



WIRESTOCK/ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES ©

View along the Drumbeg Loop (p180)

SCOTLAND'S HIGHLANDS & ISLANDS

THE JOURNEY BEGINS HERE

Everyone remembers their first trip to the Highlands and islands. For me, it was as a teenager with a freshly minted driving licence, cautiously driving up the west coast to Skye – and then beyond. Most memorable was driving the glorious Drumbeg Loop, a nonstop parade of jagged mountain peaks, shimmering blue lochs and white-sand beaches. I'd never heard of it before. Now I try to go every year. Because that's the thing about the Highlands and islands: they aren't somewhere you visit just once. This is a region that seizes your soul and refuses to let go.

Joseph Reaney

[@strangeoldjoe](#)

4

Joseph is a travel and comedy writer based in Scotland and Czechia. He's also the host of the Strange Old World podcast.



My favourite experience is hiking through the rugged, road-free, lochan-speckled landscapes of the Knoydart peninsula – then rewarding myself with a drink in the **Old Forge** (p137).

WHO GOES WHERE

Our writers and experts choose the places which, for them, define Scotland's Highlands and islands.

GONZALO BUZONNI/SHUTTERSTOCK ©



The island of **Hoy** (p200) in Orkney holds memories of a magical week spent scuba diving on the wrecks of the WWI German High Seas Fleet, topped off with an adrenaline-fuelled ascent of the Old Man of Hoy (and a nerve-racking descent by abseil). Afterwards, we unrolled our sleeping bags in the bothy at Rackwick Bay and sat outside watching sea spray drift the beach as the setting sun faded into twilight. A magical place.

Neil Wilson

@neil3965

Neil is a travel writer who lives in Perthshire and has covered Scotland for Lonely Planet for more than 25 years.

RICHARD KELLET/SHUTTERSTOCK ©



My favourite experience is watching the sunset from the north of **Iona** (p66); waves foaming upon white sand and vivid pastel skies above the silhouette of Staffa and the Treshnish Isles.

Kay Gillespie

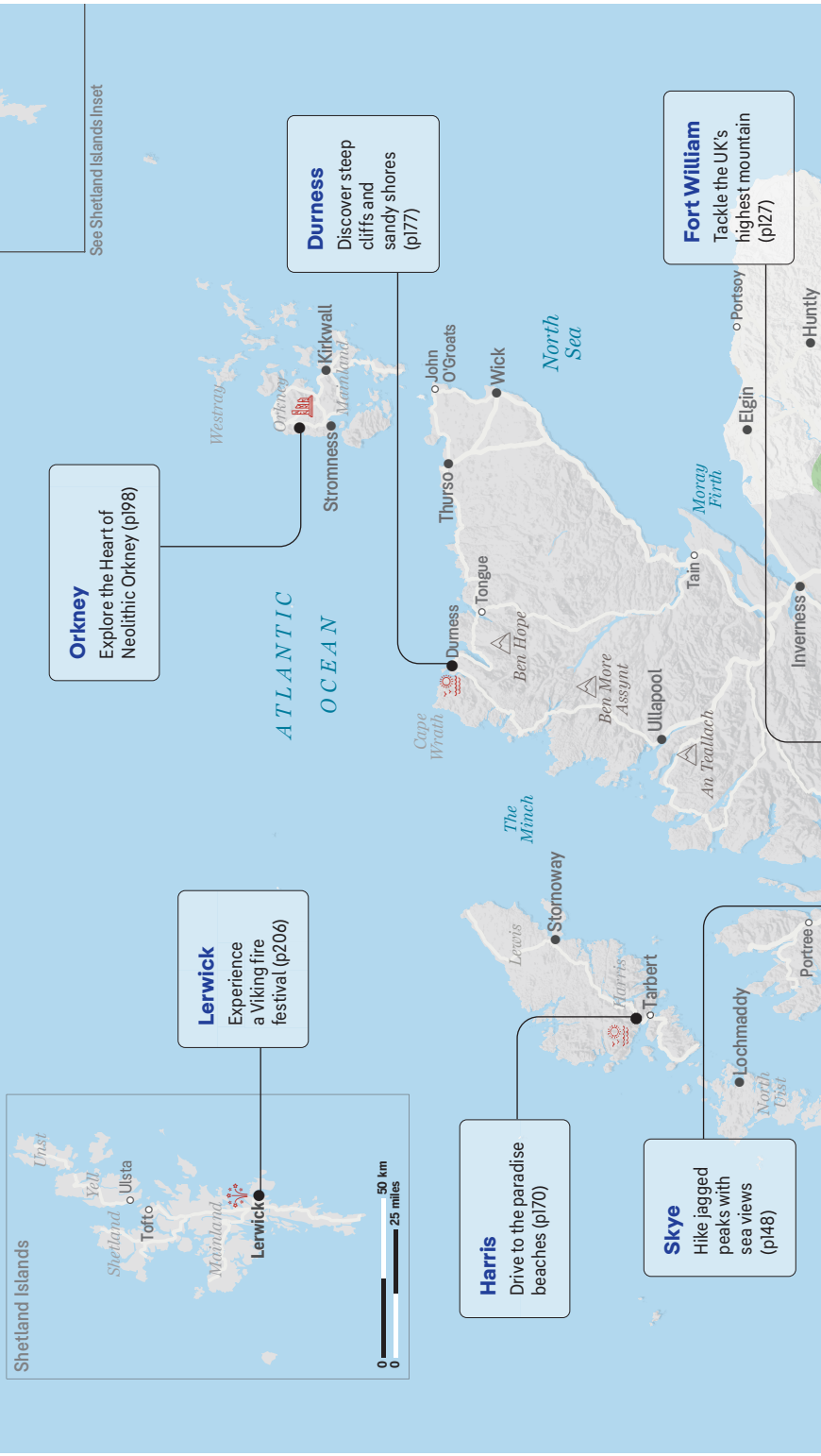
@thechaoticscot

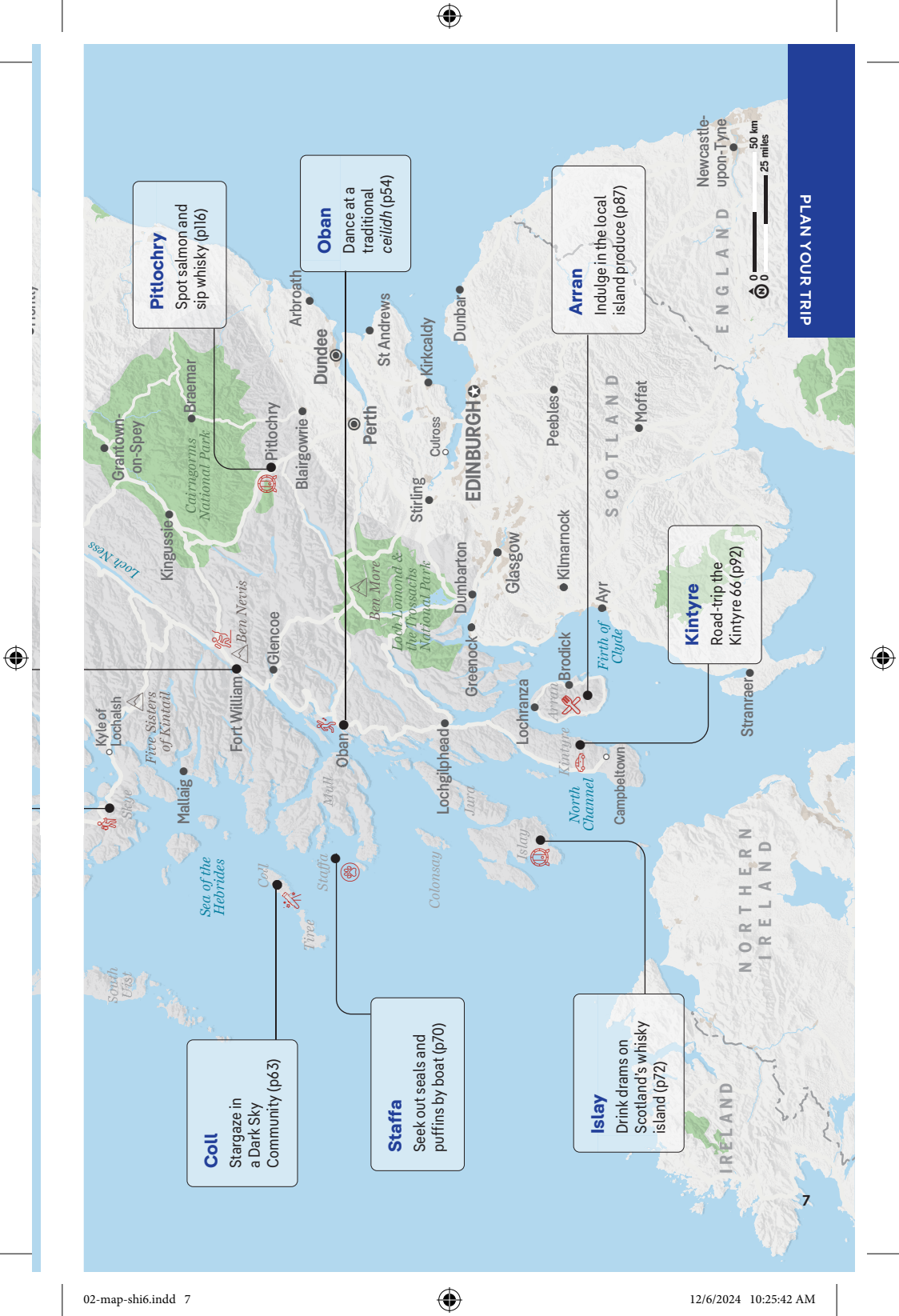
Kay is a travel writer and content creator from Edinburgh who explores Scotland by public transport and has visited more than 60 Scottish islands.

