

Highlands & Northern Islands



Scotland's extremities encourage superlatives; from Britain's deepest lake (Loch Ness) to its highest peak (Ben Nevis), and all the way out to the Shetlands where they're not even sure if they're part of Scotland or Britain. There's a rich history of bloody battles on heather-softened moors and defence of now-crumbling castles, while Viking ruins hark back to another history preserved by the isolation of the outer islands. Buried even deeper in the past are the mystical standing stones that lift megalithic profiles across the Hebrides and Orkneys, their meaning blurred by time. And then there are the stories of prehistoric monsters puddling around in the lochs...

It's not all spooky though, with gutsy Fort William earning the title of UK's Outdoor Capital for its exciting walks, challenging skiing and burgeoning mountain-biking scene. Then there's the surprise of golden-sand beaches on remote Harris, and of watching the playful stumblings of puffins on a sheer cliff turn suddenly into flight. The absence of humans has meant that the isolated areas thrive with seals and whales, and birds you've never seen before.

Speaking of rare specimens, there are the locals; tougher than their shaggy highland cows and best encountered by the warm hearth of a highland pub. Folk might start with a chat as they warm their hands, but by the end of the night they'll be buying you a dram for the road if they're not inviting you for a lock-in.

HIGHLIGHTS

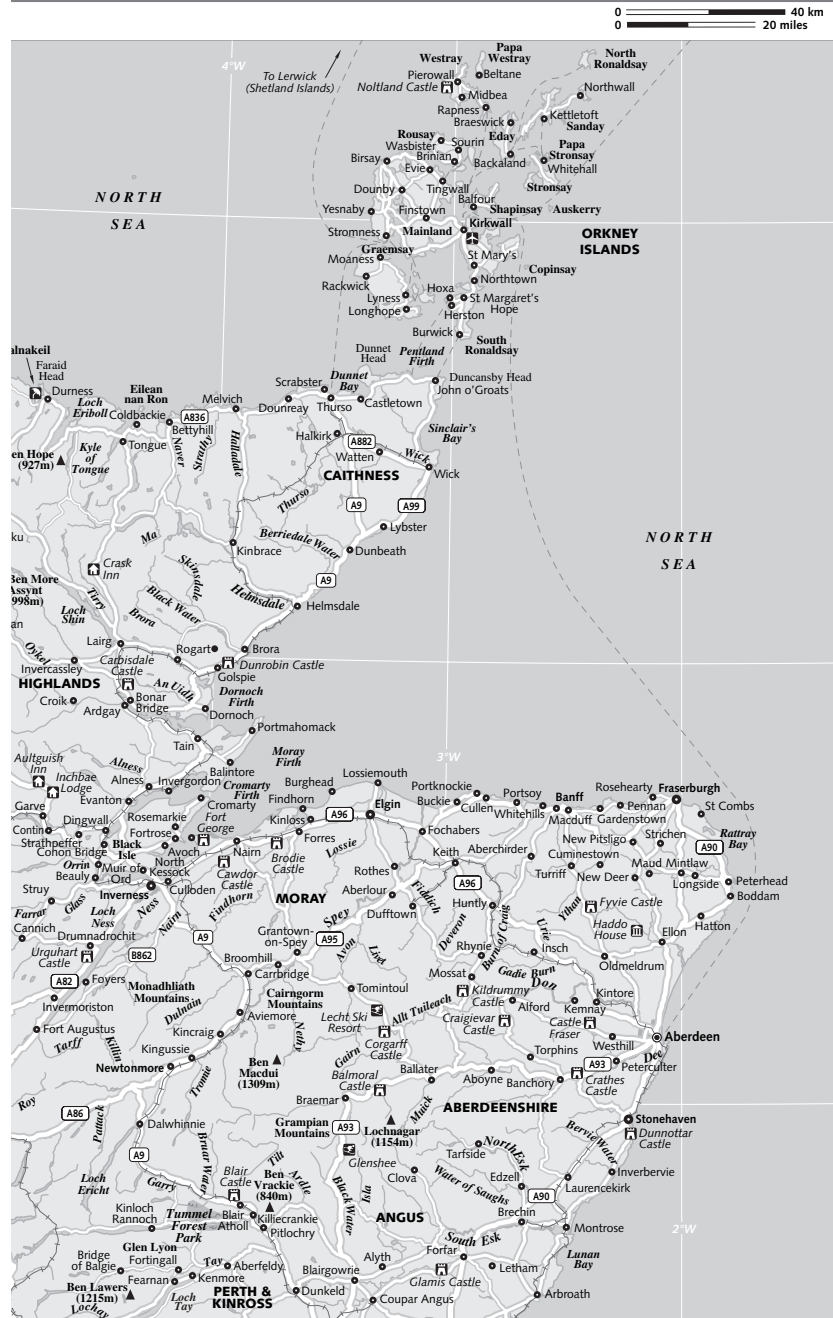
- Playing with puffins in Britain's extreme north at **Hermaness** (p939)
- Getting in touch with your inner Viking at **Mousa Broch** (p938) or **Skara Brae** (p927)
- Admiring the view of the rugged **Cuillin Hills** (p910) from the serene island of **Raasay** (p912)
- Taking on Britain's highest mountain with a climb at **Ben Nevis** (p885)
- Treading the boards as thane-for-a-day on the set of the Scottish play at **Cawdor Castle** (p894)
- Stepping back in time in Kirkwall's magnificent **St Magnus Cathedral** (p921)

■ POPULATION: 276,649

■ AREA: 12,041 SQ MILES



HIGHLANDS & NORTHERN ISLANDS



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Activities

For outdoor-lovers, especially walkers, the Highlands are heaven. For general information, see p83, and there are suggestions for shorter routes given throughout this chapter. Regional tourist offices stock free leaflets, plus maps and guides covering walking, cycling and other activities.

CYCLING

While you're winding through glorious scenery, often with light traffic, you'll think the Highlands have been designed for cyclists – although distances between towns can be long. The northern section of the 214-mile **Lochs & Glens Cycle Way** starts in Glasgow and winds its way through the heart of the region via Loch Ness and Pitlochry, ending in Inverness. The **Aberdeen to John o'Groats Cycle Route** leads inland across the Aberdeenshire Peninsula, via Inverness, before aiming north for the extreme northeast point on the British mainland, and continuing on through Orkney and Shetland as well. On the other side of the region, if you set aside a couple of weeks and have fair weather, one of the most rewarding (and possibly hardest) rides available follows the stunning roads of the west coast through Kyle of Lochalsh, Kinlochewe, Gairloch, Ullapool and Inchnadamph – and possibly all the way to Cape Wrath.

And then there are the islands – Skye is the most easily reached island in this region. If you want to go even further, ferries from Skye sail to the Outer Hebrides, where an end-to-end tour of this island chain is a popular cycling option. The only disadvantage with heading this way is that you may often be facing the wind (it usually comes from the southwest, and has the whole of the Atlantic to get up speed), so doing this tour in reverse is another option, sailing from Oban to Barra or South Uist, heading 10 miles north to Harris and Lewis, and then going by ferry back to Skye and the mainland. There are bike-rental outfits on Skye, Lewis, Barra and South Uist. **Sustrans** (www.sustrans.co.uk) have maps of National Cycling Networks.

Two good outfits that can get you cycling are **Wild Adventures** (☎ 851 374; www.wild-adventures.co.uk), which goes to Glen Coe, Ben Nevis, the Cairngorms, Orkney and the Hebridean Islands, and **Cycle Wild Scotland** (☎ 810676; www.cyclewildscotland.co.uk), which does guided tours and courses for mountain and downhill biking.

WALKING

Long-distance walking possibilities in this region include the **Great Glen Way**, a 70-mile jaunt from Fort William to Inverness along the Great Glen, and the **West Highland Way**, which runs for 95 miles from Fort William to Milngavie, 8 miles north of Glasgow. If you don't want to go the whole distance, Glen Coe (21 miles) makes a good place to aim for – and it's a fine area in its own right for mountain walking. A more leisurely, and very beautiful, route is the 84-mile Speyside Way (p824), which follows one of Scotland's best-loved rivers from the Cairngorm foothills to the coast.

Walk Scotland (www.walkscotland.com) produces several good walk leaflets and a comprehensive website that can get you planning.

OTHER ACTIVITIES

Other activities in the Highlands and northern islands of Scotland include **scuba diving**, notably at Scapa Flow in the Orkneys (p925); **rock climbing** and **mountaineering**, most famously on and around Ben Nevis; and **fishing**, both in rivers and the sea. The main areas for **skiing** and **snowboarding** are the Cairngorms (p880), Glen Coe (p888), and the Nevis Range (p885) near Fort William.

Getting Around

If you don't have wheels, make your first priority grabbing a free copy of *The Highlands, Orkney, Shetland and the Western Isles Public Transport Map* from a tourist office. It's a valuable resource.

BOAT

Ferries connect the mainland with the islands off the west and north coasts. **Caledonian MacBrayne** (CalMac; ☎ 0870 565 0000; www.calmac.co.uk) is the main operator off the west coast. If you're travelling by car in summer, it's wise to book a few days in advance. For ferries to Orkney and Shetland, see p921 and p935, respectively.

BUS

Wick, Thurso, Ullapool and Kyle of Lochalsh can all be reached by **Scottish Citylink** (☎ 08705 505050; www.citylink.co.uk) bus from Inverness, or from Edinburgh and Glasgow via Inverness or Fort William. Another major operator on local routes is **Rapsons/Highland Country** (☎ 01463-710555; www.rapsons.co.uk). The **Royal Mail Postbus** (☎ 0845 774 0740; www.postbus.royalmail.com) serves many remote communities.

There are several bus services specifically aimed at backpackers; see Transport (p969) for details.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

If you want to explore some of the more remote areas you should consider hiring a car; it will significantly increase your flexibility and independence. Roads are single track in many areas, so duck into passing places when you spot oncoming traffic. Plan ahead, as petrol stations can be few and far between. Rental-car outlets are listed under towns throughout this chapter, but it's worth considering renting a car from Edinburgh or Glasgow as it works out a bit cheaper. Taking cars on ferries to the islands can be expensive; on the further-flung islands it can work out cheaper to hire a car for a couple of days once you get there.

TRAIN

The two Highland railway lines from Inverness – north along the east coast to Wick and Thurso, and west to Kyle of Lochalsh – are justly famous. The West Highland line also follows a spectacular route from Glasgow to Fort William and Mallaig (for the Isle of Skye and the Small Isles).

ScotRail's Highland Rover ticket gives four days of unlimited travel to be used within eight days (£59) on the lines from Inverness to Wick and Thurso, Kyle of Lochalsh, Aberdeen and Aviemore; and on the West Highland line between Glasgow, Oban, Fort William and Mallaig; inquire about local ferry and bus travel also included in the ticket.

For rail information, you can call the **National Rail Enquiries** (☎ 08457 48 49 50; www.nationalrail.co.uk) or check ScotRail's website at www.scotrail.co.uk.

THE CAIRNGORMS

Britain's second-highest mountain range still elicits gasps as you approach through forests of Caledonian pine. The broad valley is sliced in two by the sparkling River Spey and is famous for whisky. The country around here gets different crowds throughout the year: walkers and bird-watchers pace the forest paths in spring and summer, hoping for a glimpse of the rare capercaillie or osprey, while in winter Britain's largest ski resort attracts powderhounds from across the country.

AVIEMORE

☎ 01479 / pop 2397

Aviemore is decked out to look like a ski village that could be anywhere in the world (there's something not quite right about faux-chalet chic in the middle of Scotland). Despite the town's odd architecture, the surrounding landscape has enough natural beauty to impress. Aviemore is the jumping-off point for the Cairngorms, a mecca for skiers, walkers and lovers of the truly great outdoors.

Orientation & Information

Aviemore is just off the A9 bypass. Grampian Rd is the main street with banks, eateries and the train station, while Dalfaber runs parallel. Eight miles southeast are the Cairngorms, on Ski Rd (B970/A951).

The **tourist office** (☎ 810363; aviemoretic@host.co.uk; The Mall, Grampian Rd; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Sat, 10am-4pm Sun) has a bureau de change and sells many Ordnance Survey (OS) maps of the area, and books on walking in the Cairngorms.

There's a cluster of ATMs just outside Tesco supermarket on Grampian Rd. Many outdoor equipment shops along Grampian Rd organise gear hire and ski lessons. Try **Ellis Brigham** (☎ 810175; 9 Grampian Rd), near the train station. To get online, the cheapest of several places is the **Old Bridge Hotel** (Dalfaber Rd; per hr £2), on the other side of the tracks.

Activities

WALKING

Don't be fooled by the beauty of the Cairngorms; they're just as tough as many other Scottish mountains. A moderate steep half-day hike (4½ hours return) can take you to the summit of **Cairngorm** (1245m) from the car park at the end of the Ski Rd. More advanced walkers continue south to **Ben Macdui** (1309m – Britain's second-highest peak), but this takes eight to 10 hours from the car park, and it's a serious walk.

A more sedate, and extremely beautiful walk, the **Speyside Way** is a waymarked trail that meanders along the River Spey from Aviemore to the coast at Spey Bay, passing through whisky country and running along a former railway line.

Another trail leads west from Aviemore Youth Hostel and passes under the A9 into the **Craigellachie Nature Reserve**, a great place for short hikes traversing steep hills, with plenty of wildlife spotting.

The **Lairig Ghru trail**, which can take up to eight hours, is a demanding 24-mile route from Aviemore over the Lairig Ghru Pass to Braemar. If you're not doing the full route, it's still worth hiking the six-hour return trip up to the pass.

With Scotland's notoriously changeable weather, you should always prepare for all conditions: bring plenty of sustenance and liquids, as well as a good map, a compass and waterproof jacket. Always ask about conditions before heading out. In winter these walks are not to be attempted without serious equipment and experience of snowy conditions.

SKIING

With 19 runs, **Cairngorm Mountain** (☎ 861261; www.cairngormmountain.com; day pass adult/child £26/16) is Britain's largest ski area. Snow is notoriously unreliable, but when there's a good fall and the sun's out, there's good skiing. The season runs from December until the snow melts, which can be at the end of April.

The ski area is about 9 miles southeast of Aviemore. Ski tows and the Cairngorm Mountain Railway funicular start from the main Coire Cas car park, and are connected

to the more distant Coire na Ciste car park by free shuttle bus. Several places along Aviemore's main street hire out gear.

For tips on hitting the white stuff try the following instructors: **School of Snowsports** (☎ 812335; www.schoolofsnowsports.co.uk; 1-/2-day lesson from £35) which hires out gear, and **Ski School** (☎ 861319; www.theskischool.co.uk; 1-day lesson from £66) which offers snowboard lessons.

FISHING

Fishing is wildly popular around these parts, with salmon, sea trout and brown trout in abundance. The tourist office has information on permits for the River Spey and various local lochs. Shops such as **Speyside Sports** (☎ 810656; 1 Station Sq) sell fishing permits (local rivers/lochs £25/15). A less demanding option, the **Rothiemurchus Fishery** (☎ 810703; Rothiemurchus Estate; 1-day rod hire £12-45, 1hr tuition £300) has stocked lochs that almost guarantee a bite.

OTHER ACTIVITIES

Glenmore Lodge (☎ 861256; www.glenmorelodge.co.uk; Loch Morlich; 2-day courses from £120) is an impressive centre for training courses in almost any

snow-, rock- or water-based activity you care to name. It offers a level of professionalism many outfits only dream of; most courses last three to five days, although there are some one-day sessions. The lodge offers excellent accommodation (see right).

For other adventures **G2 Outdoors** (☎ 07946 285612; www.g2outdoor.co.uk; half-day trips from £20) does a range of activities including canoeing, rock climbing, abseiling and mountain biking.

Sleeping BUDGET

There are several hostels and bunkhouses in Aviemore and along the Ski Rd.

Aviemore Bunkhouse (☎ 811181; www.aviemore-bunkhouse.com; Dalfaber Rd; dm/d/f £14/34/48; ☎ ☎) This independent hostel has really come into its own since we last visited, with a drying room, top-of-the-line security locks and en suite bathrooms in every bunkroom. Best of all, a Dennis-the-Menace mural greets you with a custard pie as you come upstairs.

Aviemore SYHA Hostel (☎ 0870 004 1104; www.syha.org.uk; 25 Grampian Rd; dm £14; ☎ ☎) At the start of the Ski Rd, this spacious hostel is kitted out with skiers and walkers in mind, with a drying room, pool table and internet. It may feel a little institutional, but there are some good family rooms. There's a 2am curfew.

Other recommendations:

Glenmore Camping & Caravan Park (☎ 861271; Loch Morlich; tent sites from £8) Good lochs location; 6 miles from Aviemore, along Ski Rd.

Cairngorm Lodge SYHA Hostel (☎ 0870 004 1137; www.syha.org.uk; Loch Morlich; dm £12; ☎ ☎ mid-Dec-Oct; ☎ ☎) Six miles from Aviemore along Ski Rd; prebooking is advised.

Rothiemurchus Caravan Park (☎ 812800; tent sites/caravans from £13/20) Just 1.5 miles along the B970, it's the closest camp site to Aviemore.

MIDRANGE

Ardlogie Guest House (☎ 810747; www.ardlogie.co.uk; Dalfaber Rd; s/d from £25/40) This cheerful B&B is snuggled into a quiet spot behind the train station. A real bonus is that guests get free use of Dalfaber Golf & Country Club facilities, including Jacuzzi, gym and sauna.

Ravensraig Guest House (☎ 810278; www.aviemoreonline.com; 141 Grampian Rd; s £25-35, d £45-55; ☎ ☎) Fitted out in dark wood, this friendly guesthouse, with king-size beds, is one of the better options on Aviemore's main street. Bike- and ski-storage areas make it a good option if

you're keen to get active. Substantial breakfasts are enjoyed in the glassed-in conservatory that puts you outside regardless of the weather.

Kinapol Guest House (☎ 810513; Dalfaber Rd; s/d £27.50/45) The oldest guesthouse in town can teach the whippersnappers a thing or two. In a homely spot, it has clean, well-presented rooms with peach bedspreads and shared bathrooms. There's a roomy, green garden out the back.

Cairngorm Hotel (☎ 810233; www.cairngorm.com; Grampian Rd; s/d £31.50/80; ☎ ☎ wi-fi) This large, historic place has reasonable rooms, though there's a creaky staircase and some fearsome *Braveheart*-style claymores in the foyer. The location is handy for trains and the rooms are spacious.

Other recommendations:

Glenmore Lodge (☎ 861256; www.glenmorelodge.org.uk; Loch Morlich; s/d £30/40; ☎ ☎ ☎) A training centre for outdoor activists; includes a gym, climbing wall and kayak pool.

MacKenzie's Highland Inn (☎ 810672; mackhotel@aol.com; 125 Grampian Rd; r £50; ☎) A good one for families; a bit tacky and very child friendly.

TOP END

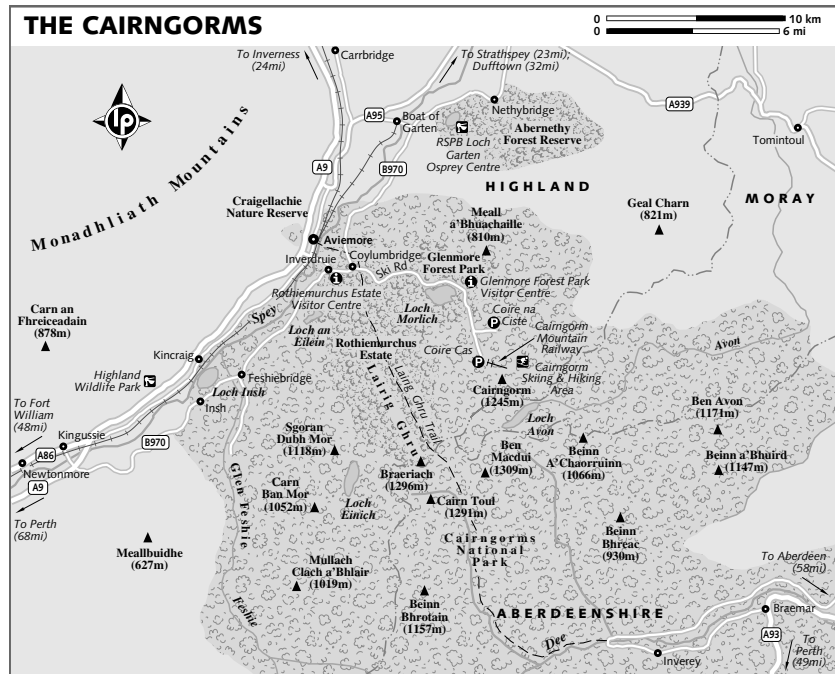
Corour House Hotel (☎ 810220; www.corourhousehotel.co.uk; Inverdrue; r per person from £70; ☎ ☎ closed Nov) Like the sound of your own country estate within striking distance of the ski fields? A mile from Aviemore off Ski Rd, this boutique hotel may be as close as you'll get. Its gracefully decorated rooms are so perfect you might skip the slopes in favour of a lie-in, while the surrounding grounds offer deer spotting and short walks.

Eating & Drinking

Aviemore has no shortage of eateries, but few are particularly inviting.

Café Mambo (☎ 811670; Grampian Rd; mains £5-9; ☎ ☎ 9am-11pm daily, food served noon-8.30pm Sun-Thu, noon-7.30pm Fri & Sat) This is the hip spot in town, doubling as a bar and nightclub. By day it serves up bladder-bursting coffees to passing visitors and by night staff pour cocktails of their own evil devising. Meals include vegetarian and Tex Mex options such as Mean Muchacho (chilli and onion rings).

Skining-Doo (☎ 810 392; 9 Grampian Rd; mains £6-10; ☎ ☎ lunch & dinner Thu-Tue) This local institution recently changed hands, but still has the same great interior papered with skiing, beer and NFL memorabilia. Burgers are the speciality, with some hefty garlic butter to the Italian



job, though big steaks also keep the punters happy. You can happily order an international beer here and ponder the stickers for a couple of hours; our favourite is 'Support your local mountain rescue – get lost'.

Old Bridge Inn (☎ 811137; 23 Dalfaber Rd; mains £9-13; ☎ lunch & dinner; 🍷) This sweet little boozier is a sanctuary from the tourist main street, thanks to its location tucked behind the train station. It serves up grub that's better than the usual pub nosh, with hefty steaks and affordable curries for the Aviemore Bunkhouse next door (which it runs).

Getting There & Away

BUS

Scottish Citylink buses travel to Edinburgh (£15, 3¼ hours, hourly), Glasgow (£15, 3½ hours, hourly), Inverness (£5, 45 minutes, 12 to 15 daily), Newtonmore/Kingussie (£5, 25 minutes, five to seven daily) and Pitlochry (£7, 1¼ hours, hourly).

Rapsons/Highland Country links Aviemore to Inverness (£5, 1¼ hours, three daily Monday to Friday) via Grantown-on-Spey (£3.90, 35 minutes, hourly).

TRAIN

There are direct train services to Glasgow and Edinburgh (both £34, three hours, three daily) and Inverness (£8.40, 40 minutes, nine daily).

Getting Around

Rapsons/Highland Country services link Aviemore and Cairngorm (20 minutes, three to eight daily).

Bothy Bikes (☎ 811111; Ski Rd, Inverdrue; half-/full-day rental £12/17; ☎ 9am-5.30pm), a mile down Ski Rd, offers in-depth advice on route planning.

The **Strathspey Steam Railway** (☎ 810725; www.strathspeyrailway.co.uk; adult/child round-trip ticket from £9.50/4.75; ☎ Apr-Oct & Christmas) runs a loop of Aviemore, Boat of Garten and Broomhill.

AROUND AVIEMORE

Rothiemurchus Estate

The **Rothiemurchus Estate Visitor Centre** (☎ 01479-812345; www.rothiemurchus.net; Ski Rd, Inverdrue; ☎ 9.30am-5pm) is a mile from Aviemore. The vast property, owned by a single family, has over 50 miles of footpaths, including some particularly attractive trails through the Caledonian pine forests and around enchanting **Loch an Eilein** with its island ruin. Visitors can also opt for ranger-

guided walks, Land Rover tours, and fishing for rainbow trout at the estate's fish farm or in the River Spey. Pick up the free *Activities, Maps & Walks* brochure and the basic footpath maps.

Glenmore Forest Park

Around Loch Morlich, 6 miles from Aviemore, the Ski Rd passes through 8 sq miles of pine and spruce that make up Glenmore Forest Park.

The **Glenmore Forest Park Visitor Centre** (☎ 01479-861220), near steely-grey Loch Morlich, has a small exhibition on forests, and sells the *Glen More Forest Guide Map* detailing local walks, which include the three-hour-return ascent of **Meall a'Bhuachallie** that looms over the loch. From here it's an easy walk to the popular **Loch Morlich Watersports Centre** (☎ 01479-861221; ☎ May-Oct), a great spot for kids of all ages to learn basic sailing, windsurfing, and canoeing in placid, if chilly, waters off a pretty artificial beach.

Nearby, the **Cairngorm Reindeer Herd** (☎ 01479-861228; Glenmore; adult/child £8/4; ☎ 10am-4pm) gives you a chance to see the guys who deliver your Christmas presents in their natural habitat. Visits to the herd (11am) include patting and feeding.

Kincaig & Around

Kincaig, 7 miles southwest of Aviemore, is close to some great attractions. **Highland Wildlife Park** (☎ 01540-651270; www.highlandwildlifepark.org; adult/child £9.50/6.75; ☎ 10am-7pm Apr-Oct, 10am-4pm Nov-Mar), 1.5 miles south of the village, features a drive-through safari-style park. Inside are animals that once roamed wild around this country, including shaggy European bison, capercaillie, wolf lynx, stately red deer and elegantly coiffed Przewalski's horses. If you're without a car, friendly staff will drive you around.

Serene **Glen Feshie** extends south from Kincaig into the Cairngorms, with a 4WD track to the head of the glen that makes for great mountain biking. **Glen Feshie Hostel** (☎ 01540-651323; glenfeshiehostel@totalise.co.uk; dm £9.50; 🍷), about 5 miles from Kincaig, is a bothy (shelter) that's popular with hikers. Rates include bed linen and a steaming bowl of porridge to start the day.

There are Citylink and Rapsons/Highland Country buses connecting Kincaig and Aviemore (six to eight buses daily).

Boat of Garten

☎ 01479 / pop 570

Boat of Garten is known as the Osprey Village, as these rare birds of prey nest nearby at

the **Royal Society for the Protection of Birds Loch Garten Osprey Centre** (RSPB; ☎ 831476; Grianan Tullach; adult/child £2.50/50p; ☎ 10am-6pm Apr-Aug; 🍷) in Abernethy Forest Reserve. Ospreys migrate here from Africa in spring and nest in tall pine trees. You can watch them from a state-of-the-art hide equipped with telescopes and video monitoring. The centre is signposted about 2 miles from the village.

The best way to get to Boat of Garten is on the Strathspey Steam Railway (see opposite).

KINGUSSIE & NEWTONMORE

☎ 01540 / pop 2392

If you think these two hamlets are just another pair of sleepy one-street towns, think again – because running between them is Scotland's best regional museum, the Highland Folk Museum. There's just a couple of miles between the villages, but this distance, and friendships, gets stretched in the fierce rivalry of regular shinty matches, a game related to hurling but tougher. The Kingussie branch of the museum serves as a **tourist office** (☎ 661297; Duke St; ☎ Mon-Sat Apr-Oct).

Sights

The unmissable **Highland Folk Museum** (☎ 661307; www.highlandfolk.com) is divided into a branch for each village. **Kingussie Museum** (Duke St; adult/child £2/1, joint 2-day ticket £6.50; ☎ 9.30am-5pm Mon-Sat Apr-Aug, 9.30am-4pm Mon-Fri Sep & Oct; 🍷) was Britain's first open-air museum, with its collection of relics based on the collection of anthropologist Dr Isabel Grant, including representations of a Lewis blackhouse (ancient cottage). The real highlights are at **Newtonmore Museum** (Kingussie Rd; adult/child £6/3.50, joint 2-day ticket £6.50; ☎ 10.30am-5.30pm Apr-Aug, 11am-4.30pm Sep, 11am-4.30pm Mon-Fri Oct; 🍷), a huge outdoor complex that lets you travel between the 1700s and 1930s. Reconstructed from an archaeological dig, the 18th-century blackhouse village authentically evokes the period, from the peaty smoke fires to the rough straw of the rooves. Fast forward to the 20th century and there's a schoolhouse, sawmill and sweet little church. Time travel between the two sites is in dinky 1930s buses driven by chatty locals. The best feature of this attraction is the staff, cheerily re-creating history including displays of spinning, cobbling and not forgetting that prim school marm who busts you for bad spelling.

Activities

The **Monadhliath Mountains**, northwest of Kingussie, attract fewer hikers than the nearby

Cairngorms and make an ideal destination for walkers seeking peace and solitude. However, during the deer-stalking season (August to October), check with the tourist office before setting out.

Sleeping & Eating

Strathspey Mountain Hostel (☎ 673694; www.newtonmore.com/strathspey; Main St, Newtonmore; dm/d/cottages £11/25/55) With a friendly owner, crackling fires, and dorms that only have three or four bunks, this is one of the best hostel bets in town. Cyclists appreciate the lockable shed and larger groups opt for the separate cottage, which sleeps six.

Auld Poor House (☎ 661558; www.auldpoorhouse.co.uk; Kincaig Rd, Kingussie; £22-25; 🍷) Artsy and attractive, this great B&B was originally built for itinerant workers (hence the name). Today it attracts a better class of itinerant cyclists and walkers who love its snug rooms (which include Klimt prints) and the scrumptious dinners (available on request). Best of all, one of the owners is a massage therapist (massages per 30 minutes/one hour £12/20).

Glen (☎ 673203; Main St, Newtonmore; s/d £30/50) Not just trading on its appearance in the TV series *Monarch of the Glen*, this congenial boozier tracks down international talent for its lunch and dinner menus (mains £5 to £9), which feature lamb tagine and top-notch curries as well as staples such as lamb shanks and salmon risotto. It still serves a cask beer called Glen Bogle, and regulars might even tell you about sharing the bar with Tom Baker.

Columba House Hotel (☎ 661402; Manse Rd, Kingussie; s/d £35/70) If *Sesame Street's* Bert and Ernie ever wanted a special weekend away together they'd choose this cute and quirky spot. A quality in-house restaurant means they could happily stay in, and little touches like teddy bears on beds and rubber duckies in the bathroom would also appeal. If you're not a puppet, it's still a family-friendly spot with great breakfasts and an excellent location.

Our pick **Cross** (☎ 661166; www.thecross.co.uk; Tweed Mill Brae, Ardbroilach Rd, Kingussie; s/d £80/100; ☎ Tue-Sat mid-Feb-Dec) In an old tweed mill, this is casual luxury, with original fittings but new corner baths and individual CD players (with a shrewdly chosen collection of Scottish music). River views are beautiful but Room eight has a view of the red-squirrel feeding area, where the cutest of critters feed. If you're hungry, the restaurant downstairs is excellent (two-course

dinner £37 to £39), serving up the likes of maize-fed guinea fowl and baked monkfish seasoned with red pepper and orange sauce. Even the fish and chips – Scrabster hake with burgundy potatoes no less – is an elaboration on a classic, without being gussied up.

Also recommended:

Laird's Bothy (☎ 661334; 68 High St, Kingussie; dm £10) Tucked behind the sometimes noisy Topsy Laird, this is a reasonable budget option, especially if you drink half the night away in the bar.

Hermitage (☎ 662137; www.thehermitage-scotland.com; Spey St, Kingussie; s/d from £35/52) A quaint old residence that offers boutique beds in colour-themed rooms.

Getting There & Away

Kingussie and Newtonmore are on the main Edinburgh/Glasgow to Inverness route; there are Citylink bus services to Aviemore (£4, 25 minutes, five to seven daily) and Inverness (£7, one hour, six to eight Monday to Saturday, three Sunday). Rapsons/Highland Country runs a service (Monday to Friday) between Newtonmore and Inverness, calling at Kingussie, Kincairg, Aviemore and Carrbridge, with more frequent buses (school days only) between Kingussie and Aviemore.

There are trains, more stopping in Kingussie than Newtonmore, to Edinburgh (£33, 2½ hours, seven a day Monday to Saturday, two Sunday) and Inverness (£8, one hour, eight a day Monday to Saturday, four Sunday).

THE GREAT GLEN

The spectacular chain of long, thin lochs stretching from Inverness to Fort William could be axe wounds, bleeding crystal blue water. Created by geothermal activity over 400 million years ago, the line of lochs sits on a fault line with stunning Lochs Linnhe, Lochy, Oich and Ness all offering impressive scenery as well as a link between coasts with the Caledonian Canal. Historically, this area has been fiercely contested as a communication route and has witnessed the bloody battles of Glen Coe and Culloden.

Activities

The **Great Glen Way**, a 73-mile walk from Inverness to Fort William via Drumnadrochit and Fort Augustus, is the perfect way to absorb the beauty of the glen's lochs and mountains, and explore the banks of Loch Ness. The route

takes four days, but can be done in sections as day walks. At Fort William walkers can connect with the West Highland Way.

The footpath shares some sections with the 80-mile **Great Glen Cycle Route** via Fort Augustus, following the canals and gravel tracks through forests. The *Cycling in the Forest* leaflet, available from tourist offices and the Forestry Commission, provides details.

