

Scotland Itinerary Days 9 – 12

Orkney - Maeshowe Chambered Cairn - Museum of Orkney - Italian Chapel - the Tomb of the Eagles - St Magnus Cathedral - Skara Brae - Kirkbustler Museum - the Broch of Gurness - Peatfire Centre - Unstan Cairn - Brough of Birsay - Stones of Stenness - Barnhouse Village - the Ring of Brogar

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Day
Nine

This day will be free until mid afternoon when we will visit Maeshowe Chambered Cairn a very special sacred place and regarded as the finest chambered tomb in north west Europe. It consists of a large grassy mound with a long stone passage leading to an elaborate stone-lined chamber with side cells. Constructed around 5,000 years ago, the tomb was carefully aligned so that for three weeks before the Winter Solstice, the light of the setting sun shines down the passage and illuminates the back of the chamber. In the middle of the 12th century the tomb was broken into by some Norse descendants of the Norwegian Vikings who began to raid Scotland in the 8th century. They left more than 30 runic inscriptions and some beautiful sketches carved into the walls and comprise the greatest collection of runic inscriptions that survive outside Scandinavia.

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Day
Ten

Before departing Kirkwall we will visit the Museum of Orkney and see its excellent collection of Neolithic, Pictish and Viking artefacts. From Kirkwall, our first stop will be at the Italian Chapel built during World War II by a group of Italian Prisoners of War from two Nissan huts. The huts were beautifully transformed into the prettiest chapel imaginable with numerous paintings on the walls and ceiling. The people of Orkney regard the chapel as a gift to be hallowed and preserved.

We then make the short drive to the Visitors' Centre at the Tomb of the Eagles. The Visitors' Centre has a small museum and allows people to handle ancient artefacts found at the sites. From the Visitors' Centre we will make the short walk to the accessible Isbister chambered cairn (the Tomb of the Eagles) built around 5,000 years ago. Aligned to the rising sun, it has a large central chamber divided into sections by large stone slabs and has three side chambers. When excavated, among the human bones were many talons and bones of the white-tailed or sea eagle which gave the tomb its name. The 3,000 year old Bronze Age building was discovered in 1957 and is complete with a stone trough, hearth and water system. All in all, both sites are truly remarkable and very special.

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Days Eleven and Twelve

We are most privileged to be joined on these two days by Helen Woodsford-Dean, our guest guide for Orkney. An archaeologist by profession and Orkney organiser for the Scottish Pagan Federation, Helen's knowledge of the history and archaeology of sacred places and the flora and fauna of Orkney is exceptional. She will take us to some wonderful sacred sites.

We will begin our tour with Helen in Kirkwall. She will show us Viking and medieval sites including the Bishop's Palace and the Earl's Palace as well as St Magnus Cathedral. Work began on the Cathedral in Kirkwall in 1137. By this time, the descendants of the Viking Norse were Christian and the Cathedral was dedicated to St Magnus, a previous Earl of Orkney, and noted for his piety and kindness. A magnificent and beautiful structure, it dominates the town of Kirkwall. The Cathedral is not owned by any church but rather the people of Orkney.

First discovered in 1850 after a great storm blew away the sand covering it, Skara Brae gives us an extraordinarily intimate view of Neolithic life. A collection of eight stone-walled houses built near the sea, each house contains a single room which is divided into separate areas and contains stone beds, stone dressers and watertight troughs. Skara Brae was occupied between 3180BC and 2500BC and is Europe's most complete and beautifully preserved Neolithic village. It is not known why the village was abandoned. Skara Brae is a truly exceptional visiting experience.

We will also visit the Kirkbuster Museum, the only surviving example in northern Europe of a firehouse where the hearth lies in the centre of the room. It is now a museum and provides a good idea of the lifestyle of more prosperous farming people.

The Broch of Gurness once housed a substantial Iron Age community from about 1BC. Settlement at Gurness continued to the 5th century AD into Pictish times. Later in the 9th century, a stone-lined grave was made for a Viking woman who was buried with a pair of bronze broaches and an iron sickle and knife. There are other Viking graves to be seen made with stones in the shape of a boat. At the centre of the settlement is a stone tower probably once around 10 metres high which features two skins of drystone walls with stone-floored galleries in between and stone steps to access each level. The broch features two hearths and a subterranean stone cistern with steps leading down into it which is surely of religious significance. The broch is in a magnificent setting built on a clifftop by the sea.

In the evening, we will visit the Peatfire Centre for an evening of storytelling and music.

On our second day with Helen, we will first visit Unstan Chambered Cairn. Built in the Neolithic sometime between 3400 and 2800BC, the Cairn is part of the spectacular ritual landscape located only a few kilometres from the Stones of Stenness, the Ness of Brogdar and the Ring of Brogdar. The Ring of Brogdar is visible from Unstan. The Cairn has a long and narrow entrance passage to the main chamber which contains three central stalls and two shelved compartments. It also contains Norse runes carved into the walls.

Located on a tidal island off the coast of mainland Orkney, the Brough of Birsay is regarded as one of the most important and picturesque archaeological sites in Scotland. It comprises the remains of an Iron Age Viking settlement, a 7th century Pictish settlement and a 12th century church. Birsay was once the stronghold of the powerful Norse Earl of Orkney, Thorfinn Sigurdarson. The island is reached by a causeway and, weather permitting, we will be able to cross to visit these exceptional sites.

At the epicentre of Neolithic Orkney, we will visit the Stones of Stenness, the Barnhouse settlement and the Ring of Brogdar. By the time work was begun erecting the Stones of Stenness in 3100BC, the Barnhouse settlement or temple was well established. The Stones of Stenness site was originally a henge, a level circular platform surrounded by a ditch and bank. Still visible today, at the heart of the site is a great stone hearth with the remains of a dolmen like structure nearby. At some stage, foundations were dug for 12 standing stones of which only four remain standing.

A very short stroll from the Stones of Stenness takes us to the Barnhouse village occupied between 3200BC and 2900BC. It contains the foundations of houses and a much larger structure which may have been a temple. Perhaps the houses were the homes of the priests/priestesses of the temple.

The Ness of Brogdar stands on a narrow strip of land between the Stones of Stenness and the Ring of Brogdar. Discovered in 2002, it is regarded as one of the greatest achievements of Neolithic peoples anywhere in the world. Unfortunately, due to financial constraints, archaeologists work on the site for only six weeks a year in mid-summer and it is only open to view at this time. However, Helen will tell us in detail about the Ness of Brogdar, a large complex of stone buildings surrounded by a great wall, and where she has been most fortunate to be part of the dig.

The Ring of Brogdar is a massive Neolithic henge with a ditch and outer bank. It is 104 metres in diameter and is placed high on a hill overlooking a beautiful loch. It originally had 60 standing stones but 27 still stand. Most henges do not contain stone circles but Brogdar is a striking exception ranking with Avebury among the greatest of such sites. It is the finest known truly circular late Neolithic or early Bronze Age stone circle. As well as guiding us round this beautiful circle, Helen will facilitate a ritual for us within this magnificent sacred space.

Before returning to Kirkwall, we will have our post-ritual dinner at the nearby Standing Stones Hotel.

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