

Northern Lights



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FERRIES

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Welcome

Well, I pen this introduction to our latest issue of Northern Lights in mid-February sunshine. 'What's unusual about that?' some may ask. The last three weeks or so have simply been grim, presenting us with significant operating challenges, in common with many other operators across the UK.

Essentially we've had to contend with a ridge of high pressure over Scandinavia which showed no sign of abating. This, combined with an area of low pressure over the UK, resulted in low pressure coming up against the high pressure with the winds backing anticlockwise around the low pressure, resulting in our operating area receiving the constant impact of SE'ly winds running right through our network.

My thanks to all my colleagues, both ship and shore, for all efforts to communicate the impact and plan for our recovery on every occasion where this was possible.

Reflecting on our carryings, over all routes, during the last calendar year, and also comparing those volumes to the equivalent at the end of 2013 tells quite a story:

2025 v 2013			
Passengers	403,364 v 283,601	+ 42%	
Cars	109,907 v 62,707	+ 75%	
Freight lane meters	669,024 v 466,959	+ 43%	
Cabins	73,628 v 58,209	+ 27%	

Pods, which were first introduced in 2013, recorded utilisation figures of over 26,000 last year. We are just over halfway through our 2026 dry dock schedules of work and this year will see us introducing a new concept of 'lie flat' pods. Whilst we push ahead with the Freight Flex new build programme led by the team at CMAL, it is important to test out new market trends and whilst we were first with our Pod lounges, we are again partnering with Eknes (eknes.no) and taking our offering to a new level.

If you are a regular traveller, you will know that in response to customer requests, we have provided a pet cabin option since July 2020. Dry dock 2026 will have seen an increase in the number of available pet cabins to twelve on both the Hrossey and Hjaltland, so 10% of cabins available for use with pets. We hope this increase will work well in addressing demand.

I'll sign off now in wishing a happy retirement after 22 years' service to Mr Michael Carter, our Onboard Service Manager on m.v. Hrossey. Michael has been a stalwart colleague and a well known face to many of our regular travellers.

For now, enjoy your time travelling with us and please do not hesitate to ask any of my colleagues for advice or assistance if required.



Stuart Garrett
Stuart Garrett
 Managing Director
 Serco NorthLink Ferries

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Front page photograph:
 Esha Ness Lighthouse, Shetland

Colour me in!



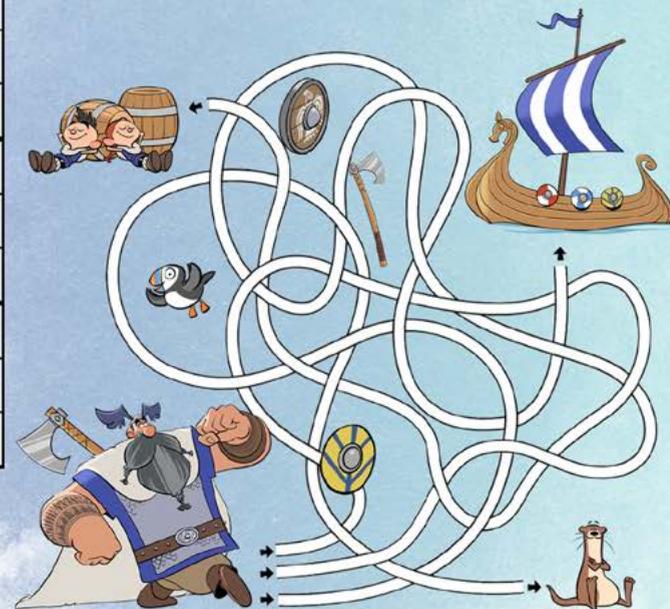
Vikling Activities

Can you find all the words?

I	W	S	X	L	S	A	G	A	T	E	H	N	N
R	Z	W	B	T	O	F	V	I	K	I	N	G	S
K	N	O	D	O	S	N	H	H	E	A	U	U	B
E	P	R	S	W	L	B	G	W	A	K	X	O	O
W	F	D	T	A	M	D	O	S	K	R	H	E	L
D	I	W	R	N	I	T	L	N	H	C	A	U	A
U	Z	M	O	W	F	O	W	X	X	I	C	L	N
V	B	O	N	F	N	R	M	O	F	I	P	B	D
Z	P	T	G	Q	M	B	N	A	L	T	E	E	E
Q	K	L	H	C	W	E	D	D	R	G	K	R	R
X	V	E	O	S	Z	N	L	M	R	A	A	S	T
K	G	N	L	O	P	L	U	N	D	E	R	E	A
X	O	G	D	I	T	K	V	O	V	N	M	R	M
Z	B	L	C	S	H	I	E	L	D	J	U	K	L

- MARA
- BONXIE
- STRONGHOLD
- OLGA
- VIKINGS
- BERSERK
- HARALD
- AXE
- LOOT
- TAM
- LONGSHIP
- BOLD
- TORBEN
- SHIELD
- PLUNDER

Help Harald find his way to the Viklings Galley!



		8	3	7	5	1	4	
4		3						5
5	1					8	6	3
		9	7			4		6
1		6	9		2		8	
7		4		5	8	9		1
9			1	2		5	8	4
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	5	1					2	

SUDOKU
 Something for the adults!