FORT WILLIAM & AROUND

☎ 01397 / pop 9902

Fort William claims the crown of Outdoor Capital of UK, and visiting it is all about getting out into the surrounding country. Backed by the magnificent Ben Nevis, you'll be strapping on your walking boots in summer, and skis to cut the white stuff of Glen Nevis in winter. It's at the end of the West Highland Way, so pubs will be packed with contented-looking hikers.

The township is marred by the ugly bypass that blocks the town centre from the delightful Loch Linnhe, plus the town itself can feel like a mall packed with tartan tat. When you feel like it's time to rouse yourself, walk up the ever-present Ben Nevis.

Orientation & Information

Fort William meanders along the edge of Loch Linnhe for several miles but has a fairly compact centre. The pedestrianised main street is the key to most dining options and other facilities, while accommodation tends to fall on side streets.

Glen Nevis (Iona Nibheis) Visitor Centre

(☎ 705922; ☎ Easter–mid-Oct) Outside of town.

Library (High St; ☎ 10am–8pm Mon & Thu, 10am–6pm Tue & Fri, 10am–1pm Wed & Sat) Free internet access.

One World Internet Café (☎ 07976 961695; 123 High St; per hr £1.50; ☎ 10am–9pm)

Tourist office (☎ 0845 225 5121; fortwilliam@host.co.uk; Cameron Sq; per 20min £1; ☎ 9am–8pm Mon–Sat, 10am–6pm Sun) Internet access.

Sights & Activities

WEST HIGHLAND MUSEUM

Next to the tourist office, this **museum** (☎ 702169; Cameron Sq; adult/child £3/50p; ☎ 10am–5pm Mon–Sat Jun & Sep, 10am–5pm Mon–Sat, 2–5pm Sun Jul & Aug, 10am–4pm Mon–Sat Oct–May) has artefacts harking back to the Neolithic age with special attention given to Glen Coe and highland weaponry.

For a wee tippie, **Ben Nevis Distillery** (☎ 700200; Lochy Bridge; adult/child £4/2; ☎ tours hourly 9am–5pm Mon–Fri Apr–Jun & Sep, 9am–6pm Mon–Fri, 10am–4pm Sat, non-

4pm Sun Jul & Aug) gives a free swig of their peaty whisky at the end of the tour.

WALKING

The most obvious hike is up Britain's highest mountain, **Ben Nevis** (1343m), but even though it's a tiddler compared with international mountains you'll need to prepare thoroughly. The weather at the top is often bad (with thick mist), even if it's sunny when you set off. Bring warm clothes, a detailed map, food and water.

The path begins in Glen Nevis, southeast of town, either from the car park by Achintee Farm (reached by the road through Claggan), or from the Glen Nevis SYHA Hostel on the road up the glen. Both trails join after a mile, then head up to the summit and ruins of the

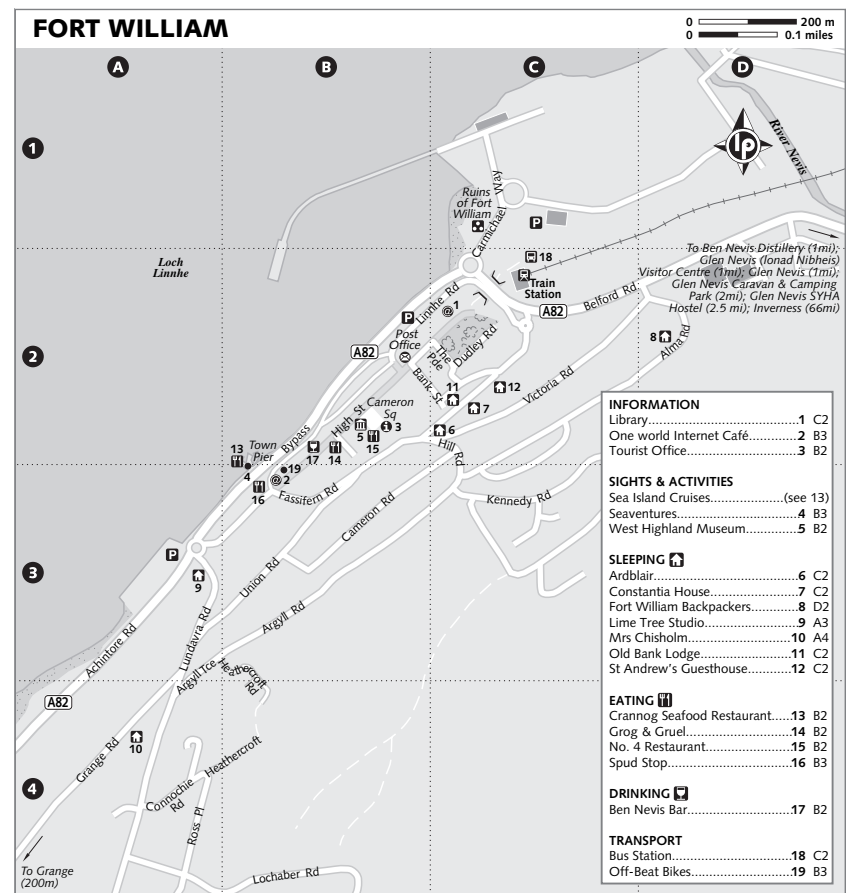
old observatory. It takes at least 5½ hours return, but you should allow eight to be sure.

There are pleasant (far less strenuous) walks along Glen Nevis at the eastern end to beautiful **Steall Meadows**. You could also walk part of the **West Highland Way** from Fort William to Kinlochleven via Glen Nevis (14 miles).

The **Great Glen Way** concludes at the Old Fort in Fort William and many walkers hike the Fort William–Gairloch section (21 miles return) in a day. It's a lovely scenic path overlooking the River Lochy, with views to Ben Nevis.

SKIING

There's good skiing at **Nevis Range** (☎ 705825; www.nevisrange.com; 1-day lift pass adult/child £23/13.50, instruction £39), with more than 30 runs to explore



during the ski season (December to May, depending on snow).

OTHER ACTIVITIES

When the Nevis Range sheds its winter coat of snow, there's a competition-class **downhill mountain-bike trail** (bike hire & 1-day lift ticket £26; ☞ 11am-3pm mid-May–mid-Sep) which hosted the 2006 UCI Mountain Bike Championships. There's also 25 miles of waymarked mountain-bike trails, for all standards, in the nearby forest.

For wildlife spotting, two good operators are **Seaventures** (☎ 701687; www.seaventures-scotland.com; adult/child trips from £14/10) on the pier; and **Sea Island Cruises** (☎ 700714; www.cranog.net; adult/child £8/4), linked to the fish shop on the pier, which does 45-minute trips to see seals on the islands.

Sleeping

BUDGET

Mrs Chisholm (☎ 705548; 5 Grange Rd; r per person £12.50-17) Tough to spot, with limited signage, this place has just two rooms with great views of the loch. The welcome is as warm as whisky on a cold night and doubles are particularly roomy.

Old Bank Lodge (☎ 700070; www.bankstreetlodge.co.uk; Bank St; dm/s/d £13/25/43) This well-kept hostel, boasting a great location, is roomy, despite a smaller kitchen and lounge than some. Double and single rooms represent good value and feel more like hotel rooms.

Glen Nevis SYHA Hostel (☎ 0870 004 1120; www.syha.org.uk; Glen Nevis; dm £14; ☎ ☑) A little spartan for flashpackers, this simple hostel at the start of the walking trails in Glen Nevis caters to hikers. They kick off their boots and doss comfortably in four-bunk dorms, which feel a bit tight if you've got a big backpack.

Other recommendations:

Glen Nevis Caravan & Camping Park (☎ 702191; www.glen-nevis.co.uk; Glen Nevis; tent sites £7.10-10.70, caravans from £10.50; ☞ mid-Mar–Oct) A green spot with hedges for tent privacy; there's a bus to Glen Nevis.

Fort William Backpackers (☎ 700711; www.scotlandstopping-hostels.com; Alma Rd; dm £13; ☎ ☑) Close to the train and bus stations; sociable hostel with nice lounge area.

MIDRANGE

Fassifern Rd is a popular spot for B&Bs.

Constantia House (☎ 702893; Fassifern Rd; s/d £24/40) Overlooking both town and lake, this snug B&B has several rooms to choose from, though they have more singles than most. Breakfast is the usual display of artery-straining hospitality.

St Andrew's Guesthouse (☎ 703038; www.fortwilliam-accommodation.co.uk; Fassifern Rd; s/d £25/40; ☞ Jan-Oct; ☎) The best of the B&Bs on this stretch, this former schoolhouse and headmaster's quarters is something special. A stone's throw from the main street, it offers tranquillity, great views, large rooms, stained glass, and a touch of class beyond the norm in this town.

Lime Tree Studio (☎ 701806; www.limetrestudio.co.uk; Achintore Rd; s/d from £40/70) Undergoing substantial renovations at the time we visited, this is a fabulous blending of art gallery and B&B. Paintings here include several based on the magnificent views and you'll feel like you're in the country. Let's hope the renovations, to make a great spot even better, can keep the prices low.

TOP END

Ardblair (☎ 705832; www.ardblairfortwilliam.co.uk; Fassifern Rd; d £70) More like your own in-town estate house, this lovely place has a fragrant garden and wonderful views of town. There are just three rooms (book ahead), including the Pink and Blue rooms, all of which are done out in busy florals. If your eyes need a break, check out the views again.

Grange (☎ 705516; www.thegrange-scotland.co.uk; Grange Rd; d & tw £76-96; ☞ Mar-Nov) Masquerading as a B&B, this is really a schmick boutique hotel with luxuriant grounds overlooking the loch and four rooms with chaise lounges and other antiques. Hosts turn on the charm, with blazing fires and formidable breakfasts to ensure a memorable stay.

Eating & Drinking

Grog & Gruel (☎ 705078; www.grogandgruel.co.uk; 66 High St; mains £4-9; ☞ lunch & dinner) There's nothing gruelling about the playful Tex Mex menu that includes Mucho Macho Nachos and an array of Grog Dogs. And you couldn't accuse this pig-mascotted spot of pork-barrelling: it's all real cask ale. This newcomer has found its place at the dining trough, with a rollicking younger crowd who stay for a couple of beers. The upstairs restaurant will get you out of the common sty, but has the same menu.

No. 4 Restaurant (☎ 704222; Cameron Sq; lunch mains £6-9, dinner £10-18; ☞ lunch & dinner) Next to the tourist office. This is Fort William's favoured spot for family celebrations for its dignified ambience and something-for-everyone menu. There are plenty of vegetarian options for teenagers going through 'that phase' and dads appreciate scallops with ginger-roasted veggies. It

also has a few kids' options, while mums save room for puddings such as roasted pecan tart or good old bread-and-butter pudding.

Cranog Seafood Restaurant (☎ 705589; Town Pier; mains £13-18; ☞ lunch & dinner) Right on the loch, you can almost imagine fish jumping into the pan at this place with superfresh food (in fact the restaurant has its own boats). The dinner views across the loch are the town's best as this is the only restaurant on the loch side of the bypass.

Also recommended:

Spud Stop (☎ 160671; Station Sq; snacks £2-5; ☞ 8am-10pm Apr-Sep, 9am-4pm Oct-Mar) Refuel with top snacks, including lip-smacking venison burger and real coffee.

Ben Nevis Bar (☎ 702295; 105 High St) A large pub that's popular with hikers.

Getting There & Away

BUS

Scottish Citylink buses operate services to Edinburgh (£20, four hours, daily) and Glasgow (£14, three hours, three daily) both via Glencoe (30 minutes, five daily); Inverness (£8.90, two hours, five to six daily); Oban (£8.20, 1½ hours, four daily); and Portree (£17, three hours, three direct daily).

Shiel Buses (☎ 01967-431272) runs one bus daily, except Sunday, to/from Mallaig (£4.50, 1¼ hours) via Glenfinnan (35 minutes).

Rapsons/Highland Country (☎ 702373) runs buses to Kinlochleven (£3.30, 50 minutes, six daily) via Inchree, Onich, Ballachulish and Glencoe.

TRAIN

ScotRail (www.firstscotrail.com) runs trains from Glasgow to Fort William (£23, 3¼ hours, two or three daily) and from Mallaig (£8.10, 1½ hours, three or four daily). An overnight train connects Fort William and London Euston (return seat/bed £57/99, 13¼ hours), but you'll miss the wonderful views. An overnight Caledonian Sleeper service goes to London Euston (seated £73, sleeping cabin £119, 13 hours).

From May to October consider taking the **Jacobite Steam Train** (☎ 737751; www.steamtrain.info) that runs from Fort William to Mallaig (adult/child single from £27/15.50; Sunday to Friday). It has starred in the *Harry Potter* films as the Hogwarts' train.

Getting Around

Rapsons/Highland Country buses operate 11 services Monday to Saturday, and four on Sunday from June to September, between the

bus station and the Glen Nevis SYHA Hostel. Buses to Corpach run every 20 to 25 minutes, except on Sunday when they're hourly.

Off-Beat Bikes (☎ 704008; www.offbeatbikes.co.uk; 117 High St; half-/full-day bike hire £10/15) really know biking, with tips on local trails and maps.

GLEN COE

Scotland's most famous glen is a pure microcosm of the magnificent Highlands, with heathered ranges, waterfalls, rivers and staggering mountains. Three massive, brooding spurs, known as the Three Sisters dominate the south, while the rim of the Aonach Eagach ridge, at 900m, looms in the north. Walkers of all abilities challenge themselves with a variety of spectacular hikes.

Glen Coe's notorious place in history came in 1692 when the MacDonalds were murdered by the Campbells in the bloody Glen Coe Massacre.

WALKING

This is serious walking country and you'll need maps, warm clothes, food and water. The **Glen Coe Visitor Centre** (☎ 811307; Inverigan; ☞ daily Mar-Oct, Fri-Mon Nov-Feb) stocks lots of useful information.

There are several short walks around **Glen-coe Lochan**, near the village. To get there, turn left off the minor road to the youth hostel, just beyond the bridge over the River Coe.

A more strenuous hike is into the **Lost Valley**, a magical mountain sanctuary still haunted by the ghosts of murdered MacDonalds (see the boxed text, p888). It's only a 2.5-mile round trip, but allow three hours. The walk begins at a rough path from the car park at Allt na Reigh (on the A82, 6 miles east of Glencoe village).

A great six- to seven-hour hike leads through the Lost Valley to the top of **Bidean nam Bian** (1141m).

Glencoe & Around

☎ 01855 / pop 334

Sixteen miles south of Fort William on the A82, this small village is besieged by soaring mountains on one side and Loch Leven on the other. The small thatched **Glencoe Folk Museum** (☎ 811664; adult/child £2/free; ☞ 10am-5.30pm Mon-Sat May-Sep) houses a historical collection, including military and costumes.

About 1.5 miles from the village, along the road into the glen is the excellent **Glen Coe Visitor Centre** (NTS; ☎ 811307; Inverigan; adult/concession £5/4;

THE GLEN COE MASSACRE

In an attempt to quash remaining Jacobite loyalties among the Highland clans, William III ordered clan chiefs to take a loyalty oath by the end of 1691. Maclain, the elderly chief of the MacDonalds of Glen Coe, missed his deadline.

The MacDonalds were to be punished as an example to other Highland clans, some of whom had not bothered to take the oath. A company of 120 soldiers, mainly of the Campbell clan, was sent to the glen. Since their leader was related by marriage to Maclain, the troops were billeted in MacDonald homes.

After they'd been guests for 12 days, the order came for the soldiers to kill all MacDonalds under the age of 70. Some Campbells alerted the MacDonalds to their intended fate, while others turned on their hosts at 5am on 13 February, shooting Maclain and 37 other men, women and children. Other MacDonalds fled into the snow, where many died of exposure.

There's a monument to Maclain in Glencoe village; members of the MacDonald clan still gather here on 13 February each year.

☞ daily Mar-Oct, Fri-Mon Nov-Feb; ♿), a modern facility with an ecotourism bent. The centre presents information on geological, environmental and cultural history of Glen Coe via interactive displays. Kids will love Hamish the Scotty dog who acts as mascot. The story of the Glen Coe Massacre in all its gory detail is also told.

SLEEPING & EATING

Glen Coe SYHA Hostel (☎ 0870 004 1122; www.syha.org.uk; dm £14; ♿) A couple of miles from the village on the northern side of the River Coe, this austere hostel is a good spot to tuck the hiking boots under a bunk but has little to offer other than proximity to the Clachaig Inn.

Clachaig Inn (☎ 811252; www.clachaig.com; s/d from £38/42; ♿) This cheery historic inn, 2.5 miles southeast of Glencoe village, is the perfect conclusion to a hard day of walking. Aside from delightful rooms with soporific beds, there's the Bidean Lounge, a sophisticated restaurant completed with a vegan-friendly papier-mâché stags head. Out the back is the rustic Boots bar (bar meals £6 to £10), where there's a pool table and a busy jukebox.

Other recommendations:

Red Squirrel Campsite (☎ 811256; tent sites per person £6.50) In a beautiful green spot that's handy to Clachaig Inn; good info booth.

Ben Nevis Inn & Bunkhouse (☎ 701227; www.ben-nevis-inn.co.uk; by Claggan; dm £12, mains £7-12; ♿) meals midday-9pm) Has simple dorm rooms and some tasty pub meals.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Rapsons/Highland Country and Scottish Citylink run between Fort William and Glencoe (£4.30; 30 minutes, five daily Monday

to Saturday); the latter also operates to/from Glasgow (£13, 2½ hours, four daily).

Kinlochleven

☎ 01855 / pop 897

At North Ballachulish you can take the beautiful side road running up Loch Leven to Kinlochleven. As well as the excellent walking hereabouts, **Ice Factor** (☎ 831100; www.ice-factor.co.uk; guides per day £150, half-/full-day bike hire £12/18; ♿ 9am-10pm) is a fine modern facility with indoor ice-climbing and rock-climbing walls, as well as instruction in mountaineering.

The West Highland Way passes through town and walkers often stay overnight here. The excellent **Blackwater Hostel** (☎ 831253; www.blackwaterhostel.co.uk; Lab Rd; camping £5, dm £11) is a pine-interior spot with a bright, open kitchen; it only takes smaller groups, so you won't be overrun by tour groups. It includes dedicated facilities for campers.

Kings House Hotel (☎ 851259; www.kingy.com; s/d from £24/48; ♿) is one of Scotland's oldest established inns with presentable rooms including some great singles (our favourite is number four for its views). It does well-priced hiker-sized portions of venison burgers and Cumberland sausages, but get in early for lunch (mains £6 to £9) as the outdoor tables have the best views and hence fill up quickly.

Glen Coe Ski Centre

About 1.5 miles east of Kings House Hotel, on the other side of the A82, is the car park and base station for this ski centre, where commercial skiing in Scotland first started in 1956. The **chair lift** (☎ 01855-851226; www.glen.coemountain.com; 1-day lift pass £24; ♿ year-round) is the

easiest way to get to the dramatic 640m-high viewpoint. There are several good walks, and skiing in winter at **Glencoe Mountain Resort**.

LOCH NESS

Few things are as emblematically Scottish as the mythical monster that skulks in Britain's longest body of fresh water, which sinks to a depth of 129 fathoms. But Loch Ness, stretching 23 miles from Fort Augustus nearly as far as Inverness, has other, less obvious, intrigue. There's the Caledonian Canal, a vast 19th-century construction that uses Scotland's unique succession of lochs to carry ships through the centre of the country. Of course there's an industry of tartan tack built up around Nessie, but you might like to escape the monstrous clanging of cash registers and explore the smaller towns around this impressive loch.

The busy A82 traces the northwestern shore, while the more tranquil and picturesque B862 follows the southeastern shore. A complete circuit of the loch is about 70 miles, with the best views seen by travelling anticlockwise.

Drumadrochit

☎ 01456 / pop 813

Seized by madNess (this is actually a T-shirt), the gift shops, pubs and cafés of this small town are ruled by the monstrous miss that exists to milk pounds from passing tourists. Ironically, the town isn't actually even on the lake; the road ducks inland at this point. Regardless, the friendly **tourist office** (☎ 459076; A82; ♿ year-round) shells out leaflets on the area.

The better of the two rival exhibits telling the monster's tale is **Loch Ness 2000** (☎ 450573; www.loch-ness-scotland.com; adult/child £5.95/3.50; ♿ 9am-8pm; ♿). It walks you from one audiovisual display to the next (through a surprisingly spooky fibreglass cave) giving a scientific account of the monster myth and the loch's ecology. When the 40-minute presentation ends, you're ejected into a labyrinthine gift shop.

Nearby the **Original Loch Ness Monster Centre** (☎ 450342; www.lochness-centre.com; adult/child £5/3.50, incl Braveheart Centre £6/3.75; ♿ 9am-8pm Jul & Aug, 10am-5.30pm Apr-Jun, Sep & Oct, 10am-4pm Nov-Mar) has more signage than things to do. There's a the plaster Braveheart Centre with a painted Mel Gibson lookalike. The 30-minute audiovisual is kitschy-if-overpriced fun, with stories about David Bellamy's Nessie stunt and a WWF-impersonating warlock who casts a protection spell over the monster.

URQUHART CASTLE

Due to its sublime location overlooking Loch Ness, **Urquhart Castle** (H5; ☎ 450551; adult/child £6.50/2.50; ♿ 9.30am-6.30pm Apr-Sep, 9.30am-4.30pm Mon-Sat, 2-4.30pm Sun Oct-Mar; ♿) sees its fair share of tour buses. The entrance fee includes a short film and a chance to get close to the reconstructed trebuchet (a medieval form of a catapult).

The castle was repeatedly sacked, damaged and rebuilt over the centuries, just as the Great Glen was regularly pillaged and its inhabitants robbed. It was finally blown up in 1692 to prevent Jacobites using it; what remains perches dramatically on the loch's edge.

Several cruises pass or stop at the castle (see p891 and p890).

SLEEPING & EATING

Loch Ness Backpackers Lodge (☎ 450807; www.lochness-backpackers.com; East Lewiston; dm £12.50, d & tw £30, f £45; ♿) This colourful place (check out those murals) has six-bunk dorms out the back that feel surprisingly spacious. There are two kitchens for convenience, and a Continental breakfast (£2) on offer. There's also bike hire (half-day £6) and a large barbecue with which to enjoy the good weather. To get here from Drumadrochit take the A82 towards Fort William and turn left at the sign for the Loch Ness Inn.

Benleva Hotel (☎ 450080; www.lochneshotel.com; Drumadrochit; d & tw £60) This sanctuary from monster mania is tucked off the main road (follow signs) and has quality rooms in a former church manse. The pub downstairs sells does local ales and single malts, as well as some dignified pub grub (lunch and dinner) which scored it Highland Pub of the Year in 2005.

Smiddy (☎ 450755; Lewiston; lunches £3-6; ♿ noon-3pm) Just south of Drumadrochit, this casual place does good beer, coffee and burgers with nary a mention of certain submarine creatures. It's also a good spot for a game of pool with locals.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Scottish Citylink has bus services along Loch Ness between Fort William (£9.20, 1½ hours, five to six daily) and Inverness (£5; 30 minutes, seven to eight daily), which goes via Drumadrochit.

Fort Augustus

☎ 01320 / pop 508

Once the headquarters for General Wade's military road-building in the 18th century, today Fort Augustus marches to the tourist

drum, serving as both the gateway to Loch Ness and a sweet little township in itself. The township is at the convergence of Lochs Ness and Oich, which form the impressive Caledonian Canal.

The **tourist office** (☎ 366367; 🕒 9am-6pm Mon-Sat, 10am-4pm Sun Easter-Oct), in the central car park, charges £3 for local accommodation bookings. There's internet access a few doors up at **Neuk Internet Café & Restaurant** (☎ 366208; per hr £6; 🕒 10am-8pm).

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

At Fort Augustus, boats using the **Caledonian Canal** are raised and lowered 12m through five cascading locks. You can watch boats being led on ropes, like obedient Labrador, through the locks; it's even more of a spectacle when skyscraper-like cruise liners pass through. Built from 1803 to 1822, the canal once conducted paddlesteamers between Glasgow and Inverness with a total of 29 locks between the Scotland's east and west coasts.

You can find out more about this amazing engineering project at the **Caledonian Canal Heritage Centre** (☎ 366493; admission free; 🕒 10am-5pm Apr-Oct). You can also book the **Loch Ness Express** (www.lochnessexpress.com) which heads past Urquhart Castle on the way to Inverness (adult/child one-way £13/8, return £25/15; four daily). Also departing from Fort Augustus, **Cruise Loch Ness** (☎ 0366277; www.cruiselochness.com; adult/child £8.50/5) does a one-hour cruise on the *Royal Scot*.

SLEEPING & EATING

Morag's Lodge (☎ 366289; moragslodge@hotmail.com; Bunnoich Brae; dm/d £12.50/30; 📺 📺 📺) This first-rate hostel has cheery dorms named for Scottish films. There's a cheap buffet dinner available, massive kitchen and sociable bar, plus some fairly spectacular views from its location off the main road in the northern part of town.

Bank House B&B (☎ 366755; Station Rd; s/d £22/50) Behind an actual bank on a terrace above the locks, this basic-but-budget place has lovely Loch Ness views and a small library to keep you busy.

As you wander along the canal there are several scenic spots in which to eat. Try the wittily named pub, the **Lock Inn** (☎ 366302; mains £8-10; 🕒 lunch & dinner), which does great seafood, or bustling **Neuk Café Bar** (☎ 366208; meals £5-8; 🕒 9am-6pm), which does breakfasts until midday, including the massive Climbers Breakfast.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Scottish Citylink buses from Inverness to Fort William stop at Fort Augustus (£8, 1¼ hours, five or six daily).

INVERNESS

☎ 01463 / pop 44,500

The hub of the Highlands is one of the fastest growing cities in Scotland. It's no accident that a large shopping centre is conveniently placed near the train station; folk from surrounding towns flock to Inverness to shop and enjoy the city's eateries. Snuggled into the Moray Firth and handy to Loch Ness, Inverness was ideally placed for the Caledonian Canal, and later rail and road links established it as a transport nexus. Whether you're going Nessie-spotting or heading for the remote Orkneys, you'll pass through this bustling town.

Get acquainted with the town by strolling along the river. You'll probably happen upon a pub in which to while away the hours or an eatery that takes your fancy. While attractions are limited within the city there's plenty around the city, from Macbeth's castle to the legendary Jacobite battlefield of Culloden.

Information

Main Post Office (Queensgate; 🕒 9am-5.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-6pm Sat)

New City Laundry (☎ 242507; 15 Young St; 🕒 daily) Coin-operated launderette with internet access (per hour £2.50).

Public library (☎ 236463; Margaret St; 🕒 Mon-Sat) Free internet access.

Tourist office (☎ 234353; inverness@host.co.uk; Castle Wynd; 🕒 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 10am-4pm Sat Nov-May, 9am-6pm Mon-Sat, 10am-4pm Sun Jun & Jul, 9am-7pm Mon-Sat, 9.30am-4pm Sun Aug, 9am-5pm Mon-Sat, 10am-2pm Sun Sep & Oct) Currency exchange, accommodation booking, and CalMac ferry office. It also books tickets for tours and has internet access (per hour £2.50).

Sights

Dominating the town, **Inverness Castle** is a whip-persnapper compared with some of the aged Highland fortifications. The current pastel-hued structure was built in the mid-19th century. Nevertheless it's a grand structure that shows a spectrum of colours at sunset and dawn. The building currently serves as the Sheriff's Court, so you'd have to break the law to get 'entry'.

With a lack of big-ticket landmarks, the real pleasure here is taking a walk along the River

Ness, which is latticed with walking bridges, particularly around the attractive picnic spot of the **Ness Islands**. You'll also pass grand **St Andrew's Cathedral** dating from 1869, where the bell still chimes on the hour. You can grab a copy of the free pamphlet *Riverside Guide* from the tourist office for a self-guided tour.

Tours

Trips to the Highlands and Orkneys are popular from Inverness and can all be booked at the **tourist office** (☎ 234353; inverness@host.co.uk; Castle Wynd).

BUS TOURS

Canny Tours (☎ 854411; www.cannytours.com; 1-day £25) A fun multistop day tour that includes Loch Ness, Glen Coe, and even some weapon wielding.

City Sightseeing (☎ 224400; 🕒 Easter & late May-Sep) Does a good 45-minute tour (adult/child £6/3) of the city.
John o'Groats Ferries (☎ 01955-611353; www.jogferry.co.uk) Runs day trips to the Orkney Islands (adult/child £46/23) departing at 7.30am June to September.
Puffin Express (☎ 717181; www.puffinexpress.co.uk) A range of tours up to the Orkneys and around Inverness.

CRUISES

Inverness Dolphin Cruises (☎ 717900; Shore St Quay, Shore St; 1½hr cruise adult/child £12.50/9; 🕒 10.30am-6pm Mar-Oct) Looks for dolphins, seals and bird life; great commentary.

Jacobite Queen (☎ 233999; www.jacobite.co.uk) Cruises down Loch Ness via Urquhart Castle (adult/child £12/10), with a free minibus pick-up from the tourist office (9.30am, 10.30am and 1.15pm).

INVERNESS

Scale: 0 to 200m / 0.1 miles

INFORMATION

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Loch Ness Express (☎ 0800 328 6426; www.lochness-express.com) Heads past Urquhart Castle as it shuttles between Fort Augustus and Inverness (adult/child one-way £13/8, return £25/15, four daily).

Sleeping BUDGET

Inverness Student Hotel (☎ 236556; www.scotlandstourism.com, www.machbackpackers.com; 8 Culduthel Rd; dm £11-12; 📶 🚰 🚿) Lording it over the castle and the river, this fun-packed place is brightly painted with dorms that vary from four to 10 beds (depending on how much you pay). It's got the feel of a slightly shambling student house with a sitting room that hosts occasional music jams, and plenty of hooking-up with fellow travellers. It looks after you with organised trips down to pubs, laundry service (£2.50) and bike hire (per day £12), but the 2.30am curfew is harsh for party animals.

Bazpackers Backpackers Hotel (☎ 717663; bazmail@btopenworld.com; 4 Culduthel Rd; dm/d £12/30; 📶 🚰 🚿) Overlooking the river and cathedral, this inviting spot has several comfortable nooks, including the four-bed dorms and garden with barbecue. You can curl up in a log-fired lounge (with its collection of international coins embedded in the wall), or make the most of the 24-hour access. If you've felt lost in the bigger institutional places, this little hostel is for you.

Inverness Tourist Hostel (☎ 241962; www.inverness-hotel.com; 24 Rose St; dm £12) Looking for the party place that's close to the station, in case you need to skip town in a hurry? You've found it at this pad that has tight ditch-bags-and-go-out bunkage with a lounge that's all about the flat-screen telly playing music videos. Still not convinced that this is party central? Check its guestbook, which is called 'Comments and Drunken Stories'.

Inverness SYHA Hostel (☎ 231771; www.syha.org.uk; Victoria Dr; dm/tr/q £13/50/66, tw & d £36; 📶 🚰 🚿) Hostels like this are the reason the SYHA has survived all these years: by providing all things to all people. It has a separate kitchen and dining room to keep big groups out of the way, and offers doubles for travelling couples, as well as roomy dorms. Spick-and-span with a pine feel throughout, there are plenty of facilities: free luggage storage, space-age gleaming kitchen and two lounges (one with a pool table). It's just 15 minutes' walk from the train station.

MIDRANGE

B&Bs abound in Inverness; pricier options line the river, while Old Edinburgh Rd and Ardconnel St are cheaper hunting grounds.

Ivybank Guest House (☎ 232796; www.ivybankguesthouse.com; 28 Old Edinburgh Rd; s/d from £30/60; 📶 🚰 🚿) This Heritage-listed home has been lovingly restored, retaining stained-glass windows and mahogany staircases. It's a family-run place with sweet service from all except the irritable cat. The room upstairs with the four-poster is always popular.

Trafford Bank Guest House (☎ 241414; www.traffordbankguesthouse.co.uk; 96 Fairfield Rd; s £50, d £80-98; 📶 🚰 🚿 wi-fi) It's worth straining your budget to stay at this urbane B&B with nary a ceramic kitten in sight. The lemon walls and understated tartan is tasteful; Arran Aromatic toiletries and iPod speaker docks are just some of the little luxuries. Even the radiators are opulently gold.

ourpick Bluebell (☎ 238201; www.bluebell-house.com; 31 Kenneth St; d & tw £60) Effervescent hosts warmly greet you when you arrive and you'll leave feeling as though you've made friends for life. This place is the antithesis of disinterested B&B. It goes for thoughtful extras like a modest DVD library, welcome trays and breakfast that includes boneless kippers and homemade whisky marmalade. Your hosts also cheerfully offer itinerary-setting tips on the local area.

Macrae House (☎ 243658; joycemacrae@hotmail.com; 24 Ness Bank; d £60; 📶 🚰) So many guesthouses are a product of their owners' tastes and whims, often to disastrous effect. Luckily this charming spot's cheerful owner decorated her place tastefully, with modish art, leather furniture and, in one room, a mosaiced bathroom. The large collection of pigs is borderline, but river views here are some of the most affordable on this strip.

