

An unfamiliar shore

The coastline of Scotland is more extensive than most people realise. Now the subject of a new book by **Joe Cornish**, he tells *OP* Editor Keith Wilson how he photographed a landscape that was virtually unknown to him



SEA BRITAIN

Previous page Fingal's Cave, Staffa. 'On first glance Fingal's Cave seemed as bleak as a coalmine. As my eyes adjusted to the darkness, amazing detail emerged from the gloom, but exposing it correctly and evenly in this wideangle view still proved quite a challenge'

Ebony 45SU with Schneider Super-Angulon XL 72mm f/5.6 lens, Velvia 100F, Lee ND 0.3 graduated filter on its side from left

Opposite Bay of Laig, Eigg. 'As soon as I saw Rum's mountainous profile I was hooked.

Finding fascinating foreground material to complement this great backdrop at the Bay of Laig was not difficult, though keeping the theme simple and clear sometimes was' *Ebony 45SU with Rodenstock Grandagon-N 90mm f/5.6 lens, Velvia 50, Lee ND 0.3 graduated filter*

Right Frozen maritime heath, Upper Loch Torridon. 'I was struck by the idea that this frozen pool was a blue contour map. It was extremely tricky to manoeuvre around it without disturbing the ice or frosted grasses, but when I finally positioned the tripod everything seemed to fit'

Ebony 45SU with Nikkor-W 150mm f/5.6 lens, Velvia 50, no filters

A CONSTANT SOURCE of indignation among many Scots is how few English have visited their beautiful land. Apart from company conferences in Glasgow, rugby internationals in Edinburgh and evening elopements to Gretna, how many Sassenachs actually bother to take a holiday in the Scottish Highlands and Islands? Instead most people turn their backs on Scotland and head south on a jammed motorway to one of the Channel ports.

Yet, if it's open space with unspoilt scenery and beautiful sandy beaches you seek, then there is no better place in Europe. The proof is in the photographs of Joe Cornish. This month sees the publication of his latest book, *Scotland's Coast*, a sumptuous

remember is that there were lots of stones to throw into the water!' he chuckles. 'I didn't use a camera till I was 19 and I didn't start photographing Scotland's coast until the late 1990s, my first serious pictures being of Skye. But I never looked at Scotland's coast as an entity until just two years ago.'

That was when he was commissioned by Aurum, publisher of his acclaimed 2002 book, *First Light*, to produce all the pictures for this latest project on behalf of the National Trust for Scotland. With 6,214 miles of shoreline and 787 islands, Scotland has, in Joe's own words, 'a coastline that would suit a small continent'. More than that, it is a coastline that breeds superlatives.

the islands are half the coastline but I couldn't visit all of them so I chose those places that are historically and geographically important. I wanted to get a balance that was a fair and representative selection of the breadth and length of the coast.'

Whatever the weather

Joe regarded National Trust protected areas such as St Kilda, Iona, Upper Loch Torridon, parts of Mull and the fabled island of Staffa as mandatory. While getting to these places was one thing, coming away with a satisfactory image within his deadline was quite another.

'Almost all of it (the locations) was new to me, except Skye, so it really was a journey of discovery.

'When great light occurred I worked my socks off. When it did not I kept my eyes and mind open, and tackled those subjects that still spoke to me in the quiet voice of soft light'

record of Caledonia's under appreciated shore. Of course, you would expect a book of Joe Cornish landscapes to excite and seduce, but incredibly, like so many of his fellow Englishmen, Joe was a virtual stranger to Scotland's shores before he began the project that led to this book.

'As a child we had a couple of holidays in Scotland when I was 10 or 11, and what I most

'You don't have to be a genius to work out that where there are mountains you are going to have stunning scenery,' he says, 'and Scotland has more mountains on its coast than any other British country.' True enough, so how did he decide what to include and what to leave out?

