

NORTHERN BEAUTY: Scotland's Secluded Islands



Go beyond the Scottish Borders, bypass the capital, traverse the Highlands and cross the North Sea. Only then will you reach the country's outer limits... the remote, and remarkable, Scottish islands

WORDS JOSEPH REANEY PICTURES VISITSCOTLAND

It is a bitterly-cold winter's morning in 1952. A farmer on Orkney, an archipelago off the northern coast of Scotland, is preparing for the long day's work ahead. He slips on his wellies, zips up his jacket and steps outside. Then he stops dead in his tracks. Ahead of him lies an eerie sight; an empty, silent field. He looks left, then right, scanning the horizon. But there is no denying it. His chickens have vanished.

As the morning unfolds, it transpires that this farmer is far from alone. Orkney has experienced a mass poultry exodus, with more than 85,000 hens disappearing overnight. If this were Midsomer, it

could be the start of a thrilling whodunit... yet on Orkney there's no doubt about the culprit. Last night, the islands were battered by wild, gale-force winds. And that means only one thing could have happened.

The chickens were blown away.

A day trip to Orkney

My tour guide chuckles. His chicken story has provoked a mix of anguish and laughter among my group of day-tripping tourists, and I guiltily chuckle along. But as I peer out of the bus window at the Orkney landscape, I also see how much this

Above: The Neolithic village of Skara Brae, Orkney, with the Bay of Skail in the background

tragicomic tale reveals about the island. Firstly, it evokes the flat, fallow fields I can see before me, without any trees or natural barriers to prevent an unsuspecting hen from being whisked into the North Sea. Secondly, it underlines the importance of agriculture then and now, with farm products including cheese and ice cream remaining Orkney's biggest exports. And thirdly, it reveals the vital role of Orkney during the two world wars. Well, why do you think an island of 21,000 residents needed quite so many hens? It's because farmers were used to having extra mouths to feed.

Orkney, an archipelago of over 70 islands spread out across 380 square miles, was a hive of activity during both the First and the Second World Wars – and nowhere more so than Scapa Flow. This natural, sheltered harbour was the main base for Britain's naval forces, with hundreds of thousands of troops stationed here. They had a profound effect on the region, including building a series of causeways to block eastern approaches to Scapa Flow. Known as the Churchill Barriers and made of 250,000 tons of broken rock and concrete, they

now serve as road crossings between islands.

Yet for me and many others, the biggest draw of Scapa Flow is below the surface. Lying hidden at the bottom of the harbour is an amazing sight: seven well-preserved German battleships. A small fraction of 52 ships scuttled by their commander in 1919 to ensure they couldn't fall into the hands of Britain and its Allies, the ships now rest serenely on the seabed, interrupted only by visitors enjoying one of the world's best wreck dives.

Our next stop on the island takes us back far beyond wartime Britain to the Neolithic era. Skara Brae is a 5,000-year-old coastal village comprising the ruins of nine clustered houses which were dug into the ground and fortified with stone. A stroll around this UNESCO World Heritage Site means tackling the elements, and ferocious wind and rain threaten to send me the way of the chickens. But it is undoubtedly worth it, as the ancient dwellings, complete with surviving stone-built furniture and utensils, offer a rare and fascinating insight into the lives of our distant ancestors.

Our visit to Skara Brae is followed hot on the >>



Above, clockwise from left: A view of North Uist and Eaval from the top of Rueval on Benbecula; Outer Hebrides sea kayaking; stock of fabric at Harris Tweed and Knitwear shop, Tarbert, Isle of Harris; a couple look at the intricate wall paintings inside the ornate Italian Chapel (built from Nissen huts by Italian POWs), on Lamb Holm, Orkney **Below:** A surfer with her board makes her way down to Balephuill Bay, Isle of Tiree, Inner Hebrides



heels by a stop at another highlight of prehistoric Orkney: the Standing Stones of Stenness. The oldest henge site in the UK, besting Stonehenge by 500 years or so, its exposed location in the middle of a boggy, windswept field gives the site an otherworldly aura.