Other recommendations:

Ardmuir House Hotel (☎ 231151; www.ardmuir.com; 16 Ness Bank; s/d from £36/60) Small, family-run Georgian hotel with a pleasant, riverside setting.

Fraser House (☎ 716488; 49 Huntly St; www.fraserhouse.co.uk; d £50) Large rooms in a historic building by the riverside; friendly Antipodean host.

TOP END

Rocpool Reserve (☎ 240089; Culduthel Rd; www.rocpool.com; d from £95-230) Jumping into the hotel business, Rocpool has proven it can more than keep its head above water with this swanky boutique hotel. Cool white corridors open into smart rooms, decorated with Thai furniture in chocolate and blacks. At the top of the scale, decadent

rooms have balcony hot-tubs; see-into showers led to this sophisticated pad voted Sexiest Hotel by hospitality pundits. Slip into something more comfortable and see for yourself.

Eating & Drinking

Leakey's Bookshop & Cafe (☎ 239947; Greyfriars Hall, Church St; snacks £3-5; ☎ 10.30am-4.30pm) This national-treasure bookshop has an upstairs teashop that more than supplies a break from browsing through volumes, though you can keep reading as you enjoy a cake or soup. It's also a good spot for a literary brunch.

Délices de Bretagne (☎ 712422; 6 Stephen's Brae; light meals £5-7; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Sat, 10am-5pm Sun) Bonnie Prince Charlie may have fared better if he'd tried to convert the British with artful Scottish-French fusion cuisine like this, rather than invading. With Art Nouveau décor, this is the perfect place to sup coffee and dunk croissants. Try its range of tasty *galettes* (savoury pancakes) and sweet crepes before heading out to continue your campaign to conquer Inverness.

Mustard Seed (☎ 220220; 16 Fraser St; 2-course lunch £6, mains £12; ☎ lunch & dinner; 📶 🚰) At this two-level local favourite, you should head upstairs to the flowered balcony that overlooks the river. The menu is Mediterranean-inspired but doesn't take itself too seriously, using the best Scottish produce and wandering into such dishes as char-grilled sea bass with minty salsa and curried pork on egg noodles.

Rendezvous Rocpool (☎ 717274; 1 Ness Walk; 2-course lunch £7.95, mains £12-18; ☎ lunch & dinner) Just across the bridge from the heart of town, this sophisticated eatery, with its *de rigueur* name and polished wooden floorboards, offers a range of mouth-watering choices. From toothsome snack-sized portions of southern European creations to the elaborate main dishes, there's quality all the way, and plenty of vegetarian options, too.

Riva (☎ 237377; 4-6 Inverness Walk; meals £9-15; ☎ lunch & dinner) Despite the pretentious spelling, this place flaunts the waterside locale where it does great pastas and Italian-influenced meat-based dishes. Want a sample? Tuck into the sea bass fillet with giant tiger prawns on a tarragon mash. You should save some room for the delicious desserts and not fill up on the delicious variety of breads (our favourite was shot through with onion and cheese).

River House Restaurant (☎ 222033; cnr Greig & Ness Walk; lunch £11, 2-course meal £24; ☎ lunch & dinner Tue-Sun) Locals like to keep this neighbourhood

restaurant a secret. At dinner you can choose mains such as wood pigeon on black pudding drowning in dark chocolate sauce or duck with plum and ginger sauce on a bed of mushroom risotto. Lunches are more basic (fish and chips with mushy peas or pork Milanese), but good value. Everything is served on big green plates that you'll be swiping clean.

Other recommendations:

Blackfriars (☎ 233881; 93-95 Academy St; ☎ ceilidhs Mon & Wed) A sound traditional alehouse that has excellent live-music sessions and ceilidhs.

Johnny Foxes (☎ 236577; cnr Bridge & Bank Sts) Waterside watering hole where sauced-up locals have been known to take the odd swim.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Ten miles east of town at Dalcor, **Inverness airport** (☎ 01667-464000) offers flights to Edinburgh, Glasgow, Stornoway, Kirkwall, Sum-burgh and other centres, as well as London Luton with **easyJet** (☎ 0870 600 0000).

BUS

Buses to Aberdeen (£10.50, 3¼ hours, hourly) are run by Stagecoach Bluebird. **National Express** (☎ 08705 808080; www.nationalexpress.com) operates buses to/from London (£39, 13½ hours, one daily). **Scottish Citylink** (☎ 08705 505050; www.citylink.co.uk) runs buses to/from Edinburgh (£17, four hours, hourly); Fort William (£10, two hours, five daily); Glasgow (£17, four hours, hourly); Portree (£12, 3½ hours, two daily); Thurso (£3, 3½ hours, four or five daily); and Ullapool (£7.70, 1¼ hours, two daily from Monday to Saturday). **Megabus** (☎ 0900 160 0900; www.megabus.com) offers fares from as little as £3 for buses from Inverness to Glasgow and Edinburgh, £1 to Perth and £16 to London.

The **Orkney Bus** (☎ 611 353; www.jogferry.co.uk) is a bus-ferry-bus service between Inverness and Kirkwall (return £42, four daily) via John o'Groats (p921).

TRAIN

There are direct trains to Edinburgh (£34, 3¼ hours, hourly), Glasgow (£34, 3½ hours, 11 daily, including some services changing in Aberdeen), Aberdeen (£19.90, 2¼ hours, five to 10 daily), London (£110, eight hours, daily) and Thurso (£14, 3½ hours, one to two daily).

The Kyle of Lochalsh line (£16, 2½ hours, four daily Monday to Saturday, two on Sunday) is one of the great scenic journeys in Britain.

Getting Around

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

A promised rail link to the airport should arrive by 2009, until then **Rapsons/Highland Country** (☎ 710555; www.rapsons.com) bus 11 runs from the airport to Queensgate in the city centre (£2.80, 20 minutes, at least hourly). A taxi costs around £15.

BICYCLE

There are great cycling opportunities out of Inverness and several rental outlets including **Highland Cycles** (☎ 234789; 16a Telford St; 1-day hire £12).

BUS

Local buses go as far afield as Nairn, Forres, Culloden battlefield and Cawdor and are operated by **Rapsons/Highland Country** (☎ 710555). The Tourist Trail Roverbus (£6) gives unlimited travel on buses to Inverness, Nairn, Culloden, Cawdor Castle and Fort George.

CAR

The tourist office's free *Visitor Guide* includes a handy section on car hire. As well as the big boys there's **Sharp's Reliable Wrecks** (☎ 236684; 1st fl, Highland Rail House, Station Sq; 1-day hire from £25), an excellent set-up where the cars are much better than the name suggests.

AROUND INVERNESS

Culloden

The Battle of Culloden in 1746, the last battle fought in Britain, saw the defeat of Bonnie Prince Charlie and the slaughter of more than 1200 Highlanders in a 68-minute rout. Six miles east of Inverness, the forlorn 49-hectare moor where the conflict took place has scarcely changed. The site, with its many markers and memorials, is always open and provides a reflective place to ponder this fearsome battle.

The duke of Cumberland was dubbed 'Butcher Cumberland' for his brutal treatment of the defeated Scots. The battle sounded the death knell of the old clan system, with the Clearances (p897) following soon after.

The **visitors centre** (NTS; ☎ 01463-790607; adult/child £5/4; ☎ 9am-6pm Apr-Jun, Sep & Oct, 9am-7pm Jul & Aug, 11am-4pm Nov, Dec, Feb & Mar, closed Jan) isn't great value for money but presents some background information on the battle and has good audio guides to the site. There are also one-hour guided tours (adult/child £4/2) which are presented with plenty of enthusiasm and feature fully kilted guides. At the time of

research a project to build a larger memorial was underway – slated to open in 2007.

Cawdor

The 14th-century **Cawdor Castle** (☎ 01667-404401; www.cawdorcastle.com; adult/child £7.30/4.50, gardens only £3.70; ☎ 10am-5pm May-mid-Oct) was reputedly the castle of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and includes a glory hole with a cauldron for re-enacting bubble-bubble scenes. The central tower dates from the 14th century, but the wings are 17th-century additions. The castle is still inhabited, opulently furnished and casually includes treasures, like Dali cartoons, in the Tower Room. Explanatory notes are written in a humorous style by the former Count of Cawdor himself.

The grounds are impressive and you can have a round of golf (£9) or fish for salmon (per day £525 to £575) here. In summer the castle hosts plays, concerts and other cultural happenings; check its website for details.

Fort George

Spawning over much of the headland, **Fort George** (HS; ☎ 01667-462777; adult/child £6/2.40; ☎ 9.30am-6.30pm Easter-Sep, to 4.30pm Oct-Mar; 🇨🇪) is a well-conserved 18th-century artillery fortification – one of Europe's best examples of its kind. Completed in 1769 as a base for George II's army, it remains a barracks. The mile-plus stroll around the ramparts offers stunning sea views; you may spot dolphins. You'll need half a day to look around; the visitors centre has maps.

It's off the A96 about 11 miles northeast of Inverness.

Black Isle & Cromarty

Actually a peninsula rather than an island, Black Isle is reached by **Kessock Bridge**.

In Rosemarkie, the **Groam House Museum** (☎ 01381-620961; admission by donation; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat, 2-4.30pm Sun Easter & May-Sep, 2-4pm Sat & Sun Oct-Apr) has a superb collection of Pictish stones engraved with designs that share a similarity with Celtic motifs.

The attractive village of Cromarty at the peninsula's northeastern end has the notable 18th-century **Cromarty Courthouse** (☎ 01381-600418; Church St; adult £3.50; ☎ 10am-5pm Apr-Oct, noon-4pm Nov-Dec & Mar), which details the town's history with contemporary references; kids love the goofy talking mannequins.

Rapsons/Highland Country shuttles from Inverness to Rosemarkie (30 minutes, roughly hourly Monday to Saturday, three on Sun-

day); most (none on Sunday) continue onto Cromarty (£5.40; 55 minutes).

Brodie Castle

Set in 70 hectares of parkland, **Brodie Castle** (NTS; ☎ 01309-641371; adult/child £8/5; ☎ noon-4pm Easter-Apr, Jul & Aug, noon-4pm Sun-Thu May, Jun & Sep) has several highlights, including an early-19th-century library, which has more than 6000 dusty, peeling books. There are some wonderful clocks, and a 17th-century dining room with wildly extravagant mythological carvings in the plaster ceiling (you'd swear it was woodcarving). The Brodies have lived here since 1160; the present structure was built in 1567, with many extensions being added over the years.

The castle is 8 miles east of Nairn. Stage-coach Bluebird runs to Brodie from Inverness (£4.90, 45 minutes, hourly), via Culloden.

EAST COAST

As you work your way north along the scimitar blade of the east coast, the desolation that the Clearances cut through this country becomes apparent. The road slices through the Cromarty and Dornoch Firths heading north along scenic coastline and, from Helmsdale, the impact of Viking raiders endures in the place names. The interior is dominated by the vast and mournful Sutherland mountain range, interrupted by seaside towns moored precariously along this wild coast's edge.

Getting Around

The region is well served by buses, and trains follow the coast up to Wick then across to Thurso. **Scottish Citylink** (☎ 08705 505050) runs regular bus services from Inverness to Wick, stopping at most towns on the A9 and A99 along the way, before taking the short cut inland to Thurso. **Rapsons/Highland Country** (☎ 01463-222244) operates buses from Wick to Thurso, via the coast and John o'Groats.

TAIN & AROUND

Scotland's oldest royal burgh, Tain is ennobled by sandstone buildings and a pilgrim history. You can get oriented with the free town audio tour at **Tain Through Time** (☎ 01862-894089; Tower St; adult/child £3.50/2.50; ☎ 10am-5pm Apr-Jun, Sep & Oct, 10am-6pm Jul & Aug), a heritage centre spanning three buildings, which describes history from the time of St Duthac through

to the Reformation. St Duthac was born in Tain, died in Armagh (Ireland) in 1065, and is commemorated by the 12th-century ruins of **St Duthac's Chapel**, and St Duthus Church. Drop by the excellent **Glenmorangie Distillery** (☎ 01862-892477; www.glenmorangie.com; tours adult/child £2.50/1; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, plus 10.30am-2.30pm Sat & Sun Jun-Aug), which produces fine Highland malt, sherries and madeiras.

The A9 crosses Dornoch Firth. Alternatively, from Ardgay at the head of Dornoch Firth a small road leads to **Croick**, the scene of notorious evictions during the 1845 Highland Clearances. Refugee crofters from Glencalvie scratched their tragic messages on the eastern windows of **Croick Church**.

From Ardgay you can follow the Kyle of Sutherland, which leads after 4.5 miles to **Carbisdale Castle** (the last castle to be built in Scotland, dating from 1917), which now houses the extraordinary **Carbisdale Castle SYHA Hostel** (☎ 0870 004 1109; www.syha.org.uk; Culrain; dm £13.50; ☎ Mar-Oct; 🇨🇪). Good enough to house the exiled Norwegian royal family, this opulent place is first-rate hosting, with grand salons, great views, and a top-floor ghost. Booking is advised, as it's a popular group destination. The sweeping **Bonar Bridge** then crosses the head of the firth to rejoin the A9 just before Dornoch.

DORNOCH & AROUND

☎ 01862 / pop 1206

Scotland's last executed witch perished in a vat of boiling tar in Dornoch in 1722, but these days locals are more likely to spoil you to death. Sandstone, summer flowers and nearby stretches of beach have made Dornoch a popular escape from Inverness.

The **tourist office** (☎ 810916; ☎ 9.30am-5.30pm Mon-Sat, 10am-5pm Sun Apr-Oct, 10am-5pm Tue-Sat Nov-Mar) is in the main square. It hires bikes for £12 a day and has internet access.

To see this town's fascinating past, visit the displays of **Historylinks Museum** (☎ 811275; www.historylinks.org.uk; adult/child £2/free; ☎ 10am-4pm daily Jun-Sep, Mon-Fri Apr & May, Wed & Thu Oct-Mar).

Built in the 13th century by St Gilbert, **Dornoch Cathedral** is a rough-stone edifice known for its beautiful, wedding-photo interior, with a crisscrossing of light shafts from stained-glass windows.

Sleeping & Eating

Dornoch has several camp sites and plenty of B&Bs.

Trevose Guest House (☎ 810269; trevose@amservice.net; Cathedral Sq; s/d from £25/47; ☹ Mar-Sep) This pleasant guesthouse is well placed, with rooms that vary from the majestic Room one with castle and cathedral views to others with shared bathrooms; ask to see one before you lug your bags upstairs. There are a few quirky decorative touches such as an old sea chest in one room, or an odd cupboard shower in another.

Dornoch Castle (☎ 810216; www.dornochcastlehotel.com; Castle St; chalet £60-80, castle r £110-140; ☹) This 16th-century former bishop's palace gives you the royal treatment, with large wrought-iron beds, plasma TVs, and sherry and chocolates. The chalets out the back are less impressive, but this is definitely where you'll take plenty of photos to make the folks back home envious. The pub has a roaring open fire, real ale and some good pub grub (bar meals £6 to £9); the restaurant (meals £9 to £15) serves fancier fare.

Quail 2 (☎ 811811; Castle St; www.2quail.com; d £95) Dornoch's restaurant with rooms is decked out in tasteful dark woods, and yes there's tartan but it's tasteful. As you'd expect of a luxury spot, rooms are crammed full of features such as full-sized baths and a quirky selection of books. The menu is impressive (dinner £39), with starters of pheasant salad and roast Ross-shire lamb; a night's stay includes a four-course dinner as well as breakfast.

Dornoch Patisserie (☎ 811148; 1 High St; ☹ Tue-Sun) This swish spot is known for its coffee and cakes. It's behind the cathedral, in a quiet pocket where you might even escape tourists.

Getting There & Away

Scottish Citylink has bus services to/from Inverness (£6.80, 1¼ hours, four to five daily) and Thurso (£10.30, 2¼ hours, four to five daily), stopping at Dornoch's square.

DUNROBIN CASTLE

A mile north of Golspie is **Dunrobin Castle** (☎ 01408-633177; adult/child £6.80/4.70; ☹ 10.30am-5.30pm Mon-Sat Jul & Aug, 10.30am-4.30pm Mon-Sat Apr-Jun & Sep-mid-Oct), the largest house in the Highlands (187 rooms), dating from the 13th century. Most of the elaborate fairy-tale architecture is a result of a French chateau-style expansion in 1841, but the building is better known for the villainous Duke of Sutherland, who cleared 15,000 people from the north of Scotland while residing here.

Only 22 rooms are on display, along with the museum which houses a gruesome col-

lection of big-game trophies including a pair of snapping crocodiles, a small killer whale, elephant-feet umbrella stands and other non-PC artefacts. The beautifully kept grounds are the venue for amazing falconry displays (11.30am, 1.30pm and 3.30pm), where birds swoop with Rottweiler ferocity.

CAITHNESS

A vulnerable stretch of coast, this area served as a revolving door for the Viking raiders who long held sway over this area. Inland is a remote bogland, a haven for birds. On the coast, green-swathed cliffs drop abruptly to the seas; harbours that flourished on the herring trade nestle at their base. These days the region is getting a name for its produce thanks to Prince Charles' interest in the Mey Selections, a food award that highlights the region's best nosh.

Helmsdale

☎ 01431 / pop 861

This sheltered fishing town is fringed by heather-hued hills and was once a major herring fishing centre, with a name that points to its Viking origins. You can get online and get tourist information at **Strath Ullie Crafts & Information Centre** (☎ 821402; The Harbour, Shore St; ☹ 9am-5.30pm Mon-Sat Apr-Oct, 10am-4.30pm Mon-Sat Nov-Mar).

Timespan Heritage Centre (☎ 821327; Dunrobin St; adult/child £4/2; ☹ 9.30am-5pm Mon-Sat & 2-5pm Sun Easter-Oct) covers local history including the 1869 Strath of Kildonan gold rush, art exhibitions and Dame Barbara Cartland, the late queen of romance novels, who lived locally.

Overlooking the town, the **Emigrants statue** is a memorial to the Clearances and the resulting diaspora of Scots around the world. Some dismiss it as a photo opportunity (with the sea-and-heather backdrop it's a good one) but the statue of a kilted man and his family is certainly anatomically accurate and does answer the 'What's worn under the kilt?' question.

There are several B&Bs in town, but for something special the historic **Bridge Hotel** (☎ 821100; www.bridgehotel.net; Dunrobin St; s £65-75, d £95-105) has plush rooms decked out in rich red bedspreads and deluxe baths. Vegetarians will blink at the collection of deer antlers in the stairway, but downstairs has a humming bar and a restaurant (meals £8 to £12) that wouldn't be out of place among Edinburgh's slicker eateries (except here there's country hospitality).

Bunks are available at **Helmsdale SYHA Hostel** (☎ 0870 004 1124; www.syha.org.uk; Stafford St; dm £9.50;

THE HIGHLAND CLEARANCES

In the wake of Culloden, King George II introduced land laws that made clan chiefs owners of lands, which traditionally had been let virtually for free to clan members. Lured by the prospect of wealth, some lairds decided that sheep would be more profitable than agriculture, and proceeded to evict tens of thousands of farmers.

The Clearances forced these desperate folk to emigrate – to the Americas or elsewhere – or head for the cities in the hope of finding work. Those who chose to pursue farming were marginalised into whatever narrow or barren bits of land they could subsist on; this became known as crofting. It was always precarious, as crofters only had year-long rents and could lose not only the farm but also the homes they'd built.

With the economic depression of the late 19th century, many couldn't pay their rent. This time, however, they resisted expulsion, instead forming the Highland Land Reform Association and their own political party. Their resistance led to several of their demands being acceded to by the government, including security of tenure, fair rents and eventually the supply of land for new crofts.

Crofters now have the right to purchase their farming land and recent laws have abolished the feudal system which created so much misery.

☹ May-Sep), a basic set-up with a 12-bed dorm and massive dining room.

If you've ever wondered what romance novelists have for tea, pop into **La Mirage** (☎ 821625; 7 Dunrobin St; snacks £1.50-3, mains £6-13; ☹ noon-8.45pm), where Barbara Cartland dined in flamboyant pink ambience; there's always a show tune playing. The meals are mostly variations on fish suppers, but it's campy fun to look at the faded star photos and wonder what Paul McCartney must have done to be banished behind a pot plant.

Helmsdale to Wick

This route boasts several Celtic sites. From Latheron, follow the A9 to Achavanich, wedged between Loch Rangag and Loch Stemster, then double back on the road to Lybster to the 40 or so **Achavanich Standing Stones**.

Just beyond Lybster, a turn-off leads to the **Grey Cairns of Camster**, 5 miles north of the A99. Dating from between 4000 BC and 2500 BC, the burial chambers are hidden in long, low mounds rising from an evocatively desolate stretch of moor. You can enter the main chamber but you must crawl into the well-preserved **Round Cairn**.

The **Hill o' Many Stanes**, just beyond the Camster turn-off, is a curious, fan-shaped arrangement of 22 rows of small stones probably dating from around 2000 BC. Nearer to Wick at Ulbster, the **Cairn o' Get** is 400m off the A99, and then a 2-mile walk. Steps lead down to a small, picturesque harbour, directly opposite the Cairn o' Get.

Wick

☎ 01955 / pop 7333

More gritty than pretty, Wick has been down on its luck since the collapse of the herring industry. It was once the world's largest fish port for the 'silver darlings', but when the market dropped off after WWII, job losses in Wick were huge and the town has never really recovered.

Much of this story is traced at **Wick Heritage Museum** (☎ 605393; 18-27 Bank Row; adult/child £2/50p; ☹ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat May-Sep, call for hours Oct-Apr), from the heyday of the 19th century to some uninspiring fishing tackle.

It's enough to turn you to drink and why not? With a tour of **Old Pulteney** (☎ 602371; www.oldpulteney.com; Huddart St; adult £3.50; ☹ tours 11am & 2pm Mon-Sat), the most northerly distillery on mainland Scotland, you get a dram of this light, earthy whisky.

At the time of research, Wick was also vying for the record for the world's shortest street, with Ebenezer Pl (just between Union and River Sts) fighting for the title.

Wick is a transport hub for the surrounding area. **Logan Air** (☎ 602294; www.loganair.co.uk) flies between Edinburgh and Wick airport (return from £70, one hour, one daily Monday to Saturday) and on to the Shetland Islands. **Eastern Airways** (☎ 01652-680600; www.easternairways.com) flies to Aberdeen (return £135, 35 minutes, four daily).

Scottish Citylink operates buses to/from Inverness (£11, three hours, four daily) and Thurso (£2.50, 40 minutes, four daily).

WORTH THE TRIP: CASTLE OF MEY

This former residence of the Queen Mother is more a home than a **castle** (☎ 851473; www.castleofmey.org.uk; adult/child £7/free; 🚗 10.30am-4pm Sat-Thu May-Jul & mid-Aug-Sep). The exterior may seem grand, but inside it feels domestic and everything is imbued with the character of the late Queen Mum: from a surprisingly casual lounge area with a TV showing her favourite shows (*Dad's Army*, since you asked) to a photo of the king in 1943 that's lovingly inscribed 'Bertie'. A real highlight is the collection of tacky gifts that visitors would bring back from excursions into the area's tourist shops to coax that famous smile, including a hidden Loch Ness Monster that was part of a prank. All the in-jokes are explained by staff who worked for the lady. As a homy little palace, it's popular with older visitors and a real antidote to the forbidding ruins or roped-off pomposity of other castles.

Rapsons/Highland Country runs connecting services to John o'Groats (40 minutes, up to five daily Monday to Saturday) for the passenger ferry to Burwick, Orkney.

Trains service Wick from Inverness (£14, four hours, one or two daily).

John o'Groats & Around

☎ 01955 / pop 512

This ferry port to Orkney will test your optimism. It once claimed the pseudo-superlative 'Britain's most northerly mainland point' and a gaggle of tourist shops appeared to prove it... except that gong actually goes to Dunnet Head. So John o'Groats' new claim to fame is that its car park is surrounded by probably the highest concentration of plastic Nessies and thistle tea towels anywhere in the world. It also serves as the conclusion of the 874-mile trek from Land's End in Cornwall, though few cyclists or walkers pay to get a photo taken next to the fenced-in signpost that tells them how far they've just travelled.

Fortunately **North Coast Marine Adventures** (☎ 611797; www.north-coast-marine-adventures.co.uk; adult £15) can speed you away on its boat tours which rocket around the **Island of Stroma** to spot seals and puffins and shipwrecks. There's a **tourist office** (☎ 611373; 🚗 9am-6pm Easter-Oct) beside the car park. A more scenic alternative is to continue on to **Duncansby Head**, where a 15-minute walk through a sheep paddock yields spectacular views of the sea-surrounded monoliths known as **Duncansby Stacks** and, if you're lucky, nesting guillemots.

Rapsons/Highland Country (☎ 01463-710555; www.rapsons.co.uk) runs services to/from Thurso (one hour, five daily Monday to Saturday).

See p921 for details of the passenger ferry to Orkney, and the car ferry 3 miles west of here in Gills Bay.

Dunnet Head

A stretch of narrow road across a bog takes you to the most northerly point on the British mainland, the dramatic Dunnet Head, which banishes tacky pretenders with its majestic cliffs overlooking Pentland Firth. It's marked by a lighthouse built by Robert Stevenson (grandfather of Robert Louis Stevenson) that dates from 1832.

NORTH & WEST COAST

This rugged coastline is some of the mainland's most isolated territory with fjordlike inlets, soaring mountains, and mirrorlike lochs festooned with waterlilies. The landscape here is the strong silent type, with brooding cliffs and lonely beaches. The occasional towns are a welcome relief from the imposing scenery.

After descending the mountainscape of the Assynt, the road emerges at the charming harbour village of Ullapool, an endearing port where you can hop on a ferry to the Outer Hebrides.

Banks and petrol stations are few and far between, so check your funds and fuel before setting out.

Getting Around

Public transport in the northwest is very patchy. Getting to Thurso or Kyle of Lochalsh by bus or train is easy, but it can be difficult to follow the coast between these places. Bus services are infrequent, and on a Sunday you'll go nowhere at all. Postbuses and Rapsons/Highland Country services run along the north coast. The alternative is to come north from Inverness via Lairg. There are trains daily to Lairg, from where postbus 104 and 105 run north to Durness. There are

frequent Rapsons/Highland Country and Citylink buses between Inverness and Ullapool.

Off the main routes, renting a car is a better option. Hitching is widely practised, and as easy as you'll ever find it (for more on hitching see p971).

THURSO & SCRABSTER

☎ 01847 / pop 7737

Britain's most northerly mainland town, Thurso is an unexceptional spot that makes a handy overnight stop if you're heading west or on your way to Orkney. There are some good accommodation choices and down-to-earth people keen for a chat, but the area's beaches are marred for many visitors by the local nuclear power plant (see p900).

There's first-rate **surfing** on the nearby coast, particularly on the eastern side of town, directly in front of Lord Caithness' castle and Brimms Ness. Freezing cold water means you'll need to pack a drysuit. For more on surfing see p92.

Ferries cross from the port of Scrabster, on the outskirts of Thurso, to Orkney.

Information

Library (Davidsons Lane; 🚗 10am-6pm Mon & Wed, 10am-8pm Tue & Fri, 10am-1pm Thu & Sat) Free internet access.

Tourist office (☎ 892371; Riverside Rd; 🚗 Mon-Sat Apr & May, daily Jun-Oct)

Sleeping

Sandra's Backpackers Hostel (☎ 894575; www.sandras-backpackers.ukf.net; 24 Princes St; dm £9-14, d £28; 📺) This spot is almost too good to be a backpackers, with free internet, videos and showers in all rooms. The cheaper rooms are in the basic, new bunkhouse (10 bunks to the room), but all guests get freebies including the help-yourself cereal and bikes (nonguests £6).

Holborn Hotel (☎ 892771; 16 Princess St; s/d £33/66) Having rescued the pub downstairs and turned it into a slick bar and restaurant, the new owners have turned their attention to the rooms upstairs to create plain but spick décor. It's close to the centre of town, but you might not wander much further than downstairs for a bite (see right).

Station Hotel (☎ 892003; www.stationthurso.co.uk; 54 Princess St; s/d/apt £40/70/80) This modern place comes with some nice touches like a small video collection, and other facilities. For longer stays the self-catering apartments, with excellent kitchens, are ideal.

Other recommendations:

Orcadia Guest House (☎ 894395; 27 Olrig St; s/d £20/40) An old budget favourite. The foyer is so crammed with period pieces, the rooms seem refreshingly plain.

Pentland Hotel (☎ 893202; www.pentlandhotel.co.uk; Princes St; s/d £41/75) A massive spot with decent rooms.

Eating & Drinking

Bookshop Café (☎ 893344; 10 Olrig St; light meals £4-6; 🚗 9am-5.30pm Mon-Sat) Upstairs from the newsagent, this is the perfect place to imbibe a coffee while you browse or people-watch from the window that looks out onto the street. Meals are light and include wraps and salads, but save room for the yummy cheesecake.

Le Bistro (☎ 893737; 12 Traill St; lunch £4-6, dinner mains £9-12; 🚗 lunch & dinner Tue-Sat) This romantic bistro serves tasty tucker, from coffee and snacks to ambitious main meals that combine local and international flavours. The daily blackboard chalks up good local seafood, but flavour-packed haggis parcels are always a good bet.

Holborn Hotel (☎ 892771; 16 Princess St; meals £7-9) This hip restaurant serves up brilliant food including monkfish tagliatelle and prawn bisque. The outdoor area is perfect for the fleeting warm weather, but inside is a snazzy bar at which to swill cocktails.

Getting There & Around

Scottish Citylink runs buses from Inverness (£13, 3½ hours, four or five daily) to Thurso, via Wick. Rapsons/Highland Country operates a service to Wick (45 minutes, hourly) and John o'Groats (one hour, five daily Monday to Saturday).

There are train services from Inverness (£13.50, 3½ hours, two to three daily), but space for bicycles is limited so book ahead.

It's a 2-mile walk from Thurso train station to the ferry port at Scrabster, or there are buses from Olrig St (80p). **Wheels Cycle Shop** (☎ 896124; 35 High St; 1-day hire £8) rents out mountain bikes and **Sandra's Backpackers Hostel** (☎ 894575; www.sandras-backpackers.ukf.net; 24 Princes St; 1-day rental £6) has regular two-wheelers.

WEST FROM THURSO

Leaving Thurso, the road snakes through the heather-patched hills and dramatic cliffs of the north coast to Durness. From here and beyond Durness the road alternates between a single and double carriageway, much loved by both motorcyclists and sheep; you should drive carefully and allow speed demons to pass.

Around 10 miles west of Thurso is the **Dounreay nuclear power station**, which was the first in the world to supply mains electricity and is currently being decommissioned. The clean-up is going speedily, planned to be finished by 2033, with only the odd particle (fragment of reprocessed reactor fuel) washing up on nearby beaches. Dounreay's **visitors centre** (☎ 01847-802572; admission free; ☎ 10am-4pm Apr-Oct) pumps out propaganda about the benefits of nuclear power.

Bettyhill is a crofting community named after the countess of Sutherland, who brutally evicted her tenants from Strathnaver so she could graze more sheep, then resettled the tenants here. Its **tourist office** (☎ 01641-521342; ☎ Mon-Sat Apr-Oct, plus Sun Jun-Aug) has a small café (mains £6) that does simple food, if you need a rest break from the narrow roads. **Strathnaver Museum** (☎ 01641-521418; adult £1.90; ☎ 10am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Sat Apr-Oct), in an old church nearby, tells the sad story of the Strathnaver Clearances and the Mackay clan. There's an 8th-century Pictish cross in the graveyard.

The wonderful beach at **Coldbackie** is overlooked by the **Watch Hill viewpoint**. Two miles further on is **Tongue**, overlooked by the 14th-century ruins of **Castle Varrich**. You can stay nearby at **Ben Loyal Hotel** (☎ 611216; www.benloyal.co.uk; s/d from £35/60), which has great rooms with views and filling meals that use the best local produce (mains £7 to £12, open for lunch and dinner). By the causeway, **Tongue SYHA** (☎ 0870 004 1153; www.syha.org.uk; dm £12.50; ☎ Mar-Sep) is fitted out for budget comfort in a spectacular location right by the **Kyle of Tongue** (a kyle is a strait).

From Tongue it's 30 miles to Durness – you can take the causeway across the Kyle of Tongue or the beautiful old road that climbs up to the head of the kyle. The road crosses a desolate moor to the northern end of **Loch Hope**. Beyond Loch Hope, **Heilam** has stunning views out over **Loch Eriboll**, Britain's deepest sea inlet.

DURNESS

☎ 01971 / pop 353

If you think Scottish beaches are an oxymoron then the pristine stretches of sand around Durness will make you think again. The scattered village of Durness is strung out along sea cliffs which rise from a series of beaches.

The **tourist office** (☎ 511259; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat Apr, May, Sep & Oct, 10am-5pm Mon-Sat, 10am-4pm Sun Jun-Aug, 10am-1.30pm daily Nov-Mar) has plenty of information on the surrounding area.

Sights

A path leads down to gaping **Smoo Cave**, a vast cave at the end of an inlet (*geo*), and after heavy rains a river cascades through its roof, then flows out to sea. There's evidence the cave was inhabited around 6000 years ago. At low tide you can walk in, otherwise take a **boat trip** (adult/child £3/1.50) into the floodlit cave. John Lennon spent childhood days around Durness as his aunt lived here and he last came here with Yoko Ono in 1969. The **memorial** here uses lyrics from 'In My Life', which was about the Beatles' time in Durness.

