



SHAITH/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Above: Neist Point (p310). Right: Peat blocks, Blackhouse at Arnol (p325)

NORTHERN HIGHLANDS & ISLANDS

A WILD, WINDSWEPT BEAUTY

Jagged mountain peaks, dune-fringed beaches and brooding castle ruins reveal an untamed side to Scotland.

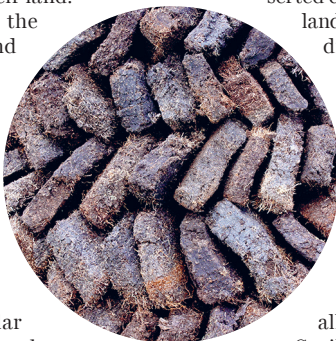
It all began with the Highland Clearances. In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, rich landowners concluded that sheep could be more profitable than agriculture, so they evicted the tens of thousands of farmers who lived on their land.

In the blink of an eye, the northern Highlands and islands became some of Europe's least populated places. But while the wild empty spaces remain, the number of tourists continues to rise, drawn to the area's melancholic mountains, stormy seas and languid lochs.

By far the most popular route around Scotland's northern Highlands is the coast-hugging NC500, a 500-mile loop that starts and ends in Inverness. It's great for seeing the seaside highlights, from its rugged and rowdy

peaks to its perfectly manicured golf courses, but those seeking true wilderness should venture further inland to the empty landscapes where the farmers once lived, now evidenced only by the crumbling walls of deserted crofts. When it comes to is-

lands, Skye is by far the biggest draw, with its craggy coastlines, ethereally green hills and top-notch whisky distilleries giving it a Scotland-in-miniature feel. But again, those looking for island adventures with fewer camper vans for company should explore the remote Outer Hebrides: all prehistoric stone circles, Caribbean-like beaches and seabird-studded cliffs. Wherever your journey takes you, end each day with a warming whisky in front of a crackling pub fire.



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THE MAIN AREAS

PORTREE

Skye's seaside capital. **p304**

ULLAPPOOL

Hiking and Highland culture. **p314**

STORNOWAY

Gateway to the Hebrides. **p322**

DURNESS

Mountains and coastline. **p330**

WICK

Whisky and golf. **p336**

Find Your Way

*Atlantic
Ocean*

The northern Highlands spread north and west from Inverness, comprising the uppermost quarter of mainland Scotland, while the islands sit off the west coast. We've picked the places that embody this region's unique character.

0 25 km
0 15 miles

Stornoway, p322

Thousands of years of Hebridean history are within easy reach of the Lewis capital, while an hour's drive south reveals the pristine beaches of South Harris.

Ullapool, p314

An ideal hiking base for the northwest and the largest settlement for miles around, Ullapool is also the port for ferries to Lewis and Harris.

Portree, p304

A pretty harbour town with good hotels, restaurants and shops, Skye's capital is a great base for exploring the island – particularly the Trotternish Peninsula.

Durness, p330

It may be small, but there's no better base for exploring the dramatic peaks, sandy shores and spectacular drives of Scotland's far northwest.

Wick, p336

Less famous but more interesting than the nearby John O'Groats, the whisky town of Wick is a great jumping-off point for castle-dotted coastlines and world-class golf.

**FERRY**

Travelling between the mainland Highlands and the distant islands is easiest by ferry, either as a foot passenger or with your car. There are also flights available to some of the islands, but you'll likely want to hire a car when you're there anyway.

**CAR**

By far the best way to explore the northern Highlands and islands, having your own four wheels allows you to explore further and wider, as well as to stop whenever you like to soak up the scenery.

**BUS**

The best option for those on a budget, buses connect the bigger towns such as Ullapool and Portree to Inverness. There's also a train line up the east coast to Wick. For smaller mainland or island destinations, you'll be relying on infrequent local buses.

Plan Your Time

The northern Highlands and islands is a large and spread-out region, requiring hours to traverse by car and ferry. Short on time? Instead of rushing, stick to one area and see it properly.



RICHARD KELLETT/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Benbecula (p328)



Seasonal Highlights

Late spring to early autumn is the best time to visit the northern Highlands and islands, though good weather is never guaranteed. Many attractions, restaurants and hotels close in the colder months.

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If You Only Do One Thing

- Spend one (very busy) day on Skye. Get up early to avoid the crowds on a two-hour hike up the **Quiraing** (p307), then drive down to Portree – via the sea cliff at **Kilt Rock** (p307) – for breakfast at **Café Arriba** (p304). Spend the rest of the morning exploring the lochside **Dunvegan Castle & Gardens** (p311) and the cliff-top **Neist Point Lighthouse** (p310), before skirting down the coast to **Talisker Distillery** (p309).
- Spend the afternoon swimming in the **Fairy Pools** (p311) before driving east (over the picture-perfect Sligachan Bridge and through Broadford) for a slap-up dinner at **Kinloch Lodge** (p309).

BOTTOM, FROM LEFT: 3232STUDIO/SHUTTERSTOCK ©, RICARDO02/GETTY IMAGES ©, BALPAPOMA/SHUTTERSTOCK ©



FEBRUARY

Winter calls for a glass of **Drambuie**, a whisky and honey liqueur invented at Skye's Broadford Hotel.



APRIL

Visit **Dunrobin Castle** as it opens for the season with extraordinary falconry displays in the garden.



MAY

Stay in Ullapool for its **May Book Festival** and nip up to Handa Island to see cute nesting puffins.

Three Days to Travel Around

● Short on time? Stick to the west coast for the best of the northern Highlands' landscapes. Start with a night in the cultural hub of **Ullapool** (p314), then spend your first day hiking **Stac Pollaidh** (p319) and visiting the **Summer Isles** (p319).

● Day two is all about the photogenic **Drumbeg Loop** (p334), with regular stops at its stunning beaches and waterfalls, before dinner at **Kylesku Hotel** (p335).

● Day three leads you up through some of Scotland's most jaw-dropping scenery – consider a half-day detour to either **Handa Island** (p335), **Sandwood Bay** (p333) or **Cape Wrath** (p331) – on the way up to **Durness** (p331).

A Week-Long Adventure

● Explore the Outer Hebrides from top to bottom in seven days. Start with a ferry to **Stornoway** (p322) and spend a few days exploring Lewis and Harris, from the prehistoric **Callanish Standing Stones** (p325) to the pristine white-sand beaches.

● Consider a day trip to the remote island of **St Kilda** (p328) before taking the ferry down to **North Uist** (p328). Spend two days travelling down through **Benbecula** (p328) to South Uist – don't miss the towering Our Lady of the Isles sculpture – before spending a last day wandering the beaches of **Barra** (p328). A ferry to Oban on the mainland ends an amazing week.



JULY

Celebrate traditional island music at the **Hebridean Celtic Festival** on Lewis and the **Fèis an Eilein** on Skye.



AUGUST

Scotland's hottest month is an ideal time to go hiking up **Stac Pollaidh**. Of course, it still might rain...



OCTOBER

Take a 20-minute boat trip through **Smoo Cave** before guide Fraser Eadie packs up for the winter.



NOVEMBER

Brave the chill to see **Lewis'** year-round attractions, including Callanish Standing Stones, Dun Carloway Broch and the Blackhouse at Arnol.

PORTREE

It may be a small town by mainland standards, but Portree is the undisputed cultural capital of Skye. What's more, this pretty harbourside settlement, with its colourful houses overlooking a sheltered bay, has something for travellers on every budget: from no-frills hostels to high-end hotels, crafty thrift markets to chic fashion boutiques, fish and chip shops to fancy seafood restaurants. It's also home to some of the island's most charming traditional pubs. In fact, the only thing Portree doesn't have is any major sights of its own – but that's no biggie, as it sits right at the base of the attraction-packed Trotternish Peninsula, with good access to the rest of the island. As such, it can get overrun with tourists in the summer, who swell the population far beyond its 2300 permanent residents – and yet it never loses its small-town charm. There's no better base for an Isle of Skye adventure.



TOP TIP

Portree is flat and compact enough to be explored on foot, though boots are best if venturing down to the harbour or up to the Lump. There are plenty of public car parks around town, and many hotels offer private parking. Bus services pick up and drop off in the central Somerled Square.

PORTREE



HIGHLIGHTS

1 Portree Harbour

SIGHTS

2 Somerled Square

3 The Lump

SLEEPING

4 Cullin Hills Hotel

EATING

5 Café Arriba

6 Dulse & Brose

7 Scurrybrec

8 Sea Breezes

9 The Chippy Portree

SHOPPING

10 Isle of Skye Soap Company

11 Skye Gathering Hall



Portree Harbour

Shopping, Shellfish & Seaside Walks

EXPLORING SKYE'S CAPITAL

Not many capitals are small enough to walk around in an afternoon, but this one is. Grab a takeaway lunch from the **Chippy** on Quay Brae, then eat it as you stroll past the row of pretty, pastel-shaded houses lining **Portree Harbour**. When you're finished, walk up to the **Skye Gathering Hall**, home to a popular little thrift market (closed on Mondays), then follow the unpaved footpath leading up to the **Lump**. It's a short but steep climb, but you'll be rewarded with panoramic views of the surrounding hills. Take the path down the opposite side of the hill to Bayfield Rd and follow it past the visitor centre and across the road to **Somerled Square**. This is the heart of the town, enclosed by charming little cafes and boutique shops; spend an hour or two indulging in some retail therapy at places such as the **Isle of Skye Soap Company**. From here, walk northeast to the **Cuillin Hills Hotel**, where signposts mark the start of the Scorrybreac Circuit. This pleasant and relatively gentle 45-minute coastal loop offers striking views back over Portree Bay. It also helps build an appetite before leading you back to the excellent, upscale **Scorrybreac** restaurant for a delicious dinner of Scottish food; book ahead as there are only 20 seats and it's packed every night. Finish the day in one of Portree's excellent pubs.

BEST RESTAURANTS IN PORTREE

Caf  Arriba

Climb the steep stairs to this laid-back cafe for a hearty Scottish breakfast or seafood-filled lunch. ** **

Isle of Skye Baking Company

Out of the way but worth the walk, this bakery-cafe (plus art gallery) specialises in filled breads. ** **

Sea Breezes

This place is all about seafood: opt for the platter with salmon, mussels and langoustines. **  **

Dulse & Brose

Try modern Scottish cuisine with an Asian twist, featuring fresh Skye seafood, venison and cheese. **   **



HIKING THE COAST

Has Scorrybreac given you a taste for seaside walks? Luckily, this region is full of them. Stroll down to the **Neist Point Lighthouse** (p310) on nearby Glendale, walk to **Sandwood Bay** (p333) near Durness or hike to **Castle Sinclair Gornigoe** (p337) from Wick.