We end our day on Orkney back close to where we started (both by location and by era). The Italian Chapel is a Catholic church built during the Second World War, and it has an inspirational backstory. Italian prisoners of war, who were put to work on the nearby Churchill Barriers, requested permission to build their own place of worship during their time of incarceration, so they were assigned two old corrugated-steel Nissen huts. They set to work creating a masterpiece. The huts were joined end to end and the interior was sculpted from every limited material at their disposal, including plasterboard, concrete, stones and rubble, empty food tins, old car exhausts and used bullet shells. The result? An impossibly beautiful, intricately-decorated chapel that stands today as testament to the human spirit.

Due north

Compared to many Scottish islands, Orkney is

remarkably close to mainland Scotland, at just over six miles from the coast. Compare that to the country's northernmost island, Shetland, which lies more than 100 miles north of the mainland, almost as close to Norway as it is to the UK. This remoteness has given Shetland a unique character; part British, part Scandinavian, with a personality that's all its own.

Like Orkney, Shetland is an archipelago, with around 15 of its 100 or so islands inhabited. The largest island is known, tongue firmly in cheek, as Mainland, and this is where I begin my four-day self-guided tour of the island. Picking up a rental car at Sumburgh Airport at the island's southern tip, I drive up the east coast – starting by crossing the airport runway, which is surreal – to Shetland's capital, Lerwick.

Lerwick is hardly an attraction-packed capital, but it is certainly worth a visit. I spend four happy hours strolling the harbour, climbing up to Fort Charlotte and exploring the Shetland Museum for some early insight into the island. Lerwick is also where the famous Up Helly Aa festival takes place every January. But I didn't come to Shetland for its urban appeal, so after checking into my B&B in Scalloway (a nearby town that was once the

island's capital, and has a pretty 17th-century castle), I venture out into nature.

Over the next three days, I enjoy some of Shetland's most spectacular natural attractions. My first day is spent hiking the red-granite cliffs of Muckle Roe to reach its remote solar-powered lighthouse, as well as exploring more coastal walks along northern Mainland. A second day is spent driving all the way up to the northern island of Unst, via two ferry crossings, to visit Hermaness Nature Reserve, a protected coastal area of moody moorland and craggy cliffs that is regularly home to nesting puffins – the cutest seabirds on earth. And I spend half a day on St Ninian's Isle, a pretty peninsula connected to the Mainland by an 'ayre', a narrow stretch of beach that, weirdly, has open sea on both sides of it.



Above: A whalebone plaque from a Viking Ship Burial at Scar on Sanday, on display at Orkney Museum, Tankerness House, Kirkwall **Below:** A puffin on Sumburgh Head, Shetland

“A protected coastal area of moody moorland and craggy cliffs that is regularly home to nesting puffins – the cutest seabirds on earth”



Shetland also has its fair share of manmade attractions. Perhaps the best known of these is Jarshof, an extraordinary archaeological site that shows human homes stretching back 4,500 years. Like Skara Brae on Orkney, it has ancient oval dwellings with sturdy stone walls set along the coast, with a series of bone artefacts on display. But built on top of these, I also see an Iron Age broch (tower), a series of Pictish artworks, a Viking longhouse and a 17th-century Scottish manor house – so every age of Shetland man.

Today, it seems Shetlanders prefer to live at bus stops. At least, that is the conclusion I came to when I stumbled across Bobby's Bus Shelter. This bus stop on Unst was spruced up by the local council about 15 years ago, when they concluded that waiting at a cold shelter in the middle of nowhere for a once-a-day bus was not much fun. So they fitted it with a sofa, TV, curtains and lots of other home comforts.

Heading for the Hebrides

Not all of Scotland's islands are in the north of the country. In fact, a great deal of them lie to the west. These are known as the Hebrides. There are the Inner Hebrides, such as Skye, Islay and Jura, close to the mainland. Then there are the Outer Hebrides, which are among Scotland's most secluded islands.

Two Outer Hebridean isles that can be reached by plane are Benbecula and Barra; the latter of which has flights landing on a beach runway. Both have interesting attractions, varying from island castles to idyllic beaches, as well as good connections to the surrounding Hebridean islands. But in my humble opinion, the most interesting Outer Hebrides island is Lewis and Harris. Don't let the name fool you – this is a single island (the third largest in the UK, in fact, after Great Britain and Ireland), though its character can be crudely divided in two parts. The north of the island, known as Lewis, has the bulk of the island's cultural attractions, while the south of the island, called Harris, is all about mother nature.