Durness has several beautiful **beaches**, including Rispond to the east, Sargo Sands below town, and Balnakeil to the west; the sea offers some superb **scuba-diving** sites complete with wrecks, caves, seals and whales. At **Balnakeil**, which is less than a mile beyond Durness, a ramshackle craft village occupies what was once an early-warning radar station. A walk along the beach to the north leads to **Faraid Head**, where you can see puffin colonies in early summer.

Sleeping & Eating

Unless otherwise specified all these accommodation options are in Durness.

Sango Sands Caravan Park (☎ 511262; tent sites per person £4.25; ☎ Apr-Oct) You couldn't imagine a better location for a camp site: great grassy areas on the edge of cliffs descend to two lovely sand beaches. Facilities are pretty good, although management can be surly.

Durness SYHA (☎ 0870 004 1113; dm £12.50) These two barracklike buildings are large bunkhouses with a curious décor, from sea-themed stencils to Dungeons & Dragons-style buxom wenches to portraits of Steptoe and Son. The rooms are comfy enough and the small kitchen and lounge are cosy in grim weather.

Mackay's Hotel (☎ 511202; www.visitmackays.com; s/d from £45/90; ☎ Mar-Oct) This swanky hotel has six exclusive rooms; book well in advance. Exposed timber floorboards with large luscious beds make it a good spot for a romantic getaway, while the restaurant (meals £8 to £13) serves up local crab and lobster that always impresses.

Loch Croispol Bookshop (☎ 511777; 17c Balnakeil Craft Village; light meals £3-6; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat, 10am-4pm Sun; ☎) A mile west of Balnakeil, this congenial bookshop is a good spot for a browse and a brew. Lunches and snacks are yummy; salads recommended.

WORTH THE TRIP: CAPE WRATH

The most northwesterly point of the mainland, Cape Wrath is crowned by a daunting lighthouse and stands close to the sea-bird colonies on **Clo Mor Cliffs**, the mainland's highest coastal cliffs. Getting to Cape Wrath involves a **ferry** (☎ 01971-511376) ride across the Kyle of Durness (return £4.30, two hours) and connecting with a **minibus** (☎ 01971-511287) for the 11 miles to the cape (return £7, one way 40 minutes). Contact the ferry office before setting out to make sure the ferry is running.

South of Cape Wrath, **Sandwood Bay** boasts one of Britain's most isolated beaches. It's about 4.5 miles north of the end of a track from Blairmore (approach from Kinlochbervie), or you could walk south from the cape (allow eight hours) and on to Blairmore.

DURNESS TO ULLAPOOL

It's worth detouring from the 69-mile Durness to Ullapool trip, as every glance out the window is postcard perfect with green hills and awesome sea aspects. Again the A894 has some hair-raisingly narrow stretches so take it easy and use the passing places.

Kylesku is the first sizable town as you head south, where a snaking bridge heads over Lochs Glencoul and Glendhu. Cruises on steely-blue Glencoul pass treacherous-looking mountains, seal colonies and the 213m-drop of **Eas a'Chual Aulin**, Britain's highest waterfall. In summer **MV Statesman** (☎ 01971-502345; 2hr cruise adult/child £12.50/5) departs from the Kylesku Old Ferry Pier (11am and 3pm Sunday to Thursday).

For a pint and a plateful of seafood, the **Kylesku Hotel** (☎ 01971-502231; s/d from £45/70) serves up superior meals (bar meals £4 to £11; open lunch and dinner) in a pierside location. Rooms are clean and reasonably priced.

There's a picturesque 30-mile detour off the A894 to **Point of Stoer** and **Rhu Stoer Light-house**. The coast road is another difficult road (single-car width), but it's rewarded with spectacular views, pretty villages and excellent beaches. From the lighthouse, a one-hour cliff walk leads to the **Old Man of Stoer**, a spectacular sea stack. There are more good beaches between Stoer and Lochinver, and the **Achmelvich Beach SYHA Hostel** (☎ 0870 004 1102; www.syha.org.uk; Achmelvich; dm £12; ☎ Apr-Sep) is beside a beautiful stretch of white sand. Facilities are simple and the nearest shop is 4 miles south in Lochinver, so bring your own supplies. The Lochinver-Drumbeg postbus will drop you 1.5 miles away.

Lochinver & Around

☎ 01571 / pop 639

The spectacular scenery eases into a sheltered bay that holds the bustling fishing port of

Lochinver. The **tourist office** (☎ 844330; Main St; ☎ 10am-5pm Apr-Oct) supplies fishing permits and walking maps for the nearby **Hills of Assynt**, popular with walkers. The brochure *Making More of Assynt* (£2) details walks in the area.

There are several B&Bs in town, but **Albannach** (☎ 844407; www.thealbannach.co.uk; d from £110; ☎ Mar-Nov) is the most indulgent, with awe-inspiring water views and spacious rooms. Dinner is included, but even if you're not staying you might want to drop in for the organic ingredients and well-selected local produce (dinner £45). For something more affordable, **Ardglas** (☎ 844257; www.ardglas.co.uk; Inver, Lochinver; s/d with shared bathrooms £19/38) has recently renovated rooms; magnificent views of town more than compensate for the shared bathrooms.

Inverpolly Nature Reserve

The curious rock formations around **Knockan** are produced by older geological layers rising above younger ones. The best place to see this phenomenon is at **Inverpolly Nature Reserve**, which has the three peaks of Cul Mor (849m), Stac Pollaidh (613m) and Cul Beag (769m). There's a three-hour walk up **Stac Pollaidh** (still commonly known by its English spelling of Stac Polly) from the car park at Loch Lurgainn.

ULLAPOOL

☎ 01854 / pop 1308

Snuggling in a curl of Loch Broom, Ullapool is a serene harbour on the jagged western coast. For many it's little more than a place to wait for the ferry to Lewis, but if you wander along the water's edge you'll be charmed by wee pubs and the view of the long, slow progress of a ferry up the loch. Contrary to its modern carefree port image, Ullapool served as an eviction point during the Clearances, with thousands of Scots watching the loch recede behind them as the diaspora cast them across the world.

Information

Royal Bank of Scotland (Ladysmith St)

Tourist office (☎ 612135; ullapool@host.co.uk; Argyle St; ☎ daily Jun-Sep, Mon-Sat Apr, May & Oct, Mon-Fri Nov-Mar)

Ullapool Bookshop (☎ 612356; Quay St; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Sat, 10am-4pm Sun) Has a good book selection and coin-operated internet.

Ullapool Library (☎ 612543; Mill St; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon, Wed & Fri, 9am-5pm & 6-8pm Tue & Thu, closed Mon & Wed during holidays) Free internet access.

Sights & Activities

Set in a converted church built by Thomas Telford, the **Ullapool Museum & Visitor Centre** (☎ 612987; 7-8 West Argyle St; adult/child £3/50p; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat Apr-Oct, 10am-4pm Sat Nov-Mar; ♿) relates the history of Loch Broom through interactive displays and other exhibits.

The peak season is in July and August when the town teems with visitors heading on to the Summer Isles. **CalMac** (www.calmac.co.uk) runs day trips to the islands of Lewis and Harris; these can be remarkably good value. Inquire at the CalMac office on the harbour or check its website. **Summer Queen** (☎ 612472; www.summerqueen.co.uk; Ullapool Pier; adult/child £22/10) runs four-hour cruises (departs 10am April to September) of the Summer Isles.

Sleeping

Just by strolling along Seaforth Rd, Pulteney St and Argyle St, you can find a B&B.

Scotpackers/West House Hostel (☎ 613126; www.scotpackers-hostels.co.uk; West Argyle St; dm £12, crofters

house per person £15; ♿) Set in a rambling colourful house, it's hard to believe you're staying in a hostel with only four bunks to a room and a large lounge that includes a rainy-day video collection and a guitar. The crofters house is a good alternative for groups of up to four, with its own facilities.

Ullapool SYHA Hostel (☎ 0870 004 1156; www.syha.org.uk; Shore St; dm £12.50; ☎ Mar-Oct) This harbour-side hostel is ideally located within a stroll of all the pubs and eateries, and has a cheerful warden who takes extra care of visitors. The front rooms have harbour views but the dining area and lounge are also good spots for contemplating the water.

Ptarmigan B&B (☎ 612232; North Rd; d £36) Looking to get away from the dock and all the lollygagging tourists? This sweet spot is a mile from the centre and boasts loch views. The larger en-suite rooms are the best bets, and breakfasts here are legendary.

Point Cottage (☎ 612494; www.pointcottage.co.uk; 22 West Shore St; d £44) This intimate spot has only three double rooms with en suite, but each is lavished with friendly service and trim decoration, including dressers and sitting chairs for contemplating the view. The lovely owners offer great advice to walkers, and loan maps.

Ceilidh Place (☎ 612103; www.theceilidhplace.com; 14 West Argyle St; d £90-130; ♿) If you're looking for a characterful place to spend a few days, this one, celebrating 'Books Music Art' (as the sign says), won't disappoint. Each luxury room comes with its own reading list (from Robbie Burns to Julian Barnes) and is

named for Scottish literati. There are plenty of indulgences, such as the guest pantry and a help-yourself kitchen. The guest lounge, resplendent in sofas and chaises-lounges, could be a bookish salon. Breakfast in the restaurant runs to fresh-baked scones and fruit. There's also regular traditional music to keep it cultural. Across the road the Ceilidh Clubhouse (West Lane; dorms £15) has simple bunkhouse-style accommodation if you want the fun but can't stretch the budget.

Other recommendations:

Broomfield Holiday Park (☎ 612664; www.broomfieldhp.fsnet.co.uk; camp sites £8-12; ☎ May-Oct) Great location with grassy lochside tent sites, a stone's throw from the heart of town. Take midge repellent.

Sea Breezes (☎ 612148; 2 West Tce; s/d £15/45) Good budget single room, but the best views are from the en-suite double.

Tigh Na Failte (☎ 613433; 17 West Tce; d & tw £44) A pleasant riverside spot; upstairs rooms overlook the bay.

Eating & Drinking

Frigate Cafe (☎ 612969; Shore St; mains £4-8; ☎ 10am-5pm) Ease into a coffee at this chic waterside spot and you might find yourself spending the day watching the tide come and go. It does an excellent breakfast. Lunches include wraps, salads and daily blackboard specials.

Anchor Restaurant (☎ 612222; Garve Rd; mains £6-10; ☎ dinner) In the Harbour Lights Hotel, this place serves up top meals at affordable prices and all with beautiful views out over the loch. You could almost make a meal with starters such as the pork terrine or the seared scallops in an orange honey and grainy mustard, but dessert (from pancakes to rice puddings) is a must.

Ferry Boat Inn (☎ 612366; www.ferryboat-inn.com; Shore St; bar meals £8-10; ☎ bar meals all day plus dinner 6.30-9pm) The FBI, as locals call it, is worth investigating for its delightful bar, which looks out onto the pier and is perfect if you've got some time to kill before your boat departs. Meals are inventive pub fare (swap beef steak for ostrich and pepper sauce for a peppery vermouth and you get the idea). Drinking here is always fun, with a cheery crowd.

Getting There & Around

Citylink has bus services from Inverness (£7.70, 1½ hours, two daily Monday to Saturday) to Ullapool linking in with the ferry to Stornoway on Lewis.

Bikes can be rented from Scotpackers/West House Hostel for £10 per day.

ULLAPOOL TO KYLE OF LOCHALSH

The long looping road from Ullapool to Kyle of Lochalsh (turn off the A835 onto A832) seems to be much more than 50 miles, partly because you'll want to pull off the road to see more of this remote region, but also because the road itself is windy.

Just 12 miles from Ullapool and before the junction of the A835 and the A832, the **Falls of Measach** ('ugly' in Gaelic) spill 45m into the spectacularly deep and narrow Corrieshalloch Gorge. A wobbly suspension bridge provides superb views of the thundering falls, though the logging in the plantation forest nearby ruins the postcard image.

Turning off onto the A832 is a scenic option that takes in some almost-undiscovered coastline and the subtropical **Inverewe Gardens** (NTS; ☎ 01445-781200; adult/concession £7/5/25; ☎ 9am-9.30pm Apr-Oct, 9.30am-4pm Nov-Mar; ♿), which utilises Gulf Stream warmth to grow Mediterranean and Japanese plants, among others. The café provides a good pit stop and has great cakes.

Alternatively you can head inland on the A835 (towards Inverness) and catch up with the A832 further down, which can save an hour on the journey.

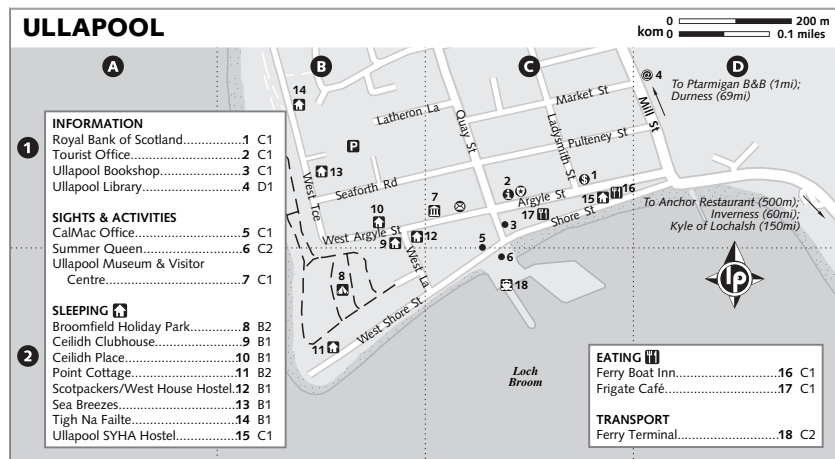
Gairloch

☎ 01445 / pop 1061

The A832 weaves between lochs into Gairloch, a peaceful group of villages scattered along the inner end of a loch. It's popular in summer with lots of places to stay. The surrounding area is known for sandy beaches and good fishing. Hill walkers use the town as a base for the nearby Torridon hills. The **tourist office** (☎ 712130; Auchtercairn; ☎ daily Easter-Sep, Mon-Sat Oct-Easter) has a bureau de change. **Gairloch Heritage Museum** (☎ 712287; www.gairlochheritagemuseum.org.uk; Auchtercairn; adult/child £3/50p; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat Mar-Sep, 10am-1pm Mon-Sat Oct) tells of life in the western Highlands and includes a typical crofting cottage.

The **Old Inn** (☎ 712006; www.theoldinn.co.uk; s/d £40/90) is a historic coaching inn nestled by the river by a lovely old bridge, making the beer garden an ideal spot for a scenic ale or malt. Rooms here are cosy with dark-wood furniture and some have four-post beds. Bar meals use local seafood to great effect (mains £6 to £13).

Away from the coast, Strath can be a good spot to stay in the busier summer months. **Wayside Guest House** (☎ 712008; Strath; s/d £25/40) is a central B&B with water views from both its pleasant rooms, which share a bathroom.



Kinlochewe to Torridon

Tiny Kinlochewe is usually used as a base for outdoor activities. From here the road follows Glen Torridon, an unforgettable journey along a river overlooked by the rugged peaks of Beinn Eithe (1010m) and Liathach (1055m). The road meets the sea at Torridon, where the small **Torridon Countryside Centre** (NTS; ☎ 01445-791221; donation adult/child £3/2; ☹ 10am-6pm May-Sep; ♿) offers displays on the area's flora and fauna, including a short audiovisual display and, in another building down the road, a deer museum.

If you're looking to stay in the lap of luxury, **Loch Torridon Country House Hotel** (☎ 01445-791242; www.lochtorridonhotel.com; standard s/d from £100/200; ☹ Feb-Dec; ♿) is a lavish Victorian shooting lodge that has an enviable lochsides position overlooking the peaks, with Liathach looming impossibly large opposite. Even the standard rooms are swish, but pricier master rooms will make you feel like you've got your own country estate. Friendly staff can organise any number of activities on land or water.

At the other end of the scale, **Torridon Youth Hostel** (SYHA; ☎ 0870 004 1154; Torridon; dm adult/child £13/10; ☹ Mar-Oct) is a homely building in a magnificent location near the Countryside Centre, and is used mainly by outdoor enthusiasts.

Plockton

☎ 01599 / pop 378

Made famous as a location for the TV series *Hamish Macbeth*, this seaside village is so endearing it's almost unbelievable. The main street, lined with palm trees and whitewashed houses, could almost be a film set – but for the large numbers of over-55 extras who tour-bus in here. You can always look out on the harbour view: a small, protected bay speckled with islets and hemmed in by vast, green-fuzzed mountains.

Calum's Seal Trips (☎ 544306; www.calums-sealtrips.com; adult/child £6/4) can get you out onto the water, where seals swarm just outside the harbour.

SLEEPING & EATING

Plockton Station Bunkhouse (☎ 544235; mickcoe@btinternet.com; Nessun Dorma; dm £10; ♿) This former train station is a well-fitted-out hostel that limits the beds to four per dorm. The kitchen-lounge is an airy spot to enjoy a read as you ponder the scenery.

Shieling (☎ 544282; www.lochalsh.net/shieling; r per person £25; ☹ Easter-Oct) Slap-bang by the sea, this characterful B&B has two carpeted rooms

with big beds that make it a popular romantic weekend. The expertly trimmed garden features a thatched blackhouse that will make you glad of the warm rooms.

Plockton Hotel (☎ 544274; www.plocktonhotel.co.uk; Harbour St; s/d £55/90, cottages per person £30) This dark-stone hotel is one of the town's best places to bunk down and brew up. The waterfront views give the large rooms an excellent aspect. While the cottage isn't as well placed, it's just as comfy (and more affordable). Even if you don't stay, pull up a seat in the beer garden and you could easily drink an afternoon away. If dinner comes around, you can order up fresh lobsters that are better than the usual pub nosh.

Shores Buttery (☎ 544263; Harbour St; ☹ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat) This is the spot for seaside snacks as you watch the water. There are plenty of paninis, ciabattas and wraps, but with a uniquely Scottish ocean view this is the place to try cullen skink, the creamy haddock soup.

GETTING THERE & AROUND

Plockton is 6 miles north of Kyle of Lochalsh. The two are connected by a postbus that runs once daily Monday to Saturday, and by trains (15 minutes). You can explore the town's surrounds with a bike from **Plockton Cycle Hire** (☎ 544255; Plockton Cottages, Frithard Rd; half-/full day £8/12; ☹ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat).

KYLE OF LOCHALSH

☎ 01599 / pop 739

Before the controversial bridge, Kyle of Lochalsh was the main ferry port to Skye. Visitors buzz through the town, preferring to stay in Skye or nearby Plockton, though they miss out on Scotland's best decorated public toilets, which include a small collection of whisky bottles – it's a real must-pee.

The **tourist office** (☎ 534276; ☹ Apr-Oct) is beside the seafront car park.

Kyle can be reached by bus from Inverness (£12, 2½ hours, two daily), and by direct City-link buses from Glasgow (£22, five to six hours, three daily), which continue on to Skye.

The train between Inverness and Kyle of Lochalsh (£16, 2½ hours, four daily Monday to Saturday, two on Sunday) is one of Scotland's most scenic trips.

AROUND KYLE OF LOCHALSH

Eilean Donan Castle

The oft-photographed **Eilean Donan Castle** (☎ 01599-555202; www.eileandonancastle.com; Dornie;

adult/child £4.75/1.50; ☹ 10am-5.30pm mid-Mar–Nov, call for winter hours) is one of Scotland's most evocative castles. Inside there's a historical re-creation exhibit as well as stills from the movie *Highlander* (in which the castle almost out-acted Sir Sean Connery) and a sword wielded at the Battle of Culloden.

The castle was trashed in response to the Jacobite uprising in 1719 and took 20 years to rebuild in the early 20th century.

ROAD TO THE ISLES

The 46 miles from Fort William via Glenfinnan to Arisaig and Mallaig is known as the 'Road to the Isles' (the A830), but it's really a highway to heaven as you'll exhaust all your wows on this spectacular countryside. Along this road Bonnie Prince Charlie got his first and last glimpses of Scotland as he arrived full of hope in 1745 and left defeated the following year.

At Glenfinnan you'll find the **Glenfinnan Monument** (NTS; ☎ 01397-722250), a kilted highlander erected in 1815 to commemorate the Jacobite cause. **Glenfinnan Visitor Centre** (☎ 722250; adult/child £3/2; ☹ 9.30am-5.30pm Jul & Aug, 10am-5pm Easter-Jun, Sep & Oct, 10am-4pm Sat & Sun Nov; ♿) recounts how the Young Pretender raised his standard here to rally the clans in his campaign to be king. Things then went tragically wrong, forcing the would-be king to flee. You can imagine the bagpipes calling the clans to the cause as you observe the lookout tower's fine views of Loch Shiel. Nearby, the famous 21-arch **Glenfinnan Viaduct** will be familiar to Harry-heads as it featured in *Harry Potter & the Chamber of Secrets*; a mile-long walk leads to an ideal viewpoint for the viaduct.

From **Arisaig**, the **MV Sheerwater** (☎ 01687-450224; www.arisaig.co.uk; ☹ May-Sep) runs day trips for foot passengers to the islands of Rum (return £20, 2½ hours, two or three a week), Eigg (return £15, one hour, six a week) and Muck (return £16, two hours, three a week), as well as wildlife cruises. From Arisaig the road winds around attractive bays and some of the country's most beautiful beaches known as the **Silver Sands of Morar**. **Morar village** is at the entrance to **Loch Morar**, Britain's deepest body of fresh water. It's said to contain its own monster, named Morag, giving hope to disillusioned Nessie hunters.

Alternatively you can let someone else do the driving and watch the scenery with the Jacobite steam train (see right).

Mallaig

☎ 01687 / pop 797

Travellers to the Isle of Skye or the Small Isles stay overnight in this bustling fishing village, but there's nothing to keep tourists here longer. There's a **tourist office** (☹ 10am-4pm Mon-Fri, 10.15am-3.45pm Sat, 1.45-3.45pm Sun) with internet access.

Sheena's Backpackers Lodge (☎ 462764; Harbour View; dm £11) is upstairs from the Tea Garden and the two businesses can clash (loud music at night carries upstairs and backpackers wander through the dining room). Still it's a friendly spot in the centre, and close enough for an early ferry.

Near the tourist office, the four-bedroom **Moorings Guest House** (☎ 462225; mooringsguesthouse@talk21.com; East Bay; s/d £25/44) has views over the harbour, especially from the breakfast room conservatory, which leads a double life as a tearoom from Easter to September.

Shiel Buses (☎ 01967-431272) runs to/from Fort William (1½ hours, one daily Monday to Friday).

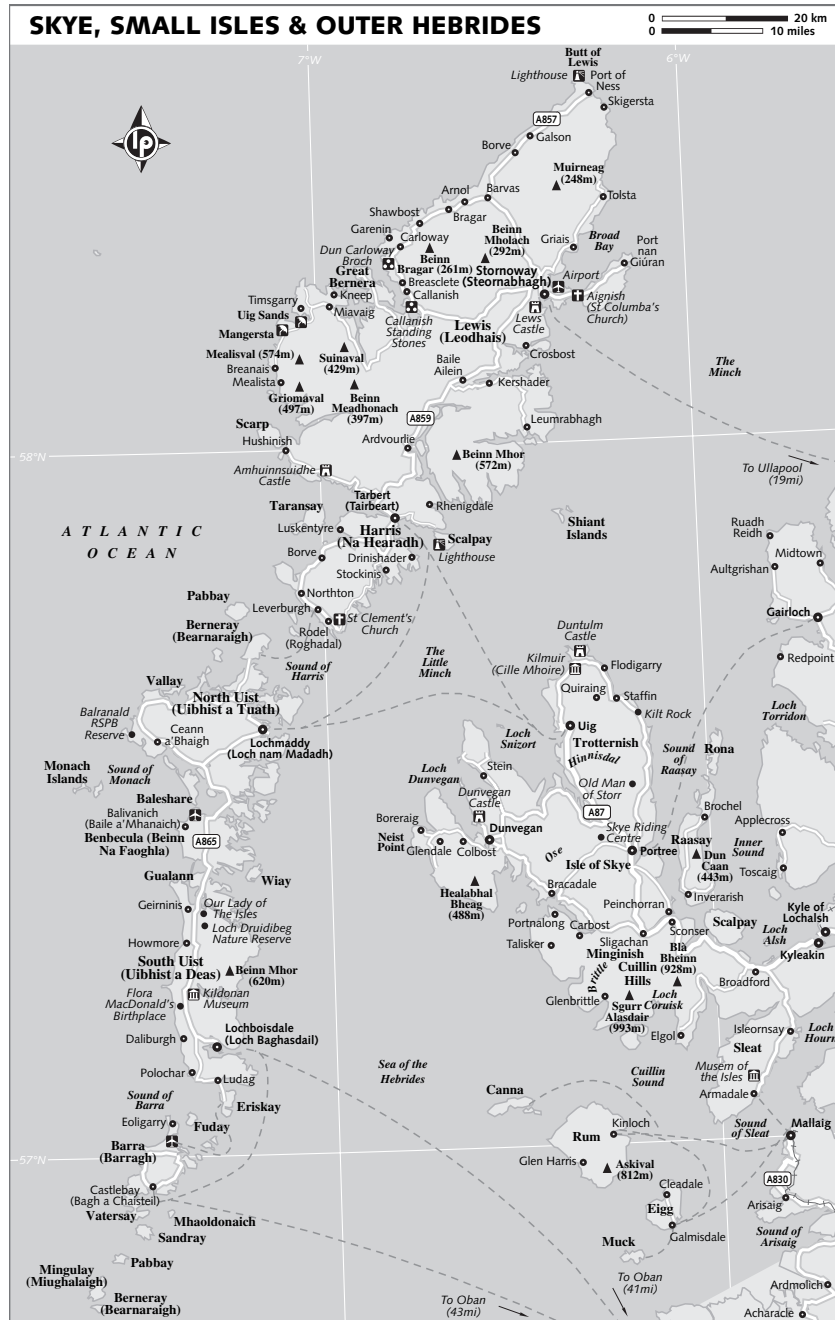
The scenic West Highland railway line rolls between Fort William and Mallaig (£8.10, 1¼ hours, four daily) with connections from Glasgow (£23, 5¼ hours, four daily Monday to Saturday, two Sunday). From May to October the **Jacobite steam train** (☎ 01463-239026; www.steamtrain.info; adult/child day-return £27/15.50) runs from Fort William to Mallaig with a stop in Glenfinnan.

CalMac operates ferries from Mallaig to Armadale on Skye (per person/car single £3.05/16.90, 25 minutes, eight to nine Monday to Saturday, plus Sunday mid-May to mid-September).

ISLE OF SKYE

This romantic destination packs so much in – distillery, castle, mountain range – that it's Scotland's most visited offshore location. The rugged splendour peaks at the Cuillin Hills which are popular with walkers and climbers who are keen to bag a few more Munros.

Less energetic visitors cruise the island's castles or shelter from the drizzle in some of the inviting Skye watering holes. The island's recent popularity means that Skye is packed with gourmet food and quality boutique hotels. Don't be surprised if you spend more time indoors, as Skye's name comes from a Norse word for 'cloud'.



Activities

WALKING

Skye offers some of the most challenging walking in Scotland. You should avoid more difficult walks in winter and always pack for all conditions. There are several great guidebooks for more advanced walks, but the *Traveller's Companion* and *In the Footsteps of...* series (both available free at tourist offices) both offer good easy walks; the latter based around historical themes such as Dr Johnson or the Clearances.

Skye Walking Holidays (☎ 01470-552396; www.skyewalks.co.uk; Duntulm Castle Hotel, Trotternish) organises week-long walking holidays, but individual walkers are welcome to join its guided walks for £25 a day.

CLIMBING

The Cuillin Hills are a playground for rock climbers. Traversing the Cuillin Ridge (a two-day expedition) is Britain's best mountaineering expedition. Unless you're an experienced climber, getting a guide is strongly advised. Guides charge from £80 a day:

Climb Skye (☎ 01478-640264; www.climbskye.co.uk)

Cuillin Guides (☎ 01478-640289; www.cuillin-guides.co.uk)

Skye Guides (☎ 01471-822116; www.skyeguides.co.uk)

OTHER ACTIVITIES

The sheltered coves and sea lochs around Skye provide superb sea kayaking. **Whitewave Outdoor Centre** (☎ 01470-542414; www.white-wave.co.uk; Linicro, Kilmuir; ☹ Mar-Oct) and **Skyak Adventures** (☎ 01471-833428; www.skyakadventures.com; 13 Camuscross, Isleornsay) provide kayaking instruction and equipment hire. It costs around £25 for a half-day kayak hire with instruction.

The green hills around Portree are best seen from horseback with **Skye Riding Centre** (☎ 01470-582419; www.skyeridingcentre.co.uk; A850), a small private stable 6 miles west of Portree on the road to Dunvegan.

For something different, you can try handling birds of prey or go on a 'hawk walk' with **Isle of Skye Falconry** (☎ 0780 821899; www.isleofskye-falconry.co.uk); appointments are essential.

Tours

For an insight into the island's history, take a tour with **Isle of Skye Tour Guide Co** (01471-844440; www.isle-of-skye-tour-guide.co.uk; 1hr tour from £10), which will cover most of the island's major sights.

Getting There & Away

The obvious way to arrive is via the bridge from Kyle of Lochalsh, which is now free. Cal-Mac operates ferries from mainland Mallaig to Armadale (single per person/car £3.25/17.65, 25 minutes, eight to nine Monday to Saturday, plus Sunday mid-May to mid-September).

There's also the six-car **Skye Ferry** (☎ 01599-522273; www.skyeferry.co.uk; adult/car with 4 passengers £1/7; ☹ 9am-7.45pm Mon-Sat & 10am-5.45pm Sun mid-May-Aug, 9am-5.45pm Mon-Sat Easter-mid-May) from Glenelg to Kyleheara.

Citylink runs direct buses between Glasgow, Portree and Uig (£25, seven hours, three daily). Buses also run from Inverness to Portree (£15, 3½ hours, twice daily).

Getting Around

Public transport dwindles to almost nothing at the weekend (it's blasphemy to even ask about Sunday buses), particularly in winter, particularly off the Portree-Kyleakin Rd.

Rapsons/Highland Country (☎ 01478-612622; www.rapsons.co.uk) operates the main bus routes on the island, linking most villages and towns. It offers a good-value Skye Roverbus ticket, giving unlimited travel for one/three days for £6/16.

PORTREE (PORT RIGH)

☎ 01478 / pop 1917

Skye's capital has two focuses: the harbour and the market square. The picturesque harbour is the ideal spot for a stroll or a cruise, while the square has facilities such as banks and the all-important pubs.

There's some debate about where the town name comes from, with many believing it's derived from the Gaelic *Port Righ* (King's Harbour), named for the 1540 call paid by James V to pacify local clan chieftains. Others speculate it comes from *Port Ruighe*, meaning port of slopes, based on Portree's hilly locale. You could ask a Gaelic-speaking local (see p909).

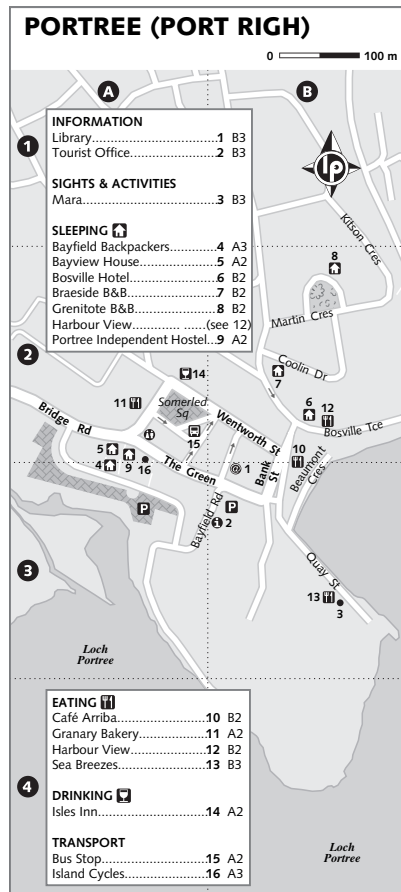
Information

Library (☎ 612697; Bayfield Rd; ☹ 1-8pm Mon, 10am-5pm Thu-Fri, 10am-1pm Sat) Free internet access.

Tourist office (☎ 612137; Bayfield Rd; ☹ Mon-Sat Oct-Easter, daily Easter-Sep) Just south of Bridge Rd. It does foreign exchange, and there's also internet access (per 20 minutes £1).

Tours

From the pier, the **Stardust MV** (☎ 07798743858; trips £10-12), takes tours to Raasay, Rona and Holm



rooms all come with en suite and are popular with outdoorsy couples who can get tips from the knowledgeable owners. Downstairs is a roomier family room that can comfortably sleep four. No breakfast makes this place cheaper – and you won't miss it with Portree on a plate at the front door.

Grenitote B&B (☎ 612808; e.a.matheson@amservice.net; 9 Martin Cres; s/d £25/40) In a quieter residential area, this cheery spot has plenty to lure you up the hill. Tastefully decorated rooms come with en suites and feel homy. The friendly owner is chatty and welcoming, like the Scottish aunt you always wanted.

