, inviting landscape. Its high hills are covered with purple heather and its deep green meadows, dotted with wild flowers in springtime, roll softly down to white sandy beaches and azure blue seas. You are reminded of the Mediterranean rather than northern Scotland if you are blessed with bright, sunny weather. Many of the places you will want to explore are easy on the feet, meaning that you can walk without much effort to most of the historic and natural sites for which the island is well known. Other parts of Iona are rugged, with high cliffs and craggy ravines, brooks, and bogs, and no distinct pathways to help guide the way. When walking over the southern cliffs or along the North Beach on a clear day you are almost overcome by the beauty around you, and you will want to ramble alone for hours taking it in. But when a heavy mist falls on Iona, or the north wind and rains catch you, there can be a bleakness about the place that makes you wonder how anyone survives a winter, especially if you are here in spring and summer when the light is long and you can go walking close to midnight, and the weather is usually the finest of the year. In the late autumn and winter months the days are short and the island "goes indoors," and if you venture out you are apt to be bent over by the force of the gale winds. But no matter the season and no matter the variances in weather, you are certain to experience both the gentleness and the elemental wildness of this unique and beautiful place.

When you first land on Iona, having to make a quick jump from the ferry onto the jetty if the waves are washing over the ramp, you'll be in the heart of the small village known in Gaelic as Baile Mor, but simply referred to as the village. Prominent from the

jetty is the row of attached stone houses to the north, with their walled gardens along the sea side of the street, dating back to the thatched roof days of the crofting period. All have been thoroughly modernized, and though most have centralized electric heat, you'll see and smell the coal fires lit more for a comforting atmosphere than for warmth.

In the middle of the row is the small family-run Argyll Hotel, operating for over one hundred and forty years and one of the oldest buildings on the island. At the end of the street is the gabled stone Bishop's House, the retreat house of the Episcopal Church of Scotland, built in 1893 with some controversy, as some of the local Presbyterians were reported to have been upset at the invasion of the Episcopalians.

Clustered near the jetty you'll find two small general stores and a craft shop, Martyr's Bay Restaurant with its cozy pub, and the tiny, well photographed post office. You'll also find the library, one of many built throughout the Hebrides by Andrew Carnegie in the early part of the last century.

Iona's main road leads away from the jetty both to the north and the south of the island, along which are the homes and farms of the islanders as well as several holiday homes and guest houses. As you leave the jetty and walk north, the road winds around the ruins of the Augustinian Nunnery, built in 1203, and dedicated to St. Mary. The low pink granite walls and the flower gardens are well tended and invite a "sit down" for a moment's contemplation or a picnic lunch.

The three hundred year history of the Nunnery—most likely a community of women from noble families who were teachers, healers, and farmers—has dropped out of memory, for primary attention turned to the sixth-century work of St. Columba and the Benedictine monastery of the medieval period. We know the names of only two of these strong and influential women—Beathag, the first prioress, and Anna MacLean the last, who died in 1543. Her finely carved stone effigy is now in the Abbey museum. It is Beathag's brother Reginald, Lord of the Isles, who gets the credit for establishing the Nunnery. The ruins of St. Ronan's, the medieval parish church that for centuries served as the place of worship for the local people, are found in the Nunnery grounds as well as the grave slabs of some of the nuns. It is thought, but not documented, that here is where Iona's women and children were also buried in the medieval period.

If you have a good eye, you might be able to decipher the eroded stones of a sheela-nagig on the outside south wall of the nunnery, above a small arched window. It's quite amazing that this rough-hewn fertility figure, dating many centuries before the Christian era, has survived to present times. Its origin is unknown. These figures are found elsewhere in Europe, often installed over the sanctuary door of a monastery or

church. Though we can only surmise, these stone figures may point to an ongoing deep, mythic need to incorporate the feminine into Christian worship and spiritual life.

Across the road from the Nunnery ruins is the primary school staffed by one teacher and several local assistants. The school is a very creative enterprise with about nine or ten children enrolled each year. Children attend up to age eleven. For secondary education they commute to public or private boarding schools on the mainland.

As you walk further north, no doubt mixing with other visitors, families, backpackers, islanders, and dogs, you'll see a small stone monument set into a low wall on your right. This is in honor of Lord Hugh Fraser, who in 1979 purchased Iona when hard economic times forced the Argyll Trust to put the island up for sale. Fraser donated Iona to the National Trust for Scotland, his generous gift ensuring that the island would be protected as a heritage site and not subject to private commercial development.

