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Why I fell for the Falklands

Roaming cook Hattie Kilmartin tells why she - and 60,000 cruise ship visitors - fall in love with the islands



Hattie Kilmartin and son Toby in the Falklands

[Hattie Kilmartin](#)

I had been wondering what to do after returning from my latest job, cooking for horseback trekkers in Outer Mongolia.

Cooking is a great way of seeing remote parts of the world. I told my agent I wanted to see South America. And she found me a job in the Falkland Islands, a bunch of barren rocks of which the only thing I knew was the 1982 conflict.

A friend, who had recently visited, changed my outlook. The beauty she portrayed was the absolute opposite to my war-driven perceptions. Suddenly I wanted to go very badly.

I worked in Port Howard on West Falkland. Robin Lee and his brother, Rodney, owned a farm and Robin had converted the manager's house into a fishing and wildlife lodge. The farm is 210,000 acres and shears 45,000 sheep and the lodge is the heart of the farm settlement - so farm activities, particularly shearing, always drew guests.

Watching a gather of 12,000 sheep approaching the settlement with dogs and shepherds at the rear is up there with the best the American West can offer.

The farm also had fabulous sea-trout fishing, with regular catches of 6 to 10 pounders. We spent magical days driving fishermen to the river over the "camp" (countryside, derived from the Gaucho "el campo"). As they cast their Orange Dog Nobbles, Green Woolly Buggers and Willie Gunn floats over the peaty ripples, we prepared lunch.

First you make a small fire with twigs of the native Diddle Dee shrub, then wrap a fresh silver sea-trout, lightly salted, in wet newspaper (brought by our guests, as the weekly paper the Penguin News is only A4) and leave it in the embers until the paper had dried out and the fish was perfectly cooked, with a lovely smoky note.

Sometimes we would mince some meat cut from the mutton hanging in our meat safe (we were given a whole mutton once a week from the farm, and a quarter of beef in the winter) and make patties seasoned with onions and herbs from our garden.

We put them together with a picnic, and would head off into camp. One of the places we would head to was the Gentoo and Rockhopper penguin rookeries that littered the North end of the farm. Watching these enchanting creatures either up to their comical antics in their rookeries, or darting ashore is spellbinding.

The Rockies determinedly hop up the relentless sheer cliffs, yet have such a humour about them. The Gentoos dash ashore on the tide and waddle like playful children across the pristine white beaches heading back to their colonies. Jackass (Magellanic) penguins would appear from their burrows shaking their heads.

Lackadaisical sealions basked in the warmth of the sun in the sand dunes. For lunch, Robin balanced his polished peat spade over the fire embers to cook the burgers, sandwiched in homemade baps and accompanied by slugs of hot shepherd's rum or cool lager, depending on the weather.

In the evenings, guests gathered together for dinner, which included Loligo squid risotto stained with squid ink, smoked Upland goose breast thinly sliced, butterfly leg of mutton or fish, followed by puddings including home-made teaberry ice-cream.

My favourite of the Port Howard shepherd shanties (huts dotted around the outer reaches of the vast farm) was at the mouth of the Warrah, called Purvis House.

It was here that in 1999 Robin and I married on a still sunny day. Guests had to drive an hour over the camp and across stone-runs (rock formations which look like vast rivers of stone) or arrive by boat. We married in the stable, followed by a barbecue of Moonfish kebabs, lamb chops, pork kebabs and home-made burgers followed by everyone dancing to a local band. Most camped for the night: we headed off in a small boat to a nearby island under the light of the moon.

Five months later Robin died. I was determined to carry on at the lodge. A close friend, Lizzie, came down from the UK to see what it was that was keeping me in the islands (she had met Robin so understood why I had originally stayed).

So why was I still there? Lizzie only needed to stay a short time before she understood. The tranquility, landscape, unpolluted air, volume and closeness of wildlife plus the resilience, self-sufficiency and warmth of welcome from the Islanders - all overwhelmed her.

We visited West Point Island as guests of Roddy and Lily Napier, wonderful characters who - along with Rob and Lorraine McGill on neighbouring idyllic Carcass Island - regularly entertain cruise ship passengers in their kitchens enjoying "smoko" (tea, originates from shearers' cigarette breaks).

A short walk from the West Point settlement, dodging the Johnny Rooks, (Striated Caracaras, one of the world's rarest birds of prey, yet incredibly tame) the land drops away and is carpeted

with Mollymawks (Black-browed Albatross) sitting on their nests, too busy with their lives to worry about us sitting quietly, eyeball to eyeball with these majestic birds.

We visited Danny and Joy Donnelly at Roy Cove, staying at their self-catering cottage, once the farm bunk-house. Fresh milk, meat and home-grown vegetables greeted us in the kitchen. Danny took us riding on his horses, which he still uses for his sheep work.

On Sea Lion Island, a small, easy-to-walk-around island, we watched roaring Elephant seal bulls, the females and pups trying to dodge the lumbering masses. On East Falkland we stayed at Darwin Lodge and were given an emotive guided tour of the '82 battlefields. Lizzie returned to London; her question answered.

That was eight years ago. I left Port Howard in 2002 to travel again (cooking in north Russia) but returned to the Falklands.

I am now happily remarried with an 18-month-old son, Toby. My husband, Kevin Kilmartin, owns Bluff Cove Farm on East Falkland, less than an hour from Stanley, the capital and only town in the Falklands.

On the farm is a beautiful beach and lagoon, teeming with Gentoo penguins and a growing colony of King penguins. Jackass penguins visit from a nearby tussac island. As do Southern sealions - particularly when the young penguins are practising their swimming. Peales and Commersons dolphins (known locally as "puffing pigs") are regularly seen porpoising in the surf. Many small birds nest in the area, their chicks scuttle and dance amongst the Sea Cabbage flowers by the beach.

It is here that Kevin and I married in 2006 with penguins looking on. We honeymooned on Saunders Island at one of its remote self-catering cottages, within a few minutes' walk there are Mollymawks and Rockhoppers in one direction and Gentoo and Jackass penguins in the other.

When large cruise ships started to include Stanley in their South American itineraries, Kevin saw an opportunity for the sheep farm to diversify, as the ships wanted penguin tours.

The Bluff Cove Lagoon Tour starts in Stanley where guests are picked up from the jetty for a tour out to the farm, through the 1982 "final push" battlefields.

This is where the road runs out, so from here, they head off across camp in Land Rovers to the beautiful lagoon to be charmed by the penguins, talk to the knowledgeable guides and take close up photographs of the wildlife, before wandering down to the beach and the Sea Cabbage Café.

This must be one of the more remote cafés in the world. Heated by peat, it offers our guests a fabulous view of the wildlife on the beach, whilst they drink tea and eat a spread of home-baking, including warm scones spread with home-made butter, Diddle Dee jam and fresh farm cream.

From there, it's back to Stanley, a very pretty little town, with a population of just 2,000, has a wonderful museum, some great gift shops - and seven pubs.

Many people in the Falklands, like Kevin and myself, came with idea of staying for six months but settle in the Islands. Many land-based tourists come back again and again. And for many cruise ship passengers the Falklands is the highlight of their whole trip. Never to be forgotten.