GETTING AROUND

Portree is the transport hub of the island – you can get here without a car and get around without one too. Buses radiate out from here in

all directions: north up to Uig, west to Dunvegan and south to Broadford and the mainland. Looking to head east? You'll need a boat.



Beyond Portree

Discover walks, wildlife and whisky galore among some of the UK's most sublime island scenery.

For all its charms, Portree is not the reason people come to Skye. They come for the big landscapes: the sharp-toothed mountain peaks, the emerald-green river valleys and the crashing cliff-edge waterfalls. So strap on your hiking boots and get out there to explore it.

Climb up the land-slipped cliffs and jagged peaks of the Quiraing, hike out to the steep sea cliffs of Neist Point, skirt along the ridge of the Black Cuillin mountains and climb up beside the impossibly pretty Fairy Pools. No boots? No problem: Skye also has world-famous whisky, fine coral beaches and playful seals and seabirds all waiting to be discovered – and all within easy reach of Portree.



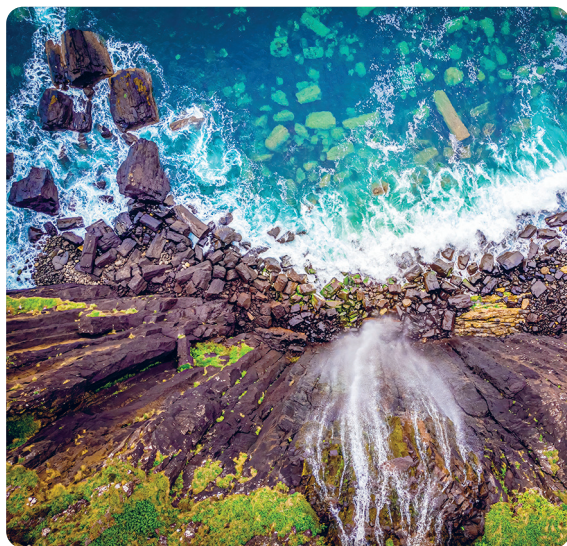
TOP TIP

Head north for challenging hikes, west and south for superb scenery, and across the Skye Bridge for castles and gardens.

The Quiraing



HELEN HORTON/SHUTTERSTOCK ©



Kilt Rock

From Sea to Skye

HIKING THE QUIRAING

Looming high above Skye's Trotternish Peninsula, the Quiraing is one of the island's most hauntingly attractive landscapes. The difficult-to-spell name comes from the Old Norse Kvi Rand (Round Fold), a small victory for Vikings who were otherwise thwarted during raids on this area. But we'll get to that.

Start early with a winding, 40-minute drive up from Portree to the Quiraing car park; the sooner you arrive, the better your chances of finding a parking space. From here, switch to two feet as you follow a well-trodden trail up into this unique landslip landscape. You are heading for the jagged rocks up ahead, known as the **Prison** because of the resemblance to a medieval fortress (at least from some angles). Beware slippery rocks as you cross the stream and climb the scree slope up to the pinnacle. Look across to the **Needle**, a 37m-high column of basalt rock that sticks out of the landscape like a sore thumb, then follow the cliff-hugging path as it winds down and back up to the **Table**. This grassy plateau was the place local farmers came to hide their cattle during frequent Viking



BEST SIGHTS ON TROTTERNISH

Old Man of Storr

This eye-catching, 50m-high shard of rock is a 45-minute hike from the main-road car park.

Kilt Rock

Stop to admire this high cliff face of vertical basalt columns (which look like pleats on a kilt).

Skye Museum of Island Life

Learn about traditional island crofting life at this preserved village of thatched cottages.

Fairy Glen

Explore a Hobbiton-esque landscape of impossibly green hillocks, enchantingly placid pools and castle-like rock formations.



SIGHT-SEEING

In this part of Scotland, sometimes the only way to see things is by boat. Take a rocky ride to visit the remote island of **St Kilda** (p328) and a ferry across to the wild peninsula of **Cape Wrath** (p331).



WHERE TO STAY ACROSS SKYE

Glenbrittle Campsite

Sleep beneath the stars with mountains on one side and a sandy beach below. £

Skye Basecamp

This mountaineer-run bunkhouse offers great views across the sea towards the Crowlin Islands. £

Portree Youth Hostel

A budget town-centre hostel with brightly coloured dorm rooms and bay-view outdoor seating. £



SKYE'S BEST SEAFOOD RESTAURANTS

Dunvegan Prawn & Mussel Bar

This unassuming snack van serves great seafood to go; try the langoustine tails with garlic butter. **£**

Elgol Bistro

Enjoy unfussy seafood dishes like hot-smoked salmon salad at this lovely out-of-the-way bistro. **££**

Claymore

A cosy place for good-quality pub seafood, from Cullen skink to haddock and chips. **££**

Loch Bay Restaurant

Renowned chef Michael Smith serves up fresh Skye seafood dishes with a subtle French twist. **£££**



ELGOL/GETTY IMAGES ©

Sea kayaking off Skye

raids. Take time to soak up the panoramic views of Trotternish and the nearby islands of Rona and Raasay before beginning your descent: a steep and usually muddy path leads back to the main car park.

Take to the Water

DISCOVERING THE SEAS AROUND SKYE

Basking idly on the rocks, their silver fur shimmering with seawater, the resident seals of Rona seem unconcerned by the boats gliding past. This is one of the largest grey seal colonies in Britain, and an all-but-guaranteed sighting for passengers on wildlife boat trips from Portree – though most will also be hoping to spot the fins of dolphins and minke whales, as well as swooping white-tailed sea eagles.

The staggering landscapes of Skye can make it tempting to keep your feet planted on terra firma, but those who head out to sea get to experience the island from a whole new perspective. As well as the Rona boat trips offered by the likes of **Seaflower Skye**, visitors can get closer to the water (and the wildlife) on a sea kayak; **Sea to Skye Xperience** offers one-day taster courses departing from Broadford. Prefer to



WHERE TO STAY ACROSS SKYE

Skye Picture House

With across-the-water views to Scalpay, this welcoming B&B is a brilliant budget option. **££**

Shulista Croft

Treat yourself to a luxury timber camping pod, including en suite shower, kitchenette and TV. **££**

Carters Rest

This Neist Point-adjacent B&B offers large bedrooms, great food and wonderful coastal views. **££**



Seal colony near Dunvegan Castle & Gardens (p310)

be in the water rather than on it? Then join a snorkelling tour with **Dive & Sea the Hebrides** to explore some of the incredible marine life, reefs and wrecks that surround the island. However you choose to take to the water, just remember to look back regularly at the Skye shoreline for stunning views of the Old Man of Storr and the Cuillin Hills.

An Island Whisky Trail

VISIT THREE INCREDIBLE DISTILLERIES

For the better part of two centuries, Talisker was Skye's only legal whisky distillery. Founded in 1830 on the island's west coast, it gradually grew to become one of the world's most popular single malt Scotches. But today, Talisker can no longer claim this corner of Scotland to itself, following the 2021 release of the first whiskies by two new local producers. While the competition may be bad news for Talisker, it's great news for whisky lovers, who can now visit all three distilleries on a single-day tour.

Start where it all began at **Talisker Distillery**, a complex of pretty, white-walled buildings around 30 minutes' drive south-west of Portree. The distillery tour and tasting here allows

SPOTLIGHT ON SLEAT

Skye's southernmost peninsula is often overlooked by visitors to Skye, but it's well worth a visit. The headline attraction here is **Armada Castle, Gardens & Museum**, a three-in-one sight comprising the romantic ruins of a 17th-century castle, a 16-hectare estate full of colourful flowers and knockout views, and an excellent museum about the Clan Donald, known as the Lords of the Isles. However, there's plenty more to see as well, from the sandy beach at **Rubha Shlèite** to the peaty whiskies of **Torabhaig Distillery**. And if you're looking for a decadent stay on Skye, Sleat has some of the island's most luxurious hotels, from the lavish lochside **Kinloch Lodge** to the beautiful boutique **Duisdale House Hotel**.

Skeabost House Hotel

Once a hunting lodge, this luxury lochside hotel has one of Skye's best restaurants. **£££**

Kinloch Lodge

This antique-filled hotel overlooking the tidal Loch na Da dates back to the 1600s. **£££**

House Over-By

The six minimalist bedrooms here sit next door to the fine-dining restaurant Three Chimneys. **£££**

BEST WALKS IN NORTHWEST SKYE



Simone and Jonathan Parkin, owners of Carters Rest (cartersrestskye.co.uk), share their favourite walks in northwest Skye.

Coral Beach

Beyond Dunvegan Castle, this beach is a 2.5-mile flat walk. See wonderful colours in the water and enjoy walking barefoot on the coral (actually sun-bleached algae).

Ramasaig

From the ruins of Lorgill homestead, follow the path upstream to the cascading falls, then down to the river mouth and back along The Hoe. Continue to Waterstein Head for great views of Neist Point Lighthouse.

MacLeod's Maidens

A long walk from Varasaig Beach in Orbst brings you to these striking pinnacle rocks. Follow the path through Rebel Wood (in spring the flowers are fantastic) for the best views.

you to sample a mix of smoky, salty classic whiskies and rare, sweet expressions matured in sherry and port casks. After a brief walk along the sands of Talisker Bay (for some sobering sea air), head east to catch the Sconser–Raasay ferry. Sitting across the water from Skye, the glass-fronted **Isle of Raasay Distillery** building looks back towards the moody Cuillin Hills. Enjoy the views with a dram of the first-release whisky, which combines a soft peatiness with a sweet fruit underbelly. Finally, ferry back to Skye to visit **Torabhaig Distillery** on Sleat. Sit in the courtyard, flanked by old stone farmhouses, to savour its lightly peated, vanilla-sweetened single malt.

Cycling the Wild Northwest

A LIGHTHOUSE-TO-LIGHTHOUSE TOUR

Stretching out of Skye's northwest coast like the warped claws of a giant crab, the twin peninsulas of Watnish and Duirnish offer a mix of the well trodden and the out-of-the-way. Some of the sights here are often overrun with cars and camper vans, while in other places you can be the only person within miles. Nothing demonstrates this contrast more than the region's two Stevenson lighthouses.

Start your one-day bike tour at **Neist Point**, roughly an hour's drive west of Portree. One of Skye's most famous sights, the elegant lighthouse here sits on a rugged cliff jutting out into the sea. From here, hop on your bike and follow the road through Glendale, before skirting along Loch Dunvegan. If your budget allows, stop for a fine-dining lunch at the superb **Three Chimneys**; otherwise, soothe your saddle sores with a stroll around **Dunvegan Castle & Gardens**. From here, continue east to the **Fairy Bridge**, guarding the gateway to Watnish. As you cycle northwards into Stein, you may find a smattering of tourists enjoying the town's great restaurants and pubs, but beyond here things get very remote very quickly. At the medieval **Trumpan Church**, park your bike and continue on foot: a muddy, 90-minute hike brings you to **Watnish Point** and the handsome Watnish Lighthouse. Some days, you won't see another soul here, with just a bay full of whales and dolphins for company.