Braeside B&B (☎ 612613; www.braesideportree.co.uk; Stormy Hill; d/tr £40/60) You'll know this bright spot by its flowerpots. Inside it's just as sweet, with ivy-patterned linen and a roomy residents' lounge that's good for meeting other guests. Breakfast is a treat with vegetarian options and a lot of choice. There's a good triple which is ideal for small walking groups or families.

Bosville Hotel (☎ 612846; 9-11 Bosville Tce; www.madeodshotels.co.uk/bosville; B&B d £110) From the complimentary sherry check-in sweetener to your last gourmet breakfast, everything is done with aplomb at this upmarket hotel. Split-level suites feature neutral furnishings and thoughtful touches, such as cosy slippers, armchairs and deep tubs in which to soak walk-worn muscles. The restaurant downstairs (mains £8 to £14) makes inventive use of local produce and has a subdued candle-lit ambience.

Other recommendations:

Portree Independent Hostel (☎ 613737; www.portreehostel.f9.co.uk; The Green; dm £13) A former post office that's showing its age but has four-bed dorms and a public laundrette.

Harbour View (☎ 612069; 7 Bosville Tce; s £20, d £40-50) Better known for its restaurant of the same name, there are three reliable rooms here, with an en-suite room costing a little more.

Eating & Drinking

The hotels around Somerled Sq serve up good pub food, so do a menu check and see if anything takes your fancy.

Granary Bakery (☎ 612873; Somerled Sq; light meals £1-3; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Sat) For a quick fresh-made roll or tasty stovied this is a good spot from which to enjoy some people-watching in the square.

Café Arriba (☎ 611830; Quay Brae; breakfast £3.95, mains £5-10; ☎ 7am-10pm) If you want to open a quality café this place is your blueprint. There are inventive sandwiches served on a range

GAELIC GOLD

As you wander around Skye you'd be forgiven for thinking there are a lot of Olympians proudly wearing gold, silver and bronze badges. The badges actually indicate locals' proficiency in Gaelic, the traditional Scots and Irish language, with different colours corresponding to the wearer's ability. Gold represents fluency, and you'll see a lot of older folk wearing it, while bronze is for beginners. A few shops even sell the badges (£2), but they'll probably want to quiz you in Gaelic before they give you one.

To get in on the action you can take a Gaelic course at **Sabhal Mor Ostaig** (☎ 01471-888000; www.smo.uhi.ac.uk; 1-week intensive courses from £140), a college where the language is spoken almost exclusively.

of breads, bagels and croissants; stay-awhile views; and the finest java jolt in town. With a bright, fun feel it can be popular when school finishes so grab the best booth before then.

Sea Breezes (☎ 612016; Quay St; lunch £5-7, dinner £12-18; ☎ lunch & dinner Thu-Tue) Most locals skip the chippers and go straight for this innovative restaurant when they want quality seafood. Lunches are simple: asparagus and goats' cheese tagliatelle, but dinner serves up hand-dived scallops with burnt-orange dressing and other treats.

Harbour View (☎ 612069; 7 Bosville Tce; mains £12-18; ☎ lunch & dinner) This place has a solid reputation for seafood (the platter for two is the ideal sampler), and the intimate dining room is decorated with fishing rods and nets so you'll feel like you landed it yourself. It's good to see pheasant and venison make an appearance on the excellent menu.

Isles Inn (☎ 612129; Somerled Sq) This cheery pub is the liveliest spot in town for a drink, with folk sessions and bands on weekends. The food is unexceptional pub grub (bar meals £5 to £8, dinner mains £9 to £12) but will line the stomach if you're making a night of it. Food served from noon to 9pm.

Getting There & Around

Somerled Sq is the Portree bus stop. Citylink runs to/from Inverness (£14, 3¼ hours, two to three buses daily); Glasgow (£22, 6½ hours, three daily) via Fort William; and Edinburgh (£28.70, eight hours, two daily). Local buses leave from here: three to five daily to Sligachan (15 minutes), Broadford (35 minutes) and Dunvegan Castle (40 minutes), and six a day on the loop around Trotternish taking in Flodigarry (20 minutes) and Uig (30 minutes).

Island Cycles (☎ 613121; www.isbuc.co.uk; The Green; half-/full day £7.50/14; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Sat) hires out bikes.

KYLEAKIN (CAOL ACAIN)

☎ 01599 / pop 380

Poor wee Kyleakin is even more redundant now that the Skye Bridge is free, as the more miserly locals no longer park here to walk across the bridge. There's good budget accommodation when the rest of the island books up.

Dun Caan Hostel (☎ 534087; www.skyerover.co.uk; Pier Rd; dm £12), a cosy hostel attracting a more mature crowd than the other backpacker barns in town, has six-bunk dorms and serene harbour views. The common room is a floral explosion that brightens up the place and the kitchen is small but functional. The owners hire out bikes and give advice on getting into the great outdoors.

From its racy red duvets that wish you goodnight in several languages, you can tell that **Skye Independent Hostel** (☎ 534510; www.scotlandstophostels.co.uk; Benmhor; caravans/chalet dm/dm/tw & d £9.50/10/12/28; ☎) is cheeky. It's also cheap, with several different options: there are dorms that have a maximum of eight bunks to a room (some have fewer) which all come with themes. The *Star Trek*-themed caravan (Captain's log; check spelling of 'Spoc' and 'Zulu') has spacey lamps but is fairly basic, while the chalet is a little tight. All guests can use the spacious garden and laid-back kitchen/dining area.

BROADFORD (AN T-ATH LEATHANN)

☎ 01471 / pop 1237

This blink-and-you'd-miss-it service centre has good accommodation options but little character. The **tourist office** (☎ 822361; ☎ daily Apr-Oct) is near the large Esso petrol station and there's also a **Co-op supermarket** (☎ 8am-10pm Mon-Fri, 10am-4pm Sat & Sun) which serves southern Skye.

Broadford SYHA Hostel (☎ 822442; www.syha.org.uk; dm £13.50; ☎ Mar-Oct; ☎) is a modern place in a quiet spot with a great outlook and good facilities. It also has neat doubles. Staff are helpful with local walks – long and short.

Island; book at the crafts shop **Mara** (☎ 612429; www.mara-direct.com; The Pier; ☎ 10am-5pm).

Sleeping

Bayfield Backpackers (☎ 612231; Bayfield; dm £12; ☎) Literally a stone's throw from the water, this brilliant hostel, operated by Bayview House, offers lessons in how to run a good hostel. Gleaming chrome appliances greet you in the kitchen, where there's free tea and coffee; most dorms have only four bunks, with individual lockers for all. The views out to the bay as you eat breakfast are unbeatable.

Bayview House (☎ 613340; Bayfield; s/d £17.50/35, f from £47.50; ☎) Finally, an affordable guest-house that casts aside the doilies and ceramic kittens for solid, basic rooms. The functional

About 7 miles north of Broadford (between the villages of Dunan and Luib) you zoom into **Skye Picture House** (☎ 822531; www.skyepicturehouse.co.uk; Ard Dorch by Broadford; d £60), an ultracomfy spot with great views across to **Scalpay** (wide-angle lens advised). The owners are avid photographers, so photography tomes and images decorate the breakfast room. Never mind the institutional aqua corridors, because en-suite rooms feel like boutique apartments with spacious bathrooms and slickly designed décor.

You can hire a bike from **Fairwinds Cycle Hire** (☎ 822270; 1-day hire £8), on the main road.

ARMADALE (ARMADAL)

☎ 01471 / pop 9063

If you catch the ferry from Mallaig you'll arrive in remote Armadale. Near the ruins of **Armadale Castle** is the excellent **Museum of the Isles** (☎ 844305; adult/child £4.90/3.80; ☎ 9.30am-5.30pm Easter-Oct; ☎). This engrossing exhibition is like walking through an encyclopaedia of the Western Isles from early Norse raids to the disintegration of Gaelic culture and Scottish emigration. The beautiful surrounding grounds offer woodlands strolls; from the main road you can access these walks without having to pay for castle-garden admission.

To explore the sea **Sea.fari** (☎ 822361; www.seafari.co.uk; The Pier, Armadale) does brilliant whale-spotting trips around Rum, with a landing on Eigg (two/three hours £24/34).

Looking a little like a whitewashed light-house, the rudimentary **Armadale SYHA Hostel** (☎ 844260; www.syha.org.uk; dm £13; ☎ Apr-Sep) is a five-minute walk from the ferry and has great water views from an expansive patio. Take your boots off though – they're strapped on that here.

Recently the home of celebrated Scottish chef Lady Clare MacDonald, **Kinloch Lodge** (☎ 833214; www.clair-mcdonald.com; off A851, Sleat; s £95-130, d £190-260) is a stately foodie treat (dinner £42). Rooms have an elegant country-house feel with bird watercolours on the wall and plump beds. The drawing room has a selection of whisky and cigars, so you can swig, puff and contemplate the view. It's 10 miles north of Armadale, just 5 miles before the turn-off to the A87.

CUILLIN HILLS & MINGINISH PENINSULA

☎ 01478

Rising to the west of Broadford, the Cuillin Hills are Britain's most impressive mountain range. Their jagged peaks and ridges could be

a serrated knife sawing at the grey sky; climbers and walkers see them as *the* challenge in Scotland. The highest summit, **Sgurr Alasdair** (993m), is one of the biggest trophies for experienced mountaineers, but is off limits for most walkers. An easier day-walk is the steep climb from Glenbrittle camp site to **Coire Lagan** (6 miles round-trip; allow at least three hours), an impressive spot known for **rock climbing**.

You'll know the crossroads at **Sligachan** (Sligeachan) by the gaggle of tripods that gather at this oft-photographed jumping-off point for the Cuillins. This spectacular spot is dwarfed by the mighty hills, but to settle your nerves grab a drink or meal at **Sligachan Hotel** (☎ 650204; www.sligachan.co.uk; bar meals £6-10, mains £10-18; ☎ lunch & dinner until 11pm; ☎), a cheery, barnlike bar with enough malts and real ales to warm any wind-blown walker. The slightly over-priced bar meals include curries, roasts and limited vegetarian (feel like cheese and macaroni again?), but the beer garden and playground out the front are the ideal spots for some pint-in-hand parenting. The more formal restaurant has more creative meals, and there are classy, if faded, rooms (dorms £10 to £12, single/double £63/96). The nearby basic **camp site** (☎ 07786-435294; tent sites per person £4; ☎ Easter-Oct) is recognisable by the campers drying out their tents in the car park.

You can sample the excellent sweetish, peaty and powerful single malt, once favoured by Robert Louis Stevenson, when you take the 45-minute tour of Carbost's **Talisker Distillery** (☎ 614308; adult/child £5/free; ☎ 9.30am-5pm Mon-Sat Easter-Oct, 2-5pm Mon-Fri Nov-Easter) that's been operating since 1830.

DUNVEGAN & AROUND

☎ 01470

On the island's western side is the stronghold of the MacLeods, **Dunvegan Castle** (☎ 521206; adult/child £7/4, gardens only £5/3, seal trips £6/3.50; ☎ 10am-5.30pm Apr-Oct, 11am-4pm Nov-Mar). Since the 13th century, this fortification has held this site – many believe because it holds the **Fairy Flag**, a silken relic brought from the Middle East by the Crusaders and purporting to bring victory to the clan that holds it. Other objects here include souvenirs of visitors such as Bonnie Prince Charlie and Dr Johnson. To really get your money's worth from the steep admission fee, however, make time to enjoy the vast and lovely gardens.

To stay in Dunvegan, try **Tables Hotel** (☎ 521 404; www.tables-hotel.co.uk; s/d/tr £45/86/120; ☎), a

family-run place with a conservatory breakfast that includes black or white pudding, smoked haddock and vegetarian options. The relaxed lounge includes a DVD player and plush sofas, plus there's a telescope that's used to give free tours of the Skye sky.

The best meals in town are at the **Old School** (☎ 521421; meals £8.50-19; ☎ dinner), a candlelit eatery bubbling with conversation, where the menu runs to peppers stuffed with dhal and tipsy duck soured in Drambuie.

Five miles from Dunvegan, on the road to Glendale, **Three Chimneys** (☎ 511258; www.threechimneys.co.uk; 2-course lunch £17.50, 3-course dinner £42; ☎ lunch Mon-Sat, dinner daily) is one of Scotland's premier restaurants with rooms. Inspired seafood is a speciality with dishes such as crab tortellini or grilled cod with squid risotto, but game also regularly features on the menu. Rooms in the **House Over-By** (d £250), the Three Chimney's megastar accommodation, are luxury-packed and include a modest CD and DVD library, huge king beds and stunning views west to the Outer Hebrides. Clearly, breakfasts are gourmet with fresh-baked croissants and exotic fruits.

From Monday to Saturday, there are three to five bus services from Portree to Dunvegan Castle. Postbuses also run this route.

TROTTERNISH PENINSULA

☎ 01470

North of Portree, Skye's coastal scenery opens up into the magical Trotternish Peninsula. Look out for the rocky spike of the **Old Man of Storr**, a terrace of basalt splayed out to look like the Scottish gent's garment at **Kilt Rock** and the ruins of **Duntulm Castle**. At Staffin Bay the dramatic escarpment of the **Quiraing** will catch your eye.

The tiny hamlet of **Flodigarry** (Flodaigearraidh) has a couple of excellent places to stay. The **Flodigarry Country House Hotel** (☎ 552203; www.flodigarry.co.uk; s/d £65/130, cottages £100; ☎) is an upper-end hotel that lets you stay in the restored cottage of Flora MacDonald. Rooms in the hotel marry heritage with comfort and feature four-post beds, beautiful textured wallpaper and a complimentary whisky or sherry. The famous cottage is more basic (Flora was a woman of simple means after all) with an unattached bathroom downstairs and small twin upstairs. The restaurant (meals £9 to £12; meals served from noon to 9.30pm) does treats such as salmon stuffed with crabmeat, and herb-crust lamb, while the bar is a scenic spot for a dram.

About 100m from Flodigarry Country House Hotel but a million miles away in budget, the **Dun Flodigarry Hostel** (☎ 552212; hos.tel.flodigarry@btinternet.com; dm/tw/f £11/27/65; ☎) has the same stupendous views. The hostel is casual with a huge dining area and well-maintained rooms; the family room is good value if you want to bring the clan.

At the northern end of the peninsula at **Kilmuir** (Cille Mhoire), the **Skye Museum of Island Life** (☎ 552206; adult/child £2/75p; ☎ 9.30am-5pm Mon-Sat Apr-Oct) re-creates crofting life in a series of thatched cottages. Up the hill from the museum in the Kilmuir cemetery is **Flora MacDonald's grave**. Flora became famous for helping Bonnie Prince Charlie escape following his defeat at the Battle of Culloden in 1746. She dressed him up in drag to play her maid as they escaped over the sea to Skye. She was imprisoned in the Tower of London for a year for her pains.

Just 3 miles south of Staffin, **Glenview Hotel** (☎ 562248; www.glenskyye.co.uk; d & tw £65-75), on the west side of the road, is a whitewashed hotel with comfort and hospitality belied by an unexceptional exterior. Friendly owners serve up massive breakfasts (ask for an extra serve of the delicious fruit pudding) and rooms have four-post beds for romantic weekenders.

Uig (Uige)

From whichever direction you come into Uig (*oo-ig*), the picture-perfect harbour, enclosed by steep hills, always impresses, particularly if the ferry is chugging across the bay. The new **tourist office** (☎ 542404; www.uig-isleofskye.com; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 11am-4pm Sat & Sun) has lots of information and enthusiasm about this area.

Before you jump on your ferry, you can book ahead to tour (and taste) the **Isle of Skye Brewery** (☎ 542477; www.skyebrewery.co.uk; tours £2; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri), which brews the local ales.

Very handy to the ferry, the lovely **Orasay B&B** (☎ 542316; www.orasay.freeserve.co.uk/bandb.html; 14 Indrigill St; s/d £22.50/45) has rooms that are ideal if you're heading off first thing in the morning for the Outer Hebrides. Owners are used to fly-by-nighters and happily do early breakfasts.

With a kitchen that overlooks the bay, you'll be racing to do the washing up at the chilled-out **Uig SYHA** (☎ 0870 004 1155; dm £13.50). Eight-bunk dorms are large enough to allow everyone their own space, while the lounge is a good spot in which to hole up when the rain sets in. The family room is a good bet for groups and there's a separate bunkhouse for overflow.

The **Pub at the Pier** (☎ 542212; The Pier; mains £8-10) does straight-up meals, but the 180-degree panorama of the harbour is ideal for watching the ferry come and go.

From Uig pier, CalMac has ferry services to Lochmaddy on North Uist (single per person/car £9.15/44, 1¼ hours, one or two daily) and to Tarbert on Harris (single per person/car £9.15/44, 1½ hours, one or two daily Monday to Saturday).

ISLE OF RAASAY

☎ 01478 / pop 194

You might want to keep it to yourself, but Raasay (Rathasair) has some of the most spectacular views across to the Cuillins and some good beginners' walks. The most popular stroll is up the conical hill of **Dun Caan** (443m). Forest Enterprise publishes a free leaflet (available from tourist offices) with other suggested walks. This small rugged island to the north-east of Skye is so happily off the tourist trail that there's no petrol station.

The most atmospheric and adventurous place to stay on the island is **Raasay Outdoor Centre** (☎ 660266; s/d from £18.50/37; ☎ 10am-9pm Mon-Sat), a ramshackle former clan mansion that now offers courses in sailing, climbing and kayaking (one-day activities from £50). Rooms range from intimate singles to large group bunkhouses and staff offer pick-ups from the ferry. Guest have the option of full board or there's the attached **Dolphin Café** (meals £5 to £8) which does delicious light meals.

Also recommended is the **Raasay SYHA Hostel** (☎ 0870 004 1146; www.syha.org.uk; dm £9.50; ☎ mid-May-Aug), north of Inverarish, a refurbished but basic hostel; and the **Isle of Raasay Hotel** (☎ 660222; www.isleofraasayhotel.co.uk; d £35; ☎ lunch & dinner), which has good rooms and reliable meals (£6 to £8).

CalMac operates ferries from Sconser on Skye (between Portree and Broadford) to Inverarish on Raasay (return per person/car £2.60/10.25, 15 minutes, nine to 11 Monday to Saturday).

OUTER HEBRIDES

Scotland's wild Western Isles (as they're also called) are something of a frontier, an outpost shielding the mainland from Atlantic gales. Their Viking name *havbreydey* ('islands at the edge of the earth') still feels true today.

The islands have long subsisted on fishing, weaving and crofting, and have developed a strong sense of their own independence. The distinctive horned Hebridean sheep have right of way on the roads around here, and you might have to adopt to local custom such as the preserving of the Sabbath (see p914). Scottish Gaelic is a working language here: signposts put the Gaelic first, and almost half of Gaelic-speaking Scots live on these islands.

Outside the semibustle of Stornoway, life exists mostly in small villages compiled of crumbling ruinous stone cottages interspersed with fresh, squat concrete bungalows; until relatively recently the main unit of housing was the blackhouse, a primitive cottage with dry stone walls and a thatched roof built around a peat hearth.

Orientation & Information

The Outer Hebrides consists of more than 200 islands running in a 130-mile arc from north to south, shielding the northwest coast of Scotland. Lewis and Harris are actually one island with a border of high hills between them. Stornoway, on Lewis, is the largest town in the Outer Hebrides, with a reasonable range of facilities. North Uist, Benbecula and South Uist are joined by bridges and causeways.

There are tourist offices in every ferry port. Those in Stornoway and Tarbert open year-round (the others open early April to mid-October) and remain open late for ferry arrivals.

Getting There & Away

AIR

There are airports at Stornoway (Lewis), and on Benbecula and Barra. There are flights to Stornoway from Edinburgh (daily), Inverness (daily) and Glasgow (Monday to Saturday). There are also two flights a day (weekdays only) between Stornoway and Benbecula. Standard one-way fares are around £150, but can be as low as £30.

There are daily flights from Glasgow to Barra and Benbecula. At Barra, the planes land on the hard-sand beach at low tide, so the timetable is tidal.

Airlines serving the Western Isles:

bmi (☎ 0870 607 0555; www.flybmi.com)

British Airways/Loganair (☎ 0845 779 9977; www.britishairways.com)

Highland Airways (☎ 01851-701282; www.highlandairways.co.uk)

BOAT

CalMac (☎ 0870 565 0000; www.calmac.co.uk) runs car ferries from Ullapool to Stornoway (Lewis); from Uig (Isle of Skye) to Lochmaddy (North Uist) and Tarbert (Harris); and from Oban to Castlebay (Barra), continuing to Lochboisdale (South Uist).

Crossing	Duration	Car	Driver/Passenger
Oban-Castlebay	4¾hr	£76	£21
Oban-Lochboisdale	6¾hr	£76	£21
Uig-Lochmaddy	1¾hr	£45	£9.40
Uig-Tarbert	1½hr	£45	£9.40
Ullapool-Stornoway	2¾hr	£70	£15

From Monday to Saturday there are two or three CalMac ferries daily to Stornoway, two to Tarbert and Lochmaddy, and one to Castlebay and Lochboisdale; on Sunday there are ferries (same frequency) to Castlebay, Lochboisdale and Lochmaddy only. Advance booking for cars are essential in July and August.

CalMac has 12 different Island Hopscotch tickets for set routes in the Outer Hebrides, offering a saving of around 10% (tickets are valid for one month).

Getting Around

The *Skye and Western Isles Travel Guide*, from tourist offices for £1, lists all current air, bus and ferry services. Visitors without their own transport should anticipate a fair amount of hitching and walking. Flights by **British Airways** (☎ 0845 773 3377; www.ba.com) partners link the islands of Barra, Benbecula and Lewis. At Barra the planes land on the beach at Cackle Strand, so timetables depend on tides. Ferries run between Leverburgh on Harris and Berneray on North Uist and between Lochboisdale on South Uist and Castlebay on Barra.

There are limited bus services, especially on Sunday.

BICYCLE

Cycling north to south is popular, but allow at least a week for the trip. The main problems are difficult weather, strong winds (you hear stories of people cycling downhill and free-wheeling uphill) and sheep that believe they have the right of way.

Bikes are available for hire:

Alex Dan's Cycle Centre (☎ 01851-704025; 67 Kenneth St, Stornoway, Lewis)

Barra Cycle Hire (☎ 01871-810284; 29 St Brendan's Rd, Castlebay, Barra)

Rothan Cycles (☎ 01870-620283; 9 Howmore, South Uist)

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

Most roads are single-track; sheep wandering onto them pose the main hazard. Petrol stations are far apart, expensive and usually closed on Sunday. We've given town names in both English and Gaelic, as signs are often only in Gaelic.

Cars can be hired from around £20 per day:

Gaeltech Car Hire (☎ 01859-520460; Grimisdale Guest House, Leverburgh, Harris)

Laing Motors (☎ 01878-700267; Lochboisdale, South Uist)

Mackinnon Self Drive (☎ 01851-702984; 18 Inadete Rd, Stornoway, Lewis)

LEWIS (LEODHAIS)

☎ 01851 / pop 18,489

Striped with black peat diggings across verdant green fields and towering mountains cut away by coastline to become impressive cliffs, Lewis is an island of extreme beauty. The northern part of the northernmost Hebridean islands, you'll hear Gaelic in pubs and mumbled when locals want to curse tourists here, but once you break through the remoteness Lewis is a welcoming island. The north is dominated by the vast Black Moor where peat cutting is a serious business providing islanders with fuel; it is cut from the earth and heaped in geometric piles in summer.

Stornoway (Steornabhagh)

pop 8569

Stornoway is the bustling 'capital' of the Outer Hebrides and the archipelago's only real town. The beautiful, natural harbour was first appreciated by the Vikings who established bases here so they could more comfortably raid further south.

More of a workhorse than a show pony, outside of the pretty centre the town can feel industrial. It hosts the base for the Western Isles Council (Comhairle nan Eilean), a hospital and the islands' Gaelic TV and radio stations. It may not blow your socks off, but it does make a pleasant introduction to this remote corner of the country. Some great food is made right here, including Britain's best black pudding and the ever-tempting Hebridean ales.

NEVER ON A SUNDAY

The Sabbath is strictly observed throughout the Hebrides. Some of the strictest locals don't believe in cooking (re-heated leftovers only) or driving (a sermon allegedly asked locals in Gaelic 'Did Jesus have a car?') on Sunday, preferring to devote the day to bible readings, worship and contemplation. When British Airways introduced Sunday flights in 2002, churches were outraged proposing boycotts, but the planes eventually took off. Similarly a petrol station in Stornoway famously flouts the Sabbath, daring to sell newspapers that other retailers will only give you on Monday; it's assured its place in hell by trading in the devil's drink.

For visitors it can be frustrating, but not impossible. You'll need to plan your travel around Sunday: most shops will close, though most hotels continue to trade. Unless you're in Stornoway, you'll need to fill up your petrol tank. While you may sometimes find it difficult, it's best to go with the flow and embrace the relaxed spirit of the day. By observing the Sabbath in your own way, you'll also be showing respect for the culture you're visiting.

ORIENTATION & INFORMATION

Stornoway is on the east coast and compact enough to make exploring on foot easy. The ferry docks at the CalMac terminal on the foreshore; the bus station is next door.

Library (☎ 708631; 19 Cromwell St; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Wed & Sat, to 6pm Thu & Fri) Free internet access, and café.

Tourist office (☎ 703088; www.witb.co.uk; 26 Cromwell St; ☎ 9am-6pm & 8.30-9.30pm Mon, Tue & Thu, 9am-8pm Wed & Fri, 9am-5pm & 8.30-9.30pm Sat)

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

The small **Museum nan Eilean** (☎ 709266; Francis St; admission free; ☎ 10am-5.30pm Mon-Sat Apr-Sep, 10am-5pm Tue-Fri, 10am-1pm Sat Oct-Mar) explains the loose history of the Outer Hebrides, and explores traditional island life and the impact of progress and technology.

After the culture fix, you've earned a chug at the **Hebridean Brewery** (☎ 700123; 18a Bells Rd, cnr Rigs Rd; ☎ by appointment) which brews up morish local beers, with tours by appointment.

Instead of complaining about the weather you can always ride it with **West Isles Kite Company** (☎ 672771; www.wikc.co.uk; 1hr from £25), which does pick ups from town and can have you out chasing the big breeze in a power-kite or kite buggy.

SLEEPING

Laxdale Holiday Park (☎ 703234; www.laxdaleholidaypark.com; 6 Laxdale Lane; tent sites £7, motor vans £9, dm £12, cottages £50-55; ☎ camp site Apr-Oct, bunkhouse year-round) North of town, 1.5 miles off the A857, this tidy site has something for everyone with good grassy camping areas, a roomy (only four bunks per room) modern bunkhouse and nice new self-catering cottages. It can be difficult to get to without your own transport.

Stornoway Backpackers (☎ 703628; www.stornoway-hostel.co.uk; 47 Keith St; dm £10) With six-bunk dorms (and maybe a pull-out bed during peak season) rooms can feel a little tight, but the kitchens are spick-and-span with bathrooms that put some of the town's hotels to shame. While it may feel a little old, the bright new wardens will soon spark it up.

Hebridean Guest House (☎ 702268; 61 Bayhead St; s/d £35/60) If you're looking for solo accommodation, this place has six singles as well as several doubles and twins. There's a diverting little video collection for wet weather and rooms are conservatively decorated. Breakfast includes healthy fruit and yogurt which is a relief from the pudding-pushing places elsewhere.

Park Guest House (☎ 702485; 30 James St; s £54, d £84-96) Undergoing substantial renovations when we visited, this Victorian house was creating larger all en-suite rooms to suit true foodies. As well as dining in the high-class seafood restaurant, you can do a cookery course that specialises in local produce and traditional dishes. Ask about discounts for stays of more than three nights.

Royal Hotel (☎ 702109; www.calahotels.com; Cromwell St; s/d £58/89) The Royal has sassed itself up downstairs as HS-1 café-bar (see opposite) and some of this sophistication has crept upstairs. Rear-facing rooms are modern and avoid downstairs bar noise, while front rooms are more traditional. It's one of the better options in town.

Other recommendations:

Kildun (☎ 703247; kildun@bushinternet.com; 14 Goathill Rd; s/d from £18/36) A peaceful B&B a 10-minute walk uphill from the centre.

Fernlea (☎ 702125; 9 Matheson Rd; s/d £30/50) A Victorian home in mint-green, with a cost-saving optional breakfast.

EATING & DRINKING

Corner (☎ 701869; cnr Francis & Keith Sts; tapas £2-6, mains £4-7; ☎ lunch & dinner) Say 'hola' to the town's new Spanish-inspired eatery that's refitted this former hostel in swish style. You can graze with a wine over *calamares Andaluza* (tender calamari) tapas or *gambas al ajillo* (garlicky prawns) or make it a longer stay with fish- and chicken-based mains. There are good veggie options, particularly in the morish tapas.

HS-1 (☎ 702109; Cromwell St; mains £5-8; ☎ noon-9pm Mon-Sat, 5-9pm Sun) This is where Stornoway's younger crowd show down on pastas, wraps and curries, in a stylish ambience with modern pop as a soundtrack. It's a fun spot, but booking ahead on Sunday is advised.

Digby Chick (☎ 700026; 28 Point St; mains £14-17; ☎ noon-10pm Mon-Sat) Head and shoulders above the rest of the dining scene, this chick should be made a Lady for services to Stornoway dining. Dapper staff dash about bringing you delicious dishes, with seafood playing a major part. Evening visits are recommended it gets romantic with candlelight and impressive specials.

Other recommendations:

Library Café (19 Cromwell St; snacks £2-5; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Wed & Sat, to 6pm Thu & Fri) An ideal spot for a pot of tea with home-baked slice, scones or toasts.

Thai Café (☎ 701811; 27 Church St; mains £5-7; ☎ lunch & dinner Mon-Sat) An unremarkable exterior disguises authentic Thai food.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Buses run from Stornoway to Tarbert (one hour, five daily Monday to Saturday) and Leverburgh (£3.90, two hours, five daily Monday to Saturday).

MacLennan Coaches (☎ 702114) run a circular route from Stornoway to Callanish, Carloway, and Arnol; the timetable means you've got time to visit one or two of these places in a day. An all-day ticket costs £5.

Arnol Blackhouse Museum

About 2 miles west of Barvas off the A858, this **museum** (HS; ☎ 710395; adult/child £4/1.60; ☎ 9.30am-6.30pm Mon-Sat Apr-Sep, to 4.30pm Mon-Sat Oct-Mar, last admission 30min before closing; 🚰) is an original blackhouse, combined byre, barn and home and an example of the traditional home in the Hebrides. Built in 1885, the house uses materials that were handy, such as turf for the roof and driftwood (including a beam that was once a tiller). The central fire was essential for keeping the turf roof dry, but not too dry, as

well as keeping human and animal inhabitants warm. Across the road is a whitehouse, which was the next architectural evolution, where the owner of this blackhouse moved, when she sold to the government in 1964.

Carloway (Carlabagh) & Garenin (Garrannan)

Carloway looks across a beautiful loch to the southern mountains and contains the defiantly perched **Dun Carloway Broch**, a well-preserved, 2000-year-old dry stone defensive tower. If you get the place to yourself, you're likely to get an eerie feeling as you crawl through the little entrance ways. Nearby is the **Doune Broch Centre** (☎ 643338; admission free; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat late May-early Sep) with a fascinating interpretative display.

At nearby Garenin, the **Garrannan Blackhouse Village** sits on the verge of a dramatic Atlantic shelf above a stony beach. The village consists of nine restored thatched-roof blackhouses. Entering the **Blackhouse museum** (☎ 643416; adult/child £2.50/1; ☎ 10am-5.30pm Mon-Sat Apr-Oct) is the only way to see inside these houses; exhibits feature working looms and authentic-smelling byres. There's also a café serving simple snacks.

Another of the blackhouses holds **Garenin Crofters' Hostel** (www.gatiff.org.uk; dm £8, cottage d per week from £78), which is warm (the fire has been replaced with central heating) and wonderfully atmospheric. Some of the other blackhouses can be rented as self-catering cottages. It's far bigger inside than you'd imagine, and is especially snug when the wind is whistling outside.

Callanish (Calanais)

Callanish is 12 miles west of Stornoway and home to the **Callanish Standing Stones** (HS; ☎ daily), which form one of Britain's most complete stone circles. Set on a wild and secluded promontory overlooking Loch Roag, these 13 monuments of banded gneiss are arranged as in worship around a central 4.5m-high monolith. Another 40 smaller stones radiate from the circle in the shape of a cross, with the remains of a chambered tomb at the centre. Dating from between 3800 and 5000 years ago, the stones are roughly contemporaneous with Egypt's pyramids. While visually impressive and imbued with all sorts of New Age speculations, their real purpose continues to baffle.

Calanais Visitor Centre (☎ 621422; admission free, exhibition adult/child £2/1, snacks £1-4; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Sat Apr-Sep, to 4pm Mon-Sat Oct-Mar) is discreetly

designed not to interfere with the visual impact of the stones. A small exhibition speculates on the meaning and construction of the monoliths, using photos, audiovisual shows and other displays.