CONTRIBUTING WRITERS

Laurie Goodlad wrote the Meet the Highlanders & Islanders, Island Languages Under Threat and Independence & Autonomy features. Laurie is a travel writer and historian – and the author of *Shetland: Your Essential Travel Guide*. @shetlandwithlaurie

Mike MacEachern wrote the Rewilding the Highlands feature. Mike is an award-winning freelance travel journalist. @MikeMacEachern





Pitlochry
Spot salmon and sip whisky (p16)

Oban
Dance at a traditional *ceilidh* (p54)

Arran
Indulge in the local island produce (p87)

Kintyre
Road-trip the Kintyre 66 (p92)

Coll
Stargaze in a Dark Sky Community (p63)

Staffa
Seek out seals and puffins by boat (p70)

Islay
Drink drams on Scotland's whisky island (p72)

0 50 km
0 25 miles

PLAN YOUR TRIP



DRAMS & DISTILLERIES

'If you don't like whisky, you've just not found the right one,' says anyone with a soft spot for single malt and Scottish clichés. Derived from the Gaelic *uisge beatha*, meaning 'water of life', whisky is Scotland's national tippie and most famous export. Tasting whisky is a rite of passage: go straight to the source and pucker up for the good stuff. When you find your favourite dram, raise your glass and say *sláinte* to that!



Whisky Regions

There are five whisky regions: Lowland, Speyside, Campbeltown, Highland and Islay. The latter three are in the Highlands and islands, as is the southwestern tip of Speyside.



Distilleries

With dozens of whisky distilleries across the region, from Inverness to Orkney to Harris, it's easy to incorporate at least one distillery tour into your itinerary.



Tour Prices

Standard one-hour distillery tours typically cost between £20 and £30, and this includes a tasting at the end. Some distilleries offer more exclusive tours.

FROM LEFT: WILL DALE/SHUTTERSTOCK ©, TIM GRAHAM/GETTY IMAGES ©, BARHANUN/SHUTTERSTOCK ©





BEST WHISKY EXPERIENCES

Embark on a distillery-hopping adventure around **1 Islay** (p72); work your way through world-famous whiskies in search of your perfect dram.

Curate your own whisky trail around the edges of **2 Cairngorms National Park** (p110), from Blair Athol to Dalwhinnie, Tomintoul to Glenlivet.

Discover a trio of island distilleries on **3 Skye** (p153) and Raasay (p157): Torabhaig Distillery, Isle of Raasay Distillery and Talisker Distillery (pictured far left).

Visit Orkney's **4 Highland Park** (p227), Scotland's northernmost whisky distillery – though Saxa Vord in Shetland may soon take that title.

Pair your single malt whisky with local handmade chocolates on the Whisky and Chocolate Pairing tour at **5 Lochranza Distillery** (p89).



JOSE MIGUEL SANCHEZ/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Dunrobin Castle (p186)



CONQUERING CASTLES

Castles have become an unofficial emblem of Scotland's Highlands and islands, unapologetically stereotypical yet undeniably appealing and evocative. Visitors can discover everything from showy, 'look-at-me' stately homes, to brutishly impenetrable fortresses – forever impressive, even in partial ruin.

Entry Fees

Admission usually costs from £10 to £15. Alternatively, you can just photograph them from outside or visit smaller, ruined castles that are free to roam.

Seasonal Hours

Many attractions in the Highlands and islands close during the quieter months or operate on reduced hours: Check online before you visit.

BEST CASTLE EXPERIENCES

Enjoy views up and down Loch Ness from
1 Urquhart Castle (p107).

Explore **2 Inverness Castle** (p102), a former prison and courts.

Look around the country house-style **3 Dunrobin Castle** (p186), with its lavish interior and magnificent gardens.

Discover the impressive ruins of **4 Gyle Castle** (p60), which overlook the sea from the Isle of Kerrera, just off Oban.

Stroll around roofless **5 Scalloway Castle** (p213): once a symbol of oppression for Shetlanders, now a fascinating history museum.





PUFFINS, DOLPHINS & DEER

The land, sea and sky of Scotland's Highlands and islands are home-sweet-home to an abundance of wonderful wildlife species, from native birds and mammals to the swathe of nesting seabirds and migrating marine life that visit every year. Quietly observe and photograph them on uninhabited islands, secluded shorelines, by the roadside or from a boat.

FROM LEFT: MARK CHRISTOPHER COOPER / SHUTTERSTOCK © PAKYASIN / SHUTTERSTOCK ©



Puffin Season

Thousands of seabirds holiday in the Highlands and islands each summer, coming to breed and nest. The best time to see them is May to July.



Marine Mammals

Minke whales, orca whales, basking sharks, dolphins, porpoises and seals all swim in the waters here. Look out for them from the shore or at sea.



Wildlife Photography

For quality, close-up shots of Scottish wildlife while keeping a safe distance, invest in a zoom lens (200mm and above); buy secondhand to save money.



BEST WILDLIFE EXPERIENCES

Get up close (but not too close!) to adorable, comical, orange-beaked puffins on a boat trip from Iona to spectacular **1 Staffa** (p70).

Look out for majestic stags on the **2 Isle of Jura** (p77); there are over 4000 red deer currently residing on the island.

Search for sea eagles soaring overhead and swooping down to grab fish from the water, available on a wildlife cruise with **3 Mull Charters** (p60).

Take a guided tour of **4 Unst** (p215) with Shetland Nature and there's a chance you'll catch a glimpse of the elusive Eurasian otter.

Watch dolphins playing in the **5 Moray Firth** (p105) near Inverness; they're best seen either from Fort George or from Chanonry Point across the bay.



PEAKS & TRAILS

Scotland's good looks didn't happen overnight – they've been millions of years in the making. Instigated by volcanic activity, peaked giants and half-pipe glens were chiselled to scenic perfection by glaciers, and the contours of the coast shaped by the brutal sea. Across these landscapes, you'll find a vast network of walking trails, from low and long distance to mighty mountain heights; 3000ft (914.4m) and above is a Munro, and there are hundreds to summit.



Plan Your Route

Use apps and online resources like **WalkHighlands** (walkhighlands.co.uk); download the route map and description before you set off – and share it with friends and family.



Guides & Transfers

Various companies offer group hikes and private guided hikes in the Highlands and islands. For long-distance walks, packages including accommodation and baggage transfers are also available.



Hiking Gear

Prepare for all weathers: pack layers, waterproofs, plenty of water and midge repellent for spring and summer. Hiking boots are essential for hill walking. Essential!

FROM LEFT: GEORGE BALASOV/SHUTTERSTOCK © JAKUB STANEK/SHUTTERSTOCK © ALAN KRAFT/SHUTTERSTOCK ©



West Highland Way (p37)



BEST HIKING EXPERIENCES

Summit the highest mountain in the UK, the mighty **1 Ben Nevis** (p127); it's a long and challenging hike with epic scenery.

Tick off a whole trio of iconic island mountains on a guided day hike up the **2 Paps of Jura** (p77).

Tackle Scotland's best-known long-distance walking route, the 96-mile **3 West Highland Way** (p37), featuring some of the region's most beautiful landscapes.

Stick close to the coast and discover waterfalls, castles, caves and wildlife galore on the multiday **4 Arran Coastal Way** (p91).

Take a clifftop walk from Orkney's Rackwick Bay to its famously striking sea stack, the **5 Old Man of Hoy** (p200).



BEST ISLAND STARGAZING EXPERIENCES

Discover a dreamworld for stargazers on the **1 Isle of Coll** (p63); the night skies are so good, it's now a designated Dark Sky Community.

Travel to **2 Shetland** (p216), the best place in Britain for spotting the northern lights (known locally as the 'mirrie dancers').

Seek out the northeast of **3 Cairngorms National Park** (p110) for regular dark-sky events, and stay warm with a flask of local Tomintoul whisky.

Take a night-sky tour of **4 Arran** (p87). The east coast villages have some light pollution, but the west coast is all big, dark skies.

Follow the Sky Trail around Shetland's **5 Unst** (p215), the UK's northernmost inhabited island, and see ruined castles and sandy beaches along the way.

ISLAND STARGAZING

Scotland is home to a whopping 790 islands, and the vast majority of these are off the west and north coasts. Only a small number have human residents, and even those that do lack the light pollution of the big mainland cities and towns – and that makes them perfect for staring at the stars.



Ferries

Clear skies can't always be guaranteed, but island ferries often need to be prebooked. So leave some bad weather contingency days in your travel schedule.



Island Life

Gazing at stars or the Northern Lights will fill your nights, but you'll need to fill your days too. Base yourself on islands with some life, then day/night-trip to further-flung outposts.