Swimming with the Fairies

A BRACING OUTDOOR DIP

If wild swimming in Scotland is only for the brave, it follows that wild swimming on the Isle of Skye is only for the stupid. After all, this is one of the wettest and windiest corners of the



WHERE TO DRINK IN A TRADITIONAL INN ON SKYE

Stein Inn

One of Skye's oldest inns, this stone-walled, beam-ceilinged inn offers good beer, whisky and seafood.

Ferry Inn

An Uig institution, known for its colourful gin cocktails and regular live music.

Old Inn

This Carbost inn guarantees a warm welcome with a variety of local beers and spirits.



TWISTIPP/GETTY IMAGES ©

Fairy Pools

country. Yet every day, visitors to the **Fairy Pools** set eyes on its crystal-clear pools, cascading mini waterfalls and lush green vegetation and can't resist the urge to strip down and plunge in. There's probably nowhere in Scotland that inspires quite so many spontaneous dips. But serious wild swimmers (and keen non-exhibitionists) know that just a little patience will lead to a much more rewarding pool experience.

Follow the throngs from the car park (40 minutes' drive from Portree) through the fields to the Fairy Pools. On seeing the temptingly luminescent blue-green water, you will immediately want to jump in – but hold your nerve. Continue to climb, past the brave but impatient swimmers enjoying a dip (and the many more watching from the edges and shivering at the thought of it) and the crowds slowly begin to thin out, either turning back or following trails west and into the hills. It looks like the pools have come to an end but carry on just a little further and you'll discover a welcome re-awakening of swimming opportunities: a smattering of clear, deep and (almost certainly) unoccupied pools just waiting for you to dive in.



BEST WILD SWIMMING ON SKYE

Sligachan River

Near Sligachan Old Bridge, with lovely views of the Cuillin Hills, this is river swimming at its wildest.

Glenbrittle Beach

Close to the Fairy Pools, this sandy beach is ideal for a bracing dip in the sea.

Loch Sheanta

This secluded little (but deceptively deep) lake is incredibly clear but with a distinctive greenish hue.



WHERE TO BUY CRAFTS ON SKYE

Edinbane Pottery

Quirky ceramics representing local landscapes are sold at this out-of-the-way pottery studio.

Ragamuffin

Discover designer knitwear and other natural fibre clothing at this long-standing Armadale store.

Skye Silver

The distinctive Celtic-themed gold and silver jewellery sold here makes for a unique souvenir.

THE HOME OF DRAMBUIE

The world's most famous whisky liqueur traces its origins to the **Broadford Hotel**. The story begins in the mid-1700s, when Bonnie Prince Charlie is said to have given Clan Mackinnon the secret recipe to his personal liqueur as a thank you for their help during his period of exile. A century later, hotel owner John Ross persuaded the family to let him make a batch of the liqueur to sell in the bar. The locals named it Drambuie (from *an dram buidheach*; 'the drink that satisfies') and the rest, as they say, is history. The recipe remains a secret to this day, though it's believed to include honey and lavender.



HABRIAN FRANKLAND/GETTY IMAGES ©

Loch Slapin and Bla Bheinn mountain

The Drive of Your Life

A ROAD TRIP TO ELGOL

As you turn out of Broadford (30 minutes' drive south of Portree) and onto the B8083, it doesn't feel like you are about to embark on one of the most dazzling drives in Scotland. In fact, the whitewashed buildings suggest the beginning of a residential cul-de-sac, rather than a scenic smorgasbord. But within 20 seconds, you will notice the round-topped **Beinn na Caillich mountain** rising up behind the Broadford Hotel, and feel the road narrowing from two-way tarmac to single-track lane, and you'll know your adventure has begun.



WHERE TO GET COFFEE IN BROADFORD

Deli Gusta

This old mill turned rustic deli-cafe serves superb coffee, toasted sandwiches and homemade cakes.

Café Sia

The artisan coffee here is drum-roasted in-house. Order yours with a side of Tuscan-style pizza.

Coffee Bothy

As well as good-quality coffee, vegans flock here for the huge range of dairy-free cakes.



The next 30 minutes of driving is a blur of barely believable vistas. First, there's the picturesque valley of **Strath Suardal**. Then there's the Insta-worthy roofless ruins of a church overlooking Loch Cill Chriosd. And then, most impressive of all, are the views of the solemn **Bla Bheinn mountain** across Loch Slapin (stop at **Amy's Place** for a cup of tea to soak them in). As you approach **Elgol**, traditional crofts lead the way down to the town's pier, which has perhaps the best vista of all: the **Cuillin Hills** jutting skywards across the water. Strong hikers may fancy going for a closer look, with a challenging two-hour hike along the shore to **Loch Coruisk** at the foot of the mountains. Less capable walkers can visit the loch on a landing trip run by **Misty Isles Boat Trips** (mistyisleboattrips.co.uk).

Castles, Gardens & Villages

A DETOUR TO THE MAINLAND

A visit to Skye isn't only about what's on the island itself, but what's within easy reach. The mainland near here has some spectacular sights, from seal-filled bays to picture-perfect castles, which can be enjoyed on a one-day excursion from the island.

Start by crossing the Skye Bridge (around 45 minutes' drive from Portree) onto the mainland, then turn left out of Kyle of Lochalsh to follow the coastal road up to **Plockton**. A pretty fishing town set around a natural bay, Plockton's unusually warm microclimate means you will find palm trees growing all along the main Harbour St. There are also seals out in the bay – and boat trips out to see them. From here, drive for about half an hour northeast to visit **Attadale Gardens**, an 8-hectare estate with an appealing blend of themed gardens, historic woodland and expansive coastal views, as well as a fun sculpture trail for kids. Finish your day with its highlight: one of the country's most-photographed castles. Perched on a little island across a stone bridge, the 14th-century fortification **Eilean Donan** has adorned the cover of a million travel brochures. From here, it's a short drive west to return to the Isle of Skye – or, if you're done with the island, head east on the same road for Loch Ness, Fort William and the cities in the south.



BEST RESTAURANTS & HOTELS IN PLOCKTON

The Shores

Enjoy freshly caught langoustines, lobster, mussels and scallops at this popular Harbour St seafood restaurant. **££**

Plockton Tasting Room

Serves the town's crumbliest homemade cakes, alongside artisan coffee, whiskies, gins and cocktails. **£**

Duncraig Castle

B&Bs don't get any more luxurious than this magnificent Highland castle overlooking Loch Carron. **£££**



MORE FAIRY FUN

Fairies are a big part of Skye culture. Check out the **Fairy Glen** (p307) on Trotternish, the **Fairy Flag at Dunvegan Castle & Gardens** (p311) and the **Fairy Bridge** (p311) on the road up to Stein.



GETTING AROUND

The Isle of Skye is best explored by car – or, for the physically fit, by bike. Public buses exist, but they are limited to the main roads, so they won't help you explore those handsome, hard-to-reach corners of Skye that make it so special.

Note that many roads are single-track, so if you see someone coming the other way, pull into a 'passing place', even if that means reversing 20m back up the road.



ULLAPOOL

It all began with herring. In 1788 a small fishing station was set up on the banks of Loch Broom, with the aim of exploiting its generous herring stocks. As the industry grew, so did the village, with rows of residential cottages appearing along the shore. While the herring population crashed in the mid-1800s, fishing for lobster and mackerel continued, and the town continued to grow. Today, it's far and away the largest settlement in Wester Ross, and one of the prettiest towns in the Highlands.

The small-fry fishing vessels remain, but they're dwarfed by the jumbo-sized ferries shuttling to and from Stornoway. As a gateway to both the Outer Hebrides and the far northwest of the mainland, Ullapool has become a hub of tourism, home to some of the region's best hotels, restaurants and shops. Spend a day or two relaxing here (or hiking the nearby hills) before continuing your journey.



TOP TIP

If you're heading north on the NC500, Ullapool is the last major town until you get to Thurso (around 165 miles away). So if you need to fill the tank of your car, stock up on supermarket supplies or get some clothes washed and laundered, do it now!



BEST HOTELS IN ULLAPOOL

Westlea House

A cosy, comfy and quirky B&B with colourful decor, unusual artworks and themed bedrooms. **££**

Tanglewood House

This half-moon-shaped B&B just south of Ullapool offers sweeping loch views in three directions. **££**

Dipping Lugger

This cute white house with very spacious rooms is Ullapool's most luxurious boutique hotel. **£££**

Shopping & Seashore Walks

A LAZY DAY IN ULLAPOOL

If you have made it to Ullapool, it means you've already travelled a long way – and you still have a long way to go. So take a break from your travels with a lovely, lazy day in this Highland town.

Start by orienting yourself: the **Ullapool Museum** explores the history of the area from the Ice Age to the modern day, with a focus on the 'klondyking' period of the 1970s and '80s, when Eastern Bloc boats came here to fish mackerel. Stroll eastwards along **West Argyll Street**, home to souvenir shops, ice-cream parlours and hiking supply stores, as well as the shop of popular local distiller **Highland Liquor Co.** Cross the road for a sandwich or light lunch at **West Coast Delicatessen**, then wander down to **West Shore Street** and head back the direction you came, this time past the harbour and along the waterfront. At the end, continue along the well-trodden grass trail to find a lochside bench, where you can sit and admire the dramatic scenery. Ready for dinner? Head back into town to enjoy the town's fresh seafood, either in a swanky restaurant like the **Dipping Lugger** or from a no-frills fish-and-chip shop like **Seefresh**. Once the sun has set, head to the **Arch Inn** for a drink or (if you've timed it right) the **Ceildh Place** for live music.

**SIGHTS**

- 1 Ullapool Museum
- 2 West Argyle St
- 3 West Shore St

EATING

- 4 Arch Inn
- 5 Ceilidh Place
- 6 Cult Cafe
- 7 Seafood Shack
- 8 Seefresh
- 9 West Coast Delicatessen

SHOPPING

- 10 Dipping Lugger
- 11 Highland Liquor Co
- 12 Westlea House

Hill Walking & Big Views

AN ACTIVE DAY IN ULLAPOOL

Not a fan of rest days? Then embark on a 10-mile, five-hour hike to Meall Mòr and Loch Achall.

