GeoCultura

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Shetland and Orkney Islands: Wilderness, Wildlife & Ancient History



Shetland and Orkney Islands: Wilderness, Wildlife & Ancient History

Shetland and Orkney 9-Day Small Group Tour

Shetland and Orkney islands: wilderness, wildlife and ancient history

- Journey to Britain's far north, island-hopping through Shetland and Orkney, among wild sea cliffs, white-sand beaches, working harbour towns and seemingly endless skies.
- Meet the local people who bring the islands to life, including Akshay the 'Shetland Chef', Billy of Billy & Molly: An Otter Love Story and Orcadian wildlife guide Megan.
- Watch for Arctic terns, storm petrels, hen harriers, puffins, seals and otters on coastal walks, with the chance of spotting dolphins, whales and even orcas along the way.
- Journey through thousands of years of island history, from Jarlshof and Mousa Broch on Shetland to Skara Brae, the Ring of Brodgar and Maeshowe on Orkney, with Viking stories and volcanic landscapes woven through the route.
- Price includes 8 nights' accommodation, 8 breakfasts, 6 dinners, an expert Scottish guide and local experts, all transport and entry fees. Group size 6 to 12.



Day 1 - Welcome to Shetland: Jarlshof, Sumburgh Head and St Ninian's Isle

Explore Jarlshof, Sumburgh Head and St Ninian's Isle

Jarlshof Prehistoric and Norse Settlement

After a 9am pick-up, we drive to Jarlshof Prehistoric and Norse Settlement, where more than 4,000 years of human history are layered into one remarkable site. Explore Bronze Age dwellings, Norse longhouses and the remains of a 16th-century laird's house as you begin to unravel Shetland's long story.

Sumburgh Head

Take in the sweeping views across Sumburgh Head, where the rocks tell stories of continental collision some 400 million years ago, when Shetland lay much closer to the equator. You'll also spot Shetland's first lighthouse, built in 1821, and – in season – look out for puffins nesting on the cliffs.

Picnic Lunch

After a picnic lunch, stretch your legs at St Ninian's Isle, linked to the mainland by the UK's largest active sand tombolo (a sandy isthmus).

St Ninian's Isle Walk

Walk across the sweep of golden sand to see the ruins of a 12th-century chapel, where a schoolboy famously uncovered a hoard of Pictish treasure in 1958.

Lerwick Guest House

In the early evening, we check into your accommodation for the next two nights.

Group Dinner

Group dinner at a Lerwick restaurant.



Day 2 - Mousa Wildlife and Shetland Museum Tour

Explore Mousa Broch and Shetland Museum

Mousa Island and Broch Visit

After a later start, we set sail for one of Shetland's finest gems: the atmospheric, uninhabited island of Mousa, where you'll spend a couple of hours exploring. You can't miss Mousa Broch standing tall on its shores. The best-preserved broch in Scotland is a 13-metre-tall, 2,000-year-old tower that has stood the test of time so well you can still climb its winding staircase to the top. It's even mentioned in the old Norse sagas – twice! The views from up here stretch far along the east coast of the South Mainland. Mousa is also an RSPB reserve, so keep watch for seals hauling themselves out on the shore and, until the end of July, storm petrels darting among the rocks. The island is home to one of Britain's largest breeding colonies of these tiny seabirds.

