

Life lessons from a SMALL ISLAND

WHEN KATE OLDFIELD TOOK A SABBATICAL FROM THE CITY, SHE BROUGHT HOME MORE THAN A LOVE OF FRESH AIR AND NEW-FOUND APPRECIATION OF MODERN TECHNOLOGY

My husband, Andrew, and I don't belong to the city. We are, however, very happy here. We live in the modern house we've built from scratch in Battersea, South London, right by our son's brilliant school. We have lots of friends, there are endless opportunities for me as a freelance writer and my husband runs a successful building-design firm. But... Our belief in our city selves is always brought up short by that little word with disproportionate importance.

The source of this conflict is the fact that we were both brought up as far away from a pulsating metropolis as you can imagine. Andrew grew up in the Hebrides, on an island nine-miles long. I was raised on a remote sheep farm in North Yorkshire. The slight tingling sensation that we should, one day, go back to our roots became a full-blown itch once we had kids. It seemed only fair to give them a taste of what we had been gifted in our own childhoods.

It's so easy to feel guilty; many mothers worry about bringing up their children in a city. It's a wasted emotion – if we are doing all we can, surely it's

impractical to expect more. That's easy to say, of course. We have chosen the city as our environment, but still we want to know that when our children grow up they'll be comfortable with the many choices life has to offer to them.

So, when we were offered the chance to work through the spring on Colonsay, the remote island where Andrew grew up, we said yes. Immediately. And then the enormity of the plan hit us. Our eldest, Keir (aged nine), would have to be taken out of school, removed from his friends. We would have to turn down lucrative book and building contracts. I would also have more shallow deprivations to negotiate. I am a modern-communication junkie. I love my laptop and my iPhone, and, although you can get broadband at the island's hotel and there is a mobile-phone mast, neither is guaranteed to work. Furthermore, I'm a party girl. The total population of Colonsay hovers around 100, including grannies and babies. The opportunities for 'swanning about' are zero.

More importantly, we could only hope that the Hebridean weather (rain, cold, power cuts, lack of ferries in the storms)

and living in close proximity without respite for two months wouldn't drive us all to distraction, despair, divorce or all three.

Despite the potential for disaster, we were beside ourselves with excitement. We would not be 'tourists', but live and work as temporary islanders. Andrew and his team would renovate the Colonsay hotel and 14 holiday cottages. I would do the photography for their new website. Keir would go to the island school (swelling the numbers to 10). Our baby, Molly, and toddler, Rafe, would learn to go beyond the front door without fear of kidnap or a road accident. But, to make this more than a game, we wanted to ensure we would all feel better, rather than worse, for the experience when we returned. Of course, we expected it to change us, but we didn't realise how profoundly we would be transformed by taking a sabbatical from modern living. Here



FROM TOP: The cottage in Colonsay, where the family stayed; Kate by a loch; her son, Keir, on a local beach



are some of the life lessons I brought back from spending two months in the middle of nowhere...

Being busy doesn't mean you get more done

In the city, we rely on the proximity of supplies and slick technology to support our frantic lives. On Colonsay, we were brought up short. When the ferry was cancelled one day, it meant no deliveries, for the fridge or the business, for three days. There was a 12-hour power cut, during which neither laptop nor cooker worked. My work package to Edinburgh missed the boat and therefore its deadline. Whereas, normally, we could counteract these hiccups by shouting, running faster or wheedling for help, these tactics have no purchase on a tiny island. The roads are too narrow for speed. You are 25 miles from the mainland. There is nobody around, or interested, to hear your frustration.

We began to plan ahead – well ahead. Consequently, we found we had more time, which was a shock. But it was even more of a surprise to discover that, in our 'non-busy' moments, we were able to do the little things that make a difference. I wrote letters. Our son kept a blog. My husband went for walks; he ate and slept well (all unusual). Our two-year-old broke his own record for non-stop jumping on the trampoline.

When we returned to London, I took one look at the endless, guilt-inducing lists of chores on my pin board and tore it up.