A beginner's guide to Maeshowe in Orkney

Rising curiously from a field ten miles west of Kirkwall, Maeshowe is one of Orkney's most extraordinary archaeological treasures. This grassy mound may appear unassuming from the outside, but once inside you'll discover a masterpiece of Neolithic design built nearly 5,000 years ago.

Before you visit this remarkable monument, here is everything you need to know about Maeshowe!

What is Maeshowe?

Maeshowe is widely regarded as the most impressive chambered cairn, not only in Orkney, but in all north-west Europe. Built around 2800BC, this Neolithic tomb is nearly 5,000 years old – making it roughly 200 years older than the Great Pyramids of Giza.

It forms part of the Heart of Neolithic Orkney – a UNESCO World Heritage Site that also includes the Ring of Brodgar, the Standing Stones of Stenness and the remarkably well-preserved village of Skara Brae. These sites are a must-visit for anyone visiting Orkney for the first time.

Fascinating fact

Archaeologists estimate Maeshowe took around 100,000 man-hours to build, involving the transport and placement of multi-ton stones (some sourced from several miles away!) with no modern tools or technology.

What You Will See

From the outside, Maeshowe hides its monumentality and resembles nothing more than a grass-covered mound sitting quietly in the Orkney landscape. However, Maeshowe is actually the largest chambered cairn in Orkney, and its scale becomes truly apparent once inside.

To enter, visitors must crouch and walk along a 10-metre-long passageway built from massive stone slabs. This leads into a square central chamber measuring nearly 5 metres across and almost 4 metres high. Originally, the chamber would have reached even higher, though the exact height remains unknown due to a later break-in through the roof. Branching off the main chamber are three smaller side cells likely used for burials or storage.

If you look carefully at the walls within the central chamber, you will see the finest and largest collection of runic inscriptions found outside of Scandinavia. This 'graffiti' was carved by a group of Vikings in the 1100s who broke into the roof of Maeshowe seeking shelter. These carvings include names, messages, jokes and even pictures like the famous Maeshowe dragon.

Fascinating fact

The central chamber contains four standing stones – one in each corner. The stones' location there remains a mystery as they serve no structural purpose. Believed to have been placed before construction began, they may have held symbolic or ceremonial meaning.

Careful Alignment

One of the most remarkable aspects of Maeshowe is how it was strategically built to align with the setting sun during the winter solstice.

For a couple of weeks on either side of the shortest day of the year, the golden light of sunset shines directly down the entrance passage and illuminates the back wall of the main chamber. During this time, the light also aligns with the nearby Barnhouse Stone, a 10-foot-tall standing stone situated around 750-metres southwest of Maeshowe.

Top tip: To witness this spectacle, book the 2pm tour if visiting during midwinter!

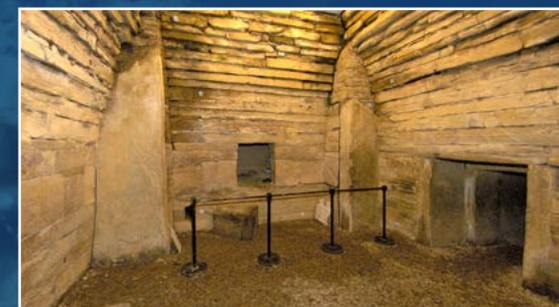
This exact alignment is too impressive to be accidental. The meticulous planning around Maeshowe's construction is truly remarkable considering how long ago it was built. The purpose of this alignment is speculated to mark the death of the old year and the beginning – or rebirth – of the new.

How to Visit?

Access to Maeshowe is by guided tour only and are led by friendly and knowledgeable Historic Scotland stewards. Tours depart from the visitor centre in Stenness and includes transport to and from the cairn. Pre-booking is highly recommended, especially if visiting during summer.



Maeshowe Viking 'graffiti'



Maeshowe interior



Maeshowe during winter solstice

Great Products, Great People: The Shetland Soap Company

Inspired by Shetland's wild beauty and strong sense of community, the Shetland Soap Company create exclusive handmade soaps and skincare products that capture the essence of the islands. The Shetland Soap Company was set up in 2002 as part of COPE Ltd who provide

employment, volunteering and work placement opportunities for people with disabilities and autism.

We were delighted to hear from Debbie Main, the Business Manager at COPE Ltd, to find out more about their story...



Can you tell us a little bit about yourself?

I started at COPE Ltd in 2021 as the Finance Manager, and about a year ago moved into my current role as Business Manager. I manage the Shetland Soap Company, Shetland Garden Company and Shetland Home Company.

What kind of products do you offer?

We offer a range of handmade soap and beauty products which are lovingly made in our small workshop in Lerwick. More recently, we started making candles and wax melts in the same scents as our soap ranges.

What is your favourite product or scent among your offerings, and why?

It's difficult to choose just one, but I'd have to say Norseman. We got a big order just before Christmas last year and the team worked really well together to meet the deadline. It was all hands-on deck, so I sometimes helped out in production. At home in the evening, the subtle scent of leather, smoke and wood drifted around me and I fell in love with it. The colour was carefully chosen to resemble peat water which I also love!

How does the Shetland landscape or heritage inspire your products?

Shetlanders have a close connection to the sea and understand its beauty and power. It has played a vital role in our history and will always shape our future. Despite our isolation, we are part of a vibrant and supportive community who enjoy diversity and are always welcoming. The elements, seasons, scenery, history and people within our islands motivate and inspire everything we do.



How long does it take to make and develop your products?

