

# Where time stands still



**Muck is a remote Scottish island and it's looking for a new family. But there's no pub, no privacy and no electricity in the afternoon! Is life on the Isle of Muck a paradise or prison?  
By Victoria Moore**

On the northern side of the Isle of Muck, **Catherine Murray-John** is packing up the house that she and her four children have lived in for the past six years. Her departure creates a rare opportunity for one lucky (or brave?) family to begin a new existence on this windswept island in the Inner Hebrides.

The private Isle of Muck has been owned and run by the **MacEwen** family for over 100 years. It is so teeny you can jog from one end to the other in ten minutes and so tranquil the loudest noise is the sound of the wind and the sea against the rocks. Exquisitely beautiful, with white sandy coves, nesting puffins and the occasional shoal of sharks, it is far removed from 21st century-style civilisation.



It doesn't have a church, let alone a pub. There's no police force (the last crime in living memory was in the Sixties, when an estate worker stole two bottles of wine). Post Office? Forget it! If you have a letter to send, you can drop it into a box in the coastguard's hut and **Sandy** the postman (who doubles as Muck's fisherman) will put it on the next boat to the mainland. Muck does have electricity – it arrived in 1970 – but the TV works only from 8am to 11am and 5pm till midnight.

It all feels blissfully remote when you step off the **Caledonian MacBrayne** ferry after a two-hour sea journey from the west coast of Scotland. You are welcomed by grazing sheep and kindly islanders collecting bulging cardboard boxes of provisions. The boat's arrival is a major social event.

Muck has a population of just 35: 23 adults, of whom eight are MacEwens, and 12 children. Since the news broke that Catherine was leaving, her phone hasn't stopped ringing with would-be islanders. But she warns those with romantic notions of island life to beware. 'People think you can come here to escape all your problems. But you can't, they come with you.'

Catherine told the MacEwen family in April that she wanted to leave the island. She explains: 'My second child starts at secondary school in the autumn, so we're moving to Dornoch on Scotland's north-east coast. It's a huge wrench.'

The man charged with deciding who will be allowed to move into one of the island's 13 houses is **Colin MacEwen**. He is just 29, a huge bear of a man, bursting with vitality, glowing skin and a surprisingly un-Scottish accent. He says:

'We're keen to get a young couple or a family because it's so important to keep the island alive and also for the school. This year we had eight children; next term, if no one new comes, there will be only two. We're looking for practical people who have ideas about how to make a living here.'

The MacEwen family has a feudal level of authority over what goes on here. They own and rent out all the houses.



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Muck hasn't always been so sparsely populated. In 1821, there were 320 people making a living on its 1,500 acres. But by the time it was sold to the MacEwens in 1896, it was much less crowded. By 1973, Muck's population had dropped to the teens and they made a similar appeal for a young family with children. Colin's father, the impressively-bearded **Lawrence MacEwen**, Laird (Lord) of the island says:

'We don't really want people fresh from the south. They tend to be very idealistic. Running away from the towns is one thing, but you need guts to live here. When I was a boy, everyone here except our family spoke Gaelic.'

Certainly not everyone has found Muck to be the home of their dreams, but there are plenty of upsides to living in such a small community. The lack of crime, for one.

'We don't lock our doors,' says **Dave**, who runs the B&B. 'Most of them don't lock. I don't even know whether there's a key for ours.'

But the smallness of the island can magnify problems between its inhabitants. Lawrence says darkly about Catherine's departure: 'There were other reasons, too.'

Island life can feel just a wee bit claustrophobic. You bump into the same people over and over again and you run out of small talk. In a closed environment like Muck it's easy for relationships to become sour and disagreeable. You may dream of giving up the hustle and bustle of town life but there is sometimes something restful about the anonymity of a big city.

### **Isle of Muck**

The islanders of Muck are looking for a new family to live on the island.

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