

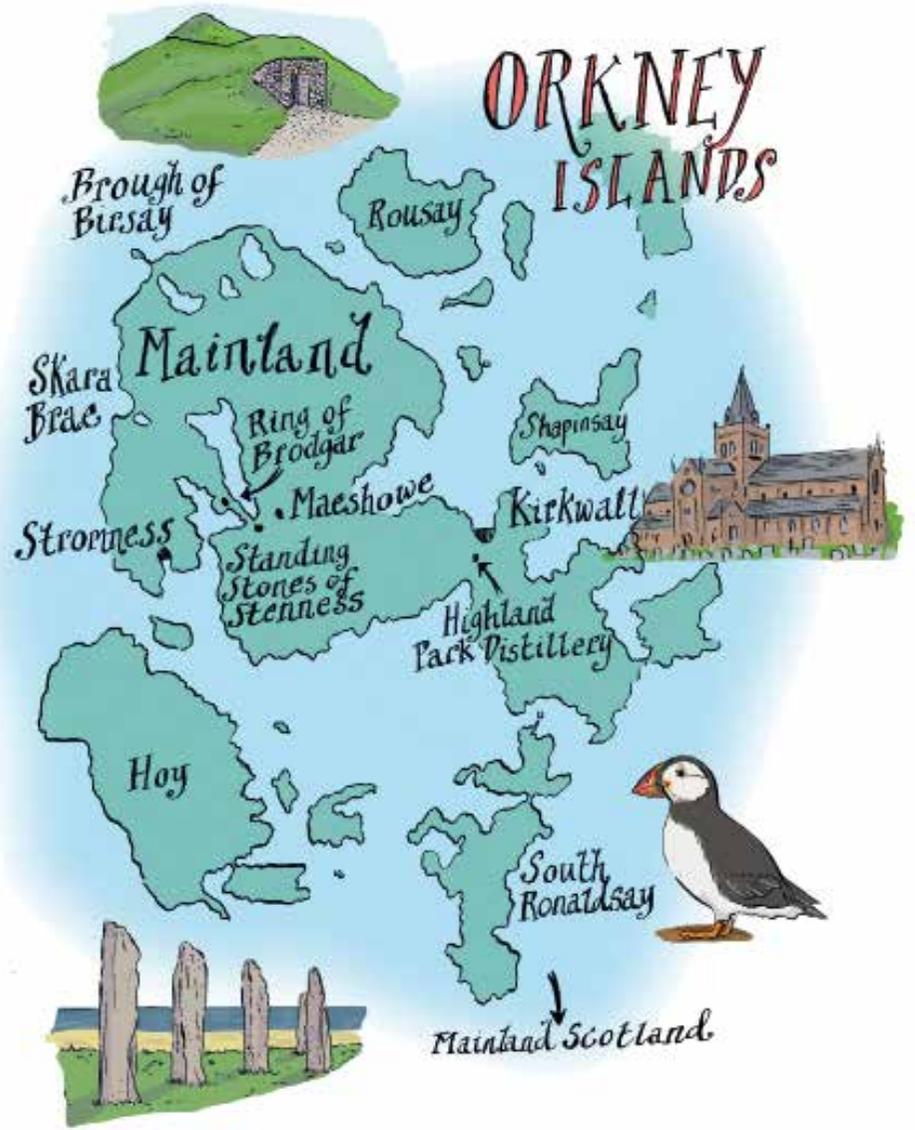
Words by REBECCA F REUTER

ORKNEY

casts its spell

*Our writer looks back at her first visit to Orkney,
when she fell in love with the remote island group*





Amid-morning, late-summer squall welcomes us to Scotland's Orkney Islands. Our car ferry, the MV Pentalina, arrives at the village of St Margaret's Hope on South Ronaldsay, one of the smaller islands of the Orkney archipelago. We've taken the 15-mile, hour-long ferry ride across the Pentland Firth from Gills Bay on the northern tip of Scotland to explore the Neolithic history of Orkney, as well as my partner's Orcadian ancestry.