On your left, across from the monument, is the Heritage Centre, a long, two-story stone building set apart from the road by a grassy field and hawthorn hedge. Once the manse for the parish church, the upper-floor apartment is still a home for the visiting Church of Scotland minister who serves Iona and other islands. The Heritage Centre, opened in 1990, is one of Iona's treasures and a place you must visit, for while the Abbey tells the story of Columba and the religious history of Iona, the Heritage Centre tells the story of the local people for whom Iona is home. Here you will learn about the lives of the island families, particularly the crofters and fishermen, the artists and the entrepreneurs, with photos and artifacts from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. You'll also find fascinating interpretative displays of Iona's geology and wildlife. An excellent video is well worth watching. The Heritage Centre also has a small book and gift shop with a unique collection of original work by Alexander Ritchie, the talented silversmith whose home in the village was a gathering place for artists in the early years of the past century and who is credited with the revival of interest in the old Celtic silver craft. His work is treasured by collectors, and the Heritage Centre is one of the few places where "Ritchie pieces" can be purchased. You'll also find maps, cards, polished stones, jewelry, crafts, and lovely knit work. An inexpensive ticket gives you unlimited access for a week.

The parish Church of Scotland, a simple, traditional stone structure built in 1828, stands next to the Heritage Centre as the road bends north. Located between the Heritage Centre and the church is a small tea shop where you can enjoy lunch or a snack, eaten inside or at a table in its lovely, quiet garden rimmed by old fruit trees and hedges of honeysuckle and hawthorn. This is a place you can retreat to when you find yourself caught among the waves of tourists just arriving or leaving Iona. You'll be accompanied

by a variety of songbirds hoping for crumbs and the ever-present rooks that have nested for centuries in the nearby sycamore trees.

As you walk further north along the road to the Abbey you'll pass the well-maintained organic gardens of the Argyll Hotel and the St. Columba Hotel on your right, a feast for the eyes with their extensive beds of vegetables and flowers. At the bend in the road is MacLean's Cross, erected in the late fifteenth century and one of the few remaining carved stone crosses of the many that once stood on Iona. Some records say that in the centuries following St. Columba there were no less than forty-seven of these magnificent sun-crosses erected on the island, all except for the few that remain, falling into ruin in the medieval period or broken apart and thrown into the sea by zealous Calvinists at the time of the Reformation.

Not far from MacLean's Cross is the St. Columba Steddings on your left, a beautifully designed arts and crafts center built in 2008 from the rubble of an old byre, or cowshed. Here you'll find Aosdana, the gallery of Mhairi Killin, one of the finest of the contemporary Scottish silver artists and a descendent of Alexander Ritchie. Here, too, is Oran Creative Crafts, a cooperative venture of local artists. Across from the Steddings is the St. Columba Hotel with its expansive lawn looking east across Iona Sound. Originally built as the Free Church manse in 1864, it has operated as a hotel almost continuously since 1868. Across from the hotel is the very small, low-doored Iona Book Shop with a fine collection of used and antiquarian books about Iona, the Hebrides, Scottish history, church history, and art, as well as an assortment of novels and children's books. You'll also find hand-carved, wooden Celtic crosses for sale, the acclaimed work of local artist, Jeff Minton.

Now you come to Iona Abbey, the destination of most Iona visitors. The present-day Abbey, also known as St. Mary's Cathedral, was founded by the Benedictines in 1203 (the same year that Reginald and Beathag established the Augustinian Nunnery), and constructed south of the ruins of the monastic school founded by Columba six hundred years earlier. The Reformation brought the Abbey church under Protestant control, though the next centuries saw the population and religious activity decline and the Abbey fall into ruin. It became the private holding of the Duke of Argyll estate. Eventually, in 1899, the 8th Duke, whose effigy you'll find inside the Abbey, gifted the Abbey to a new body, the Iona Cathedral Trustees, who continue to be responsible for the preservation and upkeep of this historic site. In the years following, Iona Abbey was beautifully restored and is considered one of the finest of the medieval cathedrals in Britain. Restoration of the cloisters, however, would have to wait until 1938 when the Rev. Lord George MacLeod arrived with his passionate vision for the rebuilding of the abbey and the formation of the Iona Community, and began the work that was to take

almost forty years to complete. Today, the site is under the protection of Historic Scotland, thanks to the gift of Lord Fraser.

