

In brief

Category: moderate-exacting walk

Walking Distance: approx 12km / 7.5 miles

Time: allow five to six hours to complete the full circuit

Map Reference: OS Landranger 18 and Pathfinder 116 (NF88 / 98)

Bed and Breakfast is available on Berneray. There is also hostel accommodation (the hostel also accepts campers).

Berneray



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HEBRIDES



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How to get there?

From North Uist

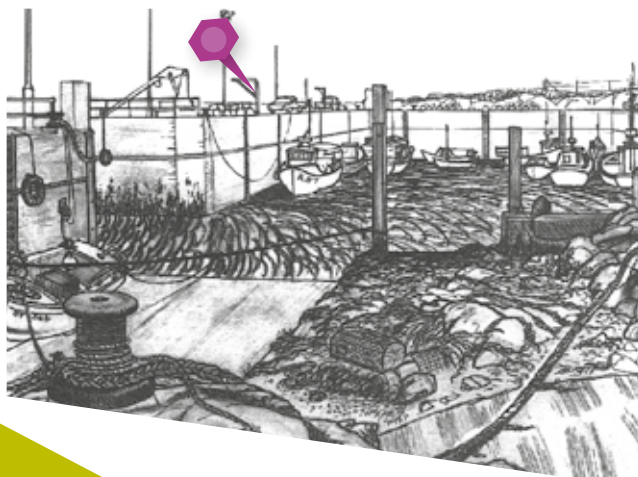
Berneray is linked by causeway to North Uist (connected to B893). Details of local buses from Lochmaddy are available from Tourist Information Centres and at <http://www.cne-siar.gov.uk/travel/busservice/current/indexu.asp>.

From Harris

A regular car and passenger ferry to Berneray departs from Leverburgh, Harris.

For details Tel: 01859 502444 or visit www.calmac.co.uk.

For details contact the Stornoway bus station. Tel: 01851 704327 or the Tourist Information Centre Tel: 01851 703088 or visit <http://www.cne-siar.gov.uk/travel/busservice/current/indexlh.asp>.



Follow the Crofting Code

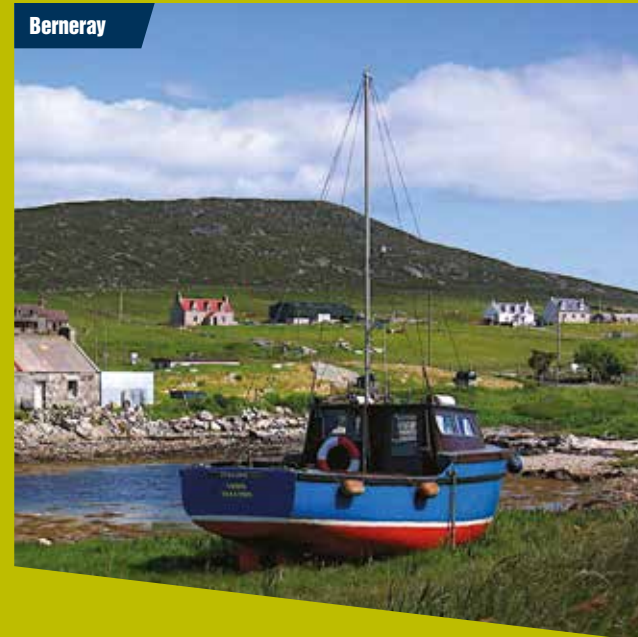
- Please leave dogs behind, or ensure they are on a leash as they can be a danger to livestock.
- Park your car without blocking access for other vehicles.
- Please fasten gates.
- Leave no litter.
- Do not disturb breeding birds.
- Protect wildlife and plants.
- Avoid damaging archaeological sites.

For your safety

- Remember the weather here can be unpredictable!
- Wear sensible clothing and footwear.
- Take an OS map and a compass.
- Tell someone where you are going or leave a note visible on the dashboard of your car – stating your destination and estimated time of return.

“For a small island, Berneray has a rich history and its natural habitats support a varied and abundant wildlife.”

Berneray



Explore...

The walk starts and finishes at the Community Hall, Borgh, where car parking is available. To reach this from the causeway and ferry terminal, turn right at the main road and then left through Borgh to the end of the road.