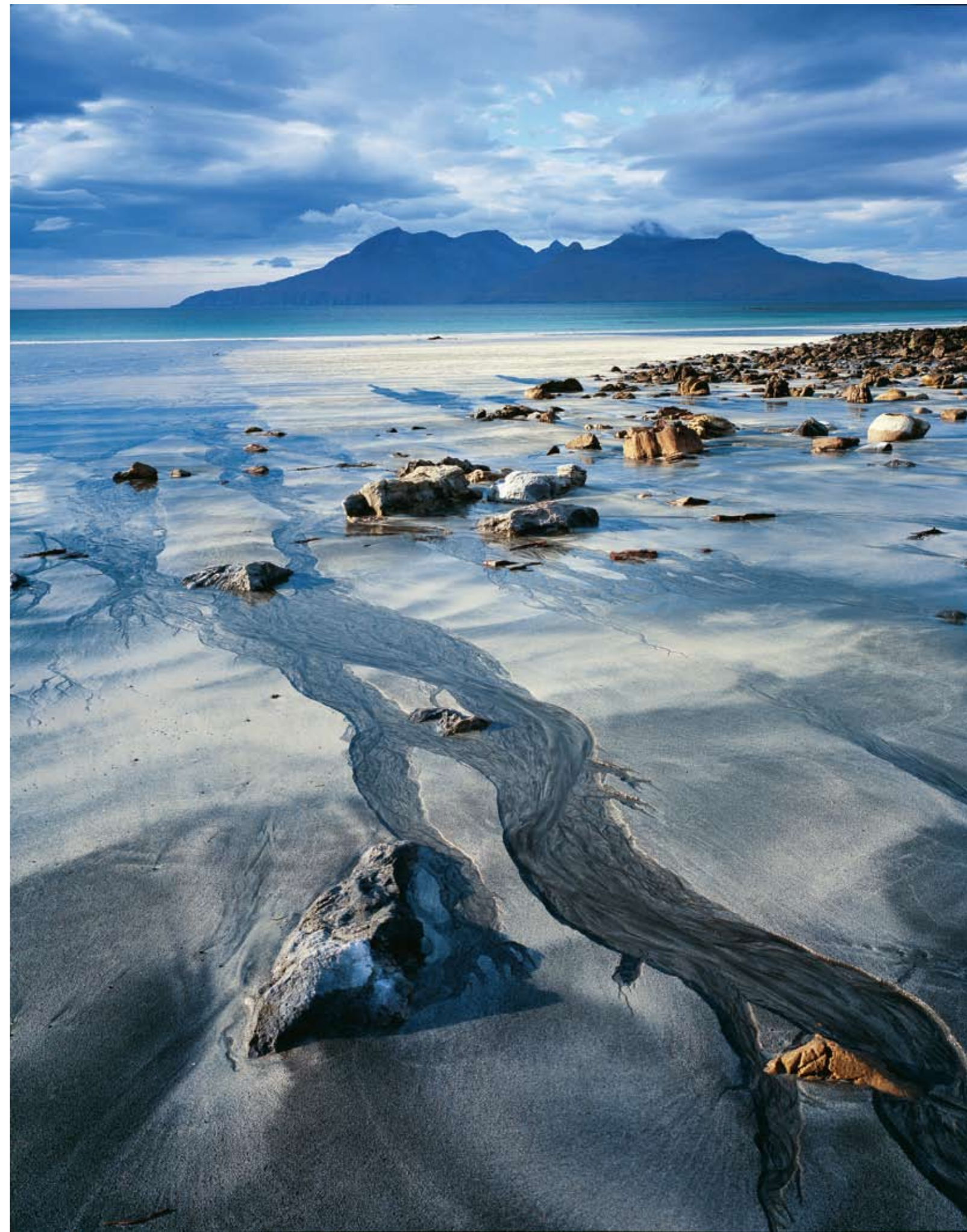
'That was the single, biggest logistical question,' he replies. 'If you look at a map of Scotland,

I started at Shetland and worked down through the Northern Isles during that amazing summer of 2003. It was very dry.' So far so good, but Joe decided not to resume until January 2004.

'Well, 2004 was a terrible year in Scotland!' he exclaims. 'Most of the pictures were shot in very trying and hard conditions, but I like to think that it doesn't show in the book. So many places I went to I thought, "Wow! This is amazing, but I can't see anything because it's raining!"'