When to Go

While most island visitors choose summer, wannabe stargazers should opt for autumn or winter (also the best time for bracing coastal walks and fireside drams).

PHOTO LEFT: ISTOCKPHOTO/DAVID SHUTTERSTOCK ©, ZENKAI HANAKAWA/DAVID SHUTTERSTOCK ©

TOMMY LEE WALKER/SHUTTERSTOCK ©



Passing place, North Coast 500 (p28)

BEST ROAD TRIP EXPERIENCES

Drive a loop of **1 Harris** (p170) for mountains, lunar landscapes and paradise beaches.

Explore **2 Mull's wild west coast** (p59) from Tobermory to Fionnphort; it's a slow, scenic drive of tight corners and vast seascapes.

Blaze a 66-mile trail around the remote **3 Kintyre peninsula** (p92) on the Kintyre 66, including detours to Arran and Gigha.

Detour from Ullapool onto **4 Destitution Road** (p162).

Follow the dramatic, dazzling **5 Road to Ardnamurchan** (p133) to reach Britain's most westerly point.



HIT THE ROAD

Did someone say 'road trip'? Forget long, tedious drives from A to B – Scotland's Highlands and islands are all about the journey. Every route is rewarded with spectacular sights and constant shifts in the lay of the land. The final destination? A minor detail.

Car Hire

You can rent a car in Inverness or at island airports like Kirkwall, Lerwick and Stornoway. Return it to a different location for an extra fee.

Passing Places

It is important to understand the use of passing places on single-track roads: pull into them to avoid oncoming vehicles and to allow overtaking.



TIME TRAVEL

To instantly blow and boggle the mind, simply try to comprehend the interminable timeline of the Highlands and islands' human history. This is a land filled with 4000-year-old mysteries: stroll through prehistoric villages and ponder the lives of the people who settled there; step into stone circles and burial cairns, positioned in tune with the sun, moon and stars. Where your imagination fails, let a local guide fill in the gaps with fascinating facts.



Passes

If you are planning to visit multiple Historic Environment Scotland sites, buy an Explorer Pass. It's £44 for adults and valid for 14 consecutive days.

Special Events

Historical venues throughout the Highlands and islands host events all year round. Check individual websites for after-hours tours, guided walks, light shows and family fun.



Midsummer

Head to Orkney, Lewis and other remote Scottish islands for the summer solstice, when people gather at sunrise and sunset around the Neolithic standing stones.

FROM LEFT: ANGELA N. PEARMAN/SHUTTERSTOCK ©, EUN CHERRY/BETTY IMAGES ©, WESTEND61/BETTY IMAGES ©





BEST PREHISTORIC EXPERIENCES

Explore a cluster of prehistoric attractions in the **1 Heart of Neolithic Orkney** (p198), including Skara Brae (pictured far left) and the Ring of Brodgar.

Discover towering stone slabs, low-lying stone circles and burial cists in open Arran moorland at **2 Machrie Moor Standing Stones** (p90).

Cycle through 5000 years of history on **3 Lewis** (p167), visiting Dun Carloway Iron Age broch and Callanish Standing Stones.

Visit the atmospheric chambered cairns, standing stones and burial monuments at **4 Clava Cairns** (p104), set amid peaceful woodland near Inverness.

Take a boat to the uninhabited Shetland island of **5 Mousa** (p210) and marvel at the magnificently preserved, 2000-year-old Mousa Broch.





HELEN HORTON/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Coastline near Ullapool (p159)



COASTAL CHARM

Bejewelled with heritage harbours, cute cottages and well-worn cobbles, these seaside settlements are a treat for the eyes – and your camera. Create your own postcard pictures in quaint fishing villages and bustling port towns.

Boats & Ferries

During summer, boat trips depart from ports and harbours across the region – for wildlife watching and remote landscape tours, but also as transport between islands.

Seaside Treats

Regardless of the weather or the location, days by the sea are tailor-made for eating fish and chips and ice cream by the water.

BEST SEASIDE EXPERIENCES

Browse local shops, walk to Rubha nan Gall Lighthouse, and photograph the facades in pretty

1 Tobermory, Mull (p58).

Soak up seaside vibes with mountain vistas in

2 Ullapool (p159), and feast on seafood.

Play golf at the Championship Course at **3 Royal Dornoch** (p187).

Discover the pristine sand of Seilebost, one of many beautiful beaches along **4 Harris' west coast** (p171).

Drive the **5 Drumbeg Loop** (p180) in the far northwest, stopping at spectacular sea lochs and sandy bays along the way.



FESTIVALS & MUSIC

Highlanders and Islanders know how to throw a party, and there is always something to celebrate: culture, traditions or just...the weekend! The calendar is speckled with song, dance, games and fire, whether held under the elusive summer sun or through the dark depths of winter. So immerse yourself in celebrations while meeting the locals.

FROM LEFT: CATCHLIGHT PHOTOGRAPHY / SHUTTERSTOCK ©, JAMES J. SHUTTERSTOCK ©



Plan Ahead

As soon as dates are announced for one of the region's more popular festivals and events, book your tickets and accommodation to avoid missing out.



Island Festivals

During summer, islands like Shetland, Mull and Tiree host some of the country's best folk music festivals, and the party usually starts on the ferry!



Live Music

Listen to history passed down through Gaelic song, enjoy toe-tapping tunes in a local pub, and dance until you're dizzy at a traditional *ceilidh*.



BEST FESTIVALS & MUSIC EXPERIENCES

Experience Islay's annual **1 Fèis Ile** (p75), probably best known for its limited-edition whiskies, but also an amazing music and dance festival.

Brace yourself for the fiery festivities at **2 Up Helly Aa** (pictured left; p207) in Lerwick: Vikings, live music and a replica longship set alight with 1000 torches.

Put on your dancing shoes for a *ceilidh* night at The View in **3 Oban** (p56), and party the night away in the traditional way.

Expect bagpipes, dancing and extreme shows of strength (like caber tossing, hammer throwing and tug of war) at the **4 Braemar Gathering** (p31) in the Cairngorms.

Celebrate the summer solstice with music and dance, as well as dramatic storytelling, at **5 St Magnus International Festival** (p31), Orkney.

REGIONS & CITIES

Find the places that tick all your boxes.

Northern Highlands & Islands

A WILD & WINDSWEPT BEAUTY

Prepare to be blown away, both figuratively and literally. Roam the rugged north coast, comb paradise beaches with beauty beyond measure, marvel at the magical on Skye and hop between the incredible islands of the Outer Hebrides. Expect castles, mountains, whisky...and the history of the Highland Clearances along the way.

p143

Northern Highlands & Islands

p143

Orkney & Shetland

p190

Orkney & Shetland

SCOTLAND'S TRUE NORTH

Physically and culturally adrift from the north of Scotland, Orkney and Shetland offer some of the most incredible wildlife, hiking and archaeological sites in Scotland. Step back in time and discover the Heart of Neolithic Orkney or hike through Shetland's Geopark, discovering a landscape formed by fire and ice.

p190



Inverness & the Central Highlands

THE HEART OF SCOTLAND

The ultimate Scottish scenery and action-packed history; everything you imagined and more. Mysterious lochs, untamed wilderness, a mountain-laden national park, the UK's highest peak, and show-stopping Glen Coe; sites of battles, burials and gruesome massacres. Tranquil islands, white-sand beaches....and Inverness, capital of the Highlands and gateway to adventure.

p96

Inverness & the Central Highlands

p96

Southern Highlands & Islands

p47

Southern Highlands & Islands

SCENERY, WHISKY & WILDLIFE

Road-trip and island-hop your way to adventure and relaxation: watersports, wildlife encounters, historic gems, star-sprinkled dark skies and serene beaches trimmed in turquoise. This immensely diverse region is home to a national park, remote peninsulas, a collection of stunning islands and some of the country's best whisky, seafood and local larder.

p47





GABRIELLE PHOTOGRAPHS/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Sea views near Laphroaig distillery, Islay (p72)



ITINERARIES

South by Southwest

Allow: 7 days

Distance: 270 miles

Cast off and let your worries slip away on an epic island-hopping extravaganza around the Southern Highlands and islands. Drive, bike, hike, swim and paddle: sample local seafood, go wildlife watching, breeze around the beaches, and fill your lungs with fresh sea air on the many, *many* ferry journeys.



1

LOCH LOMOND 1 DAY

Spend most of your first day on **Loch Lomond** (p82). From Luss, you can join a lake cruise or rent kayaks, stand-up paddleboards or water-skis. Later in the day, take a drive along the super-scenic route to the Rest and Be Thankful viewpoint. Then, as the sun is setting, it's onwards to Inveraray, where you can spend the night enjoying views over Loch Fyne.



2

ISLAY 2 DAYS

An hour's drive south from Inveraray brings you to Kennacraig...and the ferry to **Islay** (p72). Once in Port Ellen, leave your car behind, as the Holy Trinity of Islay distilleries – Laphroaig, Lagavulin and Ardbeg – are all in walking distance. An extra day gives you time to explore some of the island's other distilleries, interspersed with fat biking, sea kayaking or birdwatching.