Shetland Museum & Tour

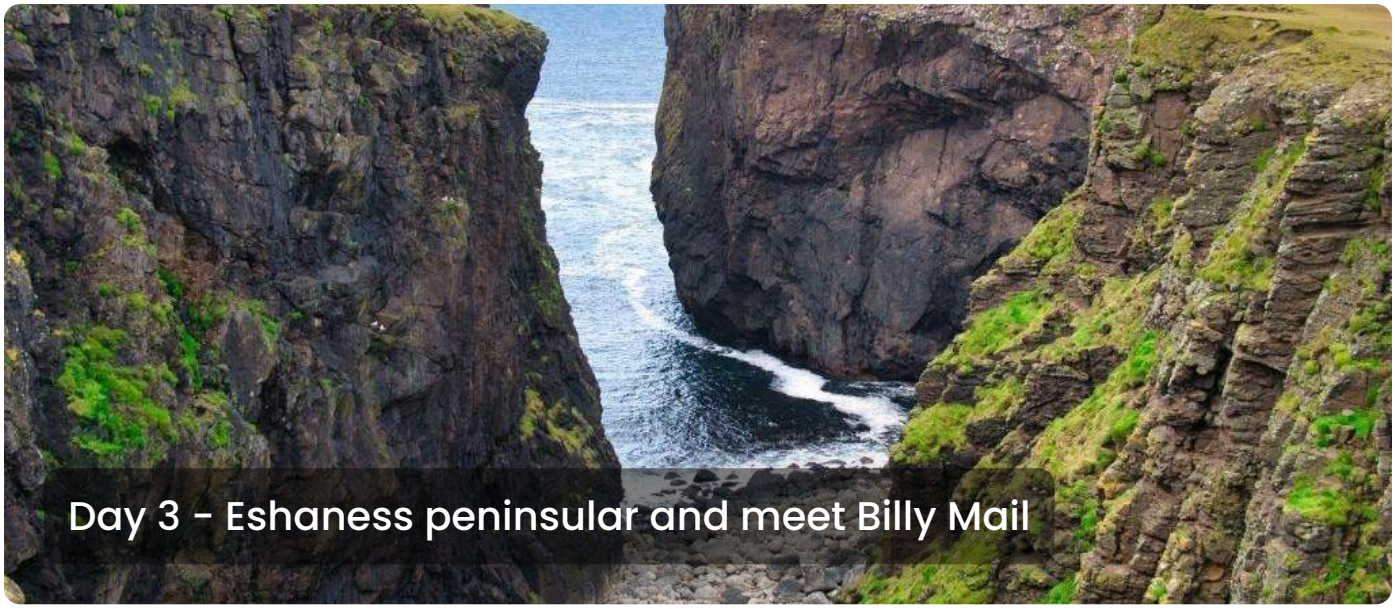
Back in Lerwick, we visit the Shetland Museum & Archives for a private 'highlights' tour revealing more of the islands' rich history and culture.

Lerwick Guest House

Overnight at Lerwick Guest House.

Group Dinner

Group dinner at a Lerwick restaurant.



Day 3 - Eshaness peninsular and meet Billy Mail

Explore Eshaness Cliffs, Wildlife and Otter Stories

Eshaness Peninsula Guided Walk

This morning, we journey west to the brooding headlands and dark, lava-formed landscapes of Eshaness. The peninsula is said to be the UK's best example of a section through the flank of a volcano, which was last active around 400 million years ago, and one of the best places in Shetland to understand the islands' deep-time origins. A guided 4-mile walk takes us along one of Shetland's most spectacular coastlines. A shorter, 2-mile option is also available. Look out for sheer cliffs, sea stacks, blowholes and Britain's largest sea cave, with the chance of glimpsing seals or even whales and dolphins offshore.

Visit Tangwick Haa Museum

We'll then visit the Tangwick Haa Museum, a lovingly preserved 19th-century laird's house.

Visit Hillswick Wildlife Sanctuary

If time allows, call in at Hillswick Wildlife Sanctuary to meet some of Shetland's rescued otters and seals.