But, I ask, with a tight deadline and such an ambitious task did not the changeable weather conditions prove to be more of a hindrance than a help?

'I would like to think it was a help,' he replies and to underline the importance of this point he proceeds to quote two paragraphs from the book's introduction to more than substantiate his answer. He reads: "Scotland's notorious weather made completing the project to deadline a special challenge. While light of transcendent revelation offers occasional photographic heaven here, lengthy spells of gloomy



SEA BRITAIN

Right Passing cloud, Traigh Eais, Barra. 'The sun had already disappeared earlier on this afternoon, but just when I thought the moment had passed this intriguing cloud started forming over the sea. As it moved inland it briefly seemed to echo the forms on the beach, creating something from almost nothing' *Ebony 45SU with Rodenstock Grandagon-N 90mm f/5.6 lens, Velvia 100F, Heliopan polariser and Lee ND 0.45 graduated filters*



cloud, wind and rain are far more common. In the time allotted it was inconceivable I could photograph all my chosen subjects in perfect light. I would have to work differently.

"One way was to acknowledge that the 'theatre of light' was not the only valid language for a landscape photographer. When great light occurred, I worked my socks off. When it did not I kept my eyes and mind open, and tackled those subjects that still

spoke to me in the quiet voice of soft light."

As a result *Scotland's Coast* is more than a selection of pictures of a remarkable array of scenery, it also reveals an incredible breadth of weather and light, a vast range of different atmospheres. Joe also believes that working with the 5x4in format helped him to overcome the initial feeling of setback when the elements were seemingly against him. 'Using 5x4 was a good discipline because it

meant I couldn't allow myself to be distracted by things that moved. Instead, I concentrated on shells, rocks, details, I avoided people and signs of human interference, so I engaged more by focusing entirely on the natural scenery.'

Favourite places

The further Joe immersed himself in the project, he says, the more appreciative he became of the sheer variety of coastal scenery that Scotland has to offer. He enthuses about the 'absolutely extraordinary geology' of the Outer Hebrides, the 'amazing sandstone boulders' of Rackwick Bay in the Orkneys and the 'pure white sandy beach' of Traigh Eais in Barra, as examples of locations that 'bore into your memory'. But when I ask him to nominate a favourite part of the coast he refers to a teasing passage of text from the book:

"I am often asked to name my favourite destinations for photography anywhere in the world. Allowing for my less than comprehensive knowledge of the earth's landscapes, I can say that, for me, at least three or four of those places will be found between the covers of this book. And does one stand out among them? That is for me to know and for you to enjoy finding out!"

Faced with such riddles, I make my own suggestion, Fingal's Cave, on the tiny Hebridean island of Staffa. Joe duly responds and makes a wonderful case for this isolated and legendary location.

'It is really unique,' he says. 'There are plenty of basalt columns in Scotland and Northern Ireland, but there is something about Staffa. It's got this very,

Opposite Thrift and granite islands, Fidden, Mull. 'Fidden overlooks the southern end of the Sound of Iona, and it was from here that my companions and I began our kayaking trip around that famous island. But Fidden's superb granite shoreline and sandy beach make it a photographic destination in its own right' *Ebony 45SU with Nikkor-W 210mm f/5.6 lens, Velvia 50, Lee 81B warm-up and Lee ND 0.6 graduated filters*

