

Northern Highlands & Islands



The northern Highlands epitomises most visitors' romantic notion of Scotland. Vast, wild expanses punctuated by sparkling, steely blue lochs, and towering mountain ranges veined with snow, their summits often lost in swirling cloud. This is powerful country, and you can almost feel the desolation and tragedy of the Clearances – the silence can be deafening. But the romanticism of the region is inescapable too, and if you've ever heard the call of the wild, you're likely to be mesmerised here. There's something unique and Scottish in all of this – it's the ethereal light that squeezes through the clouds and tangos over Europe's northern fringe, illuminating its rugged splendour and changing its appearance by the hour, or even by the minute.

The stunning scenery extends offshore to the Isle of Skye, where the jagged peaks of the Cuillin Hills tear at the mist, and the ghosts of Bonnie Prince Charlie and Flora Macdonald haunt the hallways of Dunvegan Castle. Skye is a paradise for walkers, climbers and wildlife enthusiasts, with its dramatic mountains, lonely lochs and scenic coastlines, home to golden eagles, peregrine falcons, otters, deer and seals.

And that magical light intensifies as you head west to the Outer Hebrides – the 'isles at the edge of the sea' – with their landscapes of peat bog, lochan and bare, glaciated gneiss. These harsh landscapes are softened by glittering shell-sand beaches, wildflower-strewn machair, and buttercup meadows where the outlines of ruined crofts are visible in the turf like fossils in a stone. This necklace of remote islands is a last bastion of Gaelic culture, where the hardships of life in the old *blackhouses* still remain within living memory.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Gorging on fresh, succulent seafood in the delightful town of **Ullapool** (p371), with its picture-perfect harbour
- Grappling with the Highlands' mighty peaks in the stunning mountainous playgrounds of **Inverpolly Nature Reserve** (p371), **Assynt** (p370) and **Glen Torridon** (p375)
- Enjoying crab sandwiches at the **Stein Inn** (p387) after touring the craft studios and workshops of Duirinish and Waternish on Skye
- Hiking up to spectacular **Coire Lagan** (p383) amid the jagged peaks of the Cuillin mountains of Skye
- Exploring the remote and beautiful beaches on the west coast of **Lewis** (p391) and **Harris** (p396) in the Outer Hebrides



■ POPULATION: 175,000

■ AREA: 20,000 SQ KM



EAST COAST

In both landscape and character, the east coast is where the real barrenness of the Highlands begins to unfold. A gentle splendour and a sense of escapism mark the route along the twisting A9, as it heads north for the last of Scotland's far-flung, mainland population outposts. With only a few exceptions the tourism frenzy is left behind once the road traverses Cromarty Firth and snakes its way along wild and pristine coastline.

While the interior is dominated by the vast and mournful Sutherland mountain range, along the coast great heather-covered hills have themselves out of the wild North Sea.

Dominated by miles of stone fencing crawling its way over hills and pastures, the rolling farmland drops suddenly into the icy waters, and the only interruptions en route are the small, historic towns moored precariously on the coast's edge.

Getting Around

Call **Traveline** (☎ 0871 200 22 33) for public-transport information. The region is well served by buses, and trains follow the coast up to Wick then across to Thurso. **Scottish Citylink** (☎ 0870 550 5050) runs regular services from Inverness through to Wick, stopping at most towns on the A9 and A99 along the way, before taking the short cut inland to Thurso. **Rapsons/Highland Country** (☎ 01463-710555)

operates buses from Wick to Thurso, via the coast and John o'Groats. **Stagecoach Inverness** (☎ 01463-239292) runs services to towns close to (including north of) Inverness.

STRATHPEFFER

☎ 01997 / pop 950

Strathpeffer is a delightful Highland town, its creaking old pavilions and grandiose hotels dripping with Victorian charm and a faded grandeur.

The village was a fashionable spa in Victorian and Edwardian times, when chic society folk congregated here to splash about in the sulphurous waters.

The self-service **tourist office** (☎ 421415; ☹ 10am-5pm Tue-Sat, late-May-late-Sep) is in the Pump Room and has limited info. You'll find a supermarket and a post office nearby in the town square.

Sights

The renovated **Pump Room** (☎ 421415; adult/child £2/1.50; ☹ 10am-5pm Tue-Sat, late-May-late-Sep) has some splendid displays showing the bizarre lengths Victorians went to in the quest for a healthy glow.

At the old Victorian train station is the **Highland Museum of Childhood** (☎ 421031; adult/child £2/1.50; ☹ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat, 2-5pm Sun Apr-Oct; ♿). It has a wide range of social history displays about childhood in the Highlands, and also has activities for children, including a dressing-up box and a toy train.

The **Eagle Stone** (follow the signs from the main drag) is well worth a look when you're in town. It's a pre-7th century Pictish stone connected to local folklore – the Brahan Seer, who predicted many future events.

The **Strathpeffer & District Pipe Band** plays in the town square every Saturday from 8pm, May to September. There's also Highland dancing and a festive air.

Sleeping & Eating

Wyvis View B&B (☎ 421053; rob@wyvisview.fsnet.co.uk; Arival; s/d £26/44) This homely B&B provides comfy accommodation at the back of Strathpeffer (turn up the road next to Craighvar, opposite the town square) up on a hill. Terrific views are enjoyed via a mini garden conservatory. Inside, two rooms share a private bathroom. Your host is motherly and the breakfast sufficient to fast until dinner time.

Highland Hotel (☎ 421457; www.shearingsholidays.com; r per person £35-55) Many of the old spa hotels have fallen into neglect, but this one has been renovated. It's a magnificent, European chateau-style building overlooking the town, with a wood-panelled lobby and lounge, plus lovely wooded grounds. Book in advance for the best deals.