Start in the centre of Ullapool, heading north on the A835 until you see signs for **Ullapool Hill Paths**. Enter the wooden gate and join the trail heading steeply upwards; in autumn, it's ablaze with purple heather. A short climb brings you to the first viewpoint at **Cnoc na Croiche**, but things only get more scenic from here, with regular benches offering opportunities to catch your breath and enjoy the vistas on the way up to **Meall Mòr**. From the cairn at the 270m summit, you can see the shores of both Loch Broom and Loch Achall, your next destination.

Walk down the way you came until, at the first bench, taking the right-hand track leading northeast. You'll pass through muddy, heather-dotted moorland until you reach the bridge over the river at the pretty **Eas Dubh waterfall**.



SHOPPING CENTRAL

The Highlands isn't known as a shopping hub, but there are a few places where you can pick up some interesting things. As well as Ullapool, visit **Portree** (p304) on Skye, **Balnakeil Craft Village** (p331) near Durness and **Tarbert** (p326) on Harris.



WHERE TO EAT & DRINK IN ULLAPOOL

Seafood Shack

Enjoy freshly caught and simply prepared seafood dishes, like the popular haddock wrap. £

Seefresh (Deli-Ca-Sea)

This harbourside takeaway serves crispy battered haddock and other chip shop staples. £

Dipping Lugger

Inventive tasting menus make this high-end restaurant a cut above everything else in Ullapool. £££

BEST SNACK SPOTS IN ULLAPOOL



Robert Hicks, co-owner of luxury boutique hotel the Dipping Lugger (thedippinglugger.co.uk), shares his favourite Ullapool snack spots.

Coffee and breakfast at Cult Cafe

The only way to start the day! Cult is where New Zealand cafe culture (courtesy of Kiwi co-owner Zoe) meets real Highland hospitality.

Tea and scones at the Ceilidh Place

There's no better way to spend a wet afternoon than with a pot of tea, a homemade scone and a book from the well-stocked bookshop here.

A pint and prawns at the Arch Inn

A west coast institution, this popular pub offers the chance to sup a pint of local Cromarty lager whilst feasting on fresh prawns from Loch Broom.



DANIEL ALFORD/LOONEY PLANET ©

Seafood Shack (p315)

Continue along the north bank of the loch – all the way to the estate at **Rhidorroch** – before pivoting back to Ullapool. At the turning to Meall Mòr, follow the white marker to join a different, forested route that heads south to the Braes, with lovely Loch Broom views along the way. From here, you'll loop back on the main road to Ullapool, where a well-earned drink awaits.



GETTING AROUND

Drivers can get three hours' free parking in the Tesco car park in the city centre, though most hotels and B&Bs offer private/street parking of their own. Once in town, leave the car and walk

around the small and flat town centre. You're going to want sturdy hiking boots to venture into the hills around.



Beyond Ullapool

Incredible scenery awaits around every turn on magnificent hikes, unforgettable drives and challenging cycle rides around Ullapool.

Ullapool is at the heart of some of Scotland's most striking scenery. To the south (in the direction of Loch Carron) lies a series of glorious drives and cycle rides, including Destitution Rd, Glen Torridon and Applecross. To the north (in the direction of Loch Assynt) is a hiker's haven of a landscape, all jagged mountain peaks, gorse-covered hills and craggy sandstone cliffs. And to the east (in the direction of Lairg) lies the beautifully barren and barely visited inland of the northern Highlands, including one of the country's largest and loveliest lochs. So lace up your hiking boots, load your bikes onto the car roof, and go out there to explore it all.

TOP TIP

Renting a vehicle? Pay a little extra for full insurance, as the roads can be bumpy with loose stones and potholes.

Stac Pollaidh (p319)



MICHAEL BALADIN/GETTY IMAGES ©



BEST BEACHES ALONG DESTITUTION ROAD

Firemore Beach

The red-tinged sands and warm waters (Gulf Stream again!) make this a popular local beach.

Slaggan Bay

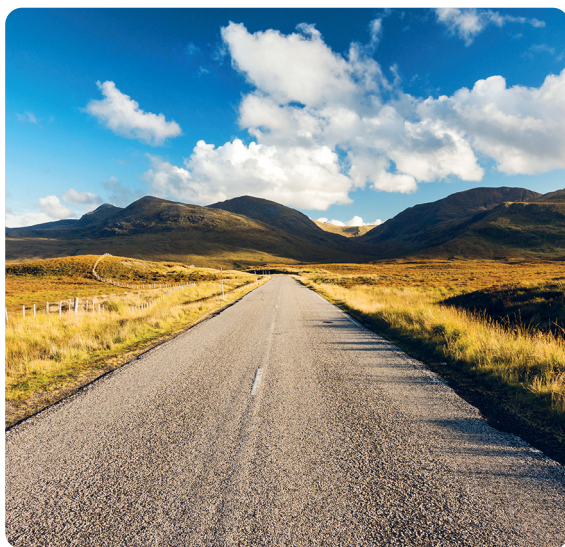
A short drive and walk off Destitution Rd brings you to this remote, picnic-perfect beach.

Gairloch Beach

The soft sands of this family-friendly village beach are sheltered from the elements by dunes and moorland.

Big Sand Beach

This sand-and-shingle beach comes with a spectacular backdrop: the mountains of Skye and Torridon.



JOE DUNCANLEY/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Destitution Rd

Views from the Car Seat

DRIVING DESTITUTION ROAD

The name may be bleak – named for the desperate men who built it during the potato famines of the 1840s – but Destitution Rd is one of the world's great drives. This 85-mile stretch of coastal road (which starts a 20-minute drive south of Ullapool) only takes around two hours to drive without stops... but trust us, you will want to stop.

The awe-inspiring scenery starts the moment you turn off the A835 and start skirting along the edge of **Corrieshalloch Gorge**. Park the car and walk down through the wooded valley to the suspension bridge for views of the tumbling **Falls of Measach**. From here, the road twists and turns through wild moorland, with memorable vistas of the toothlike tips of **An Teallach** mountain, before following the banks of Little Loch Broom. Stop to admire **Gruinard Bay**, with its pink-hued beaches and life-filled rock pools, before continuing to **Inverewe Garden**, where the exotic plants are testament to the climatic effects of the Gulf Stream. Further down the east coast, you will swing around to the southern shore of **Loch Maree**, a scenic lake that's lined with Scots pines and, very



WHERE TO STAY NORTH OF ULLAPOOL

Acheniver Hostel

This off-the-beaten-path hostel with sleeping pods is a five-minute hike from the nearest road. £

Port Beag Chalets

These self-catering chalets offer an amazing away-from-everything escape for family and groups. ££

Summer Isles Hotel

Once frequented by Charlie Chaplin, this luxurious hotel has an exceptional seafood restaurant. £££



Hiking Beinn Eighe

often, red deer. As you drive east, there are plenty of opportunities to park the car and stretch your legs – including an epic all-day hike up to the dominating peak of **Beinn Eighe** – before you reach the end of Destitution Rd and rejoin the A835.

Pretty Polly

SCALING THE ICONIC STAC POLLAIDH

The name tells you everything. Stac (which is Gaelic for ‘pinnacle’) and Pollaidh (from the Old Norse *polla*, meaning ‘pool river’) not only reveals the twin Celtic and Viking influences in this corner of Scotland, but also tells you exactly what to expect: a mountain peak overlooking water. **Stac Pollaidh** (pronounced ‘stack polly’) isn’t the highest pinnacle around, but the fact hikers can get up and down in less than three hours, while enjoying incredible views from the summit, makes it a popular choice.

Begin at the car park located just over halfway along the northern shore of glittering **Loch Lurgainn**; around 30 minutes’ drive north of Ullapool. A well-trodden footpath leads across the road from here

THE SUMMER ISLES

Scattered off the coast of Coigach, where Loch Broom meets the Minch (the strait separating the mainland from Lewis and Harris), the Summer Isles are a wonderfully remote collection of uninhabited islands. The largest of these, **Tanera Mòr**, was once home to a small fishing community; today, its main inhabitants are seabirds, as well as abundant marine life in the water around. There are boat trips here from Achnahaird and Ullapool, and five self-catering cottages available for weekly hire.



MORE DRIVING ADVENTURES

The northern Highlands and islands are full of great drives. There’s the dramatic **Drumbeg Loop** (p334) further up the coast, the epic **Road to Elgol** (p312) on the Isle of Skye, and the otherworldly **Golden Road** (p327) on South Harris.



WHERE TO STAY SOUTH OF ULLAPOOL

Gairloch Sands Youth Hostel

Great for walkers and beach lovers, this hostel has magnificent mountain and sea views. £

Rua Readh Lighthouse

Get a taste of the lighthouse-keeper life with this very remote, back-to-basics stay. £££

Shieldaig Lodge

This handsome hunting lodge-turned-luxury hotel on the bay has the best restaurant for miles. £££



BEST FOOD & STAYS IN GLEN TORRIDON

Wee Whistle Stop Café

Enjoy everything from a quick coffee to enticing bistro fare with views over Loch Torridon. £

Torridon Youth Hostel

Popular with backpackers, hill walkers and climbers, this great-value hostel is one of the area's best. £

Torridon

This Gothic castle-style hotel is the region's most luxurious stay – and great for afternoon tea. £££

and up through shrubland. As you climb, look back to enjoy ever-improving views across the loch to the sleek slopes of **Sgùrr Tuath**. The path arcs around to the other side of Stac Pollaidh, before rising steeply towards its rocky crest. Make it up to the lower reaches of the ridge and you'll be rewarded with magnificent panoramic views of the wild landscape around: all moody mountain peaks, languid silvery lochs and undulating islands. Serious climbers can continue all the way up to the summit (rock towers, boulders and scree slopes mean that scrambling skills are required), while less experienced hikers can descend back the same way towards Loch Lurgainn.

Top of the World

CYCLING THE APPLECROSS PENINSULA

If there's one piece of advice to follow when exploring Scotland's northwest coast, it's this: don't cut corners. When taking the coastal route from Skye to Ullapool, it's tempting to stick to 'main' roads – after all, these are still rural routes with remarkable scenery. But those who just follow the A896 up from Lochcarron to Shildaig miss out on a formidable landscape: the **Applecross Peninsula**.

While the entire route is driveable, seasoned cyclists will enjoy it best on two wheels; vehicles can be left in the car park on Applecross Pass. It's a baptism of fire, with the incline starting almost instantly and rarely letting up for an hour, as it zigzags up the mountain valley to **Bealach na Ba**. But the early effort is rewarded with monumental views stretching all the way to Raasay and Skye, as well as the knowledge that you have just climbed Scotland's highest road. A long and luxurious descent brings you down into **Applecross**, where you can stop for a beach stroll or a bite to eat, before continuing north along the coastal road. Three hours of (mostly) gentle cycling brings you back to the A896, where it's a short ride south to retrieve your car – though not before rewarding your efforts with coffee and cake in the excellent **Bealach Café** (sit by the window for mountain vistas).

