



HEART IN THE HEBRIDES:
Katie on St Kilda, a
memorable experience closer
to home

Islander Katie is blogging all over the world

KEITH MACKENZIE profile



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At a time of year when so many of us are browsing the holiday websites, and thinking of sunnier climes and foreign adventures KEITH MACKENZIE caught up with Katie MacLeod, an award-winning travel blogger, originally from Lewis but now living in New York...

We are looking for more people to profile. If there is someone in your area you think should be interviewed, please contact Lisa Falconer on 01471 820400 or e-mail lisa.falconer@whfp.co.uk

KATIE MACLEOD thinks that it was during a family holiday to Turkey, aged 12, that she was first bitten by the travel bug.

It was her first time abroad — but in adulthood she's been inspired to travel to many more countries, documenting her adventures in her popular blog, storiesmysuitcasecouldtell.com.

Much to Katie's surprise the site has now grown to attract followers from across the world. Her online posts have earned awards and national press coverage, as well as to preserve for posterity happy memories and a passion for travel which she hopes to continue for many years to come.

She sums it up by borrowing a quote from Britain's best-loved travel broadcaster Michael Palin: "Once the travel bug bites there is no known antidote, and I know that I shall be happily infected until the end of my life."

KATIE, AN INTERNATIONAL relations graduate from St Andrews University, began blogging in 2011, during a spell in China, where she was teaching English with the British Council.

She explained: "On my first blog, Tianjin Tales, I wrote about life as an expat in China, and I enjoyed blogging so much that when I returned to Scotland in 2011 I decided to continue writing about travel, and so Stories My Suitcase Could Tell was born.

"I imagined that only family and friends would read my posts, and for the first while, I'm sure it was just my mum reading them. Now there are thousands of readers from around the world. I've had lots of lovely feedback and support from readers, which really means a lot to me. Being recognised for awards and in national magazines has been incredible too — I could never have envisaged any of this when I first sat down to write the blog at my kitchen table."

RECOGNITION FOR THE BLOG began in the summer of 2013, when Katie won the "Tale of Two Cities" travel writing competition run by holiday website Black Tomato. She then won Holiday Hypermarket's "Top Travel Blog" in January 2014, and followed that up in autumn last year by landing Cosmopolitan Magazine's "Best Travel Blog" of 2014.

Katie's writing has recently featured in National Geographic Traveller (UK), in Cosmopolitan and in the Sun newspaper. Closer to home she's been a feature writer at the Stornoway Events magazine for the past seven years.

Of the 14 countries she's so far blogged about, Katie encountered her top three travelling experiences in Kenya, China and France.

"Kenya was an all-round amazing experience," she said. "I spent two weeks there by the Indian Ocean last summer, and loved everything about it. The people were so friendly, the weather was great, and seeing animals like lions, zebras, and elephants in their beautiful natural habitat was incredible. A safari is often described as a once-in-a-lifetime experience, but now that I've been once, I'm desperate to go on one again.

"China is another one of my top destinations. It's still the most fascinating place I've ever been to, not just because of its history, but because it's so unique, so completely different to anywhere else. It's a place of contrasts — one day you're climbing the Great Wall of China, and the next you're in one of the tallest, most modern buildings in the world."



On the Great Wall of China

Then there was a spot of Parisienne luxury — which came courtesy of Black Tomato, for winning their travel writing competition.

"Staying at Le Royal Monceau in Paris was so good that I had to force myself to leave the hotel suite and see the city," she recalls. "Everything about the hotel was perfect: the arty, eccentric style; the luxurious rooms; the impeccable service from every single member of staff; the fabulous French food...I could go on about this hotel endlessly, but it's safe to say it set the standard very high."

Getting knocked over by a cyclist in Amsterdam is just about the only negative experience Katie has found on her travels thus far.

But when asked for some essential tips if

trying to avoid any holiday nightmares she offers three pieces of advice.

journey more exciting. Don't feel you have to stick to an itinerary too rigidly."



In London with her Cosmopolitan prize

"Be present in the moment, and enjoy the travel experience for what it is, not just for the Facebook statuses, Twitter posts, or Instagram photos," she said. Secondly she says it's worthwhile to take a bit of time, and shop around, when it comes to booking. "Don't assume that websites such as Expedia are giving you the best deal on airfares or hotel rooms. Use them to get a general idea of the prices available, but book at the source if you can — I've always found it better to go directly with an airline, for example, than through a third party site."

Thirdly, Katie suggests that travellers should always be ready to leave their comfort zone.

"Say 'yes' to everything — within reason, of course! Trying that strange food or stopping at an unexpected location will only make the

KATIE MOVED TO New York last year to be closer to her fiancé, although the USA is a country with which she was already very familiar. She spent her third varsity year abroad at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, where she studied Political Science as the St Andrews Society's Robert Lincoln McNeil Scholar.

She added: "New York really is the city that never sleeps. It's such an interesting place to live because of the endless supply of different places to see, people to meet, foods to eat; I don't think it would be possible to ever get bored here."

Cuba, Canada and the Middle East are on Katie's "wishlist" of places to visit in the future — admitting that for now her future plans are simply to "continue to write and continue to see more of the world!"

Nevertheless, the 27-year-old from Point admits that there is no place like home, and she has blogged extensively about the Hebrides.

"The beaches on the west coast of Harris, like Luskentyre and Seilebost, are my favourite places in the world," she said. "No matter the weather, the views there take my breath away every single time. I'm yet to find a beach elsewhere in the world as beautiful as the ones in Harris.

"St Kilda is unbelievable, the kind of place that has to be seen to be believed, and I'd encourage everyone to go there if they haven't done so already. I went there with Sea Harris for the first time last year, and I'd go again in a heartbeat."



At the Grand Canyon