Meet Billy Mail and Otter Walk

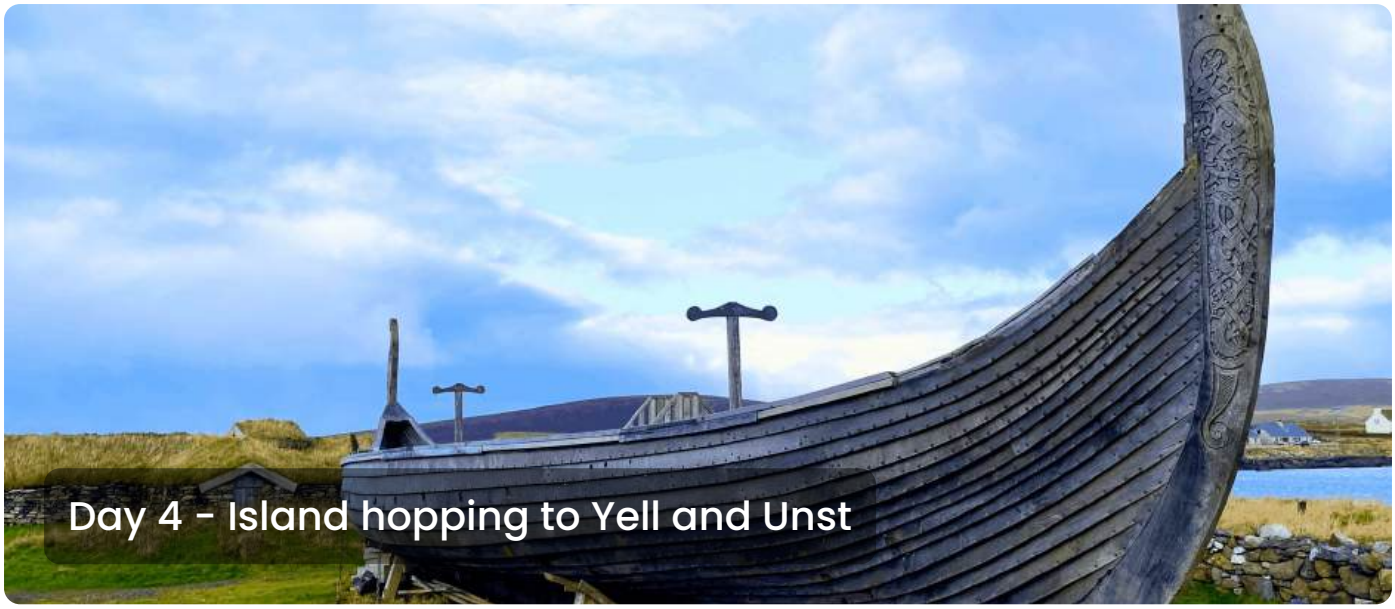
This afternoon, we meet Billy Mail, one of the stars of the National Geographic film Billy and Molly: An Otter Love Story. Welcoming us into his beautiful waterside home, Billy shares what he has learned from years spent observing wild otters, guides us on a walk pointing out the local wildlife and archaeological highlights, and tells the remarkable story of how his friendship with Molly the otter changed his life.

St Magnus Bay Hotel or Busta House

Overnight stay at St Magnus Bay or Busta House.

Group dinner

Group dinner in the hotel.



Day 4 - Island hopping to Yell and Unst

Island Hopping to Yell and Unst

Island Hopping to Yell and Unst

Today we set off on an island-hopping adventure to Yell and Unst – a duo of islands steeped in fascinating folklore and some of the most beautiful beaches in Shetland. We're also here for the wildlife, including otters and vast colonies of seabirds.

Unst and Yell Landscapes and Coastlines

You'll hear how the Unst and Yell landscapes and coastlines have been shaped over time. Today, Unst is the UK's northernmost inhabited island but the 600 people who live here are just the latest in Shetland's approximately 6,000-year-long human history.

Unst Boat Haven and Viking Longhouse

Get a glimpse into the daily lives of some of the island's early settlers at the reconstructed Viking longhouse and boat at the Unst Boat Haven, home to a fascinating collection that tells the story of Unst's seafaring heritage.

Skidbladnir Viking Ship Replica

At nearby Skidbladnir – a magnificent full-scale replica of the Gokstad Viking ship – you'll experience a striking tribute to the island's enduring connection with its Viking past and the spirit of exploration that still defines Shetland today.

Hermaness National Nature Reserve

Afterwards, we'll feel fully in the present moment at Unst's dramatic Hermaness National Nature Reserve, where gannets, puffins and great skuas fill the skies above rugged cliffs.

St Magnus Bay or Busta House

Overnight stay at St Magnus Bay or Busta House.

Group dinner



Day 5 - Scalloway, Shetland Chef Lunch and Ferry to Orkney

Scalloway Stories, Shetland Chef Lunch, Ferry to Orkney

Visit Scalloway Museum and Shetland Bus Story

Today begins in Scalloway, where we visit the excellent Scalloway Museum and hear the powerful story of the Shetland Bus. During World War II, this secret operation ferried agents, refugees and supplies between Shetland and Nazi-occupied Norway, often in extreme conditions.

Visit Scalloway Castle Ruins

There's also time to see the ruins of Scalloway Castle, a tower house with an eventful past.

Lunch with Akshay Borges, 'The Shetland Chef'

We then return to Lerwick for a very different kind of local story: lunch with Akshay Borges, 'The Shetland Chef'. Akshay invites us into his home where he demonstrates some of his favourite dishes using local ingredients and drawing on traditional recipes. You'll taste the results, hear about his life in Shetland and leave with a few recipes to try at home.

Ferry from Lerwick to Kirkwall

Departure: Lerwick | Destination: Kirkwall

Later, it's time to say goodbye to Shetland and continue our Shetland and Orkney tour south. We board the 5.30pm ferry for the five and a half hour journey to Kirkwall, Orkney's historic capital, where we check into our hotel for the next four nights.