3

JURA 1 DAY

From Islay, take a day trip to the less-developed **Jura** (p77). It's a 10-minute ferry crossing from Islay's Port Askaig to Feolin. Once there, look out for grazing red deer and soaring sea eagles among the spectacular Paps of Jura. Head to main town Craighouse for food at the Jura Hotel and a tour of Jura Distillery, then return to Port Askaig for the night.



4 COLONSAY ½ DAY

Take the morning ferry crossing to **Colonsay** (p78). Double-check the tide times before taking a barefoot stroll across the natural causeway to Oronsay. This RSPB nature reserve is a lovely place to spend a couple of hours, and you can also check out the 14th-century ruins of Oronsay Priory. If you've time to spare, consider climbing Carnan Eion, the island's highest peak.



5 OBAN ½ DAY

Another ferry ride brings you back to the mainland. **Oban** (p54) has two nicknames: the 'Gateway to the Isles' (for obvious reasons) and the 'Seafood Capital of the UK' (for reasons you'll soon discover). Stroll the seafront, hike to the hilltop monument, then reward yourself with fish and chips or a seafood platter by the pier. Later, hit the town for live music and *ceilidh* dancing.



6 IONA 2 DAYS

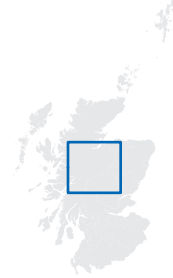
Catch the 45-minute ferry to Mull, follow the coast to Fionnphort and hop across to **Iona** (p66). Time to slow down and recharge. Explore on foot or by bike: shop for local crafts and soak in the sacred sights, airbrushed beach scenes and utter tranquility.

Detour: Take a boat trip to **Staffa** (p70) for Fingal's Cave and, if you're lucky, dolphins (4 hours).



PK289/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Rothiemurchus, near Aviemore (p110)



ITINERARIES

Heart of the Highlands

Allow: 4 days**Distance:** 205 miles

This short road trip is an adventure through Highland highlights, from mountain scenery to monstrously famous lochs, ancient pine forests to historic whisky distilleries. Every step of the journey reveals new landscapes, unique experiences and cultural gems, capturing the very best of Scotland.



1

GLEN COE ⌚ ½ DAY

Start your trip in Scotland's grandest **glen** (p120), which combines dramatic scenery with deep history. The peacefulness and beauty of this valley today belie the fact that it was the scene of a ruthless 17th-century massacre. Some of Glen Coe's finest walks follow routes used by clansmen and women to flee their attackers.



2

BEN NEVIS ⌚ 1 DAY

After graduating from the (relatively) gentle slopes of Glen Coe, it's time to tackle the ridges and rock walls of **Ben Nevis** (p127). Set aside a day to get to the summit and back, and choose your route based on your level of experience and love of a challenge. In the evening, head to Fort William to recover in a cosy pub with a roaring fire.



3

LOCH NESS ⌚ ½ DAY

Head north along the Great Glen to the western shores of **Loch Ness** (p107). Stop at Fort Augustus to check out the Caledonian canal, take time to explore atmospheric Urquhart Castle, and join a monster-spotting cruise from Drumnadrochit. When you've had your fill of the lake, head north, loop around **Inverness** (p102), then continue south into Cairngorms National Park.



4 AVIEMORE ⌚ ½ DAY

The tourist heart of the Cairngorms is **Aviemore** (p110), and it's a good base for exploring the park, including the ancient pine forests of Rothiemurchus and the Cairngorm Reindeer Herd. Consider a trip on the Strathspey Steam Railway too.

Detour: Follow the River Spey east from Aviemore to distilleries Tomintoul and Glenlivet (4 hours).



5 KINGUSSIE ⌚ ½ DAY

Venture southwest on the A9 – consider a stop at Loch Insh for a bracing swim – and you'll soon reach the **Highland Wildlife Park** (p115) near Kingussie. Home to once-native species like wolves and lynx, as well as still-native (but hard to spot) wildcats and red squirrels, it's a great way to spend an afternoon. Combine nature with culture by visiting the nearby Highland Folk Museum.



6 PITLOCHRY ⌚ 1 DAY

At the southernmost tip of the Cairngorms sits lovely **Pitlochry** (p116). Along with Aviemore, it's one of the park's two main tourism hubs, home to a host of excellent hotels, restaurants, cafes and boutique shops. Spend a day exploring its highlights – including the Pitlochry Dam Visitor Centre, salmon ladder and Blair Athol Distillery.



SDERBON/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Isle of Skye (p148)

ITINERARIES

Hebrides Hopping

Allow: 7 days

Distance: 300 miles

The Outer Hebrides are full of adventures. The cultural sights of Lewis, the contrasting landscapes of Harris, the varied birdlife of the Uists: there's so much to discover. Expect ancient standing stones, traditional blackhouses, looming mountains and pristine beaches. And the adventure continues on Scotland's most famous island: Skye.



1

ROAD TO THE ISLES

🕒 ½ DAY

From Fort William (1¼ hours), head west along the Road to the Isles (p134) to Mallaig. This scenic 40-mile stretch passes Glenfinnan, with its eye-catching monument and viaduct. Overnight in Mallaig and dine at one of its seafood restaurants.

 **Detour:** Dive off onto the B8008 for the scenic **Silver Sands of Morar** (p136; 1 hour).



2

SOUTH UIST 🕒 ½ DAY

Take the ferry from Mallaig to Lochboisdale on **South Uist** (p175). Walk along the wild beaches of the west coast, check out the Kildonan Museum and, if you've brought your fishing rod, look forward to a bit of sport on the island's many trout lochs. Before leaving for Benbecula, stop to see Our Lady of the Isles, a monolithic sculpture of the Madonna and Child.



3

NORTH UIST 🕒 ½ DAY

As you follow the road north through Benbecula to **North Uist** (p174), keep your binoculars handy: this is prime birdwatching country. Twitchers should make a beeline for Balranaid Nature Reserve in the west. Take the long way around to Berneray and spend the night before taking the morning ferry to Harris.



4 HARRIS ⌚ 1 DAY

Pray for sun in **Harris** (p170), as the road along the south island's west coast has some of the most spectacular beaches in Scotland. Don't miss Seilebost. Tarbert (a good stop for rest, food and whisky) marks the transition to the rugged hills of North Harris.

Detour: Book a boat trip from Leverburgh (Harris) to the hauntingly isolated and exposed island of **St Kilda** (p173; 1 day).



5 LEWIS ⌚ 2 DAYS

Once on **Lewis** (p166), take your time. Don't go directly to Stornoway – instead head to the Callanish Standing Stones and the Blackhouse. You can also detour west to the beautiful beaches around Miavaig and Traigh Uige; there's plenty of wild and semiwild camping here. Spend your final night in the Hebrides in Stornoway, with its cosy pubs and fascinating Museum nan Eilean.



6 SKYE ⌚ 2 DAYS

Journey from Tarbert on Harris over the sea to **Skye** (p148). A world of magical sights await: striking rock formations, otherworldly landscapes, entrancing waterfalls and a picturesque, colourful harbour. Book a boat trip, kayak the coast, hike the Quiraing and sample the island whisky.

Detour: Hop on the 25-minute ferry crossing from Sconser on Skye to **Raasay** (p157) for a tour of the distillery (4 hours).

FROM LEFT: GWYNETH BELL/SHUTTERSTOCK ©, RINI KOOLS/SHUTTERSTOCK ©, WIRESTOCK CREATORS/SHUTTERSTOCK ©



GAIL JOHNSON/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

North Coast 500



ITINERARIES

Up and Away

Allow: 7 days

Distance: 450 miles

Take a trip along the much-travelled North Coast 500, but with some added excursions along the way. Journey from (relatively) big cities to (extremely) secluded beaches, taking in everything from ancient battlefields, famous distilleries and historic islands to craggy cliffs, yawning caves and gorgeous lochs along the way.



1

INVERNESS ⌚ 2 DAYS

Inverness (p102) is a compact city, but one night will feel rushed. There are several attractions in town and even more just outside. Castle-hop around Fort George and Cawdor Castle (pictured). Delve into history at Culloden Battlefield. Birdwatch on the Black Isle. By night, return to Inverness for Scottish cuisine, whisky and live music.



2

WICK ⌚ 1 DAY

Spend the morning driving up the east coast from Inverness, stopping at windswept Royal Dornoch Golf Club and stately Dunrobin Castle. You should arrive in **Wick** (p182) just in time for lunch, so opt for fish and chips on the harbour. In the afternoon, explore the town's castles, churches, Wick Heritage Museum and Old Pulteney Distillery, before continuing north to John O'Groats.



3

ORKNEY ⌚ 1 DAY

From John O'Groats, take a trip to Orkney (p194). Full-day ferry and bus tours squeeze in most of the islands' big-ticket attractions, including Skara Brae (pictured), the Ring of Brodgar, Kirkwall, Stenness, the Churchill Barriers and the Italian Chapel.

Detour: Skip the tour and just take the ferry. That way, you can spend an extra day exploring Orkney – and two more exploring **Shetland** (p206; Kirkwall–Lerwick ferry 7½ hours; 3 days).



4 DURNESS ⌚ 1½ DAYS

Spend a day following the North Coast 500's top edge – a parade of paradise beaches and dramatic coastline – to the village of **Durness** (p177). Once here, take a half-day trip to Britain's highest cliffs at Cape Wrath, or visit nearby Balnakeil Craft Village and Smoo Cave.