Equipment details

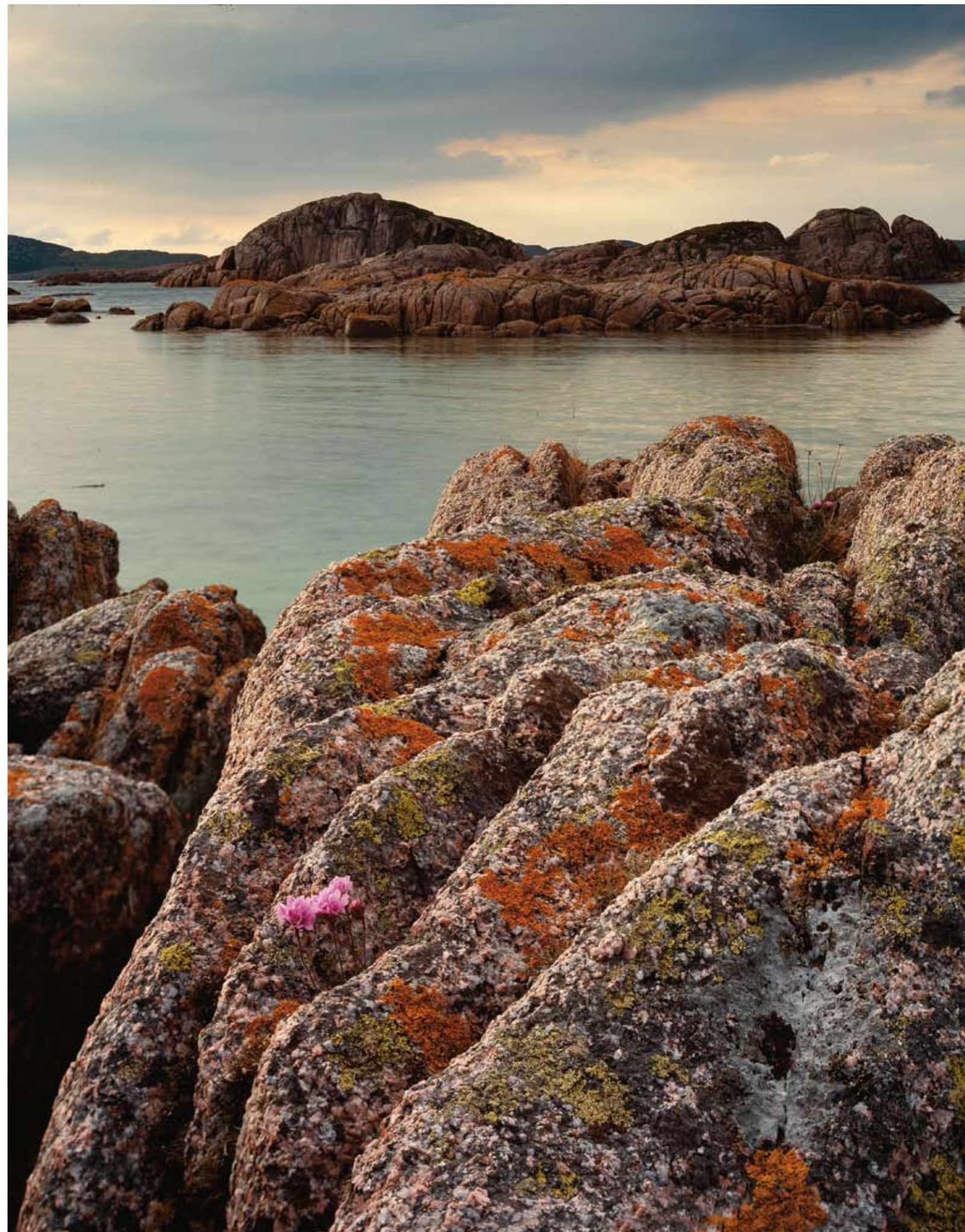
Almost all of the photographs from *Scotland's Coast* were made with an *Ebony 45SU*, a handmade 5x4in non-folding wooden field camera with interchangeable bellows. Joe used a variety of lenses, mostly a *Rodenstock Grandagon-N 90mm f/4.5*, as well as a *Nikkor-W 150mm f/5.6*, *Schneider Super-Angulon XL 72mm f/5.6*, *Rodenstock Sironar 180mm f/5.6*, *Nikkor-W 210mm f/5.6*, *Rodenstock Apo-Ronar 240mm f/9*, *Fujinon-T*

300mm f/8, *Nikkor-T 360mm f/8* and a *Nikkor-T 500mm f/11*.

