



Rocks of ages: giant concretions (far left) and the imposing Sgurr on Eig (left); taking a breather (bottom)

PHOTOGRAPHY: ANGUS MILLER

Day in the life of...



Angus Miller
Walk leader, Geowalks

Like many who love the Scottish landscape, I can trace my passion back to childhood and layers of memories; an accumulation of experiences over the years. Much like the landscape itself, these memories are the result of countless episodes, of a story going back millions of years.

Much of my time is spent not far from my home in Edinburgh. I love exploring the Lothians and Fife and sharing the stories of Scotland's rocks on day walks with adults, and guiding groups of school children around Edinburgh's own extinct volcano, Arthur's Seat. As a self-employed geologist, such days are my bread and butter. But come spring and summer, I head to the north and west on week-long walking holidays, exploring the geology of the Highlands and islands.

One such special place for me is the Isle of Eigg in the Small Isles where the combination of rocks and scenery have drawn me back many times over the last few years. On Eigg, there is no such thing as a typical or ordinary day. The combination of the weather and the tide, the wildlife and the people we meet ensures that.

Such a day might begin with the sun streaming through the windows of the Glebe Barn, Eigg's independent hostel. It's not always sunny, but here, on days like this, it seems to be the natural state of things. After a leisurely breakfast, we stroll up the road, popping into the old post office to enjoy the displays and

then it is on through conifer plantations and moorland, with just wild flowers and birds of prey for company.

Around a corner and suddenly the scene changes – a common experience here where the sea is never far away, and the varied bedrock produces a range of landscapes. We pause perched on the cliff, imagining times past when the sea covered the low land below. We drift further back in history, to a hazy, land-locked scene, a raw volcanic landscape with occasional eruptions that produced the lava rocks at our feet. And way back in the mists of time, when plesiosaurs swam in warm, quiet seas and herds of dinosaurs strolled on muddy plains. We descend to Laig Bay and the adventure starts.

With the tide out and the warm spring sunshine drying the rocks, the conditions are ideal to explore the sandstone cliffs between Laig and Camas Sgiotaig (the singing sands). The first treasures are giant concretions – round, solid boulders within the sandstone – formed by slow percolation of carbonate-rich water through the rock.

We then enter another world beneath the high sandstone cliffs, with fantastic shapes of eroded sandstone. Sharp-edged defiles block our path, criss-crossing ditches formed by eroded dykes of igneous rock, originally injected into the sandstone as liquid magma during volcanic eruptions.

Usually, dykes form upstanding features, but here the combination of rock types and pounding waves has removed the igneous rock and left a playground of narrow passageways. The more adventurous of us squeeze through dripping sea caves and behind a waterfall to emerge on a sparkling quartz sand beach – the famous singing sands that squeak as our feet force the air out from between

the grains.

It is a great spot to rest and enjoy the views across to Rum and imagine the scene 60 million years ago, when this was all underground and Rum itself lay beneath a massive volcano. For the rest of the afternoon, we have a choice of catching the minibus back across the island for cake at the tearoom, or clambering skywards to enjoy the views from flat-topped Beinn Bhuidhe as we meander back towards the Glebe Barn.

And as another day draws to a close, there is a chance to reflect on how the best of days are much more than the sum of their parts; how the combination of good company, sunshine, rocks with interesting stories and a sense of exploring off the beaten track combine to add another layer of memories that will last forever. ■

Through his company, Geowalks, Angus Miller offers trips that take people back in time to discover the rich story of Scotland's rocks and landscape. www.geowalks.co.uk