Mealista (Mealasta) & Around

The road to Mealista (the B8011 southwest of Callanish, signposted to Uig) takes you through the most remote parts of Lewis. Follow the road around towards Breanais for some truly spectacular white-sand beaches, although the surf can make swimming treacherous. The famous 12th-century walrus-ivory Lewis chess pieces were discovered in the sand dunes here in 1831, most of which ended up in London's British Museum.

Butt of Lewis (Rubha Robhanais) & Around

Heading north on A857, you head into the Gaelic heartland of the Hebrides with nine out of 10 people you meet speaking the language. You can hear Gaelic spoken over the crackling fires in the back bar of the **Cross Inn** (☎ 810687; www.crossinn.com; Port of Ness; s/d £33/48), a delightful spot that does toothsome meals (£6 to £10) and a good ale. If you've got a thirst for the language, a little further along the road is **An Sgoil Shumhraidm** (Gaelic Summer School; ☎ 770491; jayne.macleod@lews.uhi.ac.uk; 4-day course £150; ☎ Jul & Aug), which offers summer classes in the language and also attracts international visitors for its traditional music classes.

The main settlement at this end of the island is the attractive harbour of **Port of Ness** (Port Nis), which hosts **10 Callicvol** (☎ 810193; www.10callicvol.com; Port of Ness; admission free; ☎ 9.30am-5.30pm Tue-Sat Apr-Sep), a large private collection of books on the Hebrides and Scotland, many in Gaelic; upstairs there's an excellent quilt display. To the west is the sandy beach of **Traigh**, which is popular with surfers. At Eoropie (Eoropaigh), further along the road, is **St Moluag's Church** (Teampull Mholuidh), a sweet structure that dates from the 12th century. The road ends at the **Butt of Lewis** (insert your own arse gag here), the extreme northern tip of the Hebrides which is marked by an imposing **lighthouse**.

HARRIS (NA HEARADH)

☎ 01859 / pop 1984

Keep it quiet but out of the conjoined twins of Harris and Lewis, this southern sibling got all the looks. With golden-sand beaches,

rugged rocky coastline and scenic expanses of *machair* (grass- and wildflower-covered sand dunes), the steep wall-like mountains of North Harris could almost be designed to keep its northern neighbours out. The highest of these mountains is the Clisham (An Cliseam) which crowns the ridge at 799m.

South Harris doesn't have the mountainous division but the land bridge at Tarbert similarly shields its white-sand beaches from northerners. It could be that they don't want folk from Lewis to be shamed by all this beauty.

Harris is, of course, famous for Harris Tweed, a homemade fabric (see the boxed text, opposite) which although also made in Lewis is named for the southern isle. You can see why there'd be rivalry between these two islands.

Tarbert (Tairbeart)

pop 1338

This tough little village gripping the surrounding hillside serves as the link between the two islands. Tarbert has ferry connections to Uig on Skye as it's hemmed in by two sea-based lochs. But when the sun's shining this scenic port can be a real slice of heaven.

The **tourist office** (☎ 502011; Pier Rd; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon, Wed & Fri, 9am-5pm & 8-9pm Tue, Thu & Sat) is signposted up the hill. Tarbert is a service centre with a petrol station, an ATM at the tourist office and two general stores. There are several small craft stores around town, but **Harris Tweed Shop** (☎ 502493; Main St) stocks books, CDs and tweed clothing that all make good last-minute gifts as you wait for the ferry.

Rockview Bunkhouse (☎ 502081; Main St; dm £10) is an older place that can feel a bit cramped, but its functional communal facilities and views of...well, rocks, makes it a good option, particularly if you're catching an early ferry.

If you've been roughing it elsewhere, the large, country **Harris Hotel** (☎ 502154; www.harrishotel.com; s/£40-55, d/£70-100) will feel like a step back into civilisation. Easily the town's best rooms are furnished in colourful modern style, and the meals in the restaurant (three-course dinner £24), open for lunch and dinner, are brilliant. While you're there check out the signature of author JM Barrie scratched into one of the windows. For another brush with fame, this is where the 'stars' of BBC's *Survivor* were airlifted to after their island became too dangerous.

First Fruits (☎ 502439; Pier Rd; ☎ 10.30am-8pm Mon-Sat Jul & Aug, 10.30am-6.30pm Mon-Sat Jun, 10am-4.30pm Mon-Sat Apr, May & Sep) is a sweet snack house

THE TANGLED WEB WE TWEED

If you think tweed is a dusty fabric worn by professors and country gentlemen, you obviously haven't been watching footwear fashion. When sneaker supreme Nike wanted to refresh its Terminator design it thought Harris Tweed would make the perfect fabric. Only problem was, the American shoe manufacturer wanted 10,000m of the hand-loomed fabric.

The homemade manufacture of Harris Tweed (on rickety machines that are pedalled much like bicycles) is protected by an act of parliament that strictly forbids using means of mass-production. When Nike approached solo tweeder Donald John Mackay to create its massive order, Mackay knew he'd have to enlist the help of *all* of the island's tweed makers. Working round the clock for several months, tweeders on Harris and Lewis eventually produced the required bolts of fabric.

And the results? The Terminator II sold well, enjoying popularity with hip-hoppers and soccer mums from Los Angeles to London. Fortunately for Mackay and the island's other exhausted tweeders, there are no plans for a follow-up shoe.

You can visit Donald John Mackay as he works in his studio at **Luskentyre Harris Tweed Co** (☎ 01859-550261; 6 Luskentyre; admission free; ☎ 9am-6pm), or check out **Lewis Loom Centre** (☎ 01859-704500; 3 Bayhead; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Sat), although the latter no longer does displays. If you're wanting to pick up some tweed souvenirs, it seems like just about everywhere sells them, but some of the best prices are at Lewis Loom Centre.

which does warming hot chocolate when the wind is lashing the town – and great snack lunches and cakes when it's not.

Harris Coaches operates buses running to/from Leverburgh (50 minutes, four to five daily Monday to Saturday) and Stornoway (one hour, five daily Monday to Saturday).

For ferries to Uig on Skye, see p913.

South Harris

If you don't think Britain has real beaches, wait until you see South Harris. The A859 wraps around the west coast and is backed by rolling *machair* and mountains, with views across to North Harris and to offshore islands. Azure waters give way to shallow turquoise, and lap lazily against achingly tempting sandy shores. The best beach here is **Luskentyre**; if the sun is shining it looks like paradise!

Want to explore somewhere unique? The east, or Bays, coast is a strange, rocky moonscape, studded with small ponds and still dotted with numerous crofts. It's hard to believe that this area is still inhabited, but if you're wanting to get off the beaten track you could have a small beach to yourself here.

On your way south on the A859, you'll strike the **Seallam! Centre** (☎ 502058; adult/child £2.50/free; ☎), a small museum with displays on tweed, local fishing and regularly changing exhibitions. It's also one of the only places on Harris with internet access (per 20 minutes £1).

There were grand plans for **Leverburgh** (An t-Ob) to become a major fishing port in the

early 20th century, but the fishing boom never came. Today it's the kind of town where black-faced Cheviot sheep, rather than late-night hoons, wander the street.

The quirky **Am Bothan** (☎ 520251; www.ambothan.com; Leverburgh; dm £14; ☎) is owned by a boat builder and you can see evidence of his trade hanging around the hostel, literally. Suspended from the colourful common room-cum-kitchen is a large lifeboat; the sense of fun follows through to the beachcombing-decorated rooms which are large enough to allow for guests' storage needs. It's a top spot to...as the sign out the front says... 'Be warm, be dry.'

With an impressive carved eagle out the front, it's hard to miss **Grimmisdale B&B** (☎ 520460; www.grimisdale.co.uk; Leverburgh; s/d £50/70), which has an enviable view of the loch. There's a good selection of DVDs for the days when you can't see the views. Couples often opt for the Harris Room, complete with Jacuzzi, while families appreciate the suite which is like a small apartment (but at the same affordable rates).

Down by the pier **Anchorage Restaurant** (☎ 520225; The Pier, Leverburgh; meals £7-11; ☎ 11am-8pm) caters to the ferry crowd with some welcome Italian options and standard seafood. It's a bit pricey, but you're paying for proximity.

A ferry goes from Leverburgh to the Isle of Berneray (per person/car £5.20/23.70, 1¼ hours, three to four Monday to Saturday), which is connected by a causeway to North Uist.

Three miles east at **Rodel** (Roghadal) stands the remarkable **St Clement's Church** (HS; admission

free). Built between the 1520s and 1550s, it remains an endearing cruciform-designed house of worship with an impressive tower in the west.

NORTH UIST (UIBHIST A TUATH)

☎ 01876 / pop 1657

Uist is such a scramble of land, lochs and sea that you'll never know which one you're on. The roads linking the land are canyoned-in single lanes that you're likely to be sharing with sheep as well as oncoming traffic. Atmospheric ruins dot its moors and stunning beaches along its western side complement wondrous views north to the mountains of Harris.

The unique mix of water and land means that it's a great place to spot huge populations of migrant waders: oystercatchers, lapwings, curlews and redshanks. To work out the difference, you can grab a free copy of *Birds of the Uists* at most tourist offices.

You can gallop between the jewelled lochs with **North Uist Riding Centre** (☎ 07786 817577; northuistr@ao.com).

Car ferries for Leverburgh, on South Harris, leave from Berneray, which is connected to North Uist by a causeway.

Lochmaddy (Loch nam Madadh)

There's not much to keep you in tiny Lochmaddy, but it's the first town you hit after arriving on the Berneray ferry. The name, meaning Loch of Dogs refers to canine-like rock formations that you might spot on the ferry trip in.

A Bank of Scotland ATM enables you to cash up for the couple of stores, petrol station, post office and pub. The **tourist office** (☎ 500321; ☎ 9am-1pm, 2-5pm & 7.30-8.30pm Mon, Wed & Fri, 9am-1pm & 2-5pm Tue & Thu, 9.30am-1pm & 2-5.30pm Sat) also opens for late ferry arrivals. Out of town you can go on otter and bird walks around Loch Langass, leaving from Langass Lodge; call **RSPB Warden** (☎ 560287) to book.

Taigh Chearsabhagh (☎ 500293; www.taigh-chearsabhagh.org; admission by donation, internet by donation, snacks £2-5; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat Feb-Dec; 📺) is a converted 18th-century inn and Lochmaddy's main culture fix, with a wildlife centre, contemporary art gallery and kids play area. The café serves good soup and sandwiches.

our pick **Tigh Dearg Hotel** (☎ 500700; www.tighdearghotel.co.uk; d B&B £130), a welcome new addition to Lochmaddy's hotel scene, is suavely furnished, from the leather lounges around

the fire in the bar to the mauve-brown bedspreads in rooms. With only eight rooms it's all about understated luxury. Extras such as individual DVD players, flat-screen TVs and a gym with sauna all create one of the coolest sleeps in the Hebrides.

A simple bunkhouse for active types is the **Uist Outdoor Centre** (☎ 500480; www.uistoutdoorcentre.co.uk; dm £11, half-/full-day activities from £25/50; 📺 wi-fi). It has four-bed dorms and well-used lounge area that's perfect for comparing abseiling yarns. It'll help you make some of those stories with half- and full-day adventures, including abseiling, sea kayaking and scuba diving.

Langass Lodge (☎ 580285; www.langasslodge.co.uk; Locheport; s/d from £62/95), a former hunting lodge, still has a few old trophies on the walls, but is otherwise completely refurbished for comfort. The lochs location makes it worth the 10-minute drive south from Lochmaddy, even if you're just here for dinner at the award-winning restaurant renowned for seafood and estate game, including grouse, snipe and woodcock.

Balranald RSPB Reserve

At this reserve, 18 miles west of Lochmaddy off the A865, you can watch migrant waders or rare red-necked phalarope, and listen for corncrakes. There's a **visitors centre** (☎ 510372; ☎ Apr-Sep) with a resident warden.

BENBECULA (BEINN NA FAOGLHA)

☎ 01870 / pop 1249

A stepping stone between North Uist and South Uist and connected by causeways, Benbecula is a low-lying island that's almost as much water as land. The army's Hebrides Rocket Range takes up most of the west coast (be careful where you wander) and **Balivanich** (Baile a'Mhanaich), a commercial centre servicing the troops, is probably the only reason for a visit. Here you'll find services such as a bunkhouse, ATM, post office and supermarket.

SOUTH UIST (UIBHIST A DEAS)

☎ 01878 / pop 1915

South Uist is the second-largest island in the Outer Hebrides and offers many opportunities to explore off the north-south road (A865). It lacks the concentrated scenic wonder of Harris, but its expansiveness has its own magic. *Machair*-backed beaches create an almost uninterrupted golden blade along the west coast of South Uist while the east coast is nicked by

four large sea lochs. Also on the east coast, the island's highest peak **Beinn Mhor** (620m) reaches out of a rugged ridge.

Lochboisdale (Loch Baghasdail)

The ferry port of Lochboisdale in the south-east is the island's largest settlement, although you'll likely be muttering 'grim' and 'bleak' rather than running to the postcard shop. The **tourist office** (☎ 700286; ☎ Easter-mid-Oct) also opens for late ferry arrivals. There is a branch of the Royal Bank of Scotland with an ATM here, and petrol pumps.

The reliable **Lochboisdale Hotel** (☎ 700332; www.lochboisdale.com; s/d £50/75; 📺), above the ferry terminal, has old-fashioned rooms with sea views. The bar serves fish-based meals (£8 to £12) with the odd pasta.

Right from the word go the fabulously effusive host at **Brae Lea B&B** (☎ 700497; Lasgair; s/d £35/50) makes you feel like one of the family in this snug spot. A hefty breakfast is a good start to the day, and the baths in most rooms make a great way to end it. The large book nook opposite the entry door is another real treat.

There are CalMac ferries between Lochboisdale and Castlebay on Barra (per person/car £5.80/18.40, 1½ hours). Ferries sail roughly every second day, with additional summer services.

Howmore (Tobha Mor)

This attractive coastal village in the north-west, with its thatched cottages and ruined medieval chapels, was the burial site of the Ranaid clan chiefs.

About 6 miles south of Howmore, the excellent **Kildonan museum** (☎ 710343; adult/child £1.50/free; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Fri, 2-5pm Sun Easter-Oct) details crofting life using artefacts and black-and-white photographs. There are also many local accounts of harsh Hebridean life.

Tobha Mor Crofters' Hostel (www.gatlift.org.uk; dm £8) is a basic stone cottage in the village. To get there, take the turn-off from the A865 to **Tobha Mor** – the cottage is by the church at the road's end.

The South

The southern tip of the island looks across to the islands of Eriskay and Barra. A causeway links Ludag on South Uist to Eriskay, and there's a CalMac ferry between Eriskay and Ardmhor on Barra (per person/car £5.50/16.25, 40 minutes, four to five daily).

BARRA (BARRAIGH)

☎ 01871 / pop 1172

This tiny island, just 12 miles in circumference, is the pendant dangling from the chain of the Outer Hebrides. With beautiful beaches, *machair*, hills, Neolithic remains and a strong sense of community, it's almost a caricature of the Outer Hebrides. The MacNeil clan has traditionally held power here, apart from a brief stint from 1838 when they sold the island to the brutal Colonel Gordon of Cluny who orchestrated some of the harshest Clearances. In 1937, the MacNeils returned, buying the island back and restoring order.

Castlebay (Bagh a Chaisteil), in the south, is the largest village. There's a **tourist office** (☎ 810336; Main St; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Sat, noon-4pm Sun). The village gets its name from **Kisimul Castle** (HS; ☎ 810313; adult/child incl ferry £3.70/2.50; ☎ 9.30am-6.30pm Apr-Oct), which was built by the MacNeils in the 12th century, and gifted to Historic Scotland in 2000 for an annual rental of £1 plus a bottle of whisky.

Dunard Hostel (☎ 810443; www.dunardhostel.co.uk; Castlebay; dm/d £11/30), a family-run hostel, has 16 comfy beds, and is just a five-minute walk from the ferry. It can also organise sea-kayaking tours (half-/full day £20/30).

The modern B&B **Faire Mhaoldonaich** (☎ 810441; www.fairemhaoldonaich.com; Nasg; r per person £23-25; ☎ Mar-Oct) has spacious, comfortable rooms with great views over Bagh Beag to the isle of Mhaoldonaich; it's a mile west of Castlebay on the road to Vatersay.

CalMac ferries operate from Castlebay to Lochboisdale – see left for details. For details on the ferry between Oban and Castlebay, see p913.

ORKNEY ISLANDS

You'll know you're in the Orkneys when the accents sound slightly more musical; some have compared it favourably to Welsh. In fact local people have a Viking heritage which you can see set in stone at ancient sites throughout the island.

Lying only a few miles off the mainland, the Orkneys consists of 70 islands, of which only 16 are inhabited. These fertile green lands, stripped of trees by the howling winds, form a sort of oasis in the wild Atlantic. The climate, warmed by the Gulf Stream, is surprisingly moderate, with April and May being the driest months.



Getting There & Away

AIR

There are flights to Kirkwall airport on **BA/Loganair** (☎ 0870 850 9850; www.ba.com) daily from Aberdeen, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Inverness and the Shetlands, with connections to London. If your dates are flexible, buy the tickets online, as you can easily see which days still have cheaper fares available. The cheapest return tickets cost around £165 from London and £108 from Inverness.

BOAT & BUS

Drivers should book these crossings well in advance in summer, although, even if it's fully booked, there's always a chance of turning up a couple of hours before and squeezing on if there's extra space. All prices listed are for one-way trips.

Pentland Ferries (☎ 01856-831226; www.pentlandferries.co.uk) operates a ferry between Gills Bay, 3 miles west of John o'Groats, and St Margaret's Hope on Orkney (per person/car £10/25, one hour, three to four daily April to October), with reduced sailings in winter.

NorthLink Ferries (☎ 0845 600 0449; www.northlinkferries.co.uk) operates ferries from Scrabster, by Thurso, to Stromness (per person/car £14/43, 1½ hours, three daily Monday to Friday, two on Saturday and Sunday) and from Kirkwall to Lerwick (per person/car £17.75/73.75, eight hours, three to four weekly) on the Shetland Islands. Fares vary according to whether it is low, mid- or peak season and travel durations vary due to winds. NorthLink Ferries also sails from Aberdeen to Kirkwall and Lerwick.

John o'Groats Ferries (☎ 01955-611353; www.jogferry.co.uk) has a ferry (passengers and bicycles only) from John o'Groats to Burwick on South Ronaldsay from May to September (single/return £16/26, 40 minutes, up to four daily). There is an off-peak deal to Kirkwall for £24 return. In Thurso, a free bus meets the train from Inverness at about 2.50pm, and a bus for Kirkwall meets the ferry in Burwick (17 miles away). It also operates the Orkney Bus, a bus-ferry-bus through service between Inverness and Kirkwall via John o'Groats (single £28, approximately five hours, one daily in May, two daily June to August).

Citylink has buses leaving Inverness for Thurso (£11.65, 3½ hours, four or five daily). The 2pm service connects with the 7pm ferry from Scrabster. You can connect with this service on early morning departures from

Glasgow or Edinburgh, or London on the overnight coach departing around 11pm.

Getting Around

The *Orkney Public Transport Timetable*, offered free by the tourist offices, is invaluable. Note that bus services are very limited on Sunday in Orkney.

Orkney Coaches (☎ 01856-870555) runs bus services on Mainland and South Ronaldsay. It offers Rover passes for all services which cost £6/15 for one/three days and provides unlimited travel around the Orkneys on its buses. **Causeway Coaches** (☎ 01856-831444) runs to St Margaret's Hope on South Ronaldsay.

Orkney Ferries (☎ 01856-872044; www.orkneyferries.co.uk) operates interisland ferries throughout the Orkney Islands. They're not cheap, especially if you're taking a car – the standard return fare for your vehicle is around £17. Look out for special offers involving visits to three or more islands, which may include flights to places such as Papa Westray on Loganair. Destinations include North Isles (adult/child/car £12.80/6.40/28.60), Inner Isles Shapinsay, Hoy, Rousay and Egilsay (adult/child/car £6.40/3.20/19.20).

KIRKWALL

☎ 01856 / pop 6206

If you're coming in from the outer islands Orkney's busy capital can seem a little too trim with its well-kept medieval town centre, but if you're heading further out this picturesque spot could be your last gasp of civilisation. Isolation has preserved the town's stunning centrepiece, St Magnus Cathedral, along with the nearby Earl's and Bishop's Palace. Founded in the early 11th century, the original precinct of Kirkwall is one of the best examples of an ancient Norse town.

Information

Kirkwall Library (Junction Rd) Free internet access.
Launderama (☎ 872982; 47 Albert St; service washes £6; ☎ Mon-Sat)
Tourist office (☎ 872856; www.visitorkney.com; 6 Broad St; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-4pm Sat Oct-Apr, daily May-Sep) Bureau de change, accommodation booking and a good range of publications on Orkney.

Sights

ST MAGNUS CATHEDRAL

The heart of Kirkwall is **St Magnus Cathedral** (☎ 874894; admission free; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Sat, 2-6pm Sun

Apr-Sep, 9am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Sat Oct-Mar), an incredible reddish monument. Its interior is especially impressive, with an eerie atmosphere of an ancient faith pervading the place. Its narrow nave is defined by sturdy rose-hued pillars and its aisles are flanked with blind arching. And if that doesn't impress, it's one of the world's only churches with a Viking longship on the altar. The red sandstone was quarried nearby and the more golden-coloured stones are from Eday. The result of 300 years of construction and several alterations, the cathedral includes Romanesque, transitional and Gothic styles.

The cathedral was commissioned in 1137 by Earl Rognvald Kolssoon in honour of his uncle, Magnus Erlendsson, who was killed by his cousin during a squabble over control of Orkney. His bones were discovered in the 19th century in the rectangular pillars near the choir.

During summer, 40-minute **tours** (adult £5.50, ⚡ 11am & 2pm Tue & Thu) offer exclusive access to the upper levels.

EARL'S PALACE & BISHOP'S PALACE

Near the cathedral, these ruined **palaces** (☎ 871 918; Watergate; adult/child £3/1.30; ⚡ 9.30am-6.30pm Apr-Sep) are sandstone treasures. The better of the two buildings is the Earl's Palace, once known as the finest example of Renaissance architecture in Scotland. One room contains an interesting history of its builder, Earl Patrick Stewart, who was executed in Edinburgh for treason. He started construction of the palace in about 1600 using forced labour, but ran out of money and the building was left uncompleted.

The Bishop's Palace was built in the mid-12th century to provide comfortable lodgings for Bishop William, and Norwegian King Hakkon the Old died here after a defeat at Largs. The tower affords views of the cathedral and a plaque showing the different phases of its construction.

ORKNEY MUSEUM

This restored **merchant's house** (☎ 873191; Broad St; admission free; ⚡ 10.30am-5pm Mon-Sat & 2-5pm Sun May-Sep, 10.30am-5pm Mon-Sat Oct-Apr; ⚡) details Orkney's history dating back to the first settlers more than 5000 years ago, and includes Pictish stones, 'bone' pins from Skara Brae and Iron Age jewellery. Don't skip the 19th- and 20-century displays as they include a mock schoolhouse and Orkney At War, which retells the story of the scuttling of German boats during WWII.

HIGHLAND PARK DISTILLERY

The whiff of malt and peat hits you before you get to this **distillery** (☎ 874619; www.highlandpark.co.uk; Holm Rd; guided tour adult/child £5/2.50; ⚡ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat & noon-5pm Sun May-Aug, 10am-5pm Mon-Fri Apr, Sep & Oct), which produces a fine and accessible single malt in the world's most northerly whisky distillery (at least until the Shetlands distillery begins production). The first-rate tour (2pm Monday to Friday from November to March) walks you through the whole whisky-making process – this is one of the few distilleries that still does its own barley malting, meaning barley is left to lie for a week to become a green malt. The distillery's 18- and 25-year-old malts are well regarded.

Festivals

St Magnus Festival (☎ 871445; www.stmagnusfestival.com; 60 Victoria St, Kirkwall) is held every June with classical music, poetry and a popular conducting course. In 2006 the first **MagFest** was held, a younger version of the festival featuring Scottish bands.

Sleeping

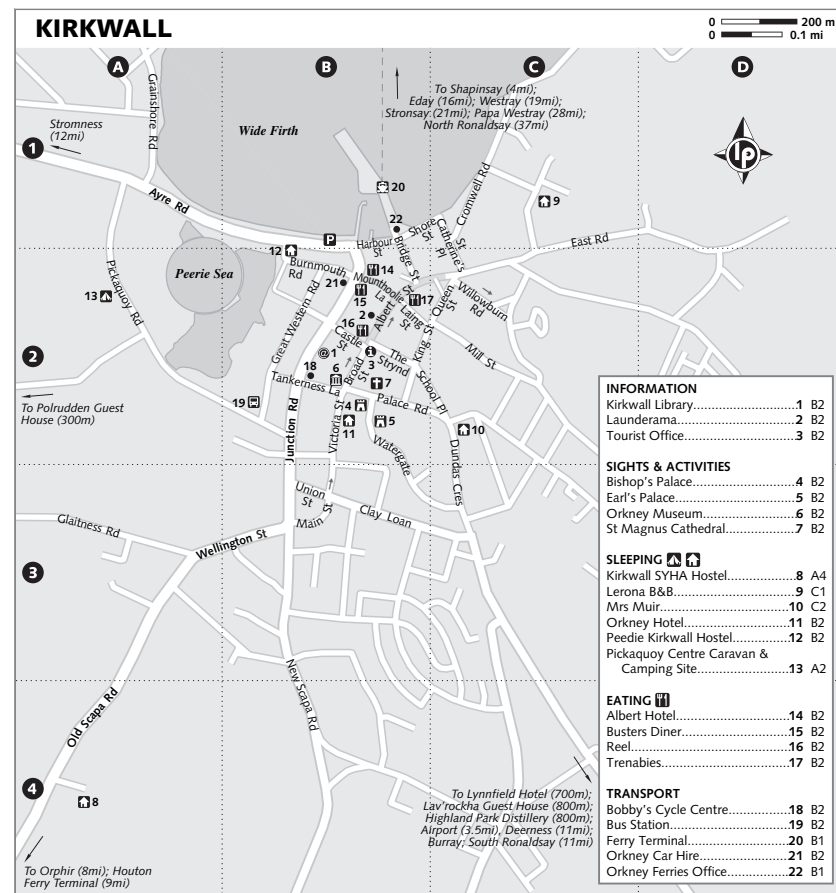
Accommodation is at affordable 'island' prices, but somewhat scarce – you'll need to book ahead in summer, especially around festival times.

BUDGET

Pickaquoey Centre Caravan & Camping Site (☎ 879 900; Pickaquoey Rd; small/large tent sites £4/7.20) On Kirkwall's western fringe, this camp site is a wind-swept place (dig those pegs deep) with plenty of grass and reasonable facilities.

Peedie Kirkwall Hostel (☎ 875477; 1 Ayre House, Ayre Rd; dm £12) If intimate is a euphemism for small, then this compact waterfront place is ultra-intimate. Space isn't really an issue though as three-bunk rooms feel private and the galley kitchen is cute (if crowded when there are two boxes of cereal).

Kirkwall SYHA Hostel (☎ 0870 004 1133; www.syha.org.uk; Old Scapa Rd; dm £13; ⚡ Apr-Sep; ♿) In a former barracks, this hostel is a 20-minute walk from the harbour on the edge of town, backing on to green fields. A friendly warden brightens up the place and a good-sized kitchen and sociable lounge make it ideal for solo travellers. There are a few problems – the long building can make for a long walk to the showers, and the lack of power outlets in rooms displays a reluctance to move into the age of mobile



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phones – but all up it makes for a good place to bunk down away from the town.

MIDRANGE

Mrs Muir (☎ 874805; 2 Dundas Cres; s/d with shared bath-room £25/40) Elegant stained glass and impressive cathedral views are just two reasons to stay at this minimansion, but there are many more. Rooms are in peaceful whites and creams. Best of all Mrs M piles the shared breakfast table high with vegetarian or gluten-free dishes and a skip-lunch-sized full Scottish breakfast.

Lerona B&B (☎ 874538; Cromwell Cres; s £25, d £40-50) Brace yourself for some quaint overload at this enchanting B&B where the owners are nutty for gnomes ('I think they're breeding!'). You can find this place by the distinctive grotto crowded

with the little fellas. Rooms are refreshingly plain with a light pinewood feel. Breakfast is in a sunny conservatory with plenty of fresh fruit.

Lav'rockha Guest House (☎ 876103; lavrockha@orkney.com; Inganess Rd; s/d from £40/55; ♿) It's the details that make this spot one of the best guesthouses in the Orkneys. Spacious rooms, for example, all come with full-pressure showers, not the fiddly boxes that never deliver. The food is particularly good, not just breakfasts (which come with the choice of beef or pork sausages along with hash browns, cheeses and several other options) but also the award-winning dinners (three-course dinner £15.95), which are preceded by a drink in the lounge.

Polrudden Guest House (☎ 874 761; www.polrudden.com; Peerie Sea Loan; s/d £40/60; wi-fi) A little way

out of town, the well-equipped rooms make this place worth the trip. Hip purple duvets complete the boldly decorated seven rooms that feature generous en suite bathrooms. The 1st-floor lounge is a good spot to relax with well-thumbed page-turners or board-game classics (anyone for Connect 4?).

TOP END

Orkney Hotel (☎ 873477; www.orkneyhotel.co.uk; 40 Victoria St; s/d £75/100; ☑ wi-fi) This historic hotel has been revitalised with shiraz-coloured walls in the foyer and wi-fi throughout, which makes it a popular spot with visiting businesspeople (the First Minister has used it as his Orkneys base in the past). While some rooms were yet to see a refit when we visited, others were impressively spacious and well equipped. The best bed is a four-poster with views of the cathedral.

Lynnfield Hotel (☎ 872595; Holm Rd; s/d £75/120) Within whiffing distance of the Highland Park Distillery, this recently refitted hotel will have you dizzy with its large rooms with four-post beds and top views (not to mention smells). With only 11 rooms it's an exclusive spot, with individual rooms featuring a Jacuzzi or antique writing desk. The restaurant is building a reputation, while the cosy dark-wood drawing room may have you wishing for rainy days.

Eating & Drinking

There are several places to eat around Bridge St, near the harbour.

our pick Reel (☎ 871000; 3 Castle St; snacks £2-4; ☎ 10am-6pm & later for gigs) Upstairs from a musical instrument shop, this place is a feast for all the senses: plush leather booths, folk music tinkling and a vase full of woodwind instruments in case you want to join in. You can slurp on massive coffee bowls and tuck into sandwiches and soups. The unmissable milkshakes are called Kula Shakers using real Orkney milk and cream.

Trenabies (☎ 874336; 16 Albert St; snacks £3.50-5, meals £5-9; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Sat, noon-5pm Sun, plus dinner Fri) With a comfy tearoom feel downstairs and a slicker bistro upstairs, this eatery flavours all its food with local produce. If you can, grab a spot upstairs to enjoy generous meals, especially the Mexican specials on Friday night.

Busters Diner (☎ 876717; 1 Mounthoolie Lane; meals £5-10; ☎ 5-10pm Mon-Fri, noon-9pm Sat, 5-9pm Sun)

From Tex Mex to Big Apple hot dogs, this always-busy spot is a local interpretation of an American diner. You can expect burgers, dogs, pizzas and some pretty good tacos in a venue that's very kid friendly.

Albert Hotel (☎ 876000; Mounthoolie Lane; bar meals £7, mains £12-16; ☎ lunch & dinner) The Albert Hotel has a reputation for good food, whether it's the good-value bar meals or gourmet meals at Stables. Local seafood is brilliantly done in this restaurant, with salmon and crab particularly tasty.

Getting There & Away

The **airport** (☎ 886210) is 2.5 miles from town. See p921 for flight information. For flights and ferries to the northern islands, see the individual islands.

From the bus station, Orkney Coaches runs to Stromness (40 minutes, four to 12 daily); Evie (40 minutes, four Monday to Saturday); Orphir and Houton (30 minutes, four to five Monday to Saturday); and Tingwall (30 minutes, up to three to five Monday to Saturday). Another route to Stromness goes via Birsay (one hour, one Monday and Thursday).

Bus 96 runs from Kirkwall to Tingwall (30 minutes, three to five daily Monday to Saturday) and the ferry to Rousay, and on to Evie (40 minutes, four daily Monday to Saturday).

From May to September, bus 90 runs between Kirkwall and the John o'Groats ferry at Burwick (45 minutes, two to five daily). From June to September, a special tourist service (bus 98A) runs twice daily Monday to Friday between Kirkwall and Stromness via Stenness standing stones, the Ring of Brodgar and Skara Brae.

Getting Around

There are several car-rental places which charge around £35 per day: **Orkney Car Hire** (☎ 872866; www.orkneycarhire.co.uk; Junction Rd) and **Drive Orkney** (☎ 870000; www.driveorkney.com), while **Bobby's Cycle Centre** (☎ 875777; Tankerness Lane; 1-day hire £10) rents out mountain bikes.

WEST & NORTH MAINLAND Stromness

☎ 01856 / pop 1609

Less of a chocolate-box streetscape than Kirkwall, Stromness is a rambling town with winding streets flanking the port and a picturesque flagstone-paved main street. The port's hey-

day was during the 18th century – it was a safe port when French fracas made the English Channel unsafe, particularly for trading ships bound for Canada. Driving the main street is a crawl (you're better off walking) past guest-houses, pubs and eateries. Although the town has few sights, many visitors prefer staying here than in Kirkwall.