Being relatively new to post, I am still to develop a new product from scratch! This summer, we have been revitalising some of our existing glycerine soaps based on wider staff feedback and would love to look at releasing a new scent next year. We have contemplated recreating a very popular scent we had to take out of production; or, alternatively, we may start afresh and see where it takes us!

Your company ethos is 'Great Products, Great People'. Could you tell us a little bit more about this?

As a charity and social enterprise, our mission is to provide working opportunities for individuals with learning disabilities and autism. We hand mix, hand pour, hand label, hand trim and wrap all of our products. We do this to ensure inclusivity by tailoring varied day-to-day jobs to match the skills of our participants. At COPE Ltd, everyone is valued for their abilities and are supported and encouraged to fully participate. At the end of each day, you can feel the pride everyone has in the great finished products they have made together as a team.

Where can people try or buy your products?

We have a shop on Commercial Street next to the Market Cross in Lerwick and our products can be purchased online at www.shetlandsoap.co.uk. You can also buy our products in many gift shops across the UK Mainland and, for many years now, our soap has been supplied on board NorthLink Ferries ships in their cabins and toilet facilities.

Why not visit the shop on board to browse and buy Shetland Soap Company skincare products and handmade soaps?



Can you tell us a bit about yourself and how you got into your current role?

I'm from Hoy originally, and my parents were farmers. I also worked on the farm – cleaning byres, feeding cattle, clipping sheep. After I left school, I found employment on fish farms, and in construction – mixing concrete and labouring.

I also volunteered with the Longhope Lifeboat. My dad was the winchman on the slipway, and, growing up, whenever the phone rang, dad would be off and I would go along with him. When I was 15, I started working on the shore crew. Then, when I turned 18, I joined the lifeboat. The coxswain said, "You've been hanging around for so many years, you might as well come on board!"

I received sea survival training, which in turn led me to work at Orkney Ferries, where I spent 15 years, starting on deck and working to eventually become mate and relief skipper, and later to NorthLink Ferries, where I've been an AB (Able Bodied Seaman) for 12 years.

Dad got an MBE for his 70 years of service to the RNLI. I put in 23 years at the lifeboat – there were a lot of callouts during that time.

What are your main duties at NorthLink?

I handle cargo, storing, and maintenance jobs assigned by the Bosun. I might be painting one day or maintaining and greasing equipment the next. The public will most often see me directing cars onboard MV Hamnavoe, but once that is done, I do the mooring – tying up the ship using ropes and the winch.

I love being outside – I couldn't work in an office – and there's always something different to do! Needle gunning is my favourite job – it's very satisfying to blast the rust off the decks and other places.

What do you do in your spare time?

My partner, my two children – Connor and Erin – and I moved to Stenness a few years back, and I like to do DIY which I call 'destroy it yourself!' I've ripped my house apart room by room, putting in insulation and new plasterboard – even installing a new kitchen. When you live on an island like Hoy, you learn to be knacky handed and do the work yourself.

It's my winter project though – during summer I prefer to be outside. I enjoy gardening in my polycrub – growing peaches, apples, figs, kiwi fruits, strawberries and lots of vegetables! I also like going for walks with my family around the shore at the weekend.

Recipe

Orkney Beef Stew with Dark Island Ale



This is a super-easy recipe for a beef stew that works every time. It uses Dark Island – a rich, dark ale from the Orkney Brewery which has chocolate, date and nut notes that pair divinely with beef.

We'd recommend cooking this stew, which serves 6, in the evening, and serving it the following teatime. You'll notice a marked improvement in the gravy and in the taste of the beef!

Ingredients

- 4 onions
- 800g stewing beef, cut into cubes
- 2 tablespoons plain flour
- 250ml (1 cup) Dark Island Ale
- 250ml (1 cup) water
- 3 beef stock cubes
- Carrots and / or mushrooms are optional extras!



Method

1. Preheat the oven to 180°C
2. Chop the onions into big chunks and fry in a large pan with a little oil.
3. Once softened, add the meat and stir until the beef is no longer red.
4. If you want, you can add sliced mushrooms or chopped carrots at this point. Or both!
5. Add the flour, then the stock, water and Dark Island. A bottle of Dark Island is 500ml which is a little too much for our needs here. So add half to three quarters of the bottle of beer and find something to do with the rest (we recommend drinking it!)
6. Season with a good dose of salt and pepper and cook for a while until the sauce starts to thicken.
7. Transfer everything to a casserole dish, put a lid on to cover and pop it in the oven.
8. Cook for 1½ hours. After 1 hour, give it a stir to make sure it's not sticking to the sides. If the sauce is too thick, add an extra splash of water.
9. Serve with mashed tatties or clapshot to sop up all the gravy!

Esha Ness Lighthouse

Far out on Shetland's wild and windswept north west coast stands the dramatically situated Esha Ness Lighthouse.

Perched high on 200-foot cliffs surrounded by crashing Atlantic waves, this white tower watches over one of the most spectacular stretches of coastline in Shetland, carved with deep geos, sea arches and towering sea stacks.

Located in Northmavine on the Shetland Mainland, Eshaness is about an hour's drive northwest from Lerwick. Though remote, it is worth the journey and rewards visitors with breathtaking views and a powerful sense of Shetland's rugged beauty.

Lighting the way

The story of Esha Ness Lighthouse begins during World War One.

In 1915, a temporary light was constructed on the Eshaness peninsula to warn ships of the Ve Skerries – a scattering of rocky islets a few miles southwest. Quickly assembled in just two months, the makeshift light was soon dismantled after the war.