Detour: Hike 4½ hours to far-flung **Sandwood Bay** (p179) near Durness, a beautifully remote stretch of sand (1 day).



5 ULLAPOOL ⌚ 1 DAY

Take the slow way from Durness, via the single-track Drumbeg Loop, for a medley of jaw-dropping scenery and white-sand beaches. Once in **Ullapool** (p159) enjoy the mountains and sea, along with the taste of fresh seafood or fish and chips. Relax by the shores of Loch Broom, browse the independent shops, or go for a hike.



6 DESTITUTION ROAD ⌚ ½ DAY

Ignore the grisly name: **Destitution Road** (p162) is a thing of rare beauty. It starts at Corrieshalloch Gorge (pictured), 12 miles south of Ullapool, and ventures west to Gairloch past waterfalls, mountains and lochs. From here, it's east via pink beaches, exotic gardens and pine-covered hills to the road's end at Loch Luichart. Then it's just 40 minutes back to Inverness, completing the loop.

FROM LEFT: STOCKSOLUTIONS/SHUTTERSTOCK ©, ALENA VEASEY/SHUTTERSTOCK ©, MORENO01/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

WHEN TO GO

Yes, Scotland's Highlands and islands can be wet and wild. But there are adventures to be had all year round.

Let's be honest, it's not the climate that brings people to the Highlands and islands. Summer's generous daylight hours allow extra time to explore, but sunshine and warm temperatures can never be guaranteed. Winter, at least, is predictably cold and dark: pack for just one season (instead of all four) and hope for ski-worthy snow on the mountains. Spring brings newborn lambs, bluebell-frosted forests and breadcrumb trails of wild-flowers, while a fiery colour palette paints the land and trees during autumn. Every season is a new wonder and a contrast to the last. Choose your seasonal vibe or calendar event, and just go for it; good weather is a bonus.

Fancy a Bargain?

Dodging the peak-season crowds is a game with cash-saving prizes; when demand gets lower, so do the nightly room rates. Take advantage of autumn/winter accommodation deals around the country: discounted stays and hotel packages including breakfast and dinner.



FROM LEFT: PAMPA BROOKS/SHUTTERSTOCK & KEVIN WELLS PHOTOGRAPHY/SHUTTERSTOCK

Lerwick (p206), Shetland

I LIVE HERE

AUTUMN VIBES

Photographer and visual storyteller Claire Ferguson shares inspirational travel content from around Scotland

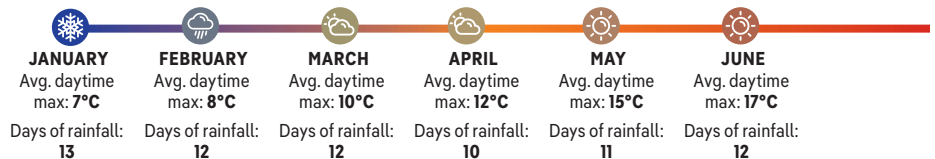
@alittlebitofclaire

The art of 'coldsie' (Old Scots for 'cosy') makes me appreciate the simple things in autumn: baking (with local pumpkins!), crackling fires, warm drinks, crisp leaves and self-care. I gravitate towards Glencoe for mountain walks in the fresh air, then back to the Clachaig Inn for folk music, comfort food and mulled wine.

CHASE THE SUN

The Isle of Tiree, dubbed 'Hawaii of the North', is one of the sunniest places in the UK with an average of 1524 annual sunshine hours; the best month is May with an average of 240 sunshine hours. Dundee is said to be Scotland's sunniest city.

Weather through the Year [Inverness]





SHETLAND'S SIMMER DIM

On the longest day of the year, in Scotland's most northerly isles, daylight lingers for 19 hours and true darkness never falls. The sun merely dips below the horizon in a long embrace before dawn; a special and symbolic twilight, known locally as 'simmer dim'.

Big Events & Gatherings

Shetland Folk Festival

Music is at the heart of island life, and the UK's most northerly folk music festival features local, national and international acts. The similarly popular **Orkney Folk Festival** (p200) takes place two weeks later. ☀️ **May**

Fèis Ile (p75) Whisky fans shouldn't miss Islay's world-famous music and dance festival, to be enjoyed with a special-release single malt from one of the island's famous distilleries. ☀️ **May**

Tiree Music Festival (p62)

This soul-stirring celebration of music provides a fusion of lively traditional tunes, camping shenanigans, family-friendly fun and Hebridean beach scenery. ☀️ **July**

Braemar Gathering Highland Games are an iconic cultural celebration, and this is the most famous of them all. Expect an explosion of tartan, bagpipes, Highland dancing and traditional sports: tug of war, tossing the caber, hammer throwing. ☀️ **September**

I LIVE HERE

SPRING AT SEA

Gus Newman is a whisky collector, seafood lover and managing director of **Islay Sea Adventures and Islay Storm Pod**

@islay_sea_adventures

As the season shifts to spring, I love taking the boats on a local adventure to Mull of Oa. I never tire of seeing the towering cliffs and Soldier's Rock sea stack, or the seabird breeding colony with kittiwakes, fulmars, shags and black guillemots; golden eagles sometimes soaring overhead. The boat can enter a sea cave with a waterfall, where green copper ore glistens.



Meadow pipit, Islay (p72)

Local Festivals & Celebrations

Fort William Mountain

Festival (p130) The 'Outdoor Capital of the UK' is the perfect host for an annual celebration of adventure; a multiday flurry of film, awards, inspirational speakers and outdoor adoration. ☀️ **February**

Mull Music Festival Enjoy Tobermory in shoulder season with this fun Scottish music festival, which hosts a welcome mix of local folk-rock groups and traditional musicians. Most events are free to attend.

☀️ **April**

St Magnus International

Festival This week-long summer-solstice celebration of the arts takes place across the Orkney Islands. The programme features musical performances, stories, drama, dance and visual arts. ☀️ **June**

Lochaber Live Expect big-name traditional music acts at this recently rebooted Fort William festival, which is held to coincide with the Camanachd Cup national shinty final; it's a real local experience. ☀️ **September**

WET OUT WEST

Contrary to popular belief, it doesn't always rain in Scotland – it's location dependent. The west coast is notoriously wet with parts of the western Highlands hitting over 3m of rainfall per year; take Billy Connolly's sound advice, 'get yourself a sexy raincoat, and live a little'.



JULY

Avg. daytime max: **19°C**

Days of rainfall: **11**



AUGUST

Avg. daytime max: **19°C**

Days of rainfall: **12**



SEPTEMBER

Avg. daytime max: **17°C**

Days of rainfall: **12**



OCTOBER

Avg. daytime max: **13°C**

Days of rainfall: **14**



NOVEMBER

Avg. daytime max: **9°C**

Days of rainfall: **13**



DECEMBER

Avg. daytime max: **7°C**

Days of rainfall: **14**



FROM LEFT: DAMIAN/SHUTTERSTOCK © RALF UEBHOLD/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

GET PREPARED FOR THE HIGHLANDS & ISLANDS

Useful things to load in your bag, your ears and your brain.

Clothes

Layers The ‘four seasons in one day’ rumour is often true, so packing a little bit of everything is a wise approach. Shorts and T-shirts for days that warrant exposed limbs, and layers of warmer clothing for when the weather has a mood swing. A waterproof jacket is a must.

Evening attire Unless you’re fine dining, drinking in fancy establishments or staying in high-end hotels, smart casual clothing is perfectly acceptable. Eateries in rural areas and on islands will happily take you straight off the hills or beach.

Footwear Waterproof walking boots are

Manners

Generally friendly, often with cheeky, sarcastic humour, Scottish people are more likely to offend than be offended.

Conversations about local politics or sport are liable to get a little heated, so it’s best to play it safe and talk about the weather. It’s customary to queue, so don’t skip ahead. Give up your seat on public transport to those who need it.

essential for any hill walks or long-distance trails. They’re the best option for tackling the often cobbled, hilly towns too.

READ



Lost Lights of St Kilda (Elisabeth Gifford; 2020)
Fictional love story capturing the way of life on St Kilda.



Corrag (Susan Fletcher; 2010) A captivating account of the 1692 Glencoe Massacre through the eyes of an accused witch.



The Lewis Trilogy (Peter May; 2011, 2012, 2013) A gripping crime thriller series, set in the remote Outer Hebrides.



A History of Scotland (Neil Oliver; 2011)
An easy-to-digest read that's a good initial overview of Scottish history.

PLAN YOUR TRIP

GET PREPARED

Words

Aye (eye) Scottish for 'yes'. When someone asks if you enjoyed your trip to Scotland, the answer is 'AYE'.
Naw (gnaw) The opposite of 'aye', meaning 'no'.

Wee (wee) Meaning 'small'. A wee lassie is a little girl.

Bonnie (boh-nay) A lovely, stereotypically Scottish way of saying 'beautiful'. The scenery was 'bonnie' or 'she is a bonnie lassie'.

Fae (fay) Meaning 'from'. As in: 'Can you tell I'm fae Scotland?'

Eejit (ee-jit) Meaning 'idiot', but usually said in a playful manner.