Stromness Library (Hellihole Rd; ☎ 2-7pm Mon-Thu, 2-5pm Fri, 10am-5pm Sat) Free internet access.

Tourist office (☎ 850716; ☎ 8am-4.30pm Apr-Oct, 1-3pm Mon-Fri Nov-Mar) In the ferry terminal and stays open later when ferries dock.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

When a town's main attraction is watching boats coming and going in the harbour, you know it's going to be fairly relaxing. If you need a culture fix, **Stromness Museum** (☎ 850025; 52 Alfred St; adult/child £8/6; ☎ 10am-5pm Apr-Oct) has a collection of oddments depicting the town's maritime heritage, including exhibits on whaling and the scuttled German High Seas fleet. If you've brought your MP3 player there's an excellent BBC podcast (www.bbc.co.uk/sn/tv/radio/programmes/take_one/downloads.shtml) that takes you on a tour of the museum. When we visited, the **Arts Centre** (☎ 850209; www.pierartscentre.com; Ferry Rd; admission free; ☎ 10.30am-12.30pm & 1.30-5pm Tue-Sat) was closed for refurbishment but the collection of 20th-century art will be worth a look when it reopens in 2007.

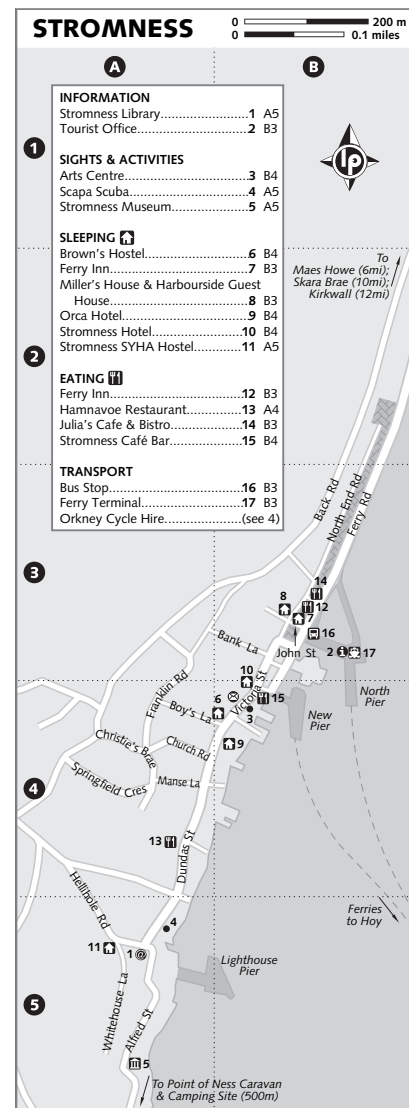
If you're not content to just look at that water, **Scapa Scuba** (☎ 851218; www.scapascuba.co.uk; Lifeboat House, Dundas St; ☎ 10.30am-5pm Mon-Fri, 2-7pm Sat, 3-7pm Sun Apr-Oct) can get you under it with regular trips out to Scapa Flow (one-day dives from £150).

SLEEPING

Point of Ness Caravan & Camping Site (☎ 873535; tent sites £4.20-7.90) Fore! Backed by a golf course, this spacious camping area won't tee you off. It has plenty of room for big caravans, drinking water and some odd-looking picnic tables.

Brown's Hostel (☎ 850661; 45 Victoria St; dm £10-12; ☑) This central hostel is popular and homy with some of the rooms upstairs still featuring kids' toys and oddments. Some rooms can be a bit crammed, but the free internet is a real draw.

Stromness SYHA Hostel (☎ 0870 004 1150; www.syha.org.uk; Hellihole Rd; dm £10.50; ☎ May-Sep) This freshly renovated hostel is unrecognisable from the old town hall where dances were



once held. With four beds to a room, a spanking new kitchen and a patio area that has good views of town, this is one of the best budget bunks on the island.

Miller's House & Harbourside Guest House (☎ 851 969; millershouse@orkney.com; 13 John St; s/d £28/46) It's between these two decorated houses (both operated by the same family) for the best

B&B in town. Miller's was one of the earliest places to offer accommodation in town. You should save room for the exceptional breakfasts which include several juices, excellent vegetarian options and daily baked bread (beer bread if you're lucky).

Stromness Hotel (☎ 850298; www.stromnesshotel.com; Victoria St; s/d from £48/96) A bit frayed around the edges, this towering hotel is a real relic of Stromness' glory days. Giant-window views are stunning and rooms are well preserved, but the lift is the best feature if you're on the upper floors.

Other recommendations:

Orca Hotel (☎ 851803; 76 Victoria St; r per person £20-25) Serviceable rooms with handy no-breakfast option if you're on a budget or shipping out early.

Ferry Inn (☎ 850280; www.ferryinn.com; John St; s/d £32/54) A harbourside spot with en-suite rooms and simpler options in a nearby annexe.

EATING & DRINKING

Julia's Café & Bistro (☎ 850904; 20 Ferry Rd; mains lunch £4-9, dinner £10-13; ☎ café all day & dinner Wed-Sun) This bright spot by the port is always busy, especially in the conservatory when the sun is shining. Healthy breakfasts cater to the early ferry crowd, while lunches are wraps and salads. Dinners run to pastas and slightly more elaborate fare.

Ferry Inn (☎ 850280; John St; mains £6-15; ☎ lunch & dinner) Everyone ends up in the Ferry, whether it's to drink the local brews (make ours an Orkney Dark Island if you're buying a round) or to sample the hefty portions at the restaurant, or for the legendary folk sessions. Daily specials spice up the menu, though the fish and chips is tough to beat when you're this close to the ocean.

Stromness Café Bar (☎ 850 551; 22 Victoria St; mains £7-10; ☎ lunch & dinner daily) Tucked away in a cul-de-sac, this spot is decked out in bright colours and mosaics with a view across the water. The menu has a curiously Australian bent featuring delicacies such as kangaroo kebabs and matilda's monk, a local monkfish tossed with prawns and leeks.

Hamnavoe Restaurant (☎ 850606; 35 Graham Pl; mains £12-16; ☎ dinner Wed-Sun Apr-Sep) The town's top table is laden with dishes such as monkfish, tanga with sweet pepper and pernod, or guinea fowl roasted with peaches in brandy. Local seafood is often dignified with some gourmet flair in this intimate dining room that also has one of the island's best wine lists.

Service is a little disappointing, but you will have plenty of time to enjoy your food.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Orkney Coaches runs to Kirkwall (40 minutes, four to 12 daily); and Birsay (25 minutes, one Monday and Thursday). From May to September there are three to four daily buses to Skara Brae (20 minutes).

For details on ferries to/from Scrabster and Lerwick, see p921. For ferry services to/from Aberdeen, see p864. For boats to Hoy, see p929.

GETTING AROUND

You can rent a well-maintained bike from **Orkney Cycle Hire** (☎ 850255; 54 Dundas St; 1-day £6).

Stenness

This hamlet is little more than a petrol station, a few houses and a hotel that prefaces the prehistoric monuments 1 mile east of here. It's easy to get here by bus as the road between Stromness and Kirkwall passes through here.

MAES HOWE

Built 3000 years before Egypt's pyramids, **Maes Howe** (☎ 01856-761606; adult/child £4/1.60; ☎ 9.30am-6.30pm Apr-Sep, 9.30am-4.30pm Oct-Mar) is the finest chambered tomb in Western Europe. A long stone passage leads into a chamber in the centre of an earth-covered mound, which contained the bones of two dozen dogs believed to have been sacred to the tribe who built this tomb.

During the winter solstice, Maes Howe reveals a mystical side as blood-red sunsets align with the passage, striking a cairn entrance at the rear of the chamber with alarming precision.

According to the *Orkneyinga Saga*, Vikings returning from the Crusades broke into the tomb searching for treasure. Finding none, they turned their attention to the walls, scribbling some curious graffiti, including some writing that you'd find in any schoolyard ('Olaf was 'ere') as well as some emblems of their recent quest including a crusader cross, a lion, a walrus and a knotted serpent.

Entry is by 45-minute guided tours that are timed to reduce crowds; book ahead in summer to ensure a place. Tickets are bought in Tormiston Mill, on the other side of the road, where there's a café, gift shop and small exhibition.

STANDING STONES OF STENNESS

Near Maes Howe stand four remaining **stones** (HS; admission free; ☎ 24hr) of the original 12 mighty boulders that once formed a ring. Fenced off from the world outside, the stones are impressive for their sheer size (one is over 5m high) and, of course, age: they were erected around 2500 BC.

RING OF BRODGAR

About a mile along the road from Stenness towards Skara Brae is a wide circle of **standing stones** (HS; admission free; ☎ 24hr), some over 5m tall. Originally 60 of the megaliths were on this site, but today just over 20 stones rise above the heather, with incidents like a lightning strike in the 1980s taking their toll on these worn monuments.

The ring remains eerie and it's worth walking around the stones to puzzle over what their different shapes could mean. You can get a few insights on a **ranger walk** (☎ 01856-841732; rangersorkneyrangers@scotland.gsi.gov.uk; ☎ 1pm Thu), a weekly tour that meets in the car park.

Skara Brae

Just 8 miles north of Stromness, **Skara Brae** (HS; ☎ 01856-841815; adult/child £5/2, joint ticket with Skail House £6/2.40; ☎ 9.30am-6.30pm Apr-Sep, 9.30am-4.30pm Mon-Sat, 2-4.30pm Sun Oct-Mar; 🇬🇧) is northern Europe's best-preserved prehistoric village. Predating the Pyramids of Giza and Stonehenge, it is staggeringly complete: even the stone furniture – beds, boxes and dressers – has survived the 4500 years since a community last lived here. This is largely due to the wind, which rapidly buried the buildings in sand once they were deserted, where they remained until 1850, when a severe storm ripped the top off the dunes, exposing the first unsuspected stones.

The interactive exhibition and short video are worth watching, as they provide information to enhance the impact of the site. Before

heading for the site itself, inspect the reconstruction of a typical house, which brings the excavation brilliantly to life.

Your ticket is also valid for **Skail House**, an early-17th-century mansion inhabited by William Watt, the founder of the village.

Private transport is the best way to get here, but from May to September there are three to four buses daily to and from Stromness.

Birsay

Before the Norse earls moved to Kirkwall, this small village was their capital and you can see their ruined might at **Earl's Palace** (HS; admission free; ☎ 24hr). Robert Stewart, scourge of Orkney peasants, built the palace in the 16th century and it's hard to imagine an archery range and bowling green among these ruins. It's an atmospheric spot, with honey-coloured walls and crumbling columns that suggest the tyranny of the former ruler.

At low tide you can stroll to the **Brough of Birsay** (HS; ☎ 01856-841815; adult/child £2/80p; ☎ 9.30am-6.30pm mid-Jun-Sep), almost a mile from the Earl's Palace. These ruins of a Norse settlement centre on the 12th-century St Peter's Church include several long houses.

If you'd like to stay near here, **Linkhouse** (☎ 01856-721221; www.efaw.co.uk; The Palace, Birsay; s/d £35/56) is a well-kept stone house overlooking the sea and does ace breakfasts that can include homemade sausages and inventive vegetarian choices, such as sweetcorn pancakes.

Evie

Signposted from Evie is the **Broch of Gurness** (☎ 01856-751414; adult/child £3.30/1.30; ☎ 9.30am-6.30pm Apr-Sep), the best example of a fortified stone tower to be found in Orkney. Built around 100 BC, this was one of Orkney's largest brochs, round towers that became common defences throughout Scotland during the Iron Age. Inside, you can see where a top

WORTH THE TRIP

If you're enjoying the history, a visit to **Wylie's Tearoom** (☎ 01856-771368; A896, Harray; mains £6-7.50; ☎ 8.30am-6.30pm) in the township of Harray is essential. The décor isn't worth mentioning, apart from some decorative bottles and gas masks, but the food is old-fashioned country tearoom favourites. If you can't decide between the cakes, slices, scones and other fancies, opt for the tiffin (£2.50), which gives you a generous serve of everything to dunk in your tea. Wylie's makes its own chutney, scones, pikelets, various slices and chunks of cake, but you can also try Orkney classics such as herring in oatmeal and breaded haddock. Like anything worth seeing on Mainland, it periodically gets invaded by tour buses so time your visit to avoid popular times.

floor and roof once were as well as the hearth which would have been vital to warm this building. Surrounding the broch are house ruins, marked by hearths in the centre of each. The small visitors centre helps unravel the mysteries of this ancient culture.

Eviaded Cottages & Campsite (☎ 01856-751270; camp sites £4-7, bothy bunks £5, self-catering cottages per week £190-310; ☞ camp site Apr-Sep) has a good grassy area for camping with picnic tables, and a rudimentary bothy with four bunk-beds but no showers. Next door, self-catering farm cottages provide superior country-style accommodation.

Accessed from a road near the Tingwall ferry dock, **Woodwick House** (☎ 01856-751330; www.woodwickhouse.co.uk; Woodwick Bay; s from £32, d £64-92) is a country-house hotel with few pretensions despite some impressive décor. Spacious rooms and extensive gardens enhance this property's charm. The pricier doubles include en suite bathrooms, but otherwise sharing isn't inconvenient. Home-cooked dinners (£25) are gourmet affairs that fill even the biggest belly.

EAST MAINLAND, BURRAY & SOUTH RONALDSAY

When a German U-boat scuppered the battleship HMS *Royal Oak* right under the Allied noses in Scapa Flow in 1939, Sir Winston Churchill decided it was time to better protect this naval base. Using concrete blocks and discarded ships, the channels between Lamb Holm, Glimps Holm, Burray, South Ronaldsay and Mainland were blocked. To honour Winnie, they were named the **Churchill Barriers**, and today they link the islands; you'll drive over them as you head north from the ferry. If you fancy a paddle, there are good sandy beaches by Barrier 3 and 4.

As you head across the island of Lamb Holm you'll catch the bright colours of the **Italian Chapel** (☎ 01856-781268; admission free; ☞ 9am-10pm Apr-Sep, 9am-4.30pm Oct-Mar), the only evidence that remains of the people who built the barriers, Italian prisoners of war (POWs). Using scraps and two Nissen huts, they built this colourful emblem to their faith during extremely difficult times.

On the far eastern shore a mile north of Skail (at the end of the Deerness Rd) is the **Gloop**, a spectacular natural arch and sea cave, which is popular with nesting sea birds, especially playful puffins. On a farm at Tankerness is the mysterious **Mine Howe** (☎ 861234; adult/child £2.50/1.50; ☞ 10am-3pm Wed, Fri & Sun May, 10am-5pm

daily Jun-Aug, 11am-4pm daily early Sep, 10am-2pm Wed, Fri & Sun late Sep), an Iron Age site made famous by an excavation in the *Time Team* TV series, which concluded only that this site may have been an oracle or shrine.

Run by local farmers, the **Tomb of the Eagles** (☎ 01856-831339; Liddle Farm, Isbister; adult/child £5/3; ☞ 10am-noon Mar, 9.30am-6pm Apr-Oct, by arrangement Nov-Feb) at the southern tip of South Ronaldsay is worth visiting. The 5000-year-old burial chamber was discovered by the same local farmers who now offer well-informed guided tours. A number of sea eagle claws and bones were found within the tomb, possibly indicating that the group revered the bird as a totem; other tombs on the island have revealed remains of different animals. Other theories speculate that sky burials were performed here.

The main village on South Ronaldsay is **St Margaret's Hope**, named after Margaret, the Maid of Norway, who was to have married Edward II of England but is thought to have died here in 1290 en route to the wedding. The town is an attractive stone-built port that serves as the terminus for the cheaper of the two Mainland car ferries.

Sleeping & Eating

Murray Arms Hotel & Backpacker's Hostel (☎ 01856-831205; murrayarms@freeuk.com; St Margaret's Hope; dm £11, hotel s/tw £33/66) This lovely stone cottage has a decent dorm, as well as a single and twins. The hotel itself has more upmarket rooms which are even closer to the congenial pub that serves tasty pub meals (meals £5 to £9) for lunch and dinner.

Creel Inn & Restaurant (☎ 01856-831311; www.thecreel.co.uk; Front Rd, St Margaret's Hope; mains £18; ☞ dinner) In an unassuming house, one of Scotland's best seafood restaurants has been winning awards and hearts for more than 20 years. Here you can feast on hand-dived scallops or North Ronaldsay's seaweed-fed lamb, and colourfully named local fish such as wolf fish and sea-witch. But it doesn't stop there, because they've got three elegant en-suite rooms (singles/doubles £60/90) which all have panoramic sea views.

Getting There & Away

Causeway Coaches travels between Kirkwall and St Margaret's Hope (30 minutes, four daily Monday to Friday, two on Saturday, one Sunday). Orkney Coaches runs the Kirkwall-

Burwick service (50 minutes, two daily) which connects with the ferries. For ferry information, see p921.

HOY

☎ 01856 / pop 392

The Norse word *Haey* (meaning High Island) gave this lofty island its name, but it's more than altitude that lends the second-largest of the Orkneys its beauty. The sea has spectacularly nibbled at this coastline creating not just jaw-dropping cliffs and turquoise bays, but also unique stacks and rock formations.

Best of all, because this island is only 14 miles across at its longest point, you can get to this dramatic landscape with or without your own vehicle. If your camera is twitching for cliff scenery, **St John's Head** (346m) on the west coast is one of Britain's highest vertical cliffs. The equally photogenic **Old Man of Hoy**, a 137m-high sea stack, is the island's best-known sight and is considered a real challenge for advanced rock climbers. The finest scenery is in the north of the island, a large part of which forms the **North Hoy RSPB Reserve**, where you can see fulmars, kittiwakes, great skuas and other sea birds.

One of the island's more popular walks follows the cliff edge opposite the Old Man of Hoy. Allow about seven hours for the return trip from Moaness Pier where the ferries dock. Alternatively, you can hike a circuit to the Old Man that goes via the **Dwarfie Stone** (HS; admission free), a squat tomb carved into a single block of sandstone in 3000 BC.

The car ferry from Mainland arrives at Lyness, which was a base for the British Grand Fleet at Scapa Flow until 1956. **Scapa Flow Visitor Centre** (☎ 791300; admission by donation; ☞ 9am-4.30pm Mon-Fri & 10am-4pm Sun May-Sep) tells the story of this base that served through two World Wars. It's a fascinating naval museum incorporating a photographic display in an old pumphouse. Most interesting is the account of the sinking of the German High Seas Fleet after WWI; there's also a cheerful little café.

Sleeping & Eating

There's good accommodation in Rackwick, but you can find some real gems by going further afield.

Rackwick SYHA Hostel (☎ 873535, ext 2415; www.syha.org.uk; Rackwick; dm £9.50; ☞ early Mar-late Sep) Almost at the start of the walk to the Old Man, this snug hostel has four bunks and appeals to

walkers, who need to bring their own sleeping bags and supplies. It's the kind of casual place where the warden wanders around in the evening to collect your cash.

Hoy Youth Hostel (☎ 873535; Moaness; dm adult/child £12/8; ☞ May-mid-Sep) Recently refurbished, this trim hostel is just 15 minutes' walk from Moaness Pier and at the base of the rugged Cuilags. You'll need your own sleeping bag and supplies for the en-suite six-bed dorms.

Stoneyquoy Farm (☎ 791234; www.visitthoy.com; r per person £20; ☞) This endearing farmhouse, between Lyness and Longhope, has Dutch-Orkadian hosts who put on a great breakfast; they also offer a great dinner option if you don't want to go back to town. The working farm is just 3 miles out of Lyness.

Stromabank Hotel (☎ 701494; www.stromabank.co.uk; Longhope; bar meals £6-9; ☞ lunch Sat & Sun, dinner Fri-Wed) One of Hoy's few eateries, this pub does good steaks and pies but has surprising specials such as crab cakes with sweet chilli sauce. The location is beautifully remote, though on a clear day locals reckon you can see mainland Scotland (before you start drinking, after which the view gets foggier).

Getting There & Away

A **passenger ferry** (☎ 850624) operates between Stromness and Moaness Pier (single per person/bicycle £3/60p, 30 minutes, two to five daily May to September). There's a reduced schedule from October to April.

Orkney Ferries (☎ 811397) also sails to Lyness (Hoy) from Houton on Mainland (single per person/car £3.20/9.60, three to six daily). The more limited Sunday service runs from May to late September. Flotta and Houton are 20 minutes and 35 minutes from Lyness, respectively.

NORTHERN ISLANDS

This group of windswept islands is a refuge for migrating birds and a nesting ground for sea birds; there are several RSPB reserves. Some of the islands are also rich in archaeological sites. However, the beautiful scenery, with wonderful white-sand beaches and lime-green to azure seas, is the main attraction.

The tourist offices in both Kirkwall and Stromness have a useful brochure, *The Islands of Orkney*, which includes maps and details of these islands. Note that the pronunciation of the 'ay' ending of each island name is 'ee' (eg Shapinsay is pronounced Shapinsee).

Shapinsay

☎ 01856 / pop 300

A 20-minute ferry trip from Kirkwall, this fertile island with its magnificent castle and basking seals makes for a brilliant day trip. **Balfour Castle** (☎ 711282; www.balfourcastle.com; tour incl return ferry adult/child £18/9) was designed as a calendar house, as it has seven turrets, 12 exterior doors, 52 rooms and 365 panes of glass. Tours of the castle (2.15pm Sunday May to September; book in advance) will take you inside to admire the birds under glass and the sweet wee chapel, and finish with Orcaidian afternoon tea made from produce from the expansive gardens. If you want to feel like royalty, you can stay in stately Victorian rooms (doubles £240) with predinner drinks in the historic library and views of the ferry sailing to Kirkwall.

Otherwise you can enjoy a cup of tea and scones at the **Smithy** (☎ 711722; www.shapinsaysmithy.com; snacks £2-5, meals £6-9; ☺ lunch & dinner), a rustic old-stone blacksmiths that was in use until the 1950s. The coffee comes with tasty shortbread and there's a daily changing blackboard menu of haddock, curries and chicken roast.

Orkney Ferries operates a ferry from Kirkwall (per person/car £3.20/9.60, 25 minutes, five to six daily May to September) with limited services in winter.

Rousay

☎ 01856 / pop 267

Called 'the Egypt of the North' for its many archaeological sites, this rugged, wind-lashed island is close enough to Mainland's Tingwall that it serves as a intriguing stepping stone on the way to Egilsay and Wyre. The hilly terrain presents a moderate challenge to walkers who take the two trails into the **Trumland RSPB Reserve**, where they may hear the distinctive call of the rare corncrake. There are three lochs for trout fishing.

Heading west from the ferry pier at Brinian, you'll strike three significant cairns: the burial mound of **Taversoe Tuick**, a rare example of two-level construction, and the cairns of **Knove of Yarso** and **Blackhammer**.

If you keep following the road (roughly 5.5 miles from the pier), you'll come to the 'Great Ship of Death', **Midhowe Cairn**, which held the remains of 25 people in the longest chambered cairn in Orkney, which dates back to the 3rd millennium BC. Nearby, **Midhowe Broch** is a daunting prehistoric fortress that once defended Eynhallow Sound.

Wandering the mile from Midhowe Cairn to Westness Farm, you'll span 5000 years of Orkney history, passing Viking and Pictish burial sites, prehistoric brochs and knowes (burial mounds), and several noble ruins from the 16th to 19th centuries. The leaflet *Westness Walk*, available from tourist offices on Mainland, details the route.

SLEEPING & EATING

Trumland Farm Hostel (☎ 821252; Trumland Farm; camp sites £4, dm £8, bedding £2 extra, cottages £60) This organic farm, just half a mile west of the ferry, has two comfortable but cramped six-bed dorms. The well-equipped cottage is a good option for self-caterers, and if you're on a budget you can pitch tents on the grass outside and use the hostel facilities. Bike hire (£7) is available.

Taversoe Hotel (☎ 821325; d £60) Just 2 miles southwest of the pier (pick-ups are available if you don't have your own transport), this freshly refurbished hotel has three simply decorated rooms with stress-reducing views of the water. The best panoramic vistas are from the dining room, which serves homemade meals and pizzas.

Pier Restaurant (☎ 821359; meals £4-7; ☺ 11am-9pm Mon-Sat; ☑) This restaurant by the ferry pier is an ideal spot for homy bar meals, a coffee or whisky while waiting for the ferry, or a chat and a game of pool after a long day's walking. There's also internet access.

GETTING THERE & AROUND

A small **car ferry** (☎ 751360) connects Tingwall (Mainland) with Brinian on Rousay (single per person/car £3.20/9.60, 30 minutes, five to six daily) and the other nearby islands of Egilsay and Wyre.

Rousay's single road makes a pleasant, slightly hilly circuit of about 14 miles, best ridden on a bike from Trumland Farm.

Egilsay & Wyre

These two small islands nestle east of Rousay. On Egilsay, a **cenotaph** marks the spot where Earl Magnus was murdered in 1117. After his martyrdom, pilgrims inspired the building of **St Magnus Church**, now missing its conical roof but otherwise intact. Today, much of the island is an **RSPB reserve**.

In the mid-12th century the neighbouring island of Wyre was the domain of the Viking baron Kolbein Hruga (Cubbie Roo). The ruins of his **castle** and **St Mary's Chapel** can be visited

for free. Wyre's serene western sliver virtually guarantees seal sightings.

Both islands are reached on the Rousay-Tingwall ferry (see opposite). Booking the ferry is mandatory for the return journey.

Stronsay

☎ 01857 / pop 358

Shaped like a bent crucifix, Stronsay attracts walkers and cyclists for its lack of serious inclines, and beautiful landscapes over its four curving bays. You can spot wildlife, with chubby seals basking on the rocks, and a healthy bird population, particularly puffins and sea birds. There are good coastal walks and, in the east, the **Vat o'Kerbister** is the best example of a *gloup* (natural arch) in Orkney.

Right next to the ferry dock at Whitehall, **Stronsay Fish Mart** (☎ 616386; Whitehall; admission free; ☺ 11am-6pm Mon & Wed, 11am-7pm Thu-Sat & 10am-7pm Sun May-Sep) now houses a herring-industry museum, which recalls the vital role fishing once played to the island. The attached 10-bed hostel (dorm bed £10) is well run if a little soulless, while the café serves up simple snacks and takeaways.

For good pub grub and some well refurbished rooms, **Stronsay Hotel** (☎ 616213; www.stronsayhotel.com; Whitehall; s/d from £25/50; ☺) is recommended. The menu includes great seafood (including paella and lobster) and there are packed lunches for walkers.

Flights from Kirkwall (one way £31, 20 minutes, two daily Monday to Saturday) are operated by BA/Loganair.

Orkney Ferries links Stronsay with Kirkwall (single per person/car £6.40/14.30, 1½ hours, two daily) and Eday (single passenger/car £6.40/14.30, 35 minutes, one Monday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday).

Eday

☎ 01857 / pop 121

At only 8 miles long, Eday has a heathered hilly interior and cultivated fields around its coast, but no central town. Occupied for at least the last 5000 years, today Eday has been left to the dead with numerous chambered cairns and the scenically located standing stones, the **Stone of Setter**.

It's worth getting hold of the *Eday Heritage Walk* leaflet, which details an interesting four-hour ramble from the Eday shop near the ferry pier to the sandstone **Red Head** on the island's north.

Four miles from the ferry, the 24-bed **Eday SYHA Hostel** (☎ 622206; www.syha.org.uk; London Bay; dm £8; ☺ Apr-Sep) is an austere affair with minimal facilities (you'll need your own sleeping bag though sleeping sheets are provided).

Pirate Gow Chalets (☎ 622285; Southcott; cottages per week £95) offers five comfy cottages with postcard sea-views and fully equipped kitchens. Shorter stays are available depending on bookings.

BA/Loganair flies from Kirkwall (one way £31, 30 minutes, two flights every Wednesday only) to London airport – that's London on Eday. The ferry service from Kirkwall sails via Stronsay (passenger/car £6.40/14.30, 1½ hours, two daily). There's also a link between Sanday and Eday.

Sanday

☎ 01857 / pop 478

With some of Orkney's best golden **beaches**, you'd be forgiven for skipping the island's history. This 12-mile island, however, is a time capsule of Neolithic, Pictish and Viking ruins. The most impressive of the archaeological sights is **Quoyness Chambered Tomb**, a burial site similar to Maes Howe (p926). At the north-eastern tip of Sanday, there's **Tafts Ness**, with around 500 prehistoric burial mounds. On the northeastern extreme, the black-and-white-striped **Start Point Lighthouse** (another Robert Stevenson creation) marks out an area that claimed several ships, with locals using shipwrecks to make fences and homes.

Kettletoft Hotel (☎ /fax 600217; www.kettletofthotel.com; Kettletoft; s/d £25/60) is a friendly pub with several well-appointed rooms in the middle of this little portside village. Meals in the bar (£7) also lean seaward, with plenty of fresh fish and even lobster scuttling into some dishes.

BA/Loganair flies from Kirkwall (one way £31, 20 minutes, two Monday to Saturday) to Sanday and Westray. Orkney Ferries operates a service between Kirkwall and Sanday (return per person/car £6.40/14.30, 1½ hours, two daily, May to mid-September). There's also a link to Eday.

Westray

☎ 01857 / pop 700

Despite its remoteness this tiny island wears the Queen of the Northern Isles crown, for its population density, agricultural wealth and vibrant fishing industry. Visitors come for prehistoric sites, sandy beaches, cliff scenery

and the ruins of the 6th-century **Noltland Castle** (HS; admission free; ☎ 9.30am-6.30pm mid-Jun-Sep). This Z-plan towerhouse has a formidable array of shot holes, including two canon mounts in the kitchen to defend its deceitful owner Gilbert Balfour, who plotted to murder Cardinal Beaton and, after being exiled, the King of Sweden. In the northwest, **Noup Head RSPB Reserve** attracts tens of thousands of breeding sea birds each year, including a sizeable puffin posse.

The main village, **Pierowall**, is one of the best natural harbours in the Orkneys, which made it a strategic Viking base in the past. Ferries from Kirkwall dock at Rapness, about 7 miles south of Pierowall.

SLEEPING & EATING

Barn (☎ 677214; www.thebarnwestray.com; Chalmersquoy, Pierowall; tent sites/dm/£6/11.75/40; ☎) Once a threshing barn, this intimate hostel has been comfortably refitted with plenty of facilities including huge storage cupboards and a DVD collection for when the weather is bad. Bike hire (per day £5) is available and a large family room is a good option for cheap clan holidays.

our pick **Bis Geos Hostel** (☎ 677420; www.bis-geos.co.uk; Bis Geos; dm £11, cottages per week from £140; ☎ Apr-Oct; ☎) This is unquestionably Orkney's best hostel and it's worth the trip to Westray just to bunk down in this unique environ. The hostel is decked out in a nautical theme with ropes, whalebones and old sails, but that doesn't mean you sacrifice comfort, with a kitchen full of shiny appliances and a selection of videos. Bunks are individually curtained with rustic hessian and have shelves for alarm clocks and valuables. Views across a small sculptured garden look out over the cliffs and there's some thoughtfully provided binoculars. For a little more privacy, the cottages sleep two to five people comfortably and come with great extras such as CD players, videos and a sauna that looks out over the cliffs.

Cleaton House Hotel (☎ 677508; www.cleatonhouse.co.uk; Cleaton; s/d £55/80) This delightful hotel offers a relaxed slice of island life, from the drawing room complete with stereo and a few good books to the pleasant pub with idyllic views of the bay and several local ales to sample. Rooms are all spacious, but our pick is the Bis Geos suite which overlooks the sea.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

For information on flights see Sanday, p931. Orkney Ferries links Kirkwall with Rapness

on Westray (single per person/car 6.40/14.30, 1½ hours, two daily) and Papa Westray.

Papa Westray

☎ 01857 / pop 65

Oddly this island is smaller than Westray at just 4 miles long and 1 mile wide. Nevertheless, the island attracts plenty of superlatives: Europe's oldest domestic building is the **Knap of Howar** (built about 5500 years ago); the world's shortest scheduled flight is the two-minute hop across Papa Sound from Westray; and Europe's largest colony of Arctic terns is at **North Hill RSPB Reserve**. Papa Westray was also the cradle of Christianity in Orkney – the restored **St Boniface Kirk** was founded in the 8th century and still impresses with its fine restored 12th-century stonework and ancient emanations.

Just over a mile north of the ferry terminal at Beltane, **Beltane House Hotel** (☎ 644267; papaybeltane2@hotmail.com; dm £10, s/d £27/50) successfully combines hostel and hotel with cosy dorms and new en-suite rooms. Hefty platefuls of local beef and seafood make satisfying lunch and dinner meals (from £7), but there's also a shop here if you're self-catering.

Flying to the island of Papa Westray (£15, 15 minutes, two daily Monday to Saturday) or North Ronaldsay (£15, 25 minutes, two daily except for three on Wednesday and one on Sunday) from Kirkwall is an amazing deal compared with other flights in the Orkneys – about twice the distance for half the price.

Private operators also make the run from Rackwick in Westray to Papa; try calling the reliable **Jim Hewitson** (☎ 644268), who heads across daily for less than £10.