Forget Nessie

EXPLORING A LESSER-VISITED LOCH

Since it launched in 2015, the NC500 route has been a huge success, introducing millions of people to the gorgeous coastal scenery throughout the northern Highlands. But it has also



WHERE TO EAT IN LOCHCARRON

Café Ceàrdach

This community-owned café serves paninis, baked potatoes and homemade cakes – and sometimes whole meals. £

Kishorn Seafood Bar

On the road from Shildaig, this blue log cabin serves freshly caught fish and shellfish. ££

Lochcarron Bistro

Watch the chefs at work from one of the five tables in this excellent restaurant. ££

KAPPELEIARD/SHUTTERSTOCK ©



Salmon, Falls of Shin

meant that the interior of the region has been wildly overlooked, despite serious scenic highlights such as Loch Shin.

Slicing through the heart of the northern Highlands, **Loch Shin** is one of Scotland's largest freshwater lakes – and yet one of its least visited. Start your exploration in **Lairg**, a pretty Highland village at the lake's southeastern edge, just over an hour's drive east from Ullapool. The village is home to some of the inland's best cafes and restaurants, as well as the **Wee Hoose**, a tiny dwelling on a lake island that's playfully known as 'Nessie's summer home'. Take a mini detour down to the **Falls of Shin**, an outlet of the loch where salmon can be seen leaping upstream during the summer months, before heading back north to drive the full 17-mile length of Loch Shin's northern shore. You'll want to stop regularly to soak up the scenery, with the tranquil, deep-blue water backed by memorable mountain vistas, including the near-1000m-high peaks of **Ben Kilbrech** (to the south) and **Ben More Assynt** (to the north). Reach the end and you'll find yourself approaching the far northwest of Scotland – and ready to continue your adventure.



BEST FOOD & STAYS IN THE INTERIOR

Pier

This Lairg cafe-restaurant serves simple but tasty meals accompanied by divine views of Loch Shin. **££**

Crask Inn

A shining beacon in an empty landscape, this out-of-the-way pub serves good beer and light meals. **££**

Garvault House

Proudly claiming to be Britain's most remote hotel, this charmingly rustic hotel is miles from anywhere. **££**



GETTING AROUND

The roads north and south of Ullapool are narrow and twisty, so make sure you're well rested before tackling them. Try not to get too

distracted by the views either: there are regular stopping places to drink it all in.

STORNOWAY

Founded by Vikings, traded between medieval clans and overtaken by the military during WWII, Stornoway has seen a lot during its 1200-year history. With a population of almost 7000, it is by far the largest settlement in the Outer Hebrides, home to many of the island chain's finest museums, restaurants and live music venues. It is also the proud birthplace of Stornoway black pudding, the 'best sausage made in the UK' according to celebrity chef Jeremy Lee and a staple of breakfasts nationwide; sample it in a local cafe or take one home from Macleod & Macleod butchers. Non-meat-eaters may be more interested in the town's other significant claim to fame: the Lewis chess pieces. Discovered about 20 miles west of Stornoway, this set of exquisite walrus-ivory chess pieces is one of Britain's great medieval artefacts, with half a dozen on display at the town's Museum nan Eilean.



TOP TIP

Stornoway is generally flat, with only gentle slopes up to Lewis Castle, so there's no need for hiking boots here (though avoid open-toed sandals as the rain can come in a flash). It's only an hour's walk from the airport into town, if you really want to stretch your legs.

WHY I LOVE STORNOWAY



Joseph Reaney, writer

Stornoway is the promise of adventure. It's the gateway to mysterious standing stones, mountain hikes and coastal scenery, from bleach-blond beaches to sea-smashed cliffs. It's the start of a Hebridean adventure that can stretch from the Butt of Lewis to Barra Head, via otherworldly St Kilda. It's also the place you return to after these far-flung adventures: a welcoming town of good food, warming whisky and creature comforts.

STORNOWAY



HIGHLIGHTS

1 Museum nan Eilean

SIGHTS

2 Lewis Castle

EATING

3 An Lanntair Cafe Bar

4 Artizan Cafe

5 Harbour Kitchen

6 Kopi Java



Lewis chess pieces

Island History & Culture

VISITING THE MUSEUM NAN EILEAN

In 1831, a Lewis crofter called Malcolm ‘Sprot’ Macleod was walking along a sandbank on the west coast of the island when he made a startling discovery: four sets of medieval chess pieces, carved from whale and walrus ivory in the 12th century in Trondheim, Norway. Considered one of Britain’s greatest-ever archaeological finds, the wonderfully expressive **Lewis chess pieces** are now exhibited in three places: the British Museum in London, the National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh and the Museum nan Eilean in Stornoway.

Opened in 2016, the purpose-built **Museum nan Eilean** (closed Sundays and Mondays) displays the Lewis chess pieces and hundreds of other artefacts to tell the story of the Outer Hebrides, from its history and geology to its traditions and culture. It’s a great first stop on any Hebridean adventure, offering colour and context before venturing further into the island chain. It’s also a lovely setting: the museum is connected to **Lews Castle**, a beautiful 19th-century Baronial mansion set in wooded parkland criss-crossed with walking trails that look out over the harbour. Visit the castle grounds during the second half of July to enjoy traditional music and dancing at the Hebridean Celtic Festival.



BEST DINING & DRINKING IN STORNOWAY

An Lanntair Café Bar

This family-friendly arts centre café is a great stop for soup, salads and sandwiches. £

Kopi Java

Good coffee and superb sweet treats (from local producer Baiba’s Bakes) make this a popular stop. £

Artizan Café

Stornoway’s hippest hang-out, this is a café-gallery by day and cocktail bar by (weekend) night. ££

Harbour Kitchen

Locally caught fish and seafood are on the menu of this open-kitchen restaurant. Book ahead! £££



GETTING AROUND

With twice-daily **CalMac** car ferries from Ullapool during summer, as well as regular **Loganair** flights from Edinburgh, Glasgow and Inverness, Stornoway is well connected to the mainland. Once on the island, there are buses

running from Stornoway bus station (by the ferry terminal) to most of the big towns, from Ness in the north to Tarbert on Harris, though the regularity changes by the season; visit cne-siar.gov.uk for timetables.



• St Kilda

Beyond Stornoway

Venture beyond Stornoway to uncover ancient history, sandy beaches and superb art galleries – as well as other Hebridean islands.

The greatest charms of Lewis and Harris lie beyond Stornoway's compact borders. The area to the north and east of the town – that's the 'Lewis' part of Lewis and Harris – is all about history, from Neolithic standing stones to 19th-century whitewashed lighthouses (and everything in between). The area south of the town – that's the 'Harris' part – is all about wide-open landscapes, from Alpine-like mountains to Caribbean-like beaches, as well as island handicrafts from Harris Tweed to award-winning gin. But Lewis and Harris is only the start of the story: venture to the other islands of the Outer Hebrides to discover soaring cliffs, sandy bays, vibrant seabirds, fascinating museums and eye-catching works of outdoor art.



TOP TIP

If you have your eye on a particular B&B then get it booked, as accommodation can fill up fast here.

Gearrannan Blackhouse Village



MARION CANNIE/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

YULIA BOGOMOLOVA/SHUTTERSTOCK ©



Dun Carloway

History on a Loop

A LEWIS-THROUGH-TIME BIKE TOUR

Five thousand years of history in just four hours on the saddle: there are few cycling itineraries in Scotland that pack in quite so much. Start your 40-mile odyssey in Stornoway, heading northwest to Arnol and your first historical stop: the **Blackhouse**. This example of a traditional Hebridean home, where families and their animals lived under the same roof, may look like a relic from a long bygone era, but these were still in widespread use in the early 20th century. Continue west towards Carloway and you'll pass by the **Gerrannan Blackhouse Village**, before hurtling back another 2000 years to Iron Age Lewis at **Dun Carloway**. Dating from around 200 BCE, this broch (defensive tower) was built to protect the inhabitants from seaborne raiders, and it was built well: some of its drystone walls still stand at 9m high, close to their original height. From here, a short cycle down the west coast brings you to one of Europe's most important prehistoric sights: the **Callanish Standing Stones**. Comprising a central monolith with 13 large stones and 40 smaller ones radiating out from it, this stone circle



BEST SNACK STOPS ON THE LOOP

Hebridean Bakehouse

Freshly baked treats are served from an honesty box in the tiny village of Brue. £

Mollans Fish & Chips

Billing itself as Scotland's smallest chip shop, this shed-turned-takeaway outlet is a local favourite. £

Callanish Visitor Centre Café

This cafe below the standing stones offers good coffee and cake, plus lovely Loch Roag views. £

Crust

Enjoy excellent Neapolitan-style pizza at the side of the road from this converted shipping container. ££



WHERE TO EAT IN LEWIS

Wobbly Dog of Lewis

This pooch-friendly cafe near the Butt of Lewis Lighthouse serves good coffee and snacks. £

Borve House Hotel

The fresh seafood in this hotel restaurant is often paired with Stornoway black pudding. ££

Uig Sands Restaurant

Local fish, shellfish, beef and lamb feature heavily on the superb set course menus here. £££

A PERFECT DAY ON LEWIS



Mhairi Law, artist photographer and owner of **Island Darkroom gallery** (islanddarkroom.com), gets her inspiration from the island. Here's her advice for 'a wee day out' on Lewis.
@island_darkroom

Start at the Hub with an amazing cooked breakfast (veggie options available) then head to the coast: get a lesson from Surf Lewis, swim in the sea with Immerse Hebrides, or explore uninhabited isles off the west coast with Seatrek. In the afternoon, head to the ancient village of Mealasta and the hills of Uig. The jaw-dropping views of the Flannan Isles and the stacks of St Kilda inspired many of my photographs. For tea, the Fank in Stornoway has innovative food and a fantastic beer selection!



HELEN HORTON/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Seilebost

is believed to date back to between 2500 and 3000 BCE – making it older than Stonehenge. Enjoy the views over Loch Roag before cycling back to the beginning; you'll be sipping beer in a Stornoway pub within 90 minutes.

Top to Bottom

A DRIVING TOUR OF HARRIS

It may be small, but Harris – the southern third of Lewis and Harris – is incredibly varied. In fact, over the course of just 300 sq miles, there are three very different landscapes: northern Harris, with its imposing mountain peaks; southern Harris' west coast, with its extraordinarily attractive beaches; and southern Harris' east coast, with its stark moonlike landscape.