Leave the Community Hall on foot, go through a gate on your right and follow the waymarkers up Beinn a' Chlaidh to the standing stone at Cladh Maolrith. Descend on the other side of the hill, until you reach the main road. Turn left here and follow the road for 3km as it winds past Borgh Hill, past the harbour and around Loch a Bhàigh. Keep to the right at Ruisgearraidh and follow the road to Baile. Then follow the road along the machair for 1.3km, go through the gate (remembering to close it behind you) and follow the waymarkers along the shore, keeping off the slopes of Beinn Ghainche (Sand Hill).

Once past the fenceline, follow the waymarkers up to the summit of Beinn Shleibhe, where you can enjoy spectacular views over the Sound of Pabbay. Descend to the north coast of Berneray and then walk for 3.5km along the most breathtaking beach or on the dune above it, turning the corner slightly at Rubh' a' Chorrain.

Turn to the left and follow the waymarkers for 1km across the machair to Scalabraig where you can see archaeological remains including the enigmatic Chair Stone. The route returns to the Community Hall.

Loch a' Bhàigh

Waymarkers will guide you down to the road where you turn to the left and walk past the Borgh road-end at Pol an Oir, and on to Rubha Mhanais and in a few hundred yards the harbour.

The harbour was completed in 1989. Before that time, boats had to ride at anchor in Loch a' Bhàigh (Bays Loch) which afforded no shelter in rough weather. Beinn Bhuirgh (Borve Hill) rises behind the harbour and the route continues along Cul na Beinne (Backhill) and past the Church of Scotland, built in 1887.



Gunneries

The church marks the boundary between the two townships of Borgh and Ruisgearraidh.

The skerries in Loch a' Bhàigh are a favourite basking place for common seals and the stretch past the Post Office is an excellent place from which to observe them. Passing Quay and Loch Bhatar Seathain, there are a number of thatched cottages around Laimrig (landing place). Several of these thatched cottages have recently been restored and are available as holiday lets.

The road to the former primary school (closed in 2005) branches off to the right.

At Sgalabraig, where rocky outcrops rise above the rough pasture, there is to be found an arrangement of ancient stones, some of which may also have Viking associations. The most prominent of these is called the Chair Stone. The purpose of the site is open to speculation, but it may have been a Viking court or meeting place with the Chair Stone as the seat of the judge and a prominent stone opposite, the place for the accused. The site could also have been a burial ground.



Eyebright

Dunes and Machair

Tràigh Iar (West Beach) is a magnificent beach almost three miles long stretching west to Rubh' a' Chorrain where it curves to the southwest all the way to the rocky edge of Rubha Bhoisinis. It is a solitary strand, where all that is usually seen of the otter are its tracks in the sand, where ravens and gulls glide above the high dunes and clumps of sea rocket grow in the summer above the high tide line.

Having rounded Rubh' a' Chorrain you walk about half the remaining distance of the beach and then turn inland to strike out in a southeasterly direction across the mealladhach, the undulating land behind the dunes, in the general direction of the Community Hall. Much of this land is flooded in winter and transformed into a network of small lakes.

The Berneray Community

In the third week of July the Community Hall is the focal point for Seachdain Bheamaraigh (Berneray Week), hosting ceilidhs, dances and concerts, a tradition which goes back to when the new hall was built in 1985.

The name "Berneray" is derived from the Norse Bjorn (bear) and Ey (island). It was a place of some importance to the Vikings as a sacred burial ground and as a fertile

island. It is situated between North Uist and Harris and its topography shows a resemblance to both these islands.

Berneray has a population of about 140 and the traditional pursuits of crofting and creel fishing continue as important activities. The island has contributed much to the Gaelic culture in the past, and has been the home of many renowned bards. For a small island (only 3 miles long by 2 miles wide) it has a rich history and its natural habitats support a varied and abundant wildlife.

Baile

The walk carries on through the cutting and over to Baile (town), where the oldest surviving building on the island stands, called MacLeod's Gunneries. Beyond it you will find the youth hostel, situated in two converted blackhouses, run by the Gatliff Trust.

The Gunneries dates back to the 16th century and was the seat of the MacLeods of Berneray and the birthplace of Sir Norman MacLeod (1614-1705), the third son of Ruairidh Mor MacLeod of Harris and Dunvegan, who granted the island in life rent to his son. There is an inscription on a marble slab over the door lintel which reads:

"Hic natus est illustris ille Normanus MacLeod de Berneray eques auratus"

MacDonalds. The house was converted into an armoury when Sir Norman moved to a bigger domicile close by, a few stones of which still remain. The period of Sir Norman's life may be reckoned as the Golden Age of Berneray. He was a scholar and a patron of the Gaelic bards, among whom must be mentioned Mary MacLeod (Mairi nighean Alasdair Ruaidh), famous bardess of the MacLeods, in whose songs he is often the most lauded hero and generous host, praise which it seems he justly deserved.

