

Get Back Great Britain

A rock, skip and a jump away

A monthly series following **Rob Cowen** and **Leo Critchley** as they reconnect with the simpler things in lifePart 1
Skimming stones

We should all take the time to skim stones. In an age of complex demands and sophisticated pleasures, too few of us allow ourselves to slow down for a moment and reconnect with nature.

All you need is a relatively calm stretch of shore and a smooth, flattish, roundish stone measuring anything from 5cm to 10cm in diameter and about half a centimetre thick. Hold it between the thumb and forefinger of your stronger hand and take a moment to trace the proposed trajectory through the air.

Imagine you are going to post the stone through a letterbox three metres offshore, angling your hand so the front of the stone is pointing slightly upwards. Keep the throwing elbow close to the body and swing the stone from hip height, whipping the hand around and driving the skimmer in as straight a line as possible.

This basic technique gives the stone the energy to keep going, but the trick is in the spin, ensuring the stone remains stable in flight after each impact and achieves the maximum number of skips.

You may need a few goes to pick up the knack, but the satisfactions are well worth it: the first successful bounce, the first leaping of an incoming wave, the first series of five, now 10, now 15 skips, will draw whoops of joy from somewhere deep inside the soul.

This power to delight first hit us in the Highlands of Scotland. We set out on foot to negotiate the Knoydart Peninsula's 200 sq km of wilderness and spent a day fighting our way through patches of scratchy heather and sharp gorse along rough, stony tracks no wider than a boot.

By mid-afternoon, we knew we wouldn't make it to the hamlet of Inverie, the only nod to civilisation on the peninsula and our proposed destination. Even worse, it was too late to turn back. There was only one option: to camp where we stood, on the only bit of flat ground around, next to a deserted sandy bay.

A mix of excitement and nervousness rose in our stomachs at the thought of sleeping somewhere so isolated and far from help. Perhaps seeking some reassurance, we began idly throwing the odd pebble, but this quickly turned to something neither of us had done for a long time: skimming stones. Suddenly it didn't seem such an unfamiliar world. With the tang of salt heavy on our tongues and dirt under our nails, we started to see the terrain through different eyes.



Line of sight: Barisdale Bay on the Knoydart Peninsula in the Scottish Highlands ROB COWEN

Top spots to skim stones

Holy Island, Lindisfarne, Northumberland
A tidal island cut off twice a day, this magical coastline is great for incidental discoveries while you skim. Grey seals nose out of the water and the rock pools are plentiful and filled with exotic flora and fauna.

Trevone, North Cornwall
Like much of North Cornwall, Trevone has both rocky areas sporting many

good skimmers and a sandy beach. When the wind is right the sea can be almost still, although watch out when there's a north-westerly wind funnelling waves into the bay.

Easdale Island, Argyll and Bute, Western Scotland
This island is the site of the World Stone Skimming Championships every September. As we found out, like many coastal

areas around the west coast of Scotland, it features superb quality slate, perfect for skimming.

Beer, South-east Devon
Sheltered from the winds by picturesque cliffs, skimming stones in this cove is like trying your arm in a natural amphitheatre. A still sea and plenty of skimmer-rich shingle present themselves on this stretch of Jurassic coast.

The following morning broke brightly with bird-song. A beach that we had initially been "trapped" on now displayed a very different aspect. By passing time in this place we had shared in some of its nature. It had left its mark on us, like ripples from our stones merging into oncoming waves. We both took a good skimmer with us as we continued to Inverie, not so much a memento as a promise to ourselves to experience this again as soon as the opportunity presented itself.

Skimming stones around the Knoydart Peninsula's breathtaking coast required us to stare into rock-pools teeming with life, from dancing blooms of sea anemones to olive-green shore crabs. It also made us realise that we all too often visit the great outdoors in the wrong state of mind. We set targets, marching across the landscape from A to B before jumping in the car and returning home.

To spend time doing something as simple as skimming stones leads us to become more absorbed in the moment and the place. Whether in the rugged beauty of the Highlands or on the sandy shores of Sussex, a vital connection is restored.

Rob Cowen and Leo Critchley's book describing their journeys around Britain will be published in spring 2012 by Hodder. For more information, follow them on their blog at getbackuk.com

Travel challenge Mexico's Pacific coast

Each week we invite three competing companies to give us their best deal for a specific holiday. Today: a seven-night stay on Mexico's Pacific coast. Prices are for two people travelling together, departing from Heathrow in the middle of next month.

Hayes & Jarvis
£2,598: Puerto Vallarta
Includes flights to Puerto Vallarta via Mexico City departing 13 May, transfers and all-inclusive accommodation at the four-star Barcelo Puerto Vallarta hotel.

"Puerto Vallarta is known for its attractive scenery, sports facilities and ecotours, including whale watching,"

says Katie Parsons, of Hayes & Jarvis. "This four-star resort offers a host of all-inclusive activities, restaurants and bars." (0871 664 0246; hayesandjarvis.com)

Trailfinders

£2,778: Huatulco
Includes indirect flights to Oaxaca departing 18 May, with onward flight/road transfers to Huatulco and accommodation at the four-star Dreams Huatulco. "This hotel has a great beachfront location and is perfect for families and couples alike," says Nikki Davies, of Trailfinders. "Plus, as it's all-inclusive, you won't have to reach for your wallet while you're there." (0845 050 5871; trailfinders.com)



Puerto Vallarta offers sports and ecotours PATRICK FRILET/REX

Steppes Travel

£5,490: Baja California Sur
Includes flights from Heathrow via Houston to San

José del Cabo departing 14 May, plus transfers and accommodation with breakfast at the Los Colibris boutique hotel, some meals and a range of sports activities.

"The hotel has just four rooms, all with stunning views over a white sandy beach," says James Armitage, at Steppes Travel.

"This is a great off-the-beaten-track adventure visiting both the Sea of Cortez and the coastlines of Baja California, ideal for the active traveller looking to experience Baja's bio-diversity; including hiking, sea kayaking, surfing, local town tours and snorkelling, which are all included in this deal." (01285 885333; steppes-travel.co.uk)

Travel Agenda

TODAY A trio of new hotels opens: the **Istanbul Edition** courtesy of Ian Schrager and Marriott (editionhotels.com); the much-delayed **St John Hotel and restaurant** in the West End of **London** (stjohnhotellondon.com); and **The Residence in Zanzibar** (theresidence.com).

THIS WEEK Cotswold Outdoor stores are offering free navigation courses with Ordnance Survey, which will teach compass skills and map reading and offer discounts on maps. Running until June, the first course takes place on Tuesday in **Carmarthen** (cotswoldoutdoor.com).



IN THE DIARY You need not be a man or travel to St Moritz to have a go at the Cresta Run. The Snow Centre in **Hemel Hempstead** is offering its own version for Easter, starting next

Saturday, 9 April. There are inflatable skeletons for adults and mini-sledges and inflatable rings for children to navigate the 100m run complete with real snow (thesnowcentre.com).