Braw (braww) An upbeat description meaning 'good' or 'brilliant'. 'That was a braw day out.'

Dreich (dreek) The best way to describe wet, moody, miserable Scottish weather. 'It's looking dreich out there.'

Dinnae (dinn-ay) Slang for 'don't', usually followed by 'ken' (know). If someone asks you a question you don't know the answer to, say 'I dinnae ken'.

Cannae (cann-ay) Same story as above, but this time meaning 'can't': instead of 'I can't do it', you would say 'I cannae dae it'.

Nae (nay) **bother** Slang for 'no problem', this might be the response when you say 'thank you'.

Ceilidh (kay-lee) The Gaelic word for a traditional Scottish gathering or party.
Steamin' (stee-min) Slang for drunk. 'I got steamin' at the ceilidh last night.'

Wheesht (weesht) A very Scottish way of saying 'be quiet'; take it to the next level by saying 'haud yer wheesht'.

WATCH



The Outrun (Nora Fingscheidt; 2024) A moving drama about a young, alcoholic woman returning from London to the Orkney Islands.

Whisky Galore! (Alexander Mackendrick; 1949) Classic film inspired by the real-life shipwreck near Eriskay and its precious cargo.

Local Hero (Bill Forsyth; 1983) A comedy-drama about an American oil company representative sent to purchase a Highland village.

Outlander (Ronald D Moore; 2014-) A TV series based on Diana Gabaldon's novels, where fiction and fantasy meet Jacobite history.

LISTEN

Sunshine on Leith (The Proclaimers; 1988)
They may hail from the Lowlands, but the Proclaimers make great Highlands and islands driving music.

Dail-Riata (Griogair Labhruidh; 2007) The debut album from Gaelic-language singer and multi-instrumentalist Griogair Labhruidh remains a cult classic.

The Last Dance – Farewell Concert (Runrig; 2018) Live album from the Scottish Celtic rock band's final performance in Stirling.

Wild for Scotland (Kathi Kamleitner; 2021-) Inspiring podcast episodes telling immersive stories of Scotland's people and places.



BBA PHOTOGRAPHY/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Haggis, neeps (turnip) and tatties (potatoes)

THE FOOD SCENE

Contrary to the rumours and stereotypes, Scotland's cuisine extends far beyond the realms of haggis, Irn Bru and deep-fried everything.

Deep-fried haggis supper? There's a time and a place for that. In pretty much every big Scottish Highlands and islands town – and in many smaller villages – you can follow the locals' lead and embark on a merry mission to the nearest chippy. Indulging in Scotland's salty, crunchy, saucy fast food is strongly encouraged, but you can also do much better than that.

Treat your taste buds to the lavish local larder: quality meat and dairy, seasonal fruit and vegetables, and world-class seafood, often available just a short distance from where it was hauled ashore. Hearty home cooking and wholesome baking ensure big appetites and sweet teeth (teeth?) are well catered for.

There's a place for every craving, budget and occasion – from humble hangover-cure cafes to fancy-pants fine dining, plus everything in between (seafood shacks, street-food stalls, quirky tearooms, hipster bakeries, farm shop honesty boxes) – so why not indulge in it all?

Home Staples

Winters are long, cold and dark, so if dinner isn't the edible equivalent of a warm hug, it's not going to cut it. Haggis is the national dish, but it's unlikely to feature on the weekly shopping list, unless it's for a breakfast roll. Traditional Highlands and islands family meals are centred around simple staples: meat, gravy and vegetables

Best Highlands & Islands Dishes

HAGGIS

The national dish, traditionally made with sheep offal, oatmeal, suet and spices.

CULLEN SKINK

A creamy, smoked haddock soup with onion and potatoes.

FULL SCOTTISH BREAKFAST

Lorne sausage, bacon, eggs, tattie scones, mushrooms, haggis and black pudding.

SMOKED SALMON

Often found on breakfast menus with eggs, soup, pasta and tarts.

(code for 'tatties'). At the helm, you'll find the Scottish granny, a notorious feeder, armed with her own special recipe soup: variations of Scotch broth, lentil soup, tattie soup or cock-a-leekie (chicken and leek).

Local comfort food comes in many similar forms. Not to be judged by its looks, 'stovies' is a satisfying one-pot combination of meat, semi-mashed potatoes, onion, gravy, salt and pepper, and is often served with oatcakes. Another firm favourite is the appropriately named mince and tatties: minced beef, carrot, onion and beef stock with potatoes; sometimes accompanied by peas, more often with white bread and a thick scraping of butter.

If the sleep-inducing main course isn't enough, a Scottish steam pudding should do the trick. Cloutie dumping is a rich, warmly spiced dessert with dried fruits, traditionally wrapped in a cloth ('cloutie') before boiling. Perfect with clotted cream or custard.

Vegetarian & Vegan Food

Scotland's plant-based dining scene is constantly expanding, not only by geography (reaching even remote corners of the Highlands and islands), but also becoming more accommodating and exciting than ever.

BARNALIN/SHUTTERSTOCK ©



Cullen skink

Bigger Highland towns like Inverness and Fort William cater very well for vegans and vegetarians, with separate menus and even dedicated restaurants. Venturing to rural and remote areas, the options may sometimes become scarce but there are gems to be found. Plan food stops in advance: check menus online and phone ahead to check; carry back-up snacks or self-cater.



MARTIN FRASER/GETTY IMAGES ©

FOOD & WHISKY FESTIVALS

Fèis Ìle (p75; May; pictured above) Islay's celebration of all things Hebridean (whisky, traditional music and island hospitality).

Scottish Wild Food Festival

(scottishwildfoodfestival.co.uk; May) A wholesome festival of foraging, workshops and banquets in Cairngorms National Park.

Tarbert Seafood Festival (tarbertfestivals.co.uk; July) Parades, live music, cooking demos and seafood.

Argyll Food Festival (foodfromargyll.com; September) Weekend-long Oban festival with artisan producers, cooking workshops and bands.

Loch Lomond Food & Drink Festival (lochlomondfoodanddrinkfestival.co.uk; September) Farmers markets, street food, cooking classes, and gin and whisky tasting.

Arran Festival of Food & Drink (arransfoodjourney.com; September) A new festival on Scotland's foodie island, showcasing the best local produce.

PORRIDGE

A warming, traditional breakfast made with Scottish porridge oats.

CRANACHAN

Delicious dessert combining fresh raspberries, cream, oats and whisky.

SHORTBREAD

This centuries-old, crumbly, buttery biscuit is stereotypically sold in tartan tins.

TABLET

A classic sweet treat: firmer than fudge, sweeter than sweet.

Local Specialities

Meaty Delicacies

Venison Thanks to the overpopulation of deer in the Highlands, venison is the most sustainable meat in the country and it's lean and tasty too. Try it in a stew or in burger form.

Reestit mutton Salty, air-dried mutton, found in a soup or stew: a traditional Shetland winter warmer with a Scandinavian influence.

Stornoway black pudding Highly acclaimed, melt-in-the-mouth blood sausage from the Isle of Lewis.

Novelty Sweet Treats

Puffin Poo Moreish chocolates from Shetland, made with white Belgian chocolate, mallow and toasted rice.

Ice cream Kirkwall-based Orkney Creamery is renowned for its fine dairy products, from milk to butter, but its greatest hit is its delicious ice cream.

Irn Bru This fizzy, neon-orange soft drink is as sweet as they come and beloved by Scots in every corner of the country.



Mussels

Fruits of the Sea

Fish supper Battered haddock or cod with chips, best served in a takeaway cardboard box for alfresco enjoyment.

Seafood Mussels cooked in white wine and garlic, hand-dived scallops, dressed crab, fresh oysters, langoustine, lobster: nowhere does them better than Scotland's Highlands and islands.

Gin Coastal botanicals like sugar kelp seaweed and sea buckthorn are key ingredients for local distillers including Rock Rose and Isle of Harris Gin.



MEALS OF A LIFETIME

Whitehouse, Lochaline (pl32) This star fine-dining restaurant on the hard-to-reach Morvern Peninsula is renowned for its tasting menus crammed with tasty local seafood and game.

Dipping Lugger, Ullapool (pl61) The inspired tasting menus here showcase the finest Highlands and islands produce. And don't worry if you've overindulged: you can stay the night.

Three Chimneys, Skye (pl54) Splurge in one of Scotland's most highly acclaimed fine-dining restaurants, nestled on the shores of Loch Dunvegan.

Seafood Special Boat Experience, Islay Sea Adventures (p75) Enjoy fresh-as-can-be scallops out on the water; they're doused in garlic-chilli butter and grilled on the boat's on-board barbecue.

THE YEAR IN FOOD



SPRING

Fill up on gorgeous greens when you're eating out: chives, parsley, kale, asparagus, leek, spring greens and spring onion all make a seasonal comeback. Look out for rhubarb on dessert menus from March onwards.



SUMMER

Peak season for fresh produce, and juicy, soft fruits are stars of the show. Head to local markets and farm shops to stock up on strawberries and raspberries, or to go pick your own.



AUTUMN

Say hello to harvest season and the bounty of seafood, shellfish and dark fruits: brambles, blueberries and plums. Ahead of Halloween, pumpkin patches burst into colour across the region.