The Kirkwall Hotel

Central Kirkwall



Day 6 - Welcome to Orkney! Kirkwall, coastal wildlife and wartime stories

Explore Kirkwall, Wildlife Walk and Wartime Landmarks

Free morning in Kirkwall

Make the most of a free morning with a lie-in or explore Kirkwall at your own pace. From our centrally located hotel, it's around a 10-minute walk to St Magnus Cathedral, built in honour of a murdered Norse earl and one of the best places in the archipelago to feel Orkney's enduring Viking past.

Guided wildlife walk at Mull Head

Later, we regroup for a guided wildlife walk with local Orcadian guide Megan. The exact route will depend on the weather, the mood and your group's shared interests but will likely be a 3-4 mile circular walk at Mull Head. Expect spectacular coastal views, The Gloup (a collapsed sea cave) and sea cliffs teeming with seabirds. In season, you may even see puffins.

Explore Orkney's wartime story: Scapa Flow, Churchill Barriers and Italian Chapel

If time allows, we'll also explore Orkney's wartime story around the vast natural harbour of Scapa Flow, driving across the impressive Churchill Barriers and visiting the Italian Chapel. The latter was built by Italian prisoners of war and is now one of Orkney's most moving landmarks.

The Kirkwall Hotel

Group dinner



Day 7 - The Heart of Neolithic Orkney: Skara Brae, Brodgar and Maeshowe

Explore Neolithic Wonders and Ancient Landscapes

Visit Skara Brae

Today is devoted to the extraordinary prehistoric landscapes of the Heart od Neolithic Orkney, a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

We begin at Skara Brae, a remarkably preserved village of ten clustered houses, hidden beneath sand dunes for around 4,500 years until revealed by a storm in 1800.

Ring of Brodgar and Standing Stones of Stenness

From here, we continue to the Ring of Brodgar and the Standing Stones of Stenness, where ancient stones rise from a landscape still alive with wildlife: in July, curlews call and skylarks sing overhead; later in the season, wildflower meadows hum with bees, including the rare great yellow bumblebee. Look out for harbour seals basking on the rocks in the Loch of Stenness, too.

Visit Maeshowe

We end at Maeshowe, a great chambered cairn dating back to 2000 BC. The stonework is so precise it has mostly stayed watertight for five millennia – preserving one of the world's largest collections of runic inscriptions, graffitied here by Norse Vikings who broke into the cairn centuries after it was built.

The Kirkwall Hotel

Evening Meal

Free Evening: choose to eat at the hotel or in a Kirkwall restaurant or pub



Day 8 - Stromness: maritime stories and modern art

Explore Stromness, Maritime Heritage and Art

Explore Stromness

Today we spend time in Stromness, a smaller, quieter town than Kirkwall, where Orkney's maritime past still feels close to the surface. Its narrow main street winds along the harbour, lined with stone houses, private piers and slipways – reminders of the town's centuries of trade, herring fishing and seafaring life. As we explore, look out for eider ducks and black guillemots on the water, along with butterflies and bees in the town's sheltered gardens.

Visit Stromness Museum

We also visit two of Stromness' cultural highlights. Stromness Museum, Scotland's oldest independent museum, was founded in 1837. Discover the islands' links to whaling, Arctic exploration and natural history.

Visit Pier Arts Centre

At the Pier Arts Centre, explore an outstanding collection of 20th-century British art, including works by Barbara Hepworth and Ben Nicholson.

The Kirkwall Hotel

Group dinner in hotel

Final group dinner in hotel.



Day 9 - Return home: across the Pentland Firth to Inverness

Ferry to Scrabster and Minibus to Inverness

Ferry from Stromness to Scrabster

Departure: Stromness | Destination: Scrabster

After breakfast, it's time to wave goodbye to Orkney and travel back to the Scottish mainland. The 90-minute ferry crossing from Stromness to Scrabster offers one last chance to take in Orkney's cliffs, sea and shifting light. Look out for the Old Man of Hoy rising from the coast, along with seabirds including gannets, fulmars and bonxies (great skuas). If you're lucky, we may even spot dolphins or orcas along the way.

Minibus transfer to Inverness

Departure: Scrabster | Destination: Inverness

From Scrabster, we continue by minibus to Inverness, arriving later in the afternoon. Here, we'll say a fond farewell and bring our Shetland and Orkney holiday to a close.