The MacLeods of Berneray remained loyal to the Royal House of Stuart throughout succeeding generations, and Sir Norman was rewarded for his loyalty with a knighthood at the restoration of the monarchy in 1660.

The walk continues along Tràigh Bheasdaire with expansive views across the Sound of Harris to the Harris hills and the yellow sands of Scarista. Banks of tangle are washed up on this beach in the winter and flocks of Dunlin and Sanderling dart about at the water's edge.

(Here was born Sir Norman Macleod of Berneray distinguished knight). The Gunneries was a fortified building of two storeys with narrow splayed windows for defence in times of feuding with rival clans, chiefly the

Beinn Ghainche

The Old Established Church of Scotland building stands on a rocky bluff in Lagachella. It was built in 1827, from a standard design by Thomas Telford, but had two entrances, one for the Berneray congregation and the other for the Pabbay folk. In recent years it has been sympathetically converted into a private home and artists' residence.

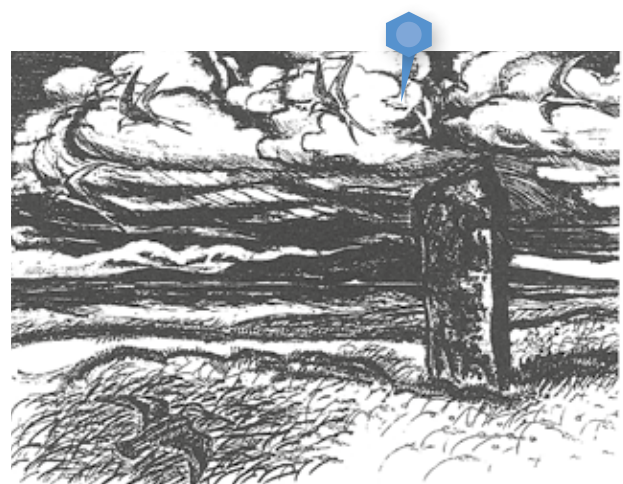
Beinn Ghainche is green and fertile and on its slope you will see the old cemetery, which was used as a burial site for countless generations.

To find the tomb of Sir Norman Macleod however you must journey to Harris where his remains lie buried in St Clements graveyard, Roghadal (Rodel).

Gaining the summit of Beinn Shleibhe you will be rewarded with a wonderful view in all directions. Look for St Kilda on the western horizon, just beyond the north tip of Boreray, the island lying out to the west of Berneray. The mountains of mainland Wester Ross can be seen to the east.



Old Telford Church



Standing stone with Snipe and Arctic Tern

Beinn a' Chlaidh

The route takes you up Beinn a' Chlaidh (Hill of the Graveyard), which was a venerated place with several sites of historical and archaeological interest. On this island of wells, Tobar Leathad Ullaraidh (the well on the slope) was renowned for its pure water and the Pabbay folk sailed over to Berneray to draw water from this well, to use in distilling the whisky for which they were famous!

This is a good vantage point from which to survey the machair, a unique habitat of small cultivated plots, narrow strips and areas of fallow land supporting a diversity of wild flowers and providing cover for over a dozen species of ground nesting birds.

Clach Mhòr (the standing stone) is impressive because of its situation and solitariness. It stands eight feet in height and dates back to the Bronze Age about 2000 BC. An eyewitness account for the late 19th century by Dr Wedderspoon who documented various sites on the island which have since disappeared, describes three concentric rings of isolated boulders set at regular intervals, encircling the stone. Early Christian monks may well have built a chapel beside the stone, but the present remains mark the site of a later church, possibly 13th century, dedicated to St Maolrubha.

A more elusive place to find is Leac an Rìgh (flat stone of the King). It is an unobtrusive rock ledge lying about 120m south of Clach Mhòr. On it is the imprint of a small foot carved into the rock. Possibly Pictish, it is a much later relic than the standing stone and was used to initiate a leader into the kingship.



Speculative reconstruction of Early Christian monastery