I start my three-day stay in Stornoway, the island's biggest city and the heart of tourism in Lewis. The town itself is larger than I expect, home to 8,000 people, which means there are not only shops, cafes and restaurants but also supermarkets and even a cinema. It is centred around a pretty harbour, which is dotted with curious seals poking out their heads, and has buses departing for all of Lewis' top sights.

The first excursion on my list is the Blackhouse Museum at Arnol. This includes a restoration of an old blackhouse, the most common type of dwelling>>



Above, clockwise from left: The Callanish Standing Stones, Isle of Lewis; the remains of the prehistoric settlement of Jarlishof on West Voe, Sumburgh, Shetland; Barrels stored at the Highland Park Distillery, Kirkwall, Orkney; The Gaada stack, a natural arch of three legs at Da Ristie, on the island of Foula, Shetland

on the island just a century ago. Built with stone walls packed with earth, and topped with wooden rafters covered in a thatch of turf and straw, the house is divided into two separate living quarters; one for people, and one for livestock. The central hearth is lit day and night, but without a chimney, the smoke simply remains trapped inside. Hence the name, 'blackhouse'.

Later that day, I catch another bus to nearby Callanish Stones, an arrangement of standing stones that dates back to the late Neolithic era. A fascinating exhibition explains the theories behind how and why the 13 stones and central monolith were placed here, and what they meant to the ancient islanders.

Harris is less easily accessible from Stornoway with public transport, so I decide to hire a car for a day so that I can explore the southern half of the island. Immediately, it's clear I've made exactly the right decision. Driving on Harris is a joy, with a new, jaw-dropping landscape appearing round every bend. One minute it is a stunning stretch of pristine beach, the next it's a moon-like landscape of rocks and craters; one minute high cliffs and crashing waves, the next lush green hills and glistening lochs. A leisurely drive around Harris – especially the southern half, stopping at the gorgeous Luskentyre Beach, the dramatic St Clement's Church and the informative Harris Tweed Museum – is a truly unforgettable experience.

It is also, I realise, the climax of my travels around Scotland's secluded islands.

INFO

EAT

Digby Chick, Stornoway, Lewis

Treat yourself to sublime seafood at this harbourside restaurant in Stornoway. Digby Chick's delicious specialities include pan-fried garlic and parsley scallops and Minch halibut fillet with lobster spaghetti.

5 Bank Street, Stornoway, HS1 2XG
+44 (0)1851 700026
www.digbychick.co.uk

Frankie's Fish and Chips, Brae, Shetland

Frankie's is the northernmost chippy in the UK. It is also the best, according to the 2015 National Fish and Chip Awards. You cannot leave Shetland without tasting Frankie's lip-smacking battered haddock.

Brae, Shetland, ZE2 9QJ
+44 (0)1806 522 700
www.frankiesfishandchips.com

Farmhouse Café, Balemartine, Tiree

A converted barn with comfy chairs, a gift shop and views of pretty peak Ben Hynish, the Farmhouse Café is a relaxing spot to enjoy perhaps the Hebrides' finest cup of coffee, as well as yummy light bites.

Balemartine, Isle of Tiree, PA77 6UA
+44 (0)7801 435599
www.isleoftiree.com/shopping/businesses/food-drink-farmhouse-cafe

STAY

Midshore Guest House, Scalloway, Shetland

A warm welcome is assured at this clean, comfortable and conveniently-located B&B. Prices are low compared to Lerwick, yet the rooms are lovely, the breakfast is divine and the owner is great company.

1 New Road, Scalloway, Shetland, ZE1 0TS
+44 (0)1595 880765
[Booking available via booking.com](http://www.booking.com)

Merkister Hotel, Orkney

Sandwiched between capital Kirkwall and Skara Brae, Merkister Hotel offers a welcome rural retreat. Expect comfy, en-suite rooms and fine food. Its location on Loch Harray also makes it a hit with anglers.

Merkister Hotel, Harray, Orkney, KW17 2LF
+44 (0)1856 771366
www.merkister.com

Harris White Cottage, Harris

This beautiful croft, which sits on the southern coast of Harris and offers stunning sea views, is one of Scotland's best self-catering cottages. It books up fast for peak season, so plan to stay here in advance.

Rodel, Isle of Harris, HS5 3TW
+44 (0)7787 851155
www.harriswhitecottage.com



FLY

Flybe has flights to Orkney, Shetland, Lewis and Harris, Barra, Benbecula and Tiree