WINTER

'Tis the season for snuggling up with a bowl of soup, stew or stovies. Wild game, greens and root vegetables are all readily available. Warm up with peaty drams and seasonally mulled beverages.



View of Ben Nevis near the end of the West Highland Way

TRIP PLANNER

WALKING THE WEST HIGHLAND WAY

Scotland's spectacular West Highland Way carries you north through rugged glens, beside fast-flowing streams and past wild moorland where magnificent mountains are never out of sight. Steeped in history, it follows stretches of old cattle paths, railway lines and military roads. Go the full seven-day distance or choose a shorter stretch to enjoy.

DAY 1 – MILNGAVIE TO DRYMEN**Duration:** 4½ to 5½ hours**Distance:** 12 miles

Start at the obelisk in Milngavie (on Douglas St). Descend the ramp beneath the West Highland Way sign and follow a path along a disused railway, then upstream beside Allander Water. At the end of Mugdock Wood, paths and a track take you past small lochs to the main road. As you turn off and skirt Dumgoyach Hill, watch out for Bronze Age standing stones to your right.

A mile past Dumgoyach Bridge, stop for a warming dram at Glengoyne Distillery.

The old railway track turns to a road that leads most of the way to Drymen, a pretty village with a central green.

DAY 2 – DRYMEN TO ROWARDENNAN**Duration:** 5 to 6½ hours**Distance:** 14 miles

From Drymen, a forest track gradually climbs to Garadhban Forest. The Way climbs then contours north of the summit of Conic Hill (358m), worth summiting for the views over Loch Lomond. You can also make out the unmistakable line of the Highland Boundary Fault, separating the Lowlands from the Highlands.



WHEN TO GO

Summer is peak season along the West Highland Way, when the most popular long-distance path in Scotland (and Britain for that matter) can feel very busy. You won't be short of company. For those seeking a quieter,

more meditative experience, come out of season instead. Experienced walkers who can brave the winter chill will be rewarded with spectacular snow-covered scenery and barely another soul in sight.

For warmer weather but still smaller crowds, choose late spring (when Loch Lomond's shores are lined with Scottish bluebells) or mid-autumn (when the midges are gone and the forests are ablaze with colour).

THINGS TO KNOW

Getting There & Away

- The start of the West Highland Way is a granite obelisk on Douglas St in Milngavie, but for most people the journey will begin at the train station. Buses stop here and there's a car park just off Station Rd.
- The walk ends in Fort William, which has frequent rail and bus connections to other parts of Scotland, including an overnight sleeper train to London.
- To return to the start, catch a three-hour bus from Fort William to Glasgow, then a 10-minute train to Milngavie.

Accommodation

- If you plan to rely on serviced accommodation (hotels, B&Bs and hostels), it's essential to book rooms in advance.
- There are several fully serviced campsites along the way, which may be more flexible. But if you know your plans, book anyway.
- The official website (westhighlandway.org) lists most of the accommodation along the route.

Guides & Maps

- For route plans and practical information, pick up either the *Harvey West Highland Way* map, or the *Rucksack Readers West Highland Way* guide.
- The most comprehensive guidebook is *Trailblazer's West Highland Way* by Charlie Loram. It has detailed trail maps and information on accommodation, places to eat and tourist attractions along the way.
- Wilderness Scotland (wildernessscotland.com) offers guided walks along the West Highland Way, while Easyways (easyways.com) organises accommodation and baggage transfer.

Descend to Balmaha, a small lakeside village usually thronged with people in boats. Continue along the shore to Crittichie, where the path dives into a dark forest and emerges to follow the road again. Finally, the Way climbs through Ross Wood, with its magnificent oaks, to Rowardennan. Time and energy to spare? Ascend Ben Lomond (974m).

DAY 3 - ROWARDENNAN TO INVERARNAN

Duration: 6 to 7½ hours

Distance: 14 miles

Follow the road that parallels the loch shore. Just past private Ptarmigan Lodge, an alternative path branches left and follows the shoreline; it's more interesting but much rougher going than the upper route. Either way, not far beyond Rowchoish Bothy, the forestry track gives way to a path down to the loch. The going improves to Inversnaid Falls (stop at the hotel for refreshments), but then the path twists and turns around large boulders and tree roots. It also passes Rob Roy's cave, where he's said to have hidden from the authorities. A climb to a col below Cnap Mór (164m) provides stunning lake views, before the path descends to Inverarnan.

SLOEN BEZEMER/SHUTTERSTOCK ©



Start of the walk, Milngavie (p37)



Devil's Staircase

DAY 4 – INVERARNAN TO TYNDRUM**Duration:** 4½ to 5½ hours**Distance:** 13 miles

The route follows the attractive River Falloch most of the way to Crianlarich, the approximate halfway point of the Way. About four miles along, it crosses the river and joins an old military road. This track climbs out of Glen Falloch, offering good views east to Ben More (1174m), and then continues through the trees before darting under the railway line, crossing over the road and traversing a wooden bridge over the River Fillan.

Soon, you'll pass the remains of St Fillan's Priory, and around an hour later you'll make it to Tyndrum, an old lead-mining settlement.

DAY 5 – TYNDRUM TO KINGSHOUSE HOTEL**Duration:** 6½ to 8 hours**Distance:** 19 miles

From Tyndrum, the route soon rejoins the old military road and crosses the railway line, affording easy walking with lovely views. Three miles in, you'll cross a burn at the foot of the imperious Beinn Dòrain (1074m).

The path climbs gradually to Glen Orchy, heralding the start of the really mountainous scenery. Cross the 18th-century Bridge of Orchy and climb through the trees to the crest of Mam Carraigh. The path then winds down to secluded Inveroran Hotel, before climbing gently past plantations and onto Rannoch Moor, where it can get very wild and windy. A cairn marks the summit at 445m. Enjoy views over Glen Coe as you descend to Kingshouse Hotel.

THE DEVIL'S SUITCASE

The steep zigzags climbing out of Glen Coe on the West Highland Way are known collectively as the 'Devil's Staircase', a name coined by the soldiers who built them in 1750. Although superseded by Thomas Telford's road through Glen Coe in the early 19th century (and then by the modern A82 in 1933), the name Devil's Staircase was re-established during the building of the Blackwater Reservoir above Kinlochleven in 1905–09. Navvies working on the dam would use the route to go drinking at the Kingshouse Hotel – during harsh winters, many perished in the snow on the way back.

DAY 6 – KINGSHOUSE HOTEL TO KINLOCHLEVEN**Duration:** 3 to 4 hours**Distance:** 9 miles

Follow the old military road alongside the A82. At Altna-feadh, there's a wonderful vantage point from which to appreciate the scenery of Glen Coe. The conical peak to your left is Buachaille Etive Mor (1022m).

From here, leave the road to begin a steep, zigzagging climb up the Devil's Staircase. The 548m-high cairn at the top is the Way's highest point; on a clear day, you can see Ben Nevis (1345m). The path now winds gradually down towards Kinlochleven. This town eases you back into 'civilisation' before Fort William tomorrow.

DAY 7 – KINLOCHLEVEN TO FORT WILLIAM**Duration:** 6 to 7½ hours**Distance:** 15 miles

Follow the road north. A path climbs through woodland to the old military road, with grand views along Loch Leven to the Pap of Glencoe (740m). Climb to the crest, see the ruins of old farm buildings, then descend into conifer plantations. The Way leads on and up to Dùn Deardail, an Iron Age fort with walls partly vitrified (turned to glass) by fire.

Soon, a forest track leads down towards Glen Nevis. Continue past the small graveyard and large visitor centre towards Fort William. The end of the Way is in Gordon Sq, marked by a bronze sculpture of a weary hiker rubbing his feet. Enjoy an end-of-hike celebration in one of the town's many restaurants and bars.



SHUTTERSTOCK ©

THE OUTDOORS

Find your little slice of outdoor paradise in Scotland's Highlands and islands. Look to the natural world for inspiration, recalibration, relaxation and adventure. Breathe it all in.

Scotland's great outdoors exceed all expectations – and nowhere more so than in the Highlands and islands. There are hundreds of Munros (mountains above 3000ft/914m), thousands of miles of coastline, and a staggeringly diverse range of landscapes in between. Go barefoot on soft white sand or lace up your hiking boots for a walk on the wild side. Whether you stroll or summit, pedal or paddle, swim or spectate, the experience will simultaneously soothe and stimulate. Adventure awaits.

Walking & Hiking

You don't have to be a hardcore hiker or fully fledged mountaineer to get high on

the region's fine fresh air and eye-widening scenery. The Highlands and islands' deep grooves and glens, curves and coastline, hidden pockets and heroic heights are interspersed with enough paths and trails to walk 500 miles, then 500 more. Whether it's a simple seaside stroll, or clinging onto cliff faces for fun, there's something for everyone: low-level wanders, energy-boost hiking routes and narrow, gnarly mountain ridges. For long-distance walks, check out **Scotland's Great Trails** (scotlandsgreattrails.com); research routes for every ability, location and duration using Walk-highlands (walkhighlands.co.uk) or download the AllTrails app (alltrails.com). Avoid

Try
Something
New

SURFING

Embrace the Atlantic wind and waves with a surfing lesson out west on the flat and exposed **Isle of Tiree** (p62).