A decade later, a permanent lighthouse was commissioned. Built between 1925 and 1929, David Alan Stevenson – a member of the famous Stevenson family who worked on 26 Scottish lighthouses throughout his career – oversaw its construction. This would be the last Northern Lighthouse Board station designed by a Stevenson engineer.

Like its wartime predecessor, the lighthouse's mission was to keep vessels clear of the dangerous Ve Skerries. Despite this, tragedy struck soon after its completion when the Aberdeen trawler Ben Doran wrecked nearby, claiming the lives of all nine crew members. In response, a dedicated light was built on the Ve Skerries in 1979, with Esha Ness serving as the operations base for its construction.



A distinctive design

Unlike the tall, round towers of many Stevenson lights, Esha Ness features a distinctive tapering square tower – one of the first of its kind in Scotland.

Standing 12 metres (39 feet) high, its square design reduced costs by avoiding curved fittings inside and the structure was built using concrete, as the local stone was unsuitable for such an exposed site. Its bright light flashes once every twelve seconds and can be seen up to 25 nautical miles (46 km) away.

Interestingly, before the lighthouse became automated in 1974, the lightkeeper's accommodation housed just a single keeper. This was unusual, as most lighthouses were manned by two or three lightkeepers.

A landscape shaped by fire and sea

The cliffs surrounding Esha Ness Lighthouse are among the most striking in Shetland, and perhaps even the UK.

Eshaness forms part of the UNESCO Shetland Geopark and tells the story of a long-extinct volcano that erupted around 350-400 million years ago when Shetland lay near the equator. The cliffs slice through the volcano's flank, revealing ancient lava flows and layers of volcanic ash.



Despite its remote setting, the area is surprisingly accessible. A well-trodden path leads from the car park along the cliffs, and there's a 6km circular walk to the Grind o da Navir – a dramatic, amphitheatre-like chasm carved from pink volcanic rock.

Other coastal highlights include Calder's Geo, a deep inlet said to be the largest sea cave in Britain, and the Hol's o' Scraada, a 150-metre partially collapsed sea cave. At the Loch of Houlland, you'll find the ruins of a 2,000-year-old broch situated on a promontory which extends into the loch.

Visiting Eshaness

Although the lighthouse is now automated and closed to the public, the surrounding landscape offers plenty to explore. From the moment you arrive, you'll feel the full force of Shetland's coastline – wind in your hair, waves crashing below and seabirds wheeling overhead.

Whether you're drawn by the history, scenery or remarkable geology of the area, Eshaness is a must-visit location for anyone exploring the Shetland Islands.

Five lovely walks to enjoy in Caithness

Caithness, with its wild coastline and ancient landmarks, offers some of the most rewarding walking routes in the north of Scotland.

Whether you're travelling north for a day trip or as part of a longer adventure to Orkney and Shetland, Caithness is well worth exploring on foot.

Here are some of our favourite walks to enjoy during your visit!



1 Stroll along the river in Thurso

Thurso, the northernmost town on Mainland Scotland, takes its name from the Old Norse *Torsaa* meaning 'Thor's River' – and it's here that our first walk begins. The Thurso river flows right through the heart of town, making this walk scenic and easily accessible.

The flat, well-maintained path runs parallel to the river with benches dotted along the route offering peaceful spots to sit and watch the world go by.

Extend the route towards the coast to view the ruins of Thurso Castle or to visit Thurso Beach. It's a perfect way to stretch your legs before exploring the town's shops and cafes – or before catching NorthLink's **MV Hamnavoe** sailing from Scrabster nearby to Stromness in Orkney.



2 Feel the sea breeze at Keiss Beach

For an invigorating coastal walk, head to Keiss Beach – a long, sweeping stretch of white sand between Wick and John O'Groats. Popular with dog walkers and locals, it offers stunning views across Sinclair's Bay and the North Sea.

To the north stands the haunting ruins of Old Keiss Castle, perched precariously on the cliff's edge, as well as three Iron Age brochs including the well-preserved Keiss Broch.

Start this walk from Keiss Harbour, following the footpath along the coast – this is a gentle route with incredible photo opportunities. Whether you're interested in archaeology or a quiet coastal wander, Keiss Beach is a must-visit.



4 Wander through woodland trails at Rumster Forest

Just northwest of Lybster lies Rumster Forest – a woodland weaved with well-marked trails – ideal for walking or cycling. The main loop is around three miles long and takes roughly an hour to complete.

Rumster is home to deer, buzzards and hawks, so keep your eyes peeled for wildlife along the way. In the south of the forest, you can seek out the remains of two ancient brochs – or follow the trail uphill to the transmitter, the tallest structure in Caithness, for sweeping views of the landscape.



3 Witness the power of the sea at Duncansby Head

A bracing walk at Duncansby Head is a great way to blow off the cobwebs. Located at the far northeastern tip of mainland Scotland, Duncansby Head truly captures the wild spirit of Caithness.

Begin at the car park by Duncansby Head Lighthouse. Head south (with the sea on your left) and enjoy a cliff-top stroll along dramatic, weather-beaten cliffs towards the Duncansby Stacks – a group of striking pointed sea stacks rising from the waves.

In summer, the cliffs teem with puffins, kittiwakes and fulmars. On clear days, you can even see across to the Orkney Islands!



