

# Orkney – prehistoric sites and friendly people

Joy had politely complimented the five musicians during a 90-minute jam session in the atmospheric Reel Bar in central Kirkwall.

As the clock ticked towards 11.00pm the white-haired mandolin player suddenly plucked the first notes of Waltzing Matilda. He had obviously noted her strong Australian accent.

The expression on Joy's face was memorable and the incident provided an indication of the warmth shown by the caring Orkadian people during our visit.

People have dominated the island's history since Neolithic times. Skara Brae, for example, pre-dates Stonehenge and the Pyramids, but more of that later.

Orkadians, we found, were reserved but passers-by smiled and were always keen to provide directions and assistance.

But where is Orkney? It is at the top of Scotland, 306 miles from Edinburgh on an island which is 436 miles from Norway and 718 from London.

The rugged, practically treeless terrain is home to over 22,000 people with Kirkwall the main town.

It's centre, even at 4.30pm on a Saturday afternoon, a normal pressure point for shoppers in major cities, was quiet.

There are big brand names like Boots but there are also distinctive local shops selling jewellery (Sheila Fleet) and knitwear.

The specialist wool shop, for example, pictures the sheep of origin on the packaging along with the animal's name.

The skyline is dominated by St Magnus Cathedral (pictured). By the 9th century AD, Norse longboats had reached Orkney, an archipelago of 70 islands, which they colonised.. The cathedral was started in 1137 by the Norse Earl Rognvald.

Orkney remained under Norse rule until it was annexed by the Scots for non-payment of a dowry following the marriage in 1469 of Margaret of Denmark and James III of Scotland.

The imposing red sandstone of the cathedral certainly shows the ravages of the weather, but we were drawn inside by the glorious sound of the organ.

The sunlight shone through the stained-glass windows leaving wonderful patterns on the stonework which added to the majesty of the setting.

The sun, however, disappeared and in came the rain. It poured for several minutes. We found shelter in the Highland Park whisky shop, a major exporter from the islands.

And, when the rain stopped, we walked along almost deserted streets to the gin distillery which is rapidly gaining a world-wide reputation with products from its two, in-house, stills.

Wind is also a factor. Our trip to the West Mainland, the heart of Neolithic Orkney, was plagued by 60mph gusts.

However, we still enjoyed dramatic cliffs, stunning coastal scenery, thriving sea bird colonies and indulging in spectacular cliff walks.

We also stepped back in time to see how our ancestors survived 5,000 years ago, living in communities including Skara Brae, a must-see, but there are also small tombs, standing stones and pre-historic villages dotted around the stark landscape.

Skara Brae is reputed to be the best-preserved Neolithic village in Northern Europe, and it nestles in the Bay of Skail.

It lay protected from the elements for over 4,000 years until a storm blew the sand away in 1850.

Six houses and a workshop have since been revealed and the well-equipped visitor centre has a four-minute video which helps tell the story of what life was like.

The on-site reconstructed house is worth exploring but the excavated site itself provides revealing details of stone beds, dressers, shelving and hearths.

The standing stones of Stenness are thought to be part of the world's earliest standing stone circle and don't miss the Maeshowe Chambered Tomb, claimed to be the finest Neolithic burial chamber in Northern Europe.

The cairn's entry passage is aligned so the setting midwinter sun illuminates the interior chamber at the winter Solstice.

The Broch of Birsay is another feature and is accessible only by foot at low tide over a causeway. The Norse village even had a sauna but check tide times as the water advances at an alarming rate.

Brochs are unique to Scotland and there are more than 500 of them, mostly in the northern and western Highlands and the islands.

Many brochs stood alone, but sizeable villages often surrounded those in Orkney. The broch village at Gurness, which began between 500BC and 200BC, is one of the most impressive. It has also been excavated and so gives a vivid impression of life in the Middle Iron Age.

The island's in the East Midlands have been linked by barriers commissioned by Winston Churchill in the Second World War to

block German submarines gaining access to Scapa Flow, one of the world's finest natural anchorages and home to the British Fleet.

On Lamb Holm stands the Italian Chapel built by prisoners of war brought in to build the barriers.

They requested two Nissen huts as a place of worship and they transformed them using basic materials including tin food cans into the most-visited of Orkney's wartime landmarks.

There is much more to see and do and there are plenty of restaurants in Kirkwall.

We loved The Shore, stylish in the restaurant but non-descript outside, in Shore Street.

The scallop carbonara and the lamb were well-recommended along with the monkfish wrapped in Parma ham with a pesto and pine nut sauce.

Helgis in Harbour Street is also central and served traditional food with a twist. How about lamb stovies – there could have been more meat – drizzled with toasted oats and beetroot?

You are best, by the way, to book restaurants, particularly in high season, but locals also like to get out and about.

Orkney is not to everybody's taste and it is difficult to get to. Rabbie's in Edinburgh, however, do excellent, escorted tours for up to 16 people. That's how I got there.

You pick up the comfortable Mercedes bus at Edinburgh Bus Station and they do the rest. Our guide Iain Murray proved to be la crème de la crème of guides I've enjoyed in my travels.

His knowledge, humour and accessibility – plus his Scottish music selection – made this trip special.

It was part of a five-day Scotland tour and our entry to the

island was by the one-hour ferry trip from a dock near underwhelming John O'Groats to St Margaret's Hope.

You can also fly with Loganair. Flights are available from Glasgow (60 minutes), Edinburgh (60 minutes), Inverness (45 minutes), Aberdeen (50 minutes) and Shetland (35 minutes).

We stayed at the well-appointed, eight-room Royal Oak B&B in Holm Road, a £5 taxi ride (1km) from the centre. It has ample parking and views over the town.

We enjoyed the hospitality of affable Liz Bruce including her home-cooked breakfast highlighted by tasty local sausages and black pudding.

Summing up, Orkney has a lot to offer, not just good food and friendly people.