It is interesting to note that when the Duke of Argyll gifted Iona Abbey to the Cathedral Trustees he insisted upon two conditions. First, he required a commitment to the restoration of the Abbey as a place of worship and not as a museum for tourists. Second, he asked that it be forever a home for Christians of all denominations to worship together as the family of Christ. This is 1899, mind you, making the progressive vision of the Duke quite remarkable given the fiercely conservative bent of Protestantism in Scotland. The Iona Community continues to honor this commitment. Worship services in Iona Abbey are open to people of all faith traditions, or none, and everyone is invited to share Holy Communion together. At the conclusion of the Sunday service you will be given a small oatcake to share with a stranger over tea in the cloisters, a symbol of the spirit of hospitality at the heart of the Celtic spiritual tradition.

In front of the Abbey are the remains of five High Crosses. These impressive sun crosses are unique to the Celtic tradition and harken back to the tall standing stones or menhirs of pre-Christian culture. Their carved designs are rich in symbolism, their intricate patterns depicting the life of Christ interwoven with nature motifs. They point to the Celtic Christian embrace of their nature-oriented spiritual heritage, enriched by the new Christian vision. The oldest of these remaining crosses is St. Martin's, standing where first erected in the ninth century, over a thousand years ago, and remarkably well preserved. The remnants of St. Matthew's Cross and a modern replica of St. John's Cross stand nearby. The original has been restored and is in the small museum behind the Abbey, along with the remnants of two other crosses and numerous grave slabs and stones from medieval times.

You will certainly want to spend time in the Abbey, not only for worship, but to sit in the stillness of this sacred space. You'll find lots of information about its history and architecture. But the most important thing for your pilgrimage experience is the reverence and devotional spirit you will experience here. The light from the east window often falls on the large, simple altar made from marble quarried on Iona. The small chapel on the south side will invite you to pray and meditate, accompanied by the sound of the wind, the sea, and the gulls.

Outside the main doors of the Abbey are the small St. Columba's Shrine thought to have once contained the relics of the saint, and the grassy mound called Tor an Abb, reputed to be the site of Columba's cell. On the northeast side of the Abbey is the St. Michael Chapel with its long central communion table and rounded wooden ceiling. In this quiet chapel is a small, stone carving of a Black Madonna. This special carving, sitting

on a window ledge and often unnoticed, was given to Iona Abbey several years ago by a pilgrim from Zimbabwe.

But another gift to Iona Abbey can't be missed. In the center of the restored cloisters is an unusual modern sculpture, a remarkable bronze piece created by Jacob Lipchitz of Lithuania, and installed in the cloister garth in 1959. He called it *Our Lady of Delight*. That name was a bit too controversial for the conservative Scottish Presbyterians at the time and was renamed the *Descent of the Spirit*. The sculpture depicts Mary at the center, blind, holding up her hands to God, supported by three angels, a lamb at her feet, above her the descending dove, and around her the "wind" of the Holy Spirit. The sculpture is said to represent the power of the Holy Spirit to open our eyes, so that "with new vision we see the world as God's creation." The inscription in French translates:

Jacob Lipchitz, Jew, faithful to the faith of his ancestors, has made this Virgin, for the goodwill of all mankind that the Spirit might prevail.

The acceptance of this gift and its installation in the cloister garden was not without controversy, given that the Scottish Reformed tradition has a deeply ingrained suspicion of the veneration of idols and any hint of Mariology. It's no wonder that the name given by the artist was changed to a more acceptable title. In the years since, however, this beautiful sculpture has become an honored part of the Abbey's legacy.

The pillars around the cloisters are intricately carved with plant, bird, and flower motifs. Only two remain from the Benedictine period, the others restored over the last few years by a contemporary Scottish sculptor.

The Abbey grounds include the Reilig Odhrain, the graveyard named after the first monk said to have died on Iona. The small stone chapel, or oratory, is the oldest ecclesiastical building on the island, dating to the late twelfth century. Its arched doorway is of the Irish style and you can still trace the face of a "green man" among the carved leaves of the lower arch, a common motif of the early Celts. Visitors search without luck for the graves of the forty-seven kings and chiefs (among them Macbeth) buried here long ago. The carved stone grave slabs of knights, chiefs and monks are preserved in the small Abbey museum. The northeastern part of the Reilig Odhrain continues to be the cemetery for the islanders, and it is only with special permission from the Iona Council that an "outsider" can be buried on Iona. Such permission was granted in 1994 for the burial of John Smith, a highly regarded leader of the British Parliament, and today many tourists come looking for John Smith's grave rather than that of Macbeth. Near the graveyard is what remains of the Street of the Dead, a cobbled

road that once led from the jetty to the Abbey and along which the pipers accompanied the funeral entourage of the kings.

