ORKNEY

Orcadia or Arcadia? Exploring the remote, enchanting islands.

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There are no flight-arrivals announcements on the island of North Ronaldsay: instead, a sudden scattering of sheep signals the descent of an incoming aircraft. This is because the airfield is exactly that – a field. And before you protest that the unfortunate sheep should be moved elsewhere, bear in mind that in their book an acre of grass is the Garden of Eden: most of the time they eat seaweed. A rough dyke runs along the perimeter of the island to confine them to the stony shore, where they dine among gulls and guillemots.

This, apart from Shetland, is as far flung as you can get in Britain. Flying in from Scotland, the Orkneys lie scattered across the sea below you like oatcakes on an expanse of beaten verdigris copper. Even on green and fertile mainland Orkney – the largest island, similar in size to the Isle of Wight – a sense of remoteness is ever-present. It is one of those places where the land seems merely an interruption of the sea and sky.

At first Orkney seems so small that you think you can comfortably get to grips with it in a couple of days. But the more you explore it, the more you appreciate the density of what there is to see. (The best time to go is in summer, because you get twenty hours of daylight -–and you need most of them.) If it were further south, its scenery and archaeological sights would make it one of the most visited places in Europe.

Take the Ring of Brodgar, a circle of 4,500-year-old standing stones on the narrow sleeve of land dividing the Loch of Harray from the Loch of Stenness. Stonehenge – built half a millennium later – seems crude in comparison, and its setting pedestrian. The Brodgar stones, sleek and

angular, command the lochs and low hills like titanic chessmen on a board of purple heather. The great burial mound of Maes Howe, close by, is even older, and has everything you could ask for in a neolithic tomb – entry via a low, spooky passageway; a central chamber whose back wall the sun strikes at the winter solstice; 30-tonne slabs of stone; and the unexpected bonus of Viking graffiti.

Offsetting this heroic paganism, Orkney has a strong Christian tradition, epitomised by the tiny ruined medieval church on the tidal island of Birsay. Visiting it means crossing a causeway at low tide, past seaweedy pools and fingers of rock pointing to the looming headland known as the Black Crag. Much of Orkney's shoreline seems designed as a geology lesson: on the far side of the island, the puffin-sheltering cliffs plunge to a sloping pavement made up of what look like giant slices of Ryvita.

The holiest of Orcadians, the 12th-century martyr St Magnus, is buried in the cathedral in Kirkwall which bears his name. From the outside the building looks like a Victorian town hall with ideas above its station, but the interior is another matter: its narrow nave, marked out by thick, rough, red-sandstone pillars rising in three tiers, gives the illusion of being aboard a great ship – or perhaps in the belly of Jonah's whale. The great number of ghoulish memorial stones (embellished with skulls and hourglasses) are a particular delight.

By Orcadian standards, Kirkwall is oppressively urban, but a city that has signs saying 'Caution – otters crossing' cannot be all bad. The handsome ruins of the Bishop's Palace and the Earl's Palace are also worth visiting, as is the Orkney Museum.

More beguiling is Kirkwall's great rival, the fishing port of Stromness. It may not be a picture-book seaside town, but there is a thrill of discovery about following the narrow, winding main street and glimpsing

the small slipways between the houses. The modest but fascinating Stromness Museum brings home the strength of Orkney's seafaring tradition, which sent local men to Newfoundland and – in Viking days – Byzantium. Across the road a blue plaque marks the flat (now in shameful disrepair) where the poet George Mackay Brown lived. Walk on past the outskirts of the town and you come to the beautiful kirkyard overlooking the ocean where he is buried: here, in his words, 'the history of the island is written on stone pages'.

Counting Orkney's other islands – some of them little more than splinters of geological shrapnel – is an almost impossible task, but there are a dozen that can be reached by regular ferry services. Chief among them is Hoy, famous for its dramatic sea stack, the Old Man (the seven-mile walk from Moaness Pier takes you down through a heathery valley and up along the cliffs of Rackwick Bay, where you can gaze out towards the Scottish mainland). Rousay has an impressive Iron Age fort, the Broch of Midhowe, and on Egilsay you can see the spot where St Magnus was murdered. Be prepared, though: shops and shelter are scarce, and the wait for the ferry back can be a wet and hungry one.

This is the deal with the Orkneys – their beauty has always been tempered by harshness, and two sites on the main island explain graphically the struggle that humans have endured to live here. The first is the neolithic village of Skara Brae. Situated on the western shore, near the wild cliffs of Yesnaby, it was lost for centuries beneath the grass and sand, until disinterred by a great storm in Victorian times. Today you can stand and peer down into half a dozen houses and imagine what the Changing Places team would have done with them in 3,000 BC. From a distance, the village looks like an ingenious crazy-golf course; from the air, like the mechanism of an antique watch.

In the centre of each house is a hearth; facing the door is a stone dresser; and to the sides are the most uncomfortable-looking beds imaginable: cramped boxes with stone sides, and bare earth by way of mattresses. (In fact the occupants may have used bracken as an early form of V-Spring.) It is hard to know which to admire more: the ingenuity of the builders in creating these places, or their fortitude in putting up with them.

Beside Skara Brae stands Skaill House, a laird's seat built between the seventeenth and twentieth century and cleverly presented as a 1950s country house. This is Orkney living at its most gracious; but to appreciate the pace of change for most Orcadians, you have to travel a few miles further, to the Corrigall Farm Museum.

To call this museum ramshackle is to put it mildly. Passing through a draughty byre with a scattering of agricultural equipment – an ox's yoke, a tub for removing pig's bristles – you come to a farmhouse arranged exactly as it would have been in the mid-nineteenth century. In the scullery are quern-stones for grinding meal and cubby holes for brood geese; in the smoky kitchen, dried fish hang across the fireplace like surrealists' Christmas stockings. A sheep wanders through, and kittens huddle in an antique cradle. The effect is to bring home more vividly than any computer-generated reconstruction how people in this part of the world lived only a few generations ago: the wooden box-beds seem only a modest advance on those at Skara Brae.

From Corrigall, drive across the interior of the island towards Evie. Along the way you will see almost no human habitations, and glimpse how Orkney would have looked when Skara Brae was built. The road seems like a causeway over an ocean of meadows, twisting into the sky. There are few places where man seems so at one with the earth – and so close to heaven.