

# Letter from Scotland



Goat Fell, Arran Island,  
photo by James Stringer

They say the island of Arran represents Scotland in miniature. If so, I have just been cycling round this virtual Scotland without ever leaving the Firth of Clyde. In just 25 miles, I've gone from the Highlands in the north, with their mountains and heather moors, to the Lowlands in the south, with their dairy farms and busy towns.



And yes this island does conform to the biscuit-tin image of Scotland – high mountain ridges, yachts in magnificent bays, castles and golf courses, old farm steadings, picturesque holiday homes. But there are no offices, no shopping malls, no tenements, no housing estates, no beggars in city streets, no heavy industry.

I was left wondering how Arran's economy worked. I was surprised to find that there are as many as 165 "enterprises", most of them tourist-related of course. They employ some 1,600 people, plus 500 seasonal staff. There are 63 small- holdings or farms. There are a couple of building contractors. There is a diary business, a toiletry and perfume business, a brewery, a distillery...and a new one being built. And then there are the service industries... shops, schools, doctors' surgeries, ferry staff etc.



Arran's new distillery  
under construction

For all that, the population is in decline and stands at 4,600. And as I cycled around, I noticed a lot of properties

for sale (average price £250,000 for a two bed-roomed house.)

So is this Scotland in miniature ? Not really. Scotland's population is rising. Homes on the mainland are hard to find. Certainly tourism is an important part of the Scottish economy, but only worth 5 per cent of our national income or 8 per cent of the workforce. Whisky is a large and growing business (14 new distilleries opened last year) but still only worth 3 per cent of GDP. Agriculture is also important but again produces only 2 per cent of GDP.

Curiously, where Arran and Scotland are similar is that their service industries create most of their wealth...those shops, schools, colleges, hospitals, banks, transport agencies etc. If we keep spending on these, the economy will churn over nicely. If we don't – because of pay caps and government "austerity" – growth will falter.



#### Prayer flags on Holy Island

Standing aside from all this materialism is Holy Island, the mountainous isle that lies off Lamlash Bay. It's been a retreat for the saints since St Colomba's time. Nowadays it's owned by Buddhist monks. I took the small ferry across the bay and spent a couple of hours wandering around the herb and vegetable garden, through the high bracken to St Molaise's cave, almost to the Stevenson lighthouse.

In the old boathouse, I was served tea and a dry biscuit, by a lay member of the community who quietly suggested we all take a break from the modern world of goods and services and "things" and, in particular, our mobile phones. Go on a retreat, take a course in "mindfulness," work in the garden.

Suddenly I wasn't so sure of my economic plan for Arran. Instead of providing more attractions for the tourists...a seventh golf course, more sailing schools, better down-hill biking trails...or another distillery or cheese plant, perhaps

the whole island should become a "holy island" where we let the beauty of nature speak for itself and we run classes in geology and botany and history and arts and culture to give our minds a holiday from the madness of the mainland.

I'm glad I visited the two Arrans and have come home refreshed.