On the road, across from the Abbey is the Welcome Centre and book shop operated by the Iona Community, where you will find information on the Community and its programs. Nearby is the MacLeod Centre, a large facility designed especially for youth and family programs offered by the Community. Just a short walk further on, Iona Gallery and Pottery is on your left, and not to be missed. Established by well-known artist Gordon Menzies, the Gallery is an art collector's delight. Here you'll find not only beautiful pottery, but one of the finest collections of paintings and etchings by acclaimed Scottish Colourists who came often to Iona in the early nineteen hundreds, F. C. B. Cadell, Samuel Peploe, William Glass, George Houston, and others. You'll also find works by contemporary painters, including Jan Fisher, Philip Coupe, and Mary Maclaren Watson. Both originals and prints are available for purchase. You may also be tempted to purchase a beautiful communion chalice and paten, created and crafted by Mr. Menzies, and unique to Iona. Many of these have been carefully carried home or shipped to churches and retreat centers all over the world.

As you keep walking north, with grazing pastures and farm fields on each side of the road, you'll begin to feel that you are opening out to the island itself. Dun-I (pronounced Dun-ee), Iona's highest hill at 332 feet, is on your left and to your right are the sea and the cliffs of Mull. On a clear day the view to the northeast, looking over the small island of Eilean Annraidh, the Isle of Storm, is truly spectacular, and one of the most frequently painted scenes of Iona.

The white sandy beach on Iona's northeastern tip is known as Traigh Bhan nam Manach, or the white strand of the monks. In the early ninth century, this lovely beach was the site of the slaughter of forty-seven monks by invading Vikings looking for the treasures rumored to be stored in the Abbey. Like Martyr's Bay to the south of the village, this beautiful spot, so loved by artists, is a reminder of the violent and tragic events that are also part of Iona's history.

At the end of the paved road is a gate and a path leading through the grazing-fields of farms, Ardionra and Lagandorain, covered in springtime with daisy and buttercup, to the long white sands of the North Beach stretching to the west. This may be a place where you'll want to spend time, for though you have walked only a mile from the jetty, here you will feel far away from the active life of the village. Overlooking the North Beach to the west is the new Iona Hostel run by John MacLean, popular with backpackers, bicyclists, and others seeking inexpensive accommodation and the

camaraderie of other travelers. Once you have reached the North Beach you've come as far north as the road from the Village can take you.

The main road on Iona also extends south and west of the ferry dock. You'll no doubt walk this way often as you head to the southern hills and the bays and the beaches on the island's western side. When you come to a sharp bend in the road, you will see a grassy path that takes you further south to Sandeel's Bay where you can begin to trek up to the higher moors and cliffs that characterize the wildest and most rugged part of the island. But most likely you will first follow the road straight west, about a mile, to a gate opening onto the grassy meadow known as the machair, or common grazing area, and the Bay-at-the-Back-of-the-Ocean. The machair is also Iona's famed nine-hole golf course, where you will often find locals and visitors enjoying a round or two, along with the sheep.

Just to the north on a prominent craggy hill are traces of an Iron Age fort, now called Dun Bhuirg, or Hill of the Fort. Excavations have uncovered remnants of pottery, beads, bones, tools, and other agricultural implements, indicating that Iona was inhabited well before the coming of Christianity.

This is the extent of the paved roads on Iona, for other than the road north and the road south and west, the rest of the island is reached only by unmarked walking treks. You will find yourself just setting out, map in hand, heading wherever your spirit leads. And this you must do.

Depending on your interests and physical condition, you will have little trouble covering much of the island. But the terrain is deceptive, and the short walk you planned can turn into a more strenuous hike than you intended. Parts of the island are boggy, requiring you to go out of your intended way. If you have health or any physical restrictions, you'll want to stay closer to the village and the historic sites, and spend time meandering along the shores and meadows rather than setting out for the high hills. I've found that Iona offers something very special to just about everyone, regardless of physical ability. If you come with openness to the Spirit, let go of expectations, decide to be grateful for whatever happens, no matter the weather, you will be met here according to your deepest needs and the longings of your heart. You may hike to the highest and further points, or you may spend all of your time on a beach, or a bench in the Abbey, or sitting for the afternoon in the Nunnery gardens.