Start your driving adventure at the western tip of the T-shaped **Loch Shiphoirt**, 30 minutes' drive southwest of Stornoway. The A859 cuts down through the increasingly mountainous landscape of North Harris – stretch your legs on a hiking trail, such as the steep ascent up to **Clisham**, or go golden eagle-spotting at the **North Harris Eagle Observatory**. Once you



WHERE TO STAY IN LEWIS

Otter Bunkhouse

Looking for a budget stay with expansive loch views? This bunkhouse is the answer. £

Hebridean Bothy Pods

Located in the village of Achmore, these four-person wooden chalets offer good-value stays. ££

Broad Bay House

This luxurious place, just a short drive north of Stornoway, has marvellous sea views. £££



hit **Tarbert**, stop for lunch or (for nondrivers) a gin tasting.

From here, continue down to South Harris along the west coast. It's a spectacularly scenic route, lined with fine sandy beaches (such as **Seilebost** and **Sgarasta Mhòr**) and flower-covered machair. Take a mini detour to see **Luskentyre**; the best beach of the bunch.

From the charming **St Clement's Church** in Rodel, head back up the east coast along the **Golden Road**. Twisting and turning through an almost otherworldly landscape of grey rock and tiny lochans, it's the antithesis of the west coast – and yet just as beautiful. Dive off onto even smaller roads to explore more alien landscapes, before rejoining the A859 just south of Tarbert.

Crafty Island

ART SHOPPING ON LEWIS AND HARRIS

Without doubt, Harris Tweed is the Outer Hebrides' most famous export. This handwoven cloth of dyed virgin wool is produced exclusively here and shipped all over the world for use in fashion and soft furnishings. But the crafty output here isn't limited to tweed: Lewis and Harris is a hub of creative talent, home to craft workshops, art studios and independent galleries.

Visitors to the island can easily support these local makers by incorporating arts-and-craft shopping into their sight-seeing routines. Heading north to the Butt of Lewis light-house? Stop along the way at **Borgh Pottery** for vases, bowls and other ceramic creations by resident potter Sue Blair, or visit **Harbour View Gallery** to see the colourful acrylic paintings of Anthony J Barber. Planning a trip to Dun Carloway? Pop into **Blue Pig Studio** to see Jane Harlington's evocative graphic artworks. Those driving from Stornoway to Harris can visit both **Island Darkroom**, which exhibits the works of award-winning photographer Mhairi Law, and **Hebridean Art Studio**, showcasing Fiona Simes' unforgettable black-and-white lino prints of local landmarks. And once you're down on Harris, venture into **Skoon Gallery** for its seascapes by oil painter Andrew John Craig, and into **Holmasaig Gallery** for the watercolour wildflowers of Margarita Williams. With so many different artists working on Lewis and Harris, you're sure to find the perfect souvenir for you.



WHERE TO EAT IN TARBERT

Distillery Canteen

Communal seating and great food lend this Isle of Harris Distillery cafe a convivial atmosphere. £

Hebscape

Just outside Tarbert, this stylish art gallery cafe has home-baked scones and extraordinary views. £

Flavour

Enjoy artfully presented eight-course menus of local produce at this fine dining restaurant. £££



BEST PLACES TO STAY IN HARRIS

Lickisto Blackhouse

The glamping tents on this campsite off the Golden Road are the ultimate out-of-the-way stay. £

Scarista House

Once a Georgian manse, this luxurious B&B has great food and fine coastal views. ££

Sorrel Cottage

A cosy and characterful B&B near Leverburgh set within an old crofting house. ££

Hotel Hebrides

This Tarbert hotel offers a comfortable, stylish stay – particularly in the standalone luxury suites. £££



FEEL THE SAND BETWEEN YOUR TOES

It's not only the west coast of South Harris that has pristine beaches. Hike to **Sandwood Bay** (p333) near Durness, sunbathe on the red-sand **Firemore Beach** (p318) near Ullapool or walk your dog along **Glenbrittle Beach** (p311) on Skye.



FLY TO THE BEACH

For a unique Hebridean experience, take a short-hop flight to Barra. You'll board the Viking DHC-6 plane in Glasgow Airport and then fly for just over an hour to the Outer Hebrides, where you will descend and land on the stunning 2-mile-long tidal beach **Traigh Mhòr**. As the only scheduled beach landing anywhere on earth, and with the views of gorgeous golden sands regularly voted the world's top airport approach, this is the definition of a bucket-list experience.



ANOTHER ARTY HUB

Heading to the northern Highlands? **Balnakeil Craft Village** (p331) near Durness is a must-see for art lovers; it's home to dozens of artisans selling everything from paintings and pottery to clothes and chocolate.



WHERE TO SNACK IN THE UISTS

Wee Cottage Kitchen

Coffee and hot snacks overlooking the bay. Try the scallop and black pudding roll. £

Croft & Cuan

This popular Lochboisdale food van offers tasty takeaway food, from burritos to smoothies. £

Taigh Chearsabhagh Café

The cafe in this arts centre serves fine French-press coffee, cakes and snacks. ££

The Quiet Islands

EXPLORING THE OUTER HEBRIDES

With ancient ruins, modern artworks and lovely, loch-dotted landscapes, the Uists should be on everyone's travel radar. If you've made it as far as Lewis and Harris, just one more short ferry trip reveals a whole other side to the Outer Hebrides.

You get off the Harris ferry at **Berneray**, a tiny island known for its idyllic beaches and basking seals. Drive across the causeway to **North Uist** and the roadside remains of its last inhabited Iron Age broch. Veer right for the **Balranald Nature Reserve**, where wardens offer guided walks to see the abundant birdlife (listen out for the rasping cry of the corncrake) or go left for **Taigh Chearsabhagh**, a museum and arts centre that explores the history and culture of the Uists. Whichever route you take, don't miss the 5000-year-old chambered cairn (Neolithic burial monument) of **Burpa Langais**. Cross the small island of **Benbecula** – famed for its links to Bonnie Prince Charlie – to reach **South Uist** and its unmissable **Our Lady of the Isles**, a towering sculpture of the Madonna and Child. The **Kildonan Museum** is also worth a visit for some insight into island culture. At **Lochboisdale**, it's time to choose your next destination: east to Skye, south to **Barra** or southeast to Oban on the mainland. Or, of course, you can drive back up to Berneray to return to Harris.

Wild & Remote

VISITING ST KILDA

The boat lurches violently from left to right. Giant waves smash into the hull, gale-force winds whip overhead and cups of tea slide off tables. It's such a rocky ride, you might find yourself questioning whether **St Kilda** is really worth the journey. But then the skyscraper-sized cliffs come into view over the horizon, and screeching clouds of yellow-headed gannets and orange-beaked puffins fill the air. As you pull into the pretty harbour of **Hirta**, St Kilda's main island, all your doubts suddenly disappear.

St Kilda was home to a tiny community for the best part of 2000 years, sustained only by seabirds. As you follow the steep, two-hour trail out of the village towards Hirta's highest point, **Conachair**, the way is strewn with stone storage huts known as cleitean, built to cure seabird meat using the

FOTOVAGER/BETTY IMAGES ©



Cliffs of Hirta, St Kilda

island's reliably strong winds. Tiptoe around the sleeping Soay sheep and territorial great skuas, native species that have long since claimed the structures for themselves, as you continue to climb to the summit. The panoramic views from the top are magnificent: Hirta is a mass of grey volcanic crags and verdant green grass, while beyond this you can see St Kilda's other islands, as well as the colossal sea stacks sitting off the coast. And then, nothing but ocean for miles. So worth the journey? Of course it was.

HOW TO GET TO ST KILDA

Go to St Kilda

Departing from Stein on Skye, this 7am-to-8pm day trip includes around four hours on Hirta.

Kilda Cruises

Leaving from Leverburgh, this modern, 16.5m motor cruiser accommodates 12 passengers, sitting inside or out.

Sea Harris

The purpose-built *Redbay Stormforce* offers a comfier (but still rocky) ride from Leverburgh to St Kilda.

Hebridean Sea Tours

Visit St Kilda from tiny Barra (south of the Uists) with this company's spacious boat.



GETTING AROUND

While the islands are best explored by car, taking four wheels with you on every ferry crossing can quickly rack up your holiday costs. Instead, consider hiring a car from Stornoway after you arrive. Or, better yet, switch four wheels for two and explore the Outer Hebrides

by bike – after all, Lewis and Harris is only 78 miles end to end, which is equivalent to around seven hours of cycling. You can bring bikes with you on the ferry or rent them from Bike Hebrides (bikehebrides.com) in Stornoway.

DURNESS

With a population of fewer than 350 people, the village of Durness is not a major Highlands settlement in the mould of Wick, Ullapool or Portree. However, its namesake parish, which covers a flat, fertile corner of the northern Highlands stretching from Loch Eriboll in the east to Rhiconich in the south, is home to some of the most unusual landscapes in Scotland. It is a place where you can promenade along soft sandy beaches, venture deep into natural limestone caves, submerge yourself in crystal-clear sea lochs, play a round of golf on a blustery links course, and explore real wilderness in cut-off Cape Wrath. With so many outdoor adventures on its doorstep, it's no wonder that Durness has belied its small size to become a major hub for bed and breakfast accommodation. There's nowhere better to base yourself when exploring Scotland's far northwest.



TOP TIP

Planning to pick up some supplies in Durness? Don't arrive too late: the town's main shop closes at 6pm every day, and the cafes in nearby Balnakeil Craft Village close even earlier. The only place that is open 24 hours a day here is the pay-by-card petrol pump.



HIGHLIGHTS

- 1 Balnakeil Craft Village
- 2 Cape Wrath

SIGHTS

- 3 Balnakeil Beach
- 4 Ceannabeine Beach
- 5 Keoldale
- 6 Loch Eriboll
- 7 Smoo Cave

EATING

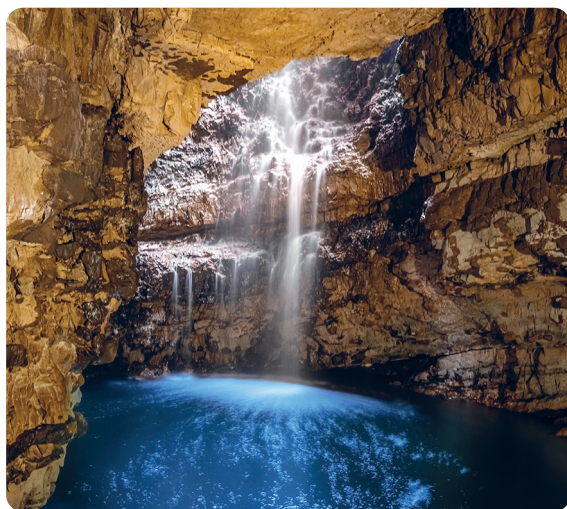
- 8 Cheese N Toasted
- 9 Choraidh Croft Tearoom
- see 1 Cocoa Mountain
- see 1 Meet & Eat - Cafe & Restaurant

10 Ozone Cafe

SHOPPING

- 11 Lotte Glob

LEAMUS/GETTY IMAGES ©



Smoo Cave

Cliffs, Crafts & Caves

EXPLORING DURNESS AND AROUND

Spend the morning on the remote **Cape Wrath**, home to mainland Britain's highest cliffs. Regular ferries depart from tiny Keoldale, 2 miles south of Durness: it's a 10-minute trip, followed by a bumpy, one-hour minibus drive through barren landscape. But it's more than worth it as you stand at Scotland's northwestern tip, looking across to the sheer Clo Mor Cliffs and the swooping seabirds around the lighthouse. Return the same way and you'll be back in Durness for lunch: head to **Cocoa Mountain** for a croissant and a hot chocolate. This popular little chocolate-ier-cafe is part of **Balnakeil Craft Village**, where old military buildings are now home to live-in artists selling paintings, pottery, glassware and other handicrafts. Before you leave, take a stroll along the beautiful **Balnakeil Beach**.