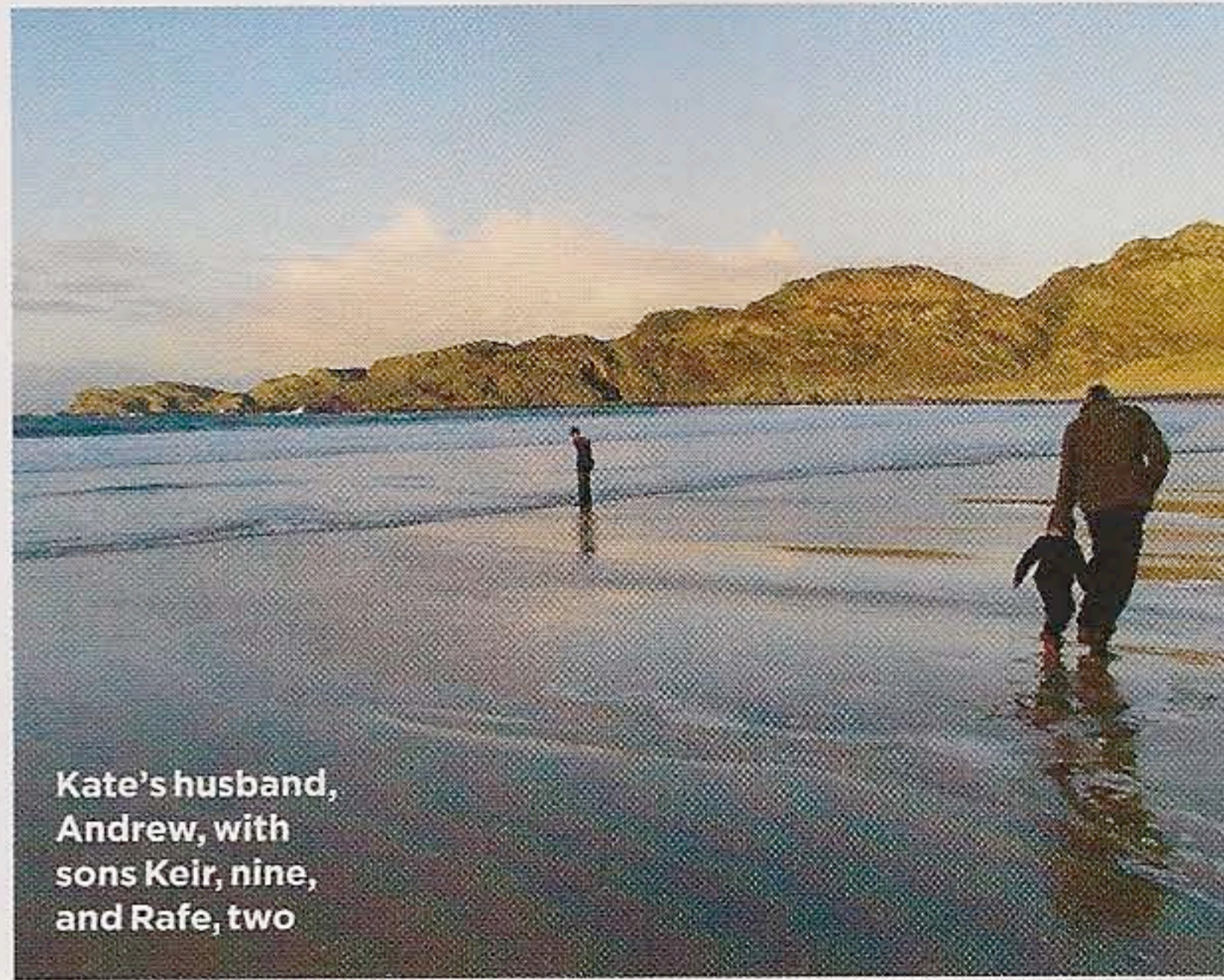
Conversation is far better than chat

As the weeks passed on Colonsay, our household became quieter, more introspective. Our son would arrive home from school and spend hours silently

playing, instead of pestering me about the Wii.

At supper, he and his little brother and baby sister would eat in calm contemplation. My husband and I ceased the endless phone bulletins.

Rarely, we began to realise, did they add anything but stress; that 'Where are you?' and 'What are you doing now?' are not genuine



Kate's husband, Andrew, with sons Keir, nine, and Rafe, two

'Looking down over a secret loch and out to sea, you get more perspective'

questions. Habits broken, we are now not afraid to sit together without volunteering information to plug the gap. We have conversations because we want to talk about something, not because we're afraid of the silence. In the age of Twitter, this is true solace.

The importance of solitude

It was wonderful to live there. We became healthier, more tanned, fitter, less stressed. This did not, however, inure us to family fracas. What place, however idyllic, can? Silence and solitude create endless opportunities for healing reflection. A remote island has them in spades. If I was annoyed, I could stomp up a hill; sulk across miles of empty white beaches; linger petulantly at the end of a rocky headland. Distancing myself from my problems did not mean I was hiding from them, rather the opposite. When you are up a hill, looking down over a secret loch, you get perspective on more than the scenery.

This is a deliciously quick fix. Essential in the city, where we are rarely not in a crowd. Try it. When public transport lets you down; when your friends are being unfriendly; when the kids' after-school commitments threaten to turn the whole house into a flaming ball of stress; when the credit crunch nibbles huge holes in your finances... get some space – a park, a Ferris wheel, a tall building with a good view (if island life forces anything out of you it's how to make do with what you have got!). And always go alone. Quite often, by the time you get there, your problem will have shrunk back to proportion.

Move outside your peers to find out who you really are

Coming back to the city wasn't easy. It was no shock that we all missed the beauty of the island, although the smaller irritations did surprise us: the children moaned at having to wear shoes again, not wellies; we missed our daily visit to the local shop, to catch up on community gossip. But we felt more comfortable within our own skins. We know that often our

worth lies in the differences. Keir is now reassured that he isn't 'terrible at maths' and he may not have a PSP, but he can recognise a buzzard at 20 paces. I now read a novel, rather than linger on Facebook – and I feel closer to my younger self for doing so. My husband is no longer ashamed of being a builder, rather than a banker; he is proud of what he and his team have achieved for his childhood home.

Immediate gratification doesn't = satisfaction

We are still learning what the experience meant to us. I expect that we will continue to do so. But if we have already realised anything, it is that some things are better for having to be worked at, considered, set aside, picked up and contemplated again. In the time it takes to have proper conversations, periods of true reflection and long sessions of family time without screens, I could have written two articles, driven from pillar to post in the pursuit of endless after-school activities, spent several hours shopping, gossiped at the school gate and watched some bad television. But would I have added to the family's spiritual wealth?

After the first few evangelising weeks, we sank bank into the city. It is difficult to follow our new island-inspired design for life all the time, but we refuse to be submerged. We do, when we remember, turn off the machines before 8pm and sit and live slowly for a while. Sometimes it is hard. A lot of the time it's impossible. But that's okay.

Last night, I stood out on the scratch of lawn that we call our garden. There was no wind and the planes seemed to have gone elsewhere for a moment. I closed my eyes. I felt the grass beneath my toes and breathed deeply. It was only then that I heard the birdsong, just as bright and insistent as it would be on Colonsay. ■

