

# Wild about the Isles of Scilly

## Foraging on this pretty archipelago makes for a delicious break

**S**LIPPERY seaweed swirls in a pool of water, some of it clinging to the rock face. I'd never before taken much notice of seaweed, but it is immensely beautiful.

Some trails like wild hair, some is feathered, all are dramatically different shades of green, red, and brown.

I am clambering around in rock pools, collecting seaweed along a milk-white beach on St Martins, one of the Isles of Scilly, the sub-tropical archipelago 30 miles from Cornwall. Here, the waters are a clear Caribbean turquoise and the pace of life mellow the moment you arrive.

I am foraging for wild foods with my husband, three children and Rachel Lambert, a wild food expert who leads foraging walks throughout the South-West.

Hell Bay, a hotel on Bryher, the smallest of the Scillies' five inhabited islands, offers bi-annual three-day trips with Rachel (who also hosts private trips throughout the year).

Each day is spent foraging on a different island — part of the fun of the Scillies is island-hopping by the punctual ferries — and at the end of each day an award-winning chef turns what you have found into a gourmet feast. Bryher is just a mile long by half a mile wide and home to only 80 people, a shop and church. The silence is vast here — there is just a handful of vehicles and most are tractors.

Hell Bay, the island's only hotel, made up of blue-and-white clapboard cottages with fantastic artwork filling the bar, is relaxed and smart. It is named after nearby Hell Bay, where ships have been smashed against the rocks by Atlantic storms. The Scillies are surrounded by volatile waters which are responsible for more than 500



Picture: ALAMY

Tasty: The Scillies have a gentle, sub-tropical climate and are rich in wild foods such as seaweed

shipwrecks, but the islands are also home to sub-tropical flowers and palm trees. Winters are frost-free because the Isles of Scilly are in the Gulf Stream's warming path, so everywhere gardens are voluptuous with agapanthus and aeoniums.

The fickle waters mean, however, that timings for our trip to St Martins can be decided only the day before. We have to reach the jungle of seaweeds before the tide goes out. 'We must collect the freshest seaweed, still covered with water,' says Rachel. 'The seaweeds

here are extremely healthy because the air and water are so clean.'

We gather gutweed, sea lettuce, Irish moss, kelp, thongweed, wracks and pepper dulse. Rachel explains the different uses of each.

The following day we forage on Bryher, wandering along untamed dune-backed beaches, moorland and country lanes. Bryher translates as 'land of hills' and resembles a tropical Scotland. Rachel opens up the landscape and shows us what we had previously just walked past. We harvest Sea

Spinach, Sandwort ('like mini Christmas trees,' Arthur, my son, observes) and Frosted Orache.

When not searching for wild food, we forage among the stalls outside farmhouses throughout the islands (with honesty boxes for payment) selling fudge, vegetables, jam and bulbs.

Each day we look forward to what glorious meal hotel head chef Glenn Gatland will prepare. Hell Bay is known for its award-winning restaurant. We enjoy sandwort consomme with sea lettuce,

mussels with pepper dulse, duck in a kelp stock, wild mushroom fricassee, beautiful salads (filled with the blush of red clover and pink mallow tree flowers) and fennel risotto. Desserts vary from a vanilla and carrageen panna cotta to a refreshing carrot flower sorbet with hogweed seed shortbreads.

**W**HAT else is there to do when not foraging to burn off all this food? You can take a boat to Samson, a deserted Robinson Crusoe island, for a picnic, snorkel with seals or visit the famous Tresco Gardens — and it's safe for children to run off and explore on their own.

It is the seaweeds, however, which demonstrate how rich in wild foods the Scillies are. While out collecting them we meet Philip Godard, the only other person on the beach. He is digging for cockles.

'I use them in a flan, or put them in a fish pie,' explains Philip, who lives with his wife on a boat and exists almost entirely from foraging. 'Tomorrow we'll go shrimping,' he says, before continuing his search for dinner.

### TRAVEL FACTS

FOUR nights at Hell Bay with return helicopter flights, dinner, B&B, six wild food walks, entry to the famous Abbey Gardens and boat excursions costs £865pp. Contact, 01720 422947, [hellbay.co.uk](http://hellbay.co.uk). Next foraging dates April 12-16, 2012.

KATE ESHLEBY

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