



## The Perfect Place to Write

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I FOUND THE PERFECT writing place at age seven, during the long summer holiday. I grew up in a crowded, bustling neighbourhood in South London, where the streets pulsed with traffic, and anonymity was guaranteed. People rarely met my eye when I rode my bike down Greenwich High Street to school. Everything changed when my father booked a family holiday on St Mary's, in the Isles of Scilly, for my mother, my older sister and me. The excitement of our bumpy three-hour sea crossing made me realise how distant the islands were from the mainland, separated by miles of undulating green ocean.

When the *Scillonian* docked in Hugh Town's harbour, fishing boats lay scattered across the sandy bay, a lifeboat house perched high on a promontory, while people strolled along the quay at a leisurely pace. That first holiday provided my first taste of unfettered freedom. My sister and I flew kites on Porthcressa beach, scrambled up the coastal path, or took boat rides to the off-islands. People stopped to say hello, and the strain of city life disappeared from my parents' faces.

I carry the memory of the islands' peace in my DNA. Each year I collect a couple of shells and pieces of weathered basalt from the beaches and keep them in a bowl on my desk, so the islands are always at my fingertips when I'm writing. The Scillies are the place my imagination retreats to when I'm grappling with a plot, or a new set of characters. The uncluttered beauty of the landscape triggers my creativity, which could explain why I return there every year.



My perfect writing place is the small cottage I always hire, for a solitary two-week writing retreat, on the island of St Mary's. It stands directly above Porthloo beach, and my view from the kitchen table extends for miles. The house contains no TV or wifi, so there are no distractions. If my imagination needs a break all I have to do is lift my head and watch lobster boats leaving Hugh Town harbour, with the black outlined islands of Samson, Treco and Bryher scattered across the Atlantic, like stepping stones. I take long walks over Halangy Down, to look at the remains of a Neolithic village. The weathered stones always remind me that people have thrived in Scilly for thousands of years, despite their remoteness and tough living conditions.

My favourite time to visit the islands is mid-winter, when they're only reachable by plane, because the Atlantic is too dangerous for the ferry to navigate. I once got stuck on St Mary's for an extra five days, due to bad weather, which was my idea of heaven.

I know that every writer has a different concept of ideal writing conditions, but I'm glad to have found mine. I've written five books set on the islands already, but I feel certain there will be more.