When you do decide to out for a good, long hike you'll likely want to head for Columba's Bay on the southern shore, where tradition has it, the saint and his men landed in 563. To get there you'll walk west to the machair Bay-at-the-Back-of-the-

Ocean, go south across the machair and follow a path reasonably well marked by the many who walk this way. This will take you to Loch Staonaig, which means the rocky pool, and until recently the reservoir for the island. From here you'll walk over hills and follow a path down into the wide glen that leads you to the popular bay known as the Port of the Coracle. You might climb up the high western ridge to the Cairn-of-the-Back-to-Ireland which marks the spot where Columba allegedly made sure he could no longer see his beloved homeland and so fulfill his pledge never to set his eyes on Ireland again. Though the most rugged part of the island, the southwest and southeastern areas are where you'll discover the Marble Quarry, the Port of the Young Lad's Rock, the Cliff of Streams, the Port of the Big Mouth, St. Martin's Caves, and other very scenic places well worth the effort you'll make to get to them.

You'll also want to go to the inland areas of the island, making your way through the boggy middle pastures to find the elusive Hermit's Cell, thought to be a place where Columba and his monks sought solitude—though some say it is just the ruin of a cattle enclosure. Or perhaps you'll walk from the North Beach right around the northwestern part of the island to the machair, sit on the lovely white shell-sand of Port Bhan, and return home along the middle road to the village, stopping for coffee, an ale, or a good meal in the pub.

If you don't get to the more remote parts of Iona you'll no doubt make the easy climb up Dun-I, the island's highest hill. A sign on a fence about midway from the Village to the North Beach directs you to the path that winds around the southeast side. From the top, you'll catch a panoramic view of Iona and will appreciate just how rugged and wild it is and how small an area is taken by the village and the farms. If the day is clear, you'll see the islands of the outer Hebrides, perhaps even the distinctive peaks of the Cuillins on Skye to the north and the Paps of Jura and the Torren Rocks to the south. On Mull, Ben Mor, the highest mountain in Scotland, is often visible. If lucky, you might stumble upon the Well of Youth on the north side of Dun-I and want to test the old folk tale that by climbing the mountain three times at sunrise, and bathing your face in the well, all age will drop away. However, many a pilgrim, including myself, can personally attest to the sad conclusion that something must have changed in the waters over the centuries, for by my own evidence, it must take many more than three hikes up Dun-I at dawn for the Well of Youth to do the job!

You will walk a lot on Iona. This is good, for you will inevitably find yourself slowing down and taking more in. "The oldest practice is still the best," writes Philip Cousineau. "Take your soul for a stroll. Long walks, short walks, morning walks, evening walks—whatever form or length it takes. Walking is the best way to get out of your head." And echoed by Soren Kierkegaard: "Above all, do not lose your desire to walk: Every day I

walk myself into a state of well-being and walk away from every illness; I have walked myself into my best thoughts." But perhaps said best by Friedrich Nietzsche, "Never trust a thought that didn't come by walking."

As you walk on Iona you'll know the practical wisdom of the well-known Irish prayer, "May the wind be always at your back and the sun shine warm upon your face." You might also find yourself reciting the prayer of pilgrims before you:

God, bless the pathway on which I go,
God, bless the earth that is beneath my sole.

When you are not out and about, where are you staying put? Depending on the reasons you have come on pilgrimage to Iona, and how long you are here, there are many comfortable and welcoming places to stay. (In the final chapter of this guidebook I've included my suggestions and other practical advice.) But as you make your plans, the most important consideration may be whether you want solitude or community, and how much or little of each. You may be coming to Iona because of the Iona Community and want to participate in a program or volunteer experience. If time for yourself in solitude and reflection are the primary reasons for your pilgrimage, then you'll want to stay in private accommodation, giving you time and space to meet God's spirit in the hills and wind and creatures of Iona as well as in worship services with others.

Wherever you stay on Iona, you will discover many places for quiet contemplation, prayer, and study. Iona will work its magic, whether you sit for hours in the dim light of the Abbey or spend your time wandering the heathered hills. What is most important is that you listen to your inner guidance, stay present to what you invoked when you first said "yes" to making an Iona pilgrimage, and be open to the beauty, inspiration, and surprises of this sacred place.