5 Step back in time at Dunbeath Broch

Nestled within the quiet Dunbeath Strath (a river valley), this short walk blends peaceful countryside with fascinating history. Starting from the Meal Mill car park, follow the Dunbeath Strath Path along the river, crossing a charming wooden suspension bridge before reaching Dunbeath Broch up a small hillside.

This Iron Age structure is one of the best-preserved in Caithness, with circular walls and small inner chambers still visible. The setting is quite beautiful as the broch sits above the river, surrounded by woodland. The route is less than two-miles-long, making it manageable for most visitors.

Winter Wildlife in Orkney



When most people think of Orkney, their minds drift to windswept cliffs, Neolithic stone circles, and summer seas shimmering with puffins and seals. But winter here is just as rich in natural spectacle, if not more so. As the days shorten and the air grows sharper, the islands transform into a sanctuary for thousands of birds and a wild stage where nature feels both raw and intimate.

A Haven for Migratory Birds

Winter in Orkney is dominated by birdlife. As northern Europe freezes, Orkney's comparatively mild climate (thanks to the North Atlantic Drift) draws in vast flocks of migrants. Whooper Swans glide onto lochs from Iceland, whilst waders like Golden Plovers and Sanderlings pepper the coastlines, their movements shimmering like waves as they take flight in unison. The sight of a murmuration of Starlings, thousands moving as one in twisting, swirling clouds, is a highlight of any winter dusk.

Scapa Flow is an important wintering ground for divers and grebes, with internationally significant numbers of some species, including the Slavonian Grebe and Great Northern Divers.

The Return of the Geese

One of the defining sights (and sounds) of an Orkney winter is the arrival of thousands of geese. From October onwards, the islands host great skeins of Greylag Geese, Pink-footed Geese, and the occasional rarer species, such as Barnacle Geese. Their calls echo across the wide skies and open fields, a reminder of ancient migratory rhythms that have long tied Orkney to the Arctic north.



Golden Plover



Greylag Geese



Short-eared Owl



Grey seal and pup

Sea Cliffs and Shorelines

The dramatic coastline is never empty. Seals haul themselves onto rocky shores, their mournful calls echoing across bays. Grey seals in particular choose Orkney as one of their key pupping grounds, in October and November, with locations like Windwick and Burwick on South Ronaldsay offering prime viewing from cliffs. Beaches can be crowded with mothers and their white-furred pups. Offshore, winter storms churn up rich feeding grounds, drawing Gannets, Fulmars, and Great Northern Divers close to land.

Birds of Prey

Orkney's wide skies also belong to raptors in winter. Hen Harriers drift low over the moorland, their pale forms ghostlike against the heather as they hunt for mice, shrews and Orkney voles. Short-eared Owls hunt during daylight hours, a bonus for watchers hoping to catch a glimpse. Merlin populations in Orkney significantly increase in winter as birds from Iceland and northern Europe migrate to the islands for milder conditions and abundant food sources. You can find them in coastal marshy areas, dunes, and farmland, where they hunt for their prey.

Mountain Hares on Hoy

In winter, the hares on Hoy turn a soft, silvery white, blending almost perfectly with the frost-dusted heather and patches of lingering snow. These mountain hares, a remnant of Scotland's wild uplands, are well adapted to the island's harsh weather, their thick fur and keen senses helping them survive in the cold winds that sweep across the moorland. Against the stark beauty of Hoy's cliffs and heath, a sudden flicker of movement, white against grey, is often the only sign of their quiet, resilient presence.

The Quiet Beauty of the Lochs

Inland waters, often still and silvered by frost, come alive with wintering wildfowl. Loch of Stenness, Loch of Harray, and other freshwater havens host Pochard, Tufted Ducks, Long-tailed Ducks, Teal, and Wigeon, their plumage striking against the subdued palette of winter skies. For those willing to wrap up warm and linger quietly, these lochs reveal a calm abundance of birdlife.

The Experience of Winter Watching

Unlike summer, winter wildlife in Orkney demands patience and resilience. Bitter winds can cut across the open landscape and the days may be short, yet the low golden light and the backdrop of sea and stone lend every encounter a rare intensity. There's a sense that you're sharing the islands not just with people, but with creatures driven here by instinct and survival.

For the keen naturalist, photographer, or simply anyone who loves wild places, Orkney in winter is a revelation.

Tips for Winter Wildlife Watching in Orkney

- **Bring binoculars:** many of the best sights are at a distance.
- **Dress in layers:** the wind chill can be fierce, even on clear days.
- **Respect pupping seals by keeping a safe distance:** watch from cliffs or designated viewpoints.
- **Visit RSPB reserves** like the Loons or the Brodgar wetlands for excellent winter birding.

Discovering the North East 250

The North East 250 is one of Scotland's most scenic road trips, showcasing everything the country is famous for and connecting some of the North East's iconic landscapes and landmarks. Best of all, it can begin the moment you step or drive off the ferry in Aberdeen.

For many people, the 250-mile-long route starts in Aberdeen where the MV Hjalmland and MV Hrossey conveniently dock. The entire loop can take three or more days to complete depending on how many stops you wish to make.

Highlights to see along the route

Aberdeen City

Before heading off on your NE250 adventure, take time to explore Aberdeen. Stroll along its mile-long golden beach, visit the quirky fishing village of Footdee, and spot dolphins in the harbour.