Hats, gloves, and coats are necessary to stand on deck where we look for hard-to-spot wildlife, like the orange-beaked oystercatcher, puffins and grey seals. The intermittent mist and white caps on the dark grey water makes spotting animals difficult. We write a note in our travel journal to bring binoculars next time.

St Margaret's Hope is a small village easily explored on foot while waiting for a return ferry, or you may wish to stay awhile if solitude in a little community is what you seek. The hanging baskets and planters filled with colourful flowers tempt us to stop as we drive through the village towards the main road. We decide to check out the town on our return journey.

Our little yellow Fiat 500 rental car zips over mist-shrouded green hills, past the barely visible farmhouses of South Ronaldsay, and across a low bridge towards our destination, another 15 miles away, the metropolis of Kirkwall. Kirkwall, the largest town in Orkney, with a population of about 8,500 people, resides on the largest Orkney island, known as Mainland, which is about a third of the size of Majorca.

PREVIOUS PAGE:

The Ring of Brodgar is just one of many ancient sites in Orkney

LEFT: Skara Brae is the best preserved Neolithic village in western Europe

We are greeted by a warm cup of tea at our B&B, Bellavista, in Kirkwall. It is difficult to leave our cosy room as another squall of sideways rain passes through, but Orkney's 5,000 years of cultural history lures us out into the elements. While driving down the main two-lane ▶

© IAN COOPER IMAGES/SHUTTERSTOCK/KENNY LAM/VISITSCOTLAND. ILLUSTRATION © MICHAEL A HILL



CLOCKWISE, FROM THIS IMAGE: Mainland Orkney is the largest island in the archipelago; the ruins of the Earl's Palace at Birsay; whisky served at Kirkwall's Highland Park Distillery

FIVE MUST-SEE SIGHTS

1 The Earl's Palace, Birsay

A few steps from the tearoom in Birsay are the ruins of the Earl's Palace. This is where Mary, Queen of Scot's half-brother resided for a short period of time in the 1500s. Free to visit year-round.

historicensevironment.scot

2 Brough of Birsay

This settlement is only accessible by foot at low tide when a walkway is exposed. The island was continuously inhabited by the Pictish from the 7th century AD to the Vikings. From here you can get a glimpse of the Orkney headlands to the south. Open, tides permitting, mid-June through to September.

historicensevironment.scot

3 St Magnus Cathedral

Founded in 1137 by the Viking, Earl Rognvald, Britain's northernmost cathedral in the town of Kirkwall was built to honour St Magnus who was martyred in Orkney.

stmagnus.org

4 Ness of Brodgar

Less than a kilometre (half a mile) from the Ring of Brodgar is another monument of the Heart of Neolithic Orkney. An active archaeological site, for two months each summer the area bustles with archaeologists, students and volunteers, as they unearth more clues about the ancients who dwelled here. Guided tours are available on a first come, first served basis at 11am, 1pm and 3pm on weekdays and 11am and 3pm on weekends.

nessofbrodgar.co.uk

5 Rousay Island

A 15-minute ferry ride takes you to the island of our writer's husband's ancestral homestead and more Neolithic monuments, such as Midhowe Chambered Cairn and Midhowe Broch.

discoverousay.co.uk



Our guide illuminates prehistoric rune symbols, graffiti left by Vikings hundreds of years ago

road towards our first stop, the sun pokes through the fast-moving clouds.

Maeshowe is the first of a cluster of monuments on Mainland Orkney that we visit, known collectively as the Heart of Neolithic Orkney. They were proclaimed a UNESCO World Heritage

Site in 1999. The guided tour of the ancient chambered cairn of Maeshowe begins at the visitor's centre. Outside, the guide points to a large, grassy knoll across the road. We are led through a fenced gate towards the knoll.

We duck our heads to enter the 3ft-high entrance and in a bent over waddle, traverse the 36ft-long passageway until we arrive at the centre of the chamber. My six-foot frame fits easily in the cavernous room lit by the guide's flashlight. She illuminates prehistoric rune symbols, graffiti left by Vikings hundreds of years ago. We're told Maeshowe's entrance was built so that each winter solstice the rays of the low hanging sun penetrated the inner chamber.