North Ronaldsay

☎ 01857 / pop 50

Even in the Orkneys, North Ronaldsay is a byword for isolation. Electricity was only wired up here in the 1980s and there are 40 sheep to every single human inhabitant. Sheep are kept at bay by a 13-mile **dry stone wall** across the flat island which stops them from nibbling on crops. Instead the toughened sheep eat seaweed, which gives their meat a unique flavour that's worth sampling if you can.

The island falls in the path of migratory birds, which in turn bring fanatical birders who spot whole chapters of *What Bird Is That?* nesting or flying over this 3-mile long island. Seals are common and whales have been seen.

With solar and wind power, the environmentally friendly **Observatory Guest House** (☎ 633200; www.nrbo.f2s.com; dm £11, s/d from £31/51; ☎) has minimal impact on the fragile local environment. It's especially designed for bird-watchers, for whom various ranger-led activities are organised. There are dorm rooms as well as en-suite twins and doubles; dinner, which can feature the unique local mutton, is available for an extra £10. The attached **Obscafé** (meals £4-8; ☎ lunch & dinner) does good meals for all visitors, and life-affirming coffee in the cold.

See Papa Westray (opposite) for details of flights. Orkney Ferries operates a service from Kirkwall (return per person/car £6.40/14.30, 2¾ hours, one on Friday only, plus every second Sunday from late May to August).

SHETLAND ISLANDS

Closer to Oslo than Glasgow, the Shetlands are adrift in the North Sea and were under Norse rule until 1469. Someone forgot to tell the locals about the handover because their Norwegian-tinged accents are frequently heard on the topic of 'making the trip down to Scotland' – when they're not burning a Viking galley at the annual Up Helly Aa festival.

Visitors to the remote islands usually pack binoculars to spot local birds or wildlife at Sumburgh Head, and carry backpacks stuffed with Gortex to protect against the notoriously changeable weather on hikes to the extreme north of Hermaness. Locals reckon that the length of the islands means that you can fly into sunny Sumburgh and be shrouded in

fog before you get to the Shetland's biggest town, Lerwick, just 25 miles away. The rugged landscape includes sheer ski-jump cliffs that are fuzzed with green and dotted with whitewashed homes and the famous toylike ponies. The largest of the 15 inhabited islands is Mainland, and from here it's an easy hop to Yell and Unst, but there are more than 100 islands to explore along the scattered archipelago.

Oil rigs to the North Sea and semisecret military bases have kept the Shetlands economically viable in a way that woolly sweaters and cute ponies could never hope to, but the islands are developing a reputation as a tourist escape. New cheap flights have led Sunday supplement writers to waggishly call the Shetlands the 'New Maldives', but after you've seen the Viking ruins of Jarlshof or Scotland's best-preserved Iron Age tower, Moussa Broch, you'll have the feeling that you've been somewhere other than Scotland.

Getting There & Away

AIR

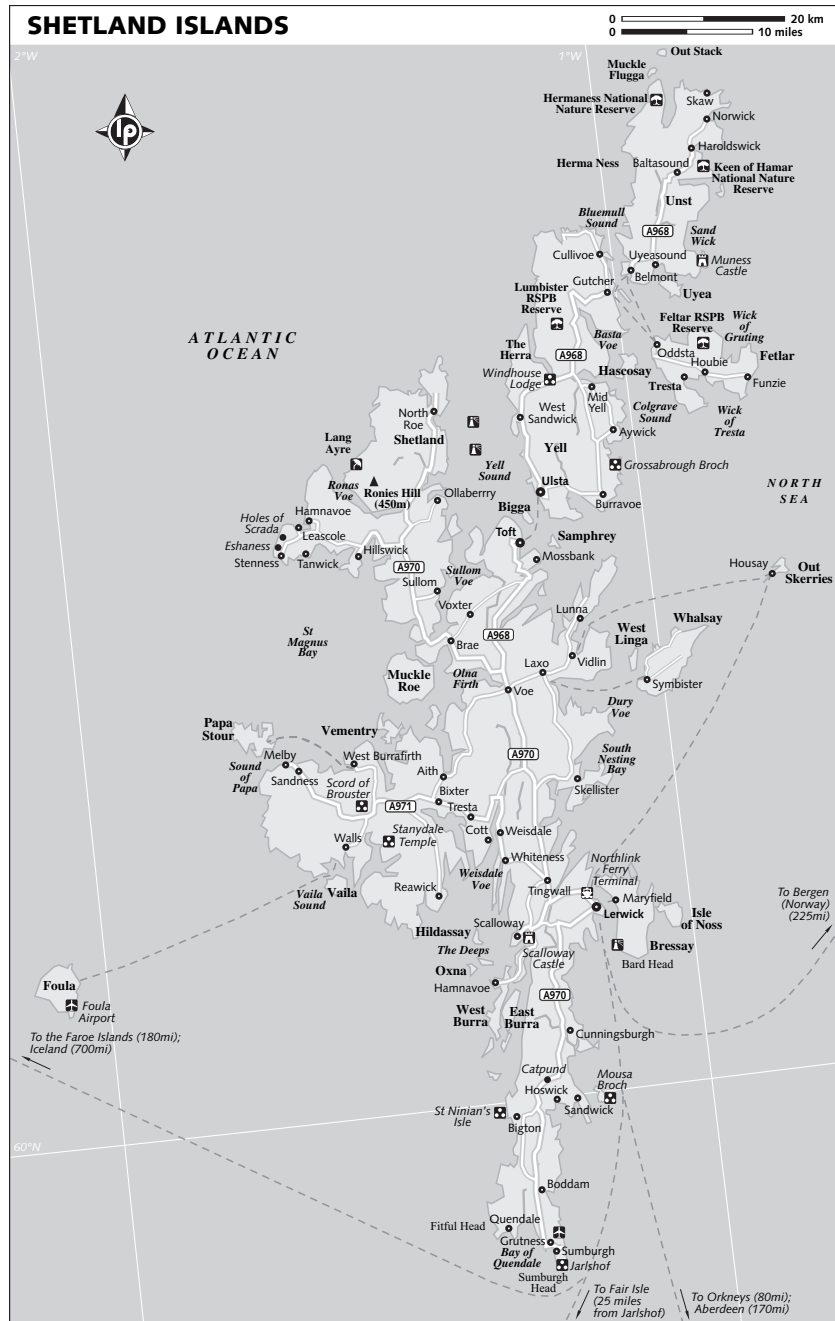
The oil industry ensures that air connections are good. The main airport is at Sumburgh, 25 miles south of Lerwick. **BA/Loganair** (☎ 01595-840246; www.ba.com) operates flights to/from Aberdeen (return from £165, one hour, two to four daily). **Highland Airways** (☎ 0845 450 2245; www.highlandairways.co.uk) also runs flights from Inverness. BA/Loganair also operates a low-flying turbo-prop aircraft between Orkney and Shetland (from £85.20, 40 minutes, one daily). **Atlantic Airways** (☎ 020 7823 4242; www.atlantic.fo) flies twice weekly from London in an experimental flight (one hour 40 minutes). Even in summer flights

YOU CAN'T TAKE THE BOY OUT OF SHETLAND

Shetlanders have a strong sense of community and certainly look after their own. When Britain decided to deport immigrants with criminal records in 2006 it made the mistake of targeting a 23-year-old Shetlander.

Sakchai Makao was born in Thailand, but moved to the Shetlands before he was 10. His criminal offence was petty arson, which occurred when Makao was coming to terms with the death of his father. The Home Office branded him a criminal and sent special constables to remove him from his job as a lifeguard, to Aberdeen. Makao's first response was to call his best friend from jail to tell him he might not be able to be his best man.

But Shetlanders mobilised to 'Save Sakchai', as the posters which filled every shop window read. Various fundraisers were held to finance his appeal including selling T-shirts and a 50p 'race' (where coins are lined end-to-end for the length of an oval). A local MP and the musician Elvis Costello wrote letters of support for Sakchai's defence and the *Scotsman* called the Shetlands 'a community in revolt'. After several months, the campaign met with success, and Makao was allowed to return to the Shetlands and his lifeguard job.



can be weather dependent, but the airlines will move you to a ferry if all goes wrong.

BOAT

NorthLink Ferries (☎ 01856-851144; www.northlinkferries.co.uk) runs car ferries between Lerwick and Aberdeen (single passenger £19.25 to £29.50, car and driver £100 to £135 single, cabins extra, 12 to 15 hours, daily) via Kirkwall. For details of the ferry link between the Shetland Islands and Bergen (Norway) see p921.

Getting Around

BICYCLE

On a fine day, cycling is the way to hop around small distances in the Shetlands, but in bad weather shelter can be scarce and winds are fierce. Bike-hire outfits include **Grantfield Garage** (☎ 01595-692709; North Rd, Lerwick; 1-day hire £7.50) and **Lerwick Youth Hostel** (SYHA; ☎ 01595-692114; www.syha.org.uk; King Harald St; 1-day hire £7).

BUS

There are several bus operators available; for information on all their services call ☎ 01595-694100.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

Thanks to the oil infrastructure, Shetland's roads are wide and well kept. If you're thinking of hiring a car, book ahead, as Lerwick's four companies can book out well in advance. Prices are from £25 per day:

Bolts Car Hire (☎ 01595-693636; 26 North Rd, Lerwick)

Grantfield Garage (☎ 01595-692709; North Rd, Lerwick)

John Leask & Son (☎ 01595-693162; leasks@zetnet.co.uk; Esplanade, Lerwick)

Star Rent-a-Car (☎ 01595-692075; www.starrentacar.co.uk; 22 Commercial Rd, Lerwick)

Call **Allied Taxis** (☎ 01595-690069) for a cab; it will cost about £35 to travel from Sumburgh airport to Lerwick.

LERWICK

☎ 01595 / pop 6830

The largest town in Shetland is dug into the hills of Bressay Sound and was once the UK's biggest herring port. The tough nut of Fort Charlotte is a testament to the town's strategic importance, though more recently life has come to centre on the pier, with changing-over oil rig crews or large ocean liners enjoying a day in port. Either way it's a contradictory spot, being the main maritime entry into

the Shetlands from northern Europe or the Orkneys and, equally, a good place to spot seals or the odd wandering whale.

Information

Shetland Library (☎ 693868; Lower Hillhead; ☎ 10am-7pm Mon, Wed & Fri, 10am-5pm Tue, Thu & Sat) Free internet access.

Support Training (☎ 695026; 6a Mounthooly St; per hr £2; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Fri) Internet access.

Tourist office (☎ 693434; www.visitshetland.com; Market Cross; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 8am-4pm Sat & Sun Apr-Oct, 9am-5pm Mon-Fri Nov-Mar) Bureau de change and excellent range of books, maps and brochures.

Sights & Activities

Keeping an iron rule over the town, **Fort Charlotte** (admission free; ☎ 9.30am-dusk) is a cannoned battlement that was once a good vantage point for watching for an invading Dutch navy. Today it provides a base for the Territorial Army and the only potential invaders are seals basking in the harbour.

A visit to the **Up-Helly-Aa Exhibition** (St Sunniva St; adult/child £3/1; ☎ 2-4pm & 7-9pm Tue, 7-9pm Fri, 2-4pm Sat mid-May-mid-Sep) is essential to make sense of 'Shetlandness'. Here you can see the construction of the Viking galley that will be burnt at the annual Viking fire festival (see p936).

Drop into the **Shetland Museum** (☎ 695057; www.shetland-museum.org.uk; Lower Hillhead; admission free; ☎ 10am-7pm Mon, Wed & Fri, 10am-5pm Tue, Thu & Sat) for an introduction to the islands' 5000-year history. Inside are terrific exhibits on Shetland's fishing heritage, along with medieval pottery, grisly human remains and fine examples of Pictish stone carvings. It's currently undergoing renovation, so opening may be erratic. Oddly handy to the town centre, **Clickimin Broch** (admission free; ☎ 24hr) is secluded by a small loch and was occupied from the 7th century BC to the 6th century AD as a military fort.

Böd of Gremista Museum (☎ 695057; admission free; ☎ 10am-1pm & 2-5pm Wed-Sun Jun-mid-Sep) has been restored as an 18th-century fishing booth with plenty of memorabilia and a chatty guide who sounds like he remembers the golden age of fishing.

Tours

The following tours depart from the tourist office.

Dim Riv (☎ 07970 864189; adult/child £5/2, ☎ 7pm Mon & 3pm Sun) If you're feeling historical, sail in a reconstructed Viking longship that takes to the bay.

Island Trails (☎ 422408; www.island-trails.co.uk; 1hr tour £10) One of the best ways to see Lerwick; with local historian Douglas Sinclair or a traditional tour with Elma.

Seabirds & Seals (☎ 693434; 3hr cruise £30; 🚢) departs 9.30am & 2pm mid-Apr–mid-Sep) Runs wildlife-spotting tours to Bressay and Noss; book with the tourist office.

Festivals & Events

Up Helly Aa Knees-up on the last Tuesday in January, when a Viking boat is sailed out into the dark then set on fire.

Folk Festival (www.shetlandfolkfestival.com) Worth being here for this, in May.

Johnsmas Foy (www.johnsmasfoymay.com) The festival of summer that includes sailing races, the Flavour of Shetland food fair and blues gigs. In June.

Flavour of Shetland (www.flavourofshetland.com) Food fair that's part of Johnsmas Foy festival in June.

Shetland Fiddle Frenzy (www.shetlandfiddlefrenzy.com) Plays up a storm in August.

Fiddle & Accordion Festival Mid-October.

Sleeping

BUDGET

Clickimin Caravan & Camp Site (☎ 741000; Lochside; tent/caravan sites £6.70/10.20; 🚐) May-Sep; (P) 🚰) Attached to the massive leisure centre, this is a real family park with plenty to keep kids busy, from squash to swimming to bowling, even when the weather isn't holding up. Grassy sites for tents are pleasant and caravan sites have purpose-built gravelled areas.

Lerwick Youth Hostel (SYHA; ☎ 692114; www.syha.org.uk; King Harald St; dm £15.50; 🚰) Apr-Sep; (S) This grand edifice houses one of Scotland's best youth hostels, with a shop, laundry, café and industrial kitchen that even has filter coffee. There's an excellent two-bed dorm, though this is usually reserved for group leaders;

book ahead as this places is popular with large groups.

MIDRANGE

Fort Charlotte Guesthouse (☎ 692140; www.fortcharlotte.co.uk; 1 Charlotte St; s £20-25, d from £55) This is another bright spot decked out in pine, with summery colours and thoughtful touches including a shed for bikes and local salmon for breakfast. Views into the town centre are quaint, and you can easily visit the neighbouring fort in this handily located spot.

Alderlodge Guest House (☎ 695705; 6 Clairmont Pl; s £25-35, d £50) Great friendly hosts (who'll let you check out whenever and shrug off a strict breakfast timetable) makes this the top guesthouse. They'll even give you tips on walks and birding spots. Most rooms have small bar fridges and come with en suites, although the cheaper single has a nonattached bathroom that's just as handy.

Glen Orchy House (☎ 692031; www.guesthouse.lerwick.com; 20 Knab Rd; s/d £47/74; (P)) Sure it's a few extra pennies, but this beautiful guesthouse is worth it for the spectacular conservatory with views of Breiwick Bay alone. Rooms are well presented and there are extra singles so it's a good bet for solo travellers.

Also recommended:

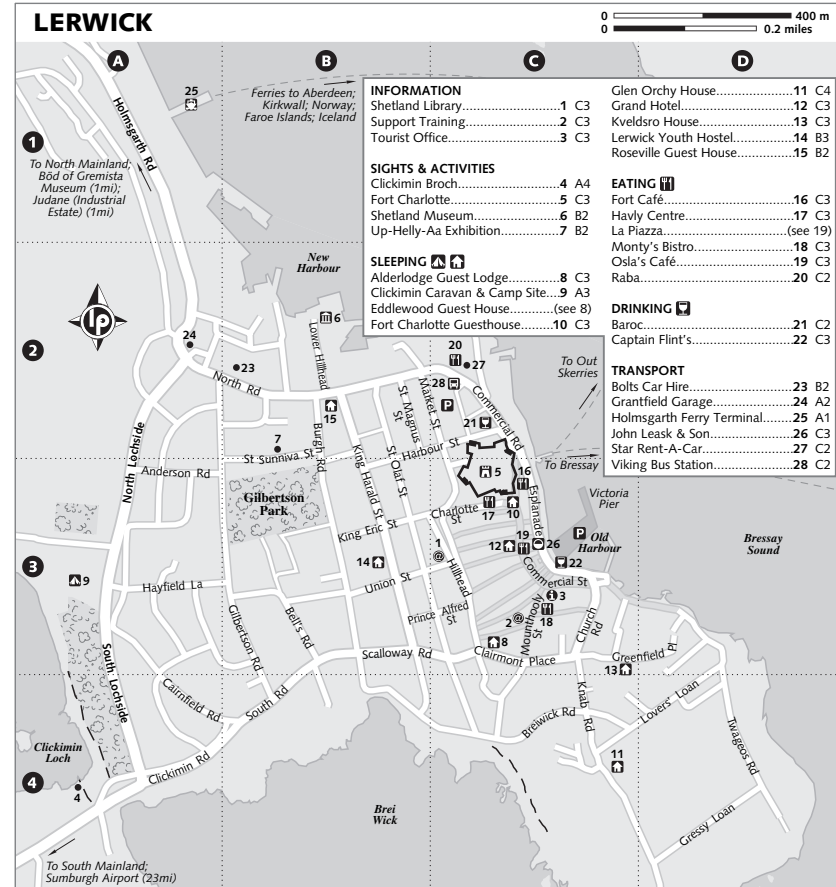
Roseville Guest House (☎ 697128; Roseville .shetland@btopenworld.com; 95 King Harald St; s/d £22/40) Good option for early buses; rates are without breakfast, for flexibility.

Eddlewood Guest House (☎ 692772; steve.murray13@btinternet.com; 8 Clairmont Pl; s/d £30/50) Superfriendly hosts do anything to help out and rooms are large for the price tag.

TOP END

Grand Hotel (☎ 695788; www.kgqhotels.co.uk; 24 Commercial St; s £72, d £94-125; (P)) The fading dame of Lerwick holds her place near the town centre with declining glory. The mazelike complex includes a restaurant that does a popular Sunday roast (book ahead) and the aptly named nightclub, Posers. Top-storey doubles offer harbour views and while a refurbishment in the 1990s dates some rooms, there are still many period features to charm, such as the snug saloon.

Kveldro House Hotel (☎ 692195; reception@kveldrohotel.co.uk; Greenfield Pl; s/d £89/110; (P)) Shetland's sweetest spot does a lot with its harbour views, which can be seen from the pricier double rooms as well as the restaurant. It's got something for everyone, with four-post beds for



romantic couples and broadband internet throughout for business travellers, although the additional charge to use LAN is cheeky.

Eating & Drinking

In recent years the eating options in Lerwick have improved immensely although, like the islands themselves, prices can seem closer to Norway than Scotland.

Fort Café (☎ 693125; 2 Commercial Rd; fish & chips £2.50-3.50) The best located chipper in town has a good sit-in area and serves up the sea after a drenching in the traditional Scottish deep fryer. The thick-cut chips are best enjoyed walking along the pier.

Havey Centre (☎ 692100; 9 Charlotte St; light meals £3-5; 🚰) 10am-4pm Mon, Tue & Thu-Sat) With all the

wholesomeness of a Danish church, this little eatery is the spot for mug-a-chino mums who let their kids play with the selection of toys while they enjoy carrot cake.

Monty's Bistro (☎ 696555; 5 Mounthooly St; lunch £5-8, dinner £10-16; 🚰) lunch Tue-Sat, dinner Mon-Sat) From the moment you head up the ivy-covered stairway, you can tell you're entering a new world of Shetland grub. Brocheliqe presentation and innovative vegetarian options single this out as one of the island's best eateries, plus it has a solid wine list and serves Unst brews.

Oslo's Café (☎ 696005; 88 Commercial St; meals £5-11; 🚰) noon-8pm Mon-Sat year-round, plus Sun Jun-Aug) This comfy spot flips a good pancake down below but the authentic Italian dishes start upstairs at La Piazza. The upstairs menu features

A COTTAGE SOMEWHERE

You didn't come to the Shetlands to stay in generic chain hotels, so why not bunk down in a *bòd*, a rustic collection of simple **hostels** (☎ 694688; www.camping-bods.com); which might mean bringing a sleeping bag, stove, and coins to feed the electric meter.

Alternatively, you can self-cater in atmospheric **lighthouse cottages** (☎ 694688; www.lighthouse-holidays.com; r per person £26-43) that mark the dramatic cliffs of Bressay, Sumburgh and Eshaness; these can also be booked at Lerwick's tourist office.

heartly pastas and peppery pizzas that satisfy most appetites.

Raba (☎ 695585; 26 Commercial Rd; mains £6-9, buffet £8.50; ☎ noon-midnight Sat & Sun) If you're thinking Lerwick is a long way from Lahore, think again. Takeaways and a Sunday all-you-can-eat buffet are the strength of this good local curry house, though eating in is worth it for the tacky collection of Indian ephemera.

Captain Flint's (☎ 692249; 2 Commercial Rd; ☎ daily) This casual boozier is decked out with mariners knots and other marine knick-knacks, but never feels gimmicky because local pirates still drink here.

Baroc (☎ 690995; cnr Commercial Rd & Harbour St; ☎ 11am-1am) This slick new spot does good coffee during the day and flips on the flat-screen video screen at night to make it the island's lounge bar. Young folk may even try to get you dancing.

Getting There & Away

See p921 for details on Orkney and Aberdeen ferries. From the main airport at Sumburgh, **Leask's** (☎ 693162) runs regular buses to meet flights (£2.40, 50 minutes), although you may wait a while on Sunday, when there are only two services.

AROUND LERWICK

Across the water from Lerwick are the islands of **Bressay** (pronounced Bressah), and beyond it the National Nature Reserve of the **Isle of Noss**.

Despite controversial plans to build a bridge, the only way across to Bressay is by **ferry** (☎ 07626 980317) from Lerwick (adult/car £3/7, frequent). It's a two-hour walk across the picturesque island; some people rent bikes in Lerwick and bring them across. You can pause for an ale or excellent shellfish meal at **Maryfield House Hotel** (☎ 01595-820207; Bressay; mains £7-10), which offers secluded accommodation (singles/doubles from £30/60) near the ferry.

Noss wardens take an inflatable **dinghy** (£3; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue, Wed & Fri-Sun mid-May-Aug) between Bressay and Noss; check with the Lerwick tourist office, as dinghies can't run in bad weather. Once on Noss most visitors head for the **Noup**, a spectacular cliff rising over 180m above sea level that is home to puffins, gannets and guillemots.

Six miles west of Lerwick is Shetland's former capital, **Scalloway** (Scallowah), with the eerie well-preserved ruins of 15th-century **Scalloway Castle** (HS; ☎ 01856-841815; admission free;

☎ 9.30am-5pm Mon-Sat) – get the key from the Royal Hotel on Sunday. **Scalloway Museum** (☎ 01595-880675; Main St; admission free; ☎ Mon-Sat May-Sep) has interesting displays on the 'Shetland Bus', boats that smuggled people and supplies during WWII for the Free Norwegian Forces. If all the action makes you hungry, you should head for **Da Haaf Restaurant** (☎ 01595-880747; Port Arthur; meals £9-12; ☎ lunch & dinner), part of the North Atlantic Fisheries College, which specialises in local seafood dishes. You can catch nonmilitary buses to/from Lerwick (11 times daily, Monday to Saturday).

SOUTH MAINLAND Sandwick & Mousa

☎ 01950 / pop 800

Opposite the scattered village of Sandwick, where you pass the 60-degree latitude line, is the small isle of Mousa, an RSPB reserve that protects 6000 nocturnal storm petrels as well as seals on the rocks. Mousa is also home to the impressive double-walled fortified **Mousa Broch**, Britain's best-preserved broch that was built between 100 BC and AD 100 as a hideout for eloping Vikings. Daily boat trips (£9, 15 minutes, twice daily April to September) allow 2½ hours on the island. You can book trips on the **Solan IV** (☎ 431367; www.mousaboattrips.co.uk; adult/child £10/5), which offers daily tours of Mousa.

There are five to seven buses daily (three on Sunday) between Lerwick and Sandwick.

Sumburgh & Around

☎ 01950

Old and new collide at the southern tip of Mainland, where an international airport is only a few metres from **Jarlshof** (HS; ☎ 01667-460232; adult £3.30; ☎ 9.30am-12.30pm & 1.30-6.30pm Apr-Sep), Shetland's most impressive archaeological attraction. This prehistoric Norse settlement was buried in sand and uncovered in a gale. From the ruins you can piece together a history of the Shetlands from Neolithic houses to 16th-century lairds' dwelling to the intact wheelhouse. While you're digging into history check out the remarkable excavation at **Old Scatness** (☎ 01595-694688; Dumrossness; adult/child £2/1; ☎ 10am-5.30pm Sat-Thu Apr-Aug, call for winter hours), which centres on a broch from around 300 BC. Period-costumed guides in the Iron Age reconstructions offer historical anecdotes for kids.

Sumburgh Head boasts large colonies of puffins, kittiwakes, fulmars, guillemots and razorbills, with the chance of spotting dolphins

and whales. Scousburgh is 5 miles northwest of Sumburgh, below which is Shetland's best beach, the gloriously white **Scousburgh Sands**.

For a spot handy to the airport (and Jarlshof) you can't beat **Sumburgh Hotel** (☎ 460201; www.sumburgh-hotel.zetnet.co.uk; Sumburgh; s/d from £50/75; ☎ ☑), a large pub and hotel that's popular with business folk for meetings, and which offers good bar meals (£8 to £14). Near Scousburgh is the delightful **Spiggie Hotel** (☎ 460409; www.spiggiehotel.co.uk; Scousburgh; s/d £55/80), an old-style country pub which also offers good seafood (meals £6 to £10). You could also stay in the atmospheric Sumburgh Lighthouse cottage (see the boxed text, p936).

To get here from Lerwick take the airport bus (50 minutes, five daily Monday to Saturday, two on Sunday) and get off at the second-last stop.

NORTH MAINLAND

Mainland's northwest is known for the red basalt lava cliffs of **Eshaness**, which have been carved out by harsh Atlantic gales to form some of Scotland's best postcard images. When the wind subsides, there's good walking on the peninsula west of Brae and south to the red granite island of **Muckle Roe**, which is connected by a bridge.

The **Tangwick haa Museum** (☎ 01806-503389; admission free; ☎ 1-5pm Mon-Fri, 11am-7pm Sat & Sun May-Sep), 1 mile east of Eshaness, captures a sense of the community here, mainly through its wonderful collection of old black-and-white photos.

Buses from Lerwick (three Monday to Friday, two on Saturday) run as far as Hillswick, 7 miles from Eshaness.

Sleeping & Eating

A lot of visitors to this area want to get into the great outdoors, so there are several good camping spots. Perched out on the cliffs is Eshaness Lighthouse cottage, a good option; for information on lighthouse cottages see the boxed text, p936.

Braewick Cafe & Campsite (☎ 01806-503345; Braewick; tent sites £5-10) The brand-spanking new spot overlooks the magnificent St Magnus Bay, with good tent sites and light meals (£5 to £8).

Johnnie Notions Camping Böd (☎ 0870 199 9440; Hamnavoe; dm £6; ☎ Apr-Sep) Offers very basic dorm accommodation in a small stone cottage with large bunks but no electricity. Book at the Lerwick tourist office or by phone.

Almara (☎ 01806-503261; www.almara.shetland.co.uk; s/d £30/50; ☎) A mile before Hillswick, a puffin signpost leads to this well-equipped guesthouse where the breakfast just keeps coming.

Busta House Hotel (☎ 01806-522506; www.busta-house.com; Brae; s/d £75/110; ☎) Just before Brae, this is a palatially refurbished hotel that has top rooms, a first-class restaurant menu and a friendly ghost (if you believe local tales).

Booth (☎ 01806-503348; meals by suggested donation of £3-8; ☎ May-Sep) Serves vegetarian food in one of Shetland's oldest buildings, which was once a Hanseatic trading post. But the best deal is that meals are paid for by donation towards the local wildlife sanctuary.

YELL & UNST

☎ 01957 / pop 720

The desolate peat moors of Yell are seen by many as a mere stepping stone across to Unst and some visitors call it Yawn. There are, however, several good hill walks and the **Old Haa Museum** (☎ 722339; Burra; admission free; ☎ 10am-4pm Tue-Thu & Sat, 2-5pm Sun Apr-Sep), with exhibits about local flora and fauna. If you're brave, there's also the haunted ruins of **Windhouse** to explore.

Yell has limited accommodation options and, even more worryingly, limited pubs. **Norwind** (☎ 702312; islandoysters@shetland.co.uk; Mid Yell; s/d £33/55) is a pleasant guesthouse near the fire station, with healthy fruit laid on at breakfast.

If you're keen to jump on the Unst ferry, the handy **Gutcher B&B** (☎ 744201; fax 744366; Gutcher; s/d £35/40) offers cheerful accommodation right by the pier. Also near the pier is **Wind Dog Café** (www.winddogcafe.co.uk; ☎ 10am-5pm daily, plus dinner Thu-Sat; ☑), a quirky spot that does great food and coffee to wake you up after exploring this sleepy island.

Unst, the more dynamic island, is Britain's northernmost populated landmass. The rugged isolation is ideal for the windy nature reserve of **Hermaness**, where you can run the gauntlet of dive-bombing bonxies (or great skuas) to sit on the cliffs with almost-tame puffins. From here you can see the rude-sounding **Muckle Flugga**, with its lighthouse built by Robert Louis Stevenson's uncle. Stevenson himself wrote *Treasure Island* while living on Unst and many say he based the treasure maps on this island. For more tips on wildlife-watching duck into the **Hermaness Visitor Centre** (☎ 711278; Shore Station, Burrafir; admission free; ☎ 9am-5pm early Apr-mid-Sep), near the

reserve's entrance. On a clear day from Hermaness you can see **Out Stack**, a collection of rocks that's Scotland's most northerly point.

For manmade attractions, drop anchor at **Unst Boat Haven** (☎ 711528; Haroldswick; adult/child £2/free; 🕒 1.30-5pm May-Sep), which showcases Norse maritime history with several replicas. Just 2 miles north, **Valhalla Brewery** (☎ 711658; www.valhallabrewery.co.uk; tours £3.50; 🕒 9am-5pm Mon-Fri) fulfils every bloke's dream to start a brewery in their own back shed and brews up the most northerly beer in Britain.

There are plenty of places to sleep in Unst, including **Gardiesfauld Hostel** (☎ 755240; www.gardiesfauld.shetland.co.uk; 2 East Rd, Uyeasound; tents £6, dm £10; 🕒 Apr-Sep; 🍷), a snug hostel with a glorious conservatory dining room that overlooks the bay, and tent sites on verdant grass. For a B&B, try **Prestegaard** (☎ 755234; www.prestegaard.shetland.co.uk; Uyeasound; s/d £22/44, with half-board £30), a Victorian house that offers great water views. Closer to Hermaness, **Gerratoun** (☎ 711323; Haroldswick; s/tw £20/40) does good breakfasts and works well with guests requiring special diets.

Yell and Unst are connected with Mainland by small car **ferries** (☎ 722259) operating between Toft and Ulsta (car and driver/passenger £7/3, 20 minutes, frequent) as well as Gutcher and Belmont (car and driver/passenger £3.60/1.70, 10 minutes, frequent).

OTHER ISLANDS

Fetlar has a large RSPB reserve (closed during May to August for the breeding season) and features spectacular arches along the coastline. The island is connected to the islands of Yell and Unst (car and driver/passenger £6.80/3,

25 minutes, six to eight daily) by regular **ferries** (☎ 01957-722259). Alternatively you can take a tour with **Ultima Thule Tours** (☎ 01957-711367; www.seeshetland.shetland.co.uk; 1-day tour £40; 🕒 Thu), which includes northern Yell.

West of Shetland is **Foula**, a windy island supporting a community of 40 people, 1500 sheep and 500,000 sea birds amid dramatic cliff scenery. It's reached by twice-weekly ferries from Walls (single per person/car £2.60/12, two hours), and planes from Tingwall (single £25, 15 minutes, four weekly). You can also charter **CycharTERS** (☎ 07887 945480; www.cycharTERS.co.uk; £50; 🕒 May-Sep), which departs from Scalloway.

Fair Isle sits between the Orkneys and Shetland but, oddly, is Britain's most remote inhabited island. The absence of people makes for bird-watching heaven, especially at **Fair Isle Lodge & Bird Observatory** (☎ 01595-760258; www.fairislebirdobs.co.uk; 📍) which offers full-board (dorms £30, singles/doubles £44/78) with guided birding strolls and displays of how rangers monitor migratory birds. The island's other big draw is its patterned knitwear, still produced here in the island's cooperative.

From Tingwall, BA/Loganair operates flights to Fair Isle (from £28 single, 25 minutes, twice on Monday, Wednesday, Friday year-round and on Saturday May to September). A day-return trip allows about seven hours on the island. Ferries sail from Grutness (near Sumburgh) with the odd one from Lerwick to Fair Isle (single per person/car £2.60/12, three hours, one on Tuesday and Saturday year-round and Thursday from May to September). Book with **JW Stout** (☎ 01595-760222).