Admire the distinctive granite architecture – especially Marischal College – and enjoy vibrant restaurants, theatres and museums like the Aberdeen Art Gallery or the Aberdeen Maritime Museum – both of which are free to enter!



The East Coast – From Aberdeen to Fraserburgh

The East Coast is dotted with lighthouses, fishing towns and stunning coastal scenery. Just 15 minutes north of Aberdeen, Newburgh Beach is home to a colony of over 400 seals. Head to Cruden Bay to explore the atmospheric ruins of New Slains Castle or walk to the Bullers of Buchan – a collapsed sea cave teeming with seabirds.

There are also some fascinating museums worth visiting along this coastline. Peterhead Prison Museum offers gripping tales from Scotland's toughest jail, while Fraserburgh's Museum of Scottish Lighthouses sits beside Kinnaird Head Lighthouse which is uniquely built within a 16th-century castle.

The Moray Firth Coast – From Fraserburgh to Speyside

Winding west from Fraserburgh, discover scenic fishing villages that feel untouched by time such as Gardenstown, Crovie and Pennan.

Stop in Banff for sea views, Portsoy for delicious ice cream and Cullen for its famous Cullen Skink soup. Near Portknockie, don't miss Bow Fiddle Rock – a dramatic sea arch that is especially striking at sunset – or the Scottish Dolphin Centre at Spey Bay.



Speyside – From Speyside to Glenlivet

Speyside is Scotland's whisky heartland and is home to over half of Scotland's distilleries. Follow the Malt Whisky Trail to renowned distilleries like Aberlour, Glenfiddich and Glenlivet – or stop by the Speyside Cooperage where over 100,000 casks are produced annually.

Explore historic castles like Ballindalloch and Balvenie, or discover natural attractions like Linn Falls near Aberlour – also home to Scotland's famous Walker's Shortbread!

The Cairngorms – From Glenlivet to Braemar

The Cairngorms – Britain's largest national park – is home to some of Scotland's most spectacular scenery. With over 50 Munros (mountains over 3,000-feet), cyclists and walkers flock year-round to enjoy the dramatic landscapes, and in winter, skiers and snowboarders will love visiting the Lecht 2090 Ski Centre.

There is plenty more to explore as you travel through the park, including historic sites like Blairfindy or Corgarff Castle. And be sure to drive along the scenic 90-mile Snow Roads – the highest public roads in Britain.



The Royal Deeside – From Braemar to Aberdeen

The final stretch winds through the Royal Deeside – an area famous for its fine castles. The most well-known of these is Balmoral Castle, the summer residence of the Royal Family, but others including Braemar, Crathes and Drum Castle are also well worth exploring!

Explore Muir of Dinnet Nature Reserve with a peaceful walk around Loch Kinord or venture into Burn O'Vat, a dramatic glacial cavern. Stop in Banchory for independent shops and cafes, before climbing Scolty Hill for panoramic views, or tee off at one of the area's renowned golf courses.

For more information, please visit www.northeast250.com

Fascinating facts about Mousa you may not know

Just off the coast of mainland Shetland, Mousa is an island famously known for its iconic broch – an Iron Age tower that has stood near its original height for over 2,000 years. But beyond its famous silhouette, Mousa holds a wealth of lesser-known stories.

Whether you're planning a visit or simply curious about the past of this peerie island, here are some fascinating facts about Mousa you may not know!

1. Mousa was inhabited over 4,000 years ago

Despite being uninhabited today, archaeological evidence suggests Mousa was first inhabited by Neolithic settlers. On the hill northwest of the West Pool, you'll find the ruins of a two-compartment structure – possibly a double house. Near the south loch, two Bronze Age (2200BC-700AD) burnt mounds, thought to have been used as communal cooking sites, can be seen.

2. The Vikings used Mousa Broch as place of refuge

The Vikings ruled over Shetland and Orkney from around 850AD until 1469. During this time, Mousa Broch served as a place of refuge as described in two Norse sagas.

In 898AD, the Saga of Egil Skallagrimsson tells of Bjorn and Thora who ran aground on Mousa. While their longship was repaired, they married and sheltered within the broch before fleeing to Iceland.



MV Hjaltland sailing past Mousa Broch

In 1153, the Orkneyinga Saga recounts how Erlend the Young abducted Margaret, the mother of Earl Harald Maddadson, and took refuge in Mousa Broch. Earl Harald besieged the broch, but it proved too difficult to attack.

Fascinating fact

The renowned Stevenson lighthouse builders helped design Sandsayre Pier – the slipway where the Mousa Boat departs from – in the 1850s.

3. A fishing community arrived in the mid-1700s

After centuries of abandonment, Bruce of Sumburgh purchased the island. By 1771, eleven families lived on Mousa.

In 1783, Lerwick merchant James Pyper acquired the island and built the Haa House overlooking the broch. Legend says he bought the island to keep his first wife away from alcohol – though Mousa's smuggling reputation ensured her bottle never ran dry!

After James' death, his second wife Anne remained in the Haa. After Anne's passing in 1852, the only other household on Mousa – the Smith family – departed the following year, leaving the isle uninhabited.

4. Mousa is a thriving RSPB nature reserve

With the departure of human interference, Mousa flourished as a haven for wildlife and now operates as a RSPB nature reserve.

The island is home to the UK's largest colony of European Storm Petrels, known locally as 'alamooties'. These seabirds return from sea under the cover of darkness to nest in boulder beaches and within the walls of Mousa Broch. This spectacle can be seen by joining guided evening trips which run from late May to mid-July.