With sunset hours away we have plenty of time for a late-afternoon tour of Kirkwall's Highland Park Distillery. The Viking heritage of the Orkneys is alive and well behind the dark stone walls of the northernmost Scotch distillery in the world. Each sip of single-malt whisky provides a smooth, full-mouth feel, with subtle smoky notes from the peat-smoked, hand-malted barley. A kiss of floral notes from the bountiful island heather, that makes up the over 4,000-year-old peat harvested from these treeless islands, finishes the taste experience.

We stretch our legs on a sunset walk along the seawall from our inn towards Kirkwall's harbour. The harbour boasts vessels of all sizes in summer, with sailboats, fishing boats, and ferries. The Victorian stone buildings of central Kirkwall are a few steps from the harbour. One of these buildings is the Kirkwall Hotel, whose Harbour View Restaurant offers a long list of Orcadian delicacies such as local cheeses with bere bannocks (bere is a type of barely grown on the ►



© NORTH LIGHT IMAGES/ISTOCK/GETTY/VISHAL GOKLANI/JULE BERLIN/SHUTTERSTOCK





PLAN YOUR FUTURE VISIT

GETTING HERE

BY SEA

Pentland Ferries run regular crossings from Gills Bay near John O'Groats to St Margaret's Hope on South Ronaldsay. pentlandferries.co.uk

Northlink offers ferries from either Scrabster in Caithness to Stromness on Mainland Orkney or from Aberdeen to Kirkwall, also on Mainland Orkney. northlinkferries.co.uk

BY AIR

LoganAir flies to Orkney from Inverness, Glasgow, Aberdeen and Edinburgh. loganair.co.uk

NEOLITHIC ORKNEY

Historic Environment Scotland looks after the main ancient sites on the isles. historicenvironment.scot

WHERE TO EAT

Refuel with a scone and cup of tea in Birsay Bay Tearoom, with unobstructed views of the Atlantic, except for the cows. birsaybaytearoom.co.uk

WHERE TO STAY

Bellavista is a family-run guest house just outside Kirkwall with unfussy rooms and a home-cooked breakfast. bellavistaorkney.co.uk

GIFTS FOR HOME

Though you can buy this Orkney-made jewellery online, a visit to the Sheila Fleet gallery in Kirkwall is a must. sheilafleet.com

INFORMATION

This is Orkney is an invaluable resource for anyone planning a future visit. orkney.com

Orkney Islands over 3,500 years), haggis and local scallops.

A bright yellow sun and blue skies greet us on our second day. The day's goal is to view the rest of the monuments of Neolithic Orkney. The main road takes us past a cluster of homes, a church turned self-catered apartment, and the post office of Finstown. Green pastures spotted with sheep and cows line the road before we turn onto a single-track road. We stop to observe a truck offload a herd of sheep near our second site, the Standing Stones of Stenness. The 16ft-high stones are remnants of a Neolithic henge and dwarf the herd of sheep mowing the grass.

Across a small bridge separating Loch Harray and Loch Stenness we see the tips of our next stop peaking over a low hill, the 5,000-year-old stones of the Ring of Brodgar. We park in the nearly empty car park. Walking around the 325.5m (1,068ft) circumference of the third largest stone circle in Britain, we contemplate a time where the cycles of the sun and moon were celebrated and human's connection to nature was ingrained in the culture of everyday life.

Just 5.5 miles away is Skara Brae. Entombed by earth and grass for thousands of years, the settlement was exposed over millennia by the winds and waves of the North Atlantic's heavy storms, which slowly eroded the coastline and created the adjacent Skail Bay. Skara Brae provides a snapshot of the more mundane aspects of Neolithic life. Imagination is unnecessary to see how the vertically organised rocks were once shelves.

Be warned all those who venture to these farflung islands – there's every chance the Orkneys will cast a spell on you, as they did us. Two years after our first Orkney visit, my partner proposed. Despite the 4,350-mile distance from our home in Seattle, Washington, we decided to have our ceremony at the Ring of Brodgar. It was our way of weaving the present with the past. **S**

LEFT: The Ring of Brodgar
RIGHT: Rebecca and Jim tied the knot at the ancient heritage site