Craigvar (☎ 421622; www.craigvar.com; The Square; s/d £37/70) Luxury living with a refined touch is what you'll find in this delightful Georgian town house. All the little extras that mark out a classy place are here, such as a welcome drink, bathrobes and fresh fruit. Couples should go for the 'Blue Room' with its sensational four-poster bed – you'll need to collapse back into it after the gourmet breakfast.

Maya (☎ 420008; Main St; box of chocs £1.80-24; ☹ 10am-5pm Tue-Sat) Ohh, this place is dangerous. Bringing Belgian chocolates to the Highlands, Maya is the ultimate in sweet indulgence. It also serves up hot drinks, including hot chocolate...which goes perfectly with chocolate.

TOP 10 PLACES TO GET OFF THE EATEN TRACK

Here's a selection of the best eating you'll find as you journey through the northern Highlands, often in remote, less touristied communities.

Oyster Catcher Restaurant (p356) – Portmahomack, east coast

2 Quail Restaurant (p358) – Dornoch, east coast

Le Bistro (p366) – Thurso, north coast

Ben Loyal Hotel (p367) – Tongue, north coast

Summer Isles Hotel (p371) – Achiltibuie, west coast

Morefield Motel (p373) – Ullapool, west coast

Tigh an Eilean Hotel (p375) – Shieldaig, west coast

Applecross Inn (p376) – Applecross, west coast

Tigh an Eilean Hotel (p375) – Shieldaig, west coast

Waverley (p377) – Kyle of Lochalsh, west coast

Red Poppy Restaurant (☎ 423332; dinner mains £10-15; ☺ lunch Tue-Sun, dinner Tue-Sat) In the restored historical Victorian spa pavilion is a much needed dining option in town. There's a large selection of meals including game dishes such as wild boar steaks, and dining is in elegant surrounds. We found it hard to go past the disoriented duck breast with a vodka, cranberry and orange glaze.

Also recommended:

Strathpeffer Hotel (☎ 421200; strathpeffer.hotel@virgin.net; standard/superior r per person £32/42) Solid pub rooms.

Museum Coffeshop (light meals £2-4; ☺ 10am-5pm) In the old Victorian train station, a good pit stop for a toastie or panini.

Getting There & Around

Stagecoach Inverness operates buses from Inverness to Strathpeffer (45 minutes, at least hourly Monday to Saturday, four on Sunday). The Inverness to Gairloch and Durness buses, plus some Inverness to Ullapool buses, also run via Strathpeffer.

Square Wheels Cycles (☎ 421000; The Square; ☺ 10am-6pm Thu-Mon) rents mountain bikes for £10/15 per half-/full day. Price decreases with multi-day hire.

TAIN

☎ 01862 / pop 3600

Tain is Scotland's oldest royal burgh (town) and was an important pilgrimage centre. It has certainly retained a sense of yesteryear, and the town streets are worth a wander for the fine examples of Victorian architecture. It also has a couple of excellent attractions, making it a desirable spot to break a journey along the east coast.

Tain Through Time (☎ 894089; adult/child £3.50/2.50; ☺ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat, Apr-Jun Sep & Oct, to 6pm Jul & Aug) is a fascinating heritage centre that describes the history of Tain as a place of pilgrimage, tracing events from the time of St Duthac through to the Reformation. St Duthac was born in Tain, died in Armagh (Ireland) in 1065, and is commemorated by the 12th-century ruins of **St Duthac's Chapel**, as well as by **St Duthus Church**.

On the northern edge of town is the excellent **Glenmorangie Distillery & Visitor Centre** (☎ 892477; ☺ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri Sep-May, 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 10am-4pm Sat, noon-4pm Sun Jun-Aug), which produces some of the finest single malts in the Highlands. For proof, knock back a dram

of the sherry- or Madeira-wood finish. There are also excellent tours (£3).

Rooms are of a high standard at the bustling **St Duthus Hotel** (☎ 894007; Tower St; s/d £35/60, without bathroom £30/50). The bathrooms are spotless and the snazzy dining area, serving treats (mains £7 to £9) such as smoked haddock and spring-onion fishcakes, has a cheery vibe.

Scottish Citylink buses from Inverness to Thurso pass through Tain (five daily). Stagecoach Inverness runs frequent express buses from Inverness (£6.30, one hour).

There are up to three trains daily to Inverness (£10.10, one hour) and Thurso (£12.30, 2½ hours).

PORTMAHOMACK

☎ 01862 / pop 650

Portmahomack is a former fishing village in a flawless spot – right off the beaten track and gazing across the water at snowcapped peaks. The best place to enjoy the town is the grassy foreshore at the far end of Main St, near the little harbour.

The intriguing **Tarbat Discovery Centre** (☎ 871351; Tarbatness Rd; adult/child £3.50/1; ☺ 10am-5pm May-Sep, 2-5pm Mar, Apr & Oct; ☺) has some excellent carved Pictish stones. When 'crop circles' appeared a few years ago, the foundations of an Iron Age settlement were discovered around the village church. The church then became the centre of excavations – it's now the discovery centre.

There are good coastal walks at **Tarbat Ness**, 3 miles northeast of the village; the headland is marked by a tall, red-and-white-striped lighthouse.

If you're staying, try the friendly and comfortable **Caledonian Hotel** (☎ 871345; www.caley.hotel.co.uk; Main St; d £44) overlooking the village's sandy beach. Only two rooms overlook Dornoch Firth, so book early. Seafood aficionados shouldn't miss the bright and cheerful **Oyster Catcher Restaurant** (☎ 871560; Main St; starters £7-10, mains £10-23; ☺ lunch & dinner Wed-Sun) – there are