Black guillemots, arctic terns and great skuas are also spotted here, while seals are frequently seen in shallow waters around the shoreline.



Fascinating fact

Despite its small size, several ships have run aground on Mousa including the French Le Jeune Alphonse in 1853, the St Sunniva passenger ship in 1930 and the SS Murrayfield in 1942.

5. Mousa Sound was once guarded by two brochs

As mentioned, the iconic Mousa Broch remains one of the best-preserved examples of its kind. However, did you know that directly across on the Mainland stands its lesser-known twin; the Broch of Burland?

Built between 500BC and 200AD, Burland Broch occupies a dramatic position 30-metres above sea level on a narrow peninsula surrounded by cliffs. A pleasant walk leads to this broch and offers a unique view over to Mousa.

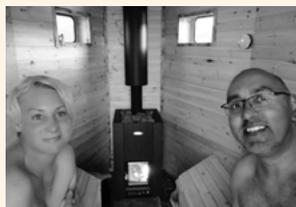
Plan your journey by visiting www.mousa.co.uk



Tucked between sweeping coastlines and windswept skies, Orkney offers a landscape that restores the soul. Now, imagine stepping from that wild beauty straight into the soothing embrace of a wood-fired sauna. Sauna Wanna brings exactly that, a mobile sauna experience at the Point of Ness in Stromness, that blends the ancient tradition of heat bathing with the raw, elemental charm of Orkney.

Whether you're plunging into icy waters after a session or simply soaking up the views through the steam, Sauna Wanna invites locals and visitors alike to slow down, reconnect, and discover wellness in its most natural setting.

We spoke to Marty, who along with his partner Judy, set up 'Sauna Wanna,' a mobile sauna in Orkney.



What inspired you to start a mobile sauna business?

This whole project started as a bit of a joke during a date night. Over dinner and a few drinks, Judy showed me a video of a guy who had converted an Ifor Williams horse trailer into a sauna. Knowing my background in property development, she asked me if I thought I could build one. I casually said, "Probably," not giving it another thought. Two weeks later, an old horse trailer was delivered to our door. Judy grinned at me and said, "Off you go." That's when I realised she had taken the challenge seriously!

We were both looking for a project to take our minds off our demanding jobs in healthcare. We never planned for it to become a full-blown business; we just wanted a place to relax and thought we would occasionally rent it out to people who wanted to use it by the slip.

What are the most common reasons customers seek out an outdoor sauna?

While the individual health benefits are great, many of our customers appear to be drawn to the social aspect. In a world dominated by screens and isolation, our sauna provides a space for people to gather, connect, and enjoy quality time together.

Are there any wellbeing trends that have influenced the design or features of your sauna?

When we designed the sauna we were aware of the wellbeing trends but this did not really influence the design. After all, how do you put a sauna into a horse trailer? We based the design as best we could on Finnish sauna standards. We did a lot of research in construction, insulation, airflow, and stove choice, all aimed to achieve Löyly – the spirit or essence of the sauna. A good löyly is not just a hot burst; it's a soft, pleasant wave of heat that descends and purifies the body and mind.

During which seasons do you find it most beneficial?

We have only been open since May, however we've been overwhelmed by the incredible support from both locals and tourists. We think the experience of a sauna in the colder months at our location will be magical. With the wood burner and LED lights, our cosy, inviting space will offer the perfect escape from the long, dark nights.

Did you face any challenges when thinking about the location of the sauna?

We feel incredibly fortunate to be where we are. The location, right on the slip at the Point of Ness in Stromness, couldn't be more perfect.

What are the health benefits from using the sauna?

Stepping out of the sauna, you're enveloped in a state of deep warmth and relaxation. The initial shock of the cold is an invigorating jolt to the system.



The icy Orcadian water feels like it's awakening every nerve ending, but that shock quickly gives way to a rush of pure adrenaline and clarity. When you emerge, the warmth returns with a powerful, tingling sensation. You're left feeling refreshed, renewed, and connected to nature in a way nothing else can.

Do you have any recommendations for first-time sauna users?

Just go for it – how many people can say they had a sauna in a horse trailer overlooking Stromness Harbour watching the boats go by?

How do I book?

You can find us on our website at www.saunawanna.co.uk

What should I bring?

You, friends, towels and water. We have a changing room in guess what... another horse trailer! The changing room is open for the community to use, so even if you're not using the sauna you're welcome to use it.

Unique things to do in Shetland

The Shetland Islands are nothing short of extraordinary. This rugged, remote archipelago of over a hundred islands is rich with ancient history, Viking heritage, vibrant culture, and incredible wildlife keeping visitors returning again and again.

Here are 12 unique things to do in Shetland on your next visit!

1. Play midnight golf

Shetland offers a truly unique golfing experience, with courses surrounded by stunning landscapes and the chance to play at midnight during simmer dim, when the sun barely sets beyond the horizon.



2. Drive across an airport runway

At Sumburgh Airport, the main road south crosses directly over the runway – one of the few places in the world where you can drive over an active landing strip. Traffic lights halt cars as planes land or take off, creating a wonderfully quirky reminder of Shetland's unique geography.



3. Step into the Viking world at Jarlshof and Underhoull

Jarlshof reveals 4,000 years of continuous settlement, including Norse longhouses where you can almost imagine hearths glowing against the Atlantic storms. On Unst, Britain's northernmost inhabited island, the Viking site at Underhoull feel even more remote. Unst holds over 60 longhouse remains, the highest density of rural Viking sites anywhere.