VIA FERRATA

Book a guided climb on the country's only *via ferrata* in **Kinlochleven** (p125), an airy obstacle course of steel ladders and cables.

FISHING

Grab a rod and try your hand at fly fishing on the salmon-rich **River Tay** (p117) in the Cairngorms.

FAMILY ADVENTURES

Ride the gondola up to the Nevis Range (p129) Hikes in spring/summer, or skiing, snowboarding and sledging in winter.

Visit the Cairngorm Reindeer Herd in Aviemore (p112) Take a guided mountainside walk to meet the UK's only free-ranging herd of reindeer.

Book a boat trip to the Isle of Staffa (p70) Meet the puffins during breeding season (May to July) and look out for dolphins on the journey.

Go stargazing on the Isle of Coll (p63) Pray for cloudless skies on a visit to Coll, designated a Dark Sky

Community for its lack of light pollution.

Spend the afternoon at Achmelvich Bay on the North Coast 500 (p180)

Search for seashells on the white-sand beach and go swimming in the sheltered bay.

crowds of people and swarms of midges by travelling in early April/May or late September/October. Failing that, sunrise and sunset hikes are rewarded with quiet trails and heart-tugging skies. Always be prepared and wear/pack the essentials: walking boots, waterproofs, warm layers, a mobile phone, head torch, plenty of food and water, and a paper map/compass for navigation.

Wild Swimming

Wild swimming is now the well-sung hero of physical and mental health, and Scotland's Highlands and islands are a reliable source of cold-water therapy. During winter, sea temperatures sit at around 5°C to 8°C, reaching no more than 14°C to 17°C in the summer months. Visitors from warmer climates may shiver at the very thought, but it's these bracing temperatures that boost the wellbeing benefits: increasing circulation, soothing aches and pains, clearing the mind and releasing natural mood-boosting endorphins that quickly become addictive. Scotland's wild waters are an open-air spa retreat for the

mind and body; the surroundings alone will calm your chaos before you've even dipped a toe in. Imagine lochs encircled by mountains and native trees, deep pools perpetually eroded by the waterfalls that tumble upon them, and sheltered beaches with the most welcoming waters: crystal clear and blotched by aquamarine. For a safe and enjoyable experience, search for open-water swimming coaches and courses in the area you're visiting.

Cycling

Two-wheeled adventures are becoming increasingly popular in this part of the world, though April to October is best to avoid the decrease in temperature and daylight hours. Whatever your fitness level or inclination for adrenaline and endurance, there's a bike and route to suit. Tackle a hair-raising mountain-biking forest trail, apply pedal power for a challenging coastal pursuit, or hop on an e-bike for an easy breezy island excursion; the turbo setting is a blessing for hills and high winds! Browse the cycle routes on the National Cycle Network, owned and maintained by Sustrans (sustrans.org.uk); search by location, distance and level of traffic.



BEST SPOTS

For the best outdoor spots and routes, see the map on p42.

STAND-UP PADDLEBOARDING

Find your balance and a new hobby at the same time with a guided SUP tour on **Loch Lomond** (p82).

GOLFING

Head to the far northeast coast for some of the world's most scenic links courses, including **Royal Dornoch** (p187).

FAT BIKING

Cycle with ease along the beaches on **Islay** (p73) thanks to the chunky and sturdy fat bike wheels.

KAYAKING

Go for a paddle around the mind-blowing coastline and islands in **Shetland** (p212) and discover caves, arches and sea stacks.

ACTION AREAS

Where to find the Highlands' and islands' best outdoor activities.

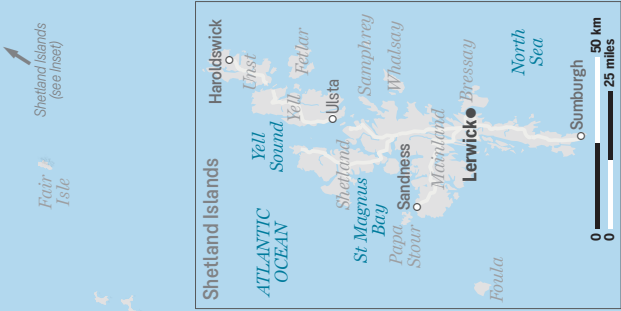
THE OUTDOORS

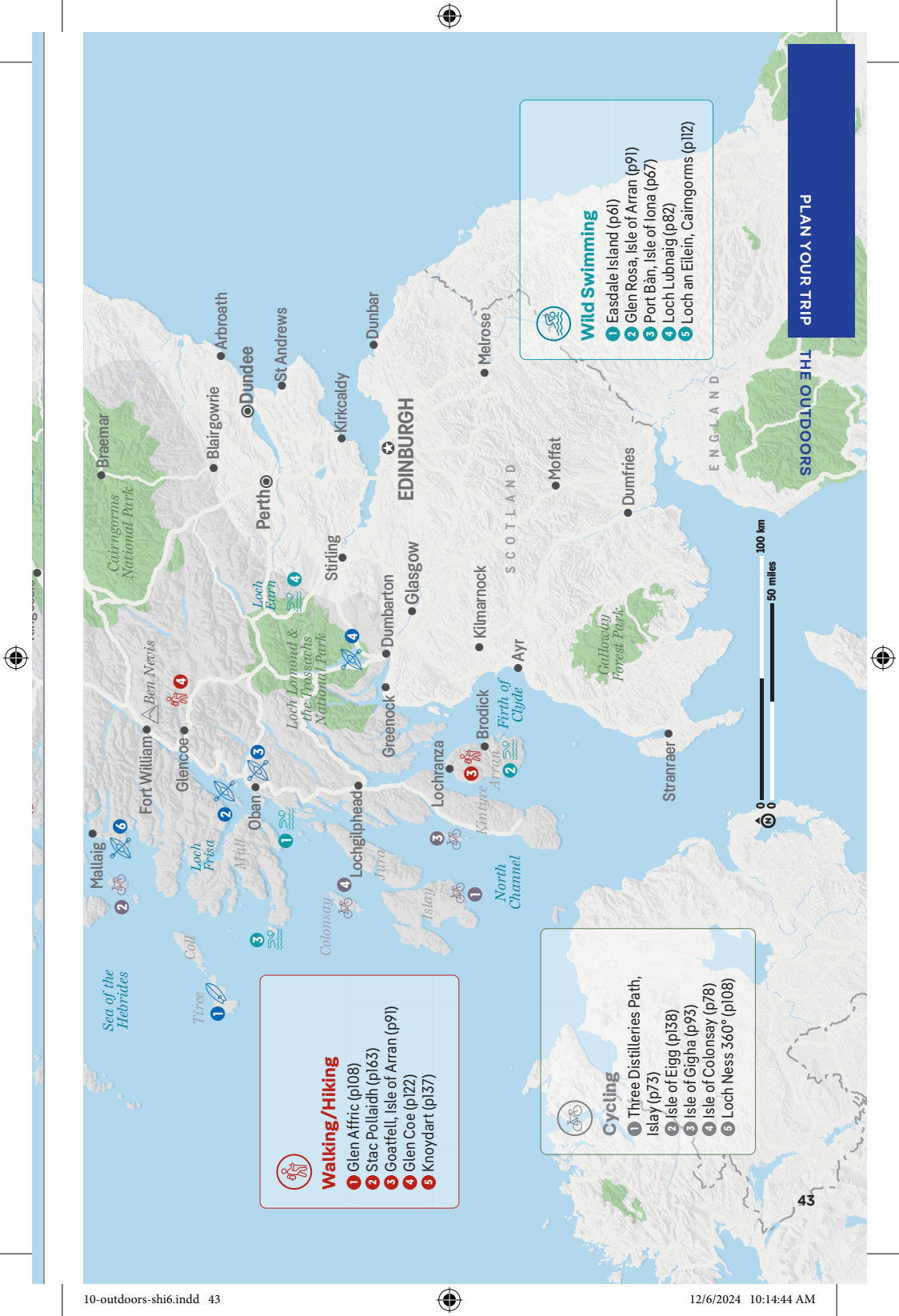
PLAN YOUR TRIP



Watersports

- 1 Isle of Tiree (p62)
- 2 Isle of Lismore (p61)
- 3 Oban (p57)
- 4 Loch Lomond (p82)
- 5 Loch Morlich, Cairngorms National Park (p114)
- 6 Arisaig (p136)





Walking/Hiking

- 1 Glen Affric (p108)
- 2 Stac Pollaidh (p163)
- 3 Goatfell, Isle of Arran (p91)
- 4 Glen Coe (p122)
- 5 Knoydart (p137)



Cycling

- 1 Three Distilleries Path, Islay (p73)
- 2 Isle of Eigg (p138)
- 3 Isle of Gigha (p93)
- 4 Isle of Colonsay (p78)
- 5 Loch Ness 360° (p108)



Wild Swimming

- 1 Easdale Island (p61)
- 2 Glen Rosa, Isle of Arran (p91)
- 3 Port Ban, Isle of Iona (p67)
- 4 Loch Lubnaig (p82)
- 5 Loch an Eilein, Cairngorms (p112)

0 50 100 km
0 50 100 miles

PLAN YOUR TRIP

THE OUTDOORS