In the afternoon, head a little east of Durness to visit **Smoo Cave**. With its chambers formed both by the sea and by rainwater, it's unique in the UK. In high season, guided boat trips allow you to explore deeper into the cave, including its 20m-high waterfall. Continue further east to visit the idyllic **Ceannabeinne Beach** and the scenic western shore of **Loch Eriboll** (pop into Danish artist **Lotte Glob**'s outdoor sculpture croft), before returning to Durness before everything closes.



BEST QUICK EATS NEAR DURNESS

Meet & Eat

This little artisan cafe in Balnakeil Craft Village serves filled ciabattas, warming soups and homemade cakes. £

Cheese 'N' Toasted

Simple but sublime: pick up a gourmet cheese toastie from this takeaway van near Smoo Cave. £

Choraidh Croft Tearoom

This tiny tearoom near Lotte Glob serves good coffee and cake with stunning Loch Eriboll views. £

Ozone Cafe

Right at the tip of Cape Wrath, this welcoming cafe serves hot food and drinks. £



GETTING AROUND

You can reach many of the sights near Durness without a car. Balnakeil and Smoo Cave are both 20 minutes' walk from the village, and the

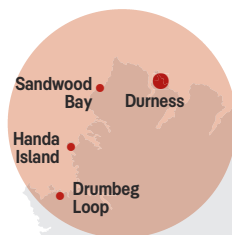
Keoldale ferry (for Cape Wrath) is walkable in 45 minutes. But you'll want a bike or car if venturing further east to Loch Eriboll.



Beyond Durness

Secluded beaches, decaying castles, cascading waterfalls and memorable drives await on the coasts around Durness.

With its position in the far northwest of Scotland, Durness is a great base for exploring easy-on-the-eye coastlines in two directions. Head east on the north coast towards Bettyhill for shimmering sea lochs, splendid golden beaches and ancient stone ruins like Ard Neackie Lime Kilns and Castle Varrich. Even better, head south down the west coast towards Lochinver to see some of Britain's most absurdly attractive scenery: an extraordinary patchwork of grass, rock, sand, heather and water. The vistas change at every turn, so travel at a leisurely pace and stop whenever you get the chance, including for high-lights such as the remote Sandwood Bay, the cascading Eas a'Chual Aluinn waterfall and the puffin-covered Handa Island.



TOP TIP

There's breathtaking scenery around every twist and turn in the road, so factor regular photo stops into your daily schedule.

Drumbeg Loop alongside Loch Assynt (p335)



BPH/STOCK/SHUTTERSTOCK ©



Sandwood Bay

Distant Sands

A HIKE TO SANDWOOD BAY

The first thing that comes into view is the windswept water of the sprawling loch. Next, it's the ruined walls of an old cottage, followed by the distant, moody cliffs of Cape Wrath. And then, finally, your destination appears: a blanket of graceful golden sand backed by grassy dunes. After a 4-mile hike from the nearest road, you have made it to one of Britain's most remote beaches: **Sandwood Bay**.

Your journey begins at Blairmore car park, a 45-minute drive southwest of Durness (turn off the A838 at Rhiconich). From here, the trail passes through sheep fields and emerges onto open peat moorland, a bleakly desolate yet graceful landscape punctuated only by grass-lined lochans. As the path continues, it gets narrower and rockier as it crosses streams and climbs upwards. Eventually, about an hour and a half into the walk, the path peaks and then slopes down through fields towards the bay. Clamber over the sand dunes and you'll suddenly emerge onto the isolated Sandwood Bay, guarded at one end by the looming rock pinnacle **Am Buachaille**. Take time to stroll along the sand and

AN ALTERNATIVE BEACH - WITHOUT THE WALK

Like the idea of a remote beach but don't fancy a half-day hike to get there? Lucky there's another appealing option just a few miles down the road. Like Sandwood Bay, **Oldshoremore Beach** is a gorgeous stretch of golden sand backed by grassy sand dunes. Unlike Sandwood Bay, it's a breeze to get here: follow the same road from the A838 via Kinlochbervie but hang a left when you see the red postbox on the edge of Oldshoremore. After leaving your vehicle in the large car park (which even has toilet blocks), it's just a short walk over the hump of the hill towards the sand dunes, where steps lead you down onto the beach.



WHERE TO STAY IN THE FAR NORTHWEST

Clachtoll Beach Campsite

A lovely camping spot set on a white-sand beach along the Drumbeg Loop. £

Tongue Hotel

This north coast hotel is pure cosiness: open fires, tartan rugs and breakfast porridge. ££

Mackay's Rooms

Spoil yourself with a comfortable stay at this luxurious (but still family-run) boutique B&B. £££

THE BEST BEACHES NEAR DURNESS



Fraser Eadie, runs **Smoo Cave Tours** (smoocavetours.com) and loves the Maldives-like beaches around Durness. Here are his favourites.

Ceannabeinne Beach

The beautiful sands here are ideal for swimming and surfing – but beware the rip-tide where the stream enters the sea. Have fun trying to squeeze through the small caves.

Sango Sands

On these beaches (split by a rocky outcrop) I've seen whales, dolphins and a basking shark all feeding in the bay! The ocean glows with bioluminescence in late summer.

Balnakeil Beach

A favourite with locals (and local cattle), this beach is great for surfing when the swell is big. Walk out to the cliffs to spot puffins... and sometimes even the northern lights!



JONATHAN W. COHEN/GETTY IMAGES ©

Clashnessie Falls

soak up the solitude – even if there are other hikers and wild campers around, a short walk north should give you plenty of beach to yourself – before heading back up the path (the hardest climb of the day) to return the same way.

A Drive to Remember

THE UNFORGETTABLE DRUMBEG LOOP

The quick way is attractive enough: the 15-minute drive from Kylesku to Inchnadamph on the A894 passes tumbling waterfalls and crumbling castle ruins. But the slow way is truly something else: the 90-minute detour along the **Drumbeg Loop** is one of Europe's most unforgettable driving experiences.

The loop begins on the B869, less than 2 miles south of Kylesku and around an hour's drive south of Durness (turn at



WHERE TO EAT IN THE FAR NORTHWEST

An Cala Café

This Lochinver cafe serves good soups, sandwiches and salads, as well as home bakes. £

Shorehouse Restaurant

Enjoy wonderfully fresh shellfish (caught by the owners) served right by the Handa ferry jetty. ££

Whale Tale

Fresh Scottish produce, from venison to crab, is well utilised in this fine bunkhouse-restaurant. ££



the 'An Druim Beag' sign). It's the start of a well-maintained, single-track road that squeezes its way between the soaring peaks of **Quinag** and the rugged shores of **Loch a' Chuarn Bhain**. As the route snakes through miles of rocky moorland – a dizzying spectacle of challenging hairpin bends and jaw-slackening scenery – there are ample opportunities to stop and soak it all in, whether at the crashing water of **Clashnessie Falls** or the idyllic sands of **Achmelvich Bay**. Got a few hours to spare? Head off-loop to see lovely **Stoer Lighthouse** and hike up the coast to the towering **Old Man of Stoer** sea stack. Rejoin the road as it sweeps around into **Lochinver**, a pretty town of whitewashed cottages – and a great stop for food. From here, there are two ways back to A894: either complete the Drumbeg Loop by driving for 20 minutes east along the north bank of **Loch Assynt** to Inchnadamph, or else drive for about an hour south down the coast to Drumrunie.

Puffins & Skuas

THE BIRDS OF HANDA ISLAND

Located roughly halfway between Ullapool and Durness, the tiny village of **Scourie** sits at the heart of a remote and rugged landscape, including hundreds of freshwater lochs that attract fly-fishers from far and wide. But its greatest treasure lies just off its west coast: the nature reserve of **Handa Island**.

You can catch the ferry – a small and open boat – from **Tarbet**, a few miles north of Scourie. It drops you off on the sandy southern shore of Handa, which marks the start of a 2½-hour walking loop around the island. The first section scythes through the open, muddy moorland at the heart of the island (bring good hiking boots, even if the boggiest sections are covered with wooden walkways) on its way up to the north coast. This is where you will find the highlights of any Handa tour: the island's 100m-high sandstone cliffs, covered in hundreds of thousands of nesting seabirds. Pick a spot to sit and watch the fulmars, guillemots, great skuas, razorbills and kittiwakes swooping overhead – come in May and June and you'll also see crowd-pleasing puffins. From here, the path continues west, with views of the towering Great Stack and the craggy peaks of Sutherland (back on the mainland), before looping back to the beaches of the south for the ferry back to Tarbet.

A STOP AT KYLESKU

The tiny fishing hamlet of Kylesku, once the site of a free ferry before the bridge was built, makes for a pleasant break on any journey between Ullapool and Durness. Park the car and wander along the harbourside to enjoy the dramatic mountain scenery. The excellent **Kylesku Hotel** has the region's best restaurant, so pop in for a meal of freshly caught seafood, from oysters to lobster. There's also an opportunity to get out on the water with **Northwest Sea Tours** (northwestseatours.co.uk). Skipper Stephen takes guests out to see Britain's tallest waterfall, the 200m-high **Eas a'Chual Aluinn**, as well as sailing around the sea lochs of **Glencoul** and **Glendhu**, complete with resident seals and seabirds.



GETTING AROUND

Forget public transport: a car is the only way to get around this region. Leave as much time as you possibly can to venture off the main drag onto smaller, single-track roads: you

never know when you're going to find the next heart-stopping panorama or wonderfully empty beach.



WICK

The history of Wick is a story of iron, silver and gold. The Iron Age saw the first pagan settlers to the area and the naming of Wick itself (from the Norse word *vík*, meaning 'bay'). The silver age came in the 1700s, when Wick became a prospect town for the herring industry; before too long, the little silver fish had made the town its name and its fortune. And the golden age came in the early 1800s, which is when the first whisky was produced by Wick's now world-renowned Old Pulteney distillery. The pagan settlers and herring fishing fleets are long gone but the golden-coloured whisky remains, with the distillery one of Wick's biggest visitor attractions. The only real competition is the Wick Heritage Museum, which delves deeper into the fascinating story of how this tiny Norse settlement became one of the largest towns in the northern Highlands.