His film stock throughout was *Fujichrome Velvia 50* and *Velvia 100F* with *Lee* system filters for achieving colour and exposure balance in-camera. Lightmetering was done manually using a *Pentax* digital spotmeter. Three tripods were used: *Manfrotto 055*, *Gitzo* carbon fibre *Mountaineer*, and a *Benbo 1*, equipped with *Manfrotto 405* or *410*

heads. All this equipment was carried in a *Loweepro Pro-Trekker* backpack.

On the film or digital debate Joe has this to say: 'I get asked all the time whether I am "shooting on digital yet?" as if it is inevitable sooner or later. I do not see it that way. So long as I get the results I want with film there seems no reason to change. I believe the future of photography will be a creative, peaceful co-existence between film and digital.'



SEA BRITAIN

Right Frosted seaweed, Ob Mheallaigh, Torrionon 'Personally, I associate the seaside with mild or warm weather, so the sight of frost transforming the familiar elements of the coastal environment had great novelty value for me. However, novelty alone is not a good reason to take a picture; I still had to make a visually convincing, technically correct study'

Ebony 45SU with Rodenstock Apo-Ronar 240mm f/9 lens, Velvia 100F, no filters



very fine grain of basalt that's produced some exceptional formations, it's like architecture with these astonishingly perfect hexagonal columns.'

Joe's story of photographing Fingal's Cave is a prime example of the effort required in the face of the fickle and frustrating weather. With a small group of friends he tried to paddle there by kayak from Mull in two days. 'We were in a Force 4 or Force 5 (wind), at the limits of safe paddling, and paddled for 15 miles along the Mull coast, then it was a four mile reach to Staffa,' Joe remembers. 'We took two days getting there, had two or three hours on Staffa and I didn't take a picture it was raining so hard. Sure enough, the following day it was perfect!'

He eventually returned on a tourist launch, arranging to be dropped alone on the island. 'You need bright, bright sunlight to get any detail from the basalt. It's a very difficult subject and I spent one and a half hours there to take just two photographs.'

Coastal eyesores

But even in the remotest locations human intrusion revealed itself in the least expected of ways. Several times Joe found an otherwise pristine and deserted stretch of shore spoilt by the sight of marine waste and detritus hugging the tideline. Describing these sights, the usually upbeat demeanour of Joe Cornish gives way to anger.

'It really is shocking,' he declares. 'It leaves you with a sense of outrage and indignation and a desire to change it, but not knowing what to do. Marine litter, and flotsam are a terrible eyesore.'

Unfortunately the source of this waste is almost impossible to police – illegal dumping far out to sea from container vessels, cruise ships and fishing boats. 'Most of it lasts far too long and because water is so dense it doesn't sink but ends up washed up on the high tide line,' says Joe. 'Even fridges! It's routine with cruise ships to chuck old fridges overboard, everything gets chucked overboard. I found fridges washed up in places I never expected.'

None of these eyesores can be seen in *Scotland's Coast* but before he lets his anger recede like an ebbing tide, Joe expresses a desire to begin a project to raise the profile of this issue. 'I am thinking along the lines of doing a hard hitting exhibition showing pictures of the same place side by side, the pristine view and the spoilt. Pictures of inspiration and indignation.'

For a landscape photographer who has made his name by representing the visually appealing side of our environment such a departure would raise more than a few eyebrows among his followers. But who among them would argue that raising awareness of the threat to such a spectacular and precious landscape is not overdue? ❖

Opposite Winter afternoon, dunes, Balnakiel.

'Something about the loveliness and intense colour of winter by the sea makes it very special. Balnakiel is one of the remotest beaches in Scotland too, and the light on this afternoon did it justice'

Ebony 45SU with Rodenstock Grandagon-N 90mm f/5.6 lens, Velvia 50, Lee ND 0.45 graduated filter

Save £5 on Scotland's Coast

Scotland's Coast, a photographer's journey, by Joe Cornish is published in hardback by Aurum Press. The normal retail price is £25 but *OP* readers can order the book for just £20, including p&p, by telephone. Just ring 01903 828503 and quote reference number AUR171. Please have your credit card details ready when you call.