4. Stand at the edge of Britain on Unst

Unst, the UK's northernmost island, feels like the edge of the world. From Hermaness cliffs, where seabirds wheel above crashing waves, to the lonely Muckle Flugga lighthouse beyond the shore, the landscape is dramatic and raw. Explore Viking sites, the 16th-century Muness Castle, and quirky attractions like Bobby's Bus Shelter. The Keen of Hamar nature reserve boasts plants so rare that they can only be found in a few places across the globe.

5. Visit Britain's biggest birdbox on Mousa

The island of Mousa is home to the 2,000-year-old Mousa Broch, a remarkable Iron Age stone tower that by night comes alive with thousands of storm petrels nesting within its ancient walls. Guided night tours from late May to mid-July let visitors witness this magical spectacle firsthand.



6. Experience a fire festival

Shetland's fire festivals are a blaze of Norse heritage, none more famous than Lerwick's Up Helly Aa each January. As darkness falls, torch-bearing "guizers" dressed as Vikings parade through the streets before burning a replica longship. The mix of history, spectacle, and community spirit makes it an unmissable experience.



7. Meet Shetland ponies and puffins

Shetland ponies, with their shaggy manes and gentle natures, wander freely across the islands, often approaching visitors with curious charm. From April to mid-August, puffins, known locally as Tammie Norries, come ashore to breed. Sumburgh Head is one of the best spots to see these colourful, comical birds up close.

8. Walk the sand tombolo to St Ninian's Isle

Linked to the Shetland Mainland by a 500m sand tombolo, the largest in the UK, St Ninian's Isle is a magical place. Waves lap gently on both sides as you cross the golden strip to the island, where an ancient chapel once hid a hoard of Pictish treasure.

9. Discover Fair Isle knitting

Fair Isle knitting, famed for its intricate patterns and vivid colours, is a cornerstone of Shetland's cultural identity. The designs reflect the sea, sky, and landscape of the remote island from which they take their name. Visit in late September for Shetland Wool Week, celebrating native sheep, textiles, and craftsmanship. The Shetland Textile Museum at the Bød of Gremista near Lerwick offers a fascinating look at historical and contemporary knitting traditions.



10. Have a Burra Bear made

At Burra Bears, soft toys are handmade from recycled Fair Isle knitwear, giving each one its own character and connection to Shetland's heritage. You can have a bear made from a cherished garment, creating a keepsake that honours a loved one or marks a special moment. More than just souvenirs, these bears are heartfelt symbols of memory and belonging.

11. Seek out Shetland's quirks

Shetland is full of unexpected delights. In Hamnavoe, the Shellie Hoose is a shed covered in intricate shell patterns. Near Brae, Mavis Grind is a narrow isthmus where you can toss a stone from the Atlantic to the North Sea. In Scalloway near the castle, you might spot a cheerful 'fish fence,' while in Hamnavoe, Anne Eunson's hand-knitted garden fence made from black fishing twine is a true local marvel. Even the colourful houses and resilient gardens, such as Da Gairdins and Lerwick's Jubilee Flower Park, tell stories of creativity thriving in northern winds.

12. Taste Shetland's flavours

Shetland's food tells its own story. Try Reestit Mutton Soup, a hearty island classic with tender salted meat and root vegetables. Sample fresh Shetland mussels, plump with the taste of the sea. And for something sweet, visit the Island Larder in Lerwick for Puffin Poo – a playful local treat made from white chocolate, meringue, and marshmallow.



Helpful information when travelling with NorthLink Ferries

We are here for you

Our passenger service team are dedicated to ensuring your sailing is safe, comfortable and enjoyable. Please don't hesitate to reach out to our staff who are available to assist with any needs throughout your journey.

Supporting passengers with accessibility requirements

NorthLink ships and ports are designed with accessibility in mind. You'll find lifts, accessible toilets, Changing Places facilities and specially adapted accessible cabins.

If you have any specific accessibility requirements, why not use WelcoMe to communicate your needs to NorthLink staff in advance of your travel? Find out more about this disability-aware customer service platform at www.wel-co.me/northlink-ferries

Travelling with pets

We are happy to accommodate pets on board our ferries. Animals can travel in a pre-booked kennel, remain in your vehicle, or stay with you in a pet-friendly cabin. On the MV Hamnavoe, there is a comfortable dog lounge to enjoy.

Entertainment on board

There is plenty to keep children entertained on board including a games zone and cinema (MV Hrossey and MV Hjaltland) and the Viking's Den play area.

Activity sheets and colouring pencils are also available from the ship's reception desk!

Browse our shop for crafts and produce from Shetland and Orkney, unwind with a drink in the Midship Bar or enjoy a delicious meal from the Feast Restaurant – view our menu at www.northlinkferries.co.uk/menu

Did you know?

- Through our Shore Power Project, the MV Hamnavoe 'plugs in' to clean electricity while docked overnight in Stromness, Orkney – saving over 750 tonnes of carbon dioxide being released into the environment annually.

That is the equivalent of:

- Over 290 diesel cars driving 10,000 miles for a year
 - 82 homes' energy use for one year
- Did you know you can view every issue of the Northern Lights Magazine on our website? Simply scan the QR code to read more!



www.northlinkferries.co.uk
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