TOP TIP

Most of Wick's biggest tourist draws – including the harbour, distillery and museum – are on the south side of the river, in an area known locally as Pulteneytown. But head to the north side of the river for high-street shopping and the big Tesco.



HIGHLIGHTS

1 Wick Heritage Museum

SIGHTS

- 2 Ebenezer Place
- 3 Harbour Road
- 4 St Fergus Church

EATING

- 5 Bord de l'Eau
- 6 Harbour Chip Shop
- 7 Wickers World

DRINKING

- 8 Old Pulteney Distillery
- 9 The Printers Rest

MARCO SOLIANT/SHUTTERSTOCK ©



Castle Sinclair Girnigoe

Castle to Castle

A WALKING TOUR OF WICK

It begins with one castle and ends with another. Kick off your one-day walking tour at the ruins of **Old Wick Castle**, which sits on a narrow headland with sheer cliffs on each side. Follow the cliffside path north past **Tinker's Cave**, a sea cave that was occupied all throughout the 19th century, and joins **Harbour Road**, with its old wooden huts and a red-roofed herring market. Head to **Old Pulteney** distillery for a tour and tasting, following the journey of the spirit from water source to whisky glass, before grabbing a lunch at **Harbour Chip Shop**. In the afternoon, have a look around **Wick Heritage Museum**, which recounts tales from the town's fishing heyday – and details its subsequent collapse. From here, follow Union St west and come to the world's shortest street, **Ebenezer Place**. It's the width of just one (particularly narrow) building, now Mackays Hotel. Cross the bridge and follow the road up to the High St and **St Fergus Church**, with the remnants of the original 15th-century church in its cemetery. Head east along the coast to Broadhaven, then pick up signs to Noss Head. From here, it's an hour's walk through green fields to the cliff-edge ruins of **Castle Sinclair Girnigoe**.



BEST PLACES TO EAT IN WICK

Wickers World

A harbourside cafe offering good comfort food, including baguettes, baked potatoes and haddock and chips. **£**

Bord de l'Eau

This simply decorated, very relaxed restaurant serves French meat and game classics alongside seafood specials. **££**

Printers Rest

Simple takeaway food done well, from fresh pasta, pizzas and fried chicken to chocolatey churros. **££**

No 1 Bistro

Dine on pan-fried Orkney scallops and pulled-beef mac and cheese at this Mackays Hotel restaurant. **££**



GETTING AROUND

Unlike other towns in this remote part of Scotland, Wick is easily reached by public transport, with daily trains and buses to Inverness, as well as three flights a day to

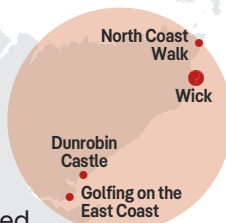
Aberdeen. So there's always the option to get to Wick without a car, then rent one (from Hertz at the airport) for further exploration.



Beyond Wick

From challenging clifftop walks to manicured golf courses, there's entertainment for everyone in the far northeast of Scotland.

Lying at the northeastern extreme of mainland Scotland, the historic county of Caithness has some of the country's most dramatic coastal scenery. Wick is the jumping-off point for big north coast destinations like John O'Groats (widely thought of as mainland Britain's northernmost point) and Dunnet Head (mainland Britain's actual northernmost point), as well as all the sweeping sandy bays, seabird-covered cliffs and top-notch distilleries in between. But Wick is also a good base for exploring the east coast, home to Neolithic burial tombs, ancient castles, grand country manors and famous golf courses. And with several of the region's larger towns connected by train to Inverness, Scotland's far northeast feels less remote than its far northwest.



TOP TIP

It's considerably flatter here than elsewhere in the Highlands; ideal for improving your hiking stamina before hitting the west coast.

Duncansby Head



CATUNGA/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

JEREMY WOODHOUSE/JETTY IMAGES ©



Puffin, Dunnet Head

Clifftop Circuits

HIKING THE NORTH COAST

The eastern end of Scotland's north coast has some of the country's most memorable cliff-edge hikes. Three of the best take around 2½ hours each, so why not tackle them all in a single day?

Start at **John O'Groats** car park, 25 minutes' drive north of Wick. Wander down towards the harbour for an obligatory photo with the distance signpost – Land's End, 874 miles! – before joining the surfaced trail leading east. You'll pass by seaweed-coated shores and pretty pebble beaches on your way to **Duncansby Head Lighthouse**. Soak up the incredible views of the cliffs and sea stacks (which are covered in guillemots and puffins during nesting season) before looping back to John O'Groats for your car – and maybe a quick lunch. From here, drive 10 minutes' west to the **Castle of Mey**, a favourite home of the Queen Mother and the start of another looped walk; this time to the headland at **St John's Point**, with sea views to the Island of Stroma. Look out for the tidal pool nature reserve Scotland's Haven on your way. Finally, drive west to **Dunnet Head**, the northernmost point of



BEST DISTILLERIES ON THE NORTH COAST

Wolfburn

There's no visitor centre here but book a tour to see this whisky distillery's inner workings.

Dunnet Bay Distillery

This family-run distillery, with regular tours and tastings, has won prizes galore for its Rock Rose gin.

North Point Distillery

With a focus on rum and gin, this modern distillery on a former US Navy base offers daily tours.

8 Doors Distillery

Due to open in 2023, there are big things expected from this John O'Groats whisky distillery.



WHERE TO SNACK ON THE EAST COAST

Tasty Toes

Grab a crab or lobster roll to go from this Dunbeath Harbour seafood shack. £

Jam Fire Deli

Part of Timespan, a museum in Helmsdale, this Caribbean cafe has unbeatable jerk chicken. £

Harry Gow Brora

Pancakes, pastries, pies and paninis are all on the menu at this award-winning bakery cafe. £

BEST THINGS TO DO IN DORNOCH



Robert Ratcliffe, General Manager of **Royal Golf Hotel** (royalgolfhoteldornoch.com), shares his top things to do in Dornoch.

Walk the beach

Dornoch Beach's fine expanse of golden sand is perfect for a stroll, especially if you have a dog.

Play golf

Royal Dornoch is one of Scotland's finest championship courses, with many golfers aspiring to play its natural links!

Drink coffee

Milk and Honey has a great variety of teas and coffees – and delicious home-baked goods too.

Listen to music

A traditional pub with fantastic food and drink, the Eagle also has live music throughout the season.

Taste whisky

Just south of town, the operators of Glenmorangie Distillery have been honing their craft for more than 175 years.



ONOREL J. NOVOTNY - 92/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Dunrobin Castle

mainland Britain, for picturesque views across the water to Orkney. Stroll around its 19th-century lighthouse and Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) nature reserve before taking the west coast down to the grassy shores of **Sanders Loch**. Turn back to collect your car or push on to the lovely **Peedie Sands** beach (though you'll then have another 2½-hour walk back to the start).

The Stateliest of Homes

DISCOVER DUNROBIN CASTLE

It's only when you're in the gardens looking back that you realise quite how strange and flamboyant it is. Constructed over several centuries in various styles, **Dunrobin Castle** (about an hour's drive down the coast from Wick) is today an entirely



WHERE TO STAY ON THE NORTHEAST COAST

The Hawthorns

A charming B&B with five super-spacious ground-floor rooms, right by the Castle of Mey. **££**

John O'Groats by Together Travel

These brightly coloured self-catering lodges offer views right across the sea to Orkney. **££**

Forss House

A luxurious country house with even more luxurious cottages, plus the best restaurant for miles. **£££**



unique creation: a bizarre (yet beautiful) cross between a French chateau, an English palace and a Highland castle, with steep walls punctuated by decorative windows and topped with Disney-like turrets. It's also enormous – by far the largest house in the north of Scotland. The interior is lavishly furnished with family portraits, 18th-century tapestries and mahogany tables – decor that befits its aristocratic owner, the Earl of Sutherland – but most visitors prefer to spend their time outdoors in the verdant, Versailles-inspired grounds. Laid out by Charles Barry, the architect behind the Houses of Parliament in London, the gardens cover more than 400 hectares between the ramparts of the castle and the open sea. There are the two formal gardens set around circular pools with fountains, as well as groves, fuchsia beds and a manicured lawn reserved for daily falconry demonstrations. But most of all, the gardens provide the perfect vantage point for looking back up at one of Scotland's most distinctive buildings.

Fairways & Fine Views

GOLFING ON THE EAST COAST

It's estimated that golf tourism is worth in the region of £300 million a year to Scotland. Hundreds of thousands of golfers come here every year to test themselves on world-famous links courses such as the Old Course at St Andrews and the Championship Course at Carnoustie. But one region that is often overlooked is the far northeast coast – despite the fact that it has some of the county's best seaside golf.

Start your golfing adventure on the most famous links in the northeast, the Championship Course at **Royal Dornoch Golf Club** (it's about 90 minutes' drive south of Wick, but you'll be making your way back up). Designed by the legendary Old Tom Morris, its stunning setting around the pristine white beaches, grassy sand dunes and blazing yellow gorse of the Dornoch Firth results in it consistently being ranked among the best courses in the world. From here, head just 6 miles up the coast to **Golspie Golf Club** to experience another scenic links course, complete with hard-to-beat sea and mountain views. Another 6 miles north brings you to **Brora Golf Club**, home to a renowned James Braid-designed championship course. And even further up the coast is **Wick Golf Club**, with its windswept links course first opened way back in 1870. New to the game? Start your golfing journey at the open-to-all, nine-hole introductory courses at **Helmsdale Golf Club** and **Lybster Golf Club**.

THE SUTHERLAND CLEARANCES

In the early 1800s, the Duke of Sutherland and Lady Sutherland concluded that they could get higher rents on their land by letting it out for sheep farming, so they set about systematically evicting their existing tenants. Over the course of the next decade, the Sutherland Clearances saw thousands of residents displaced, with many of them forced to emigrate. The 'success' of the approach led to the Duke becoming Britain's richest man, which allowed his family to spend a fortune remodelling their home: Dunrobin Castle. Today, the Duke remains a controversial figure, with growing calls to remove his hilltop monument near Golspie and replace it with a monument to the victims of the Clearances.



GETTING AROUND

Regular trains and buses run up the east coast to Wick and Thurso, with stops in Dornoch, Golspie and Helmsdale, making this by far the most accessible part of the northern Highlands.

However, the journey times are longer than by car, and some corners of the northeast (like John O'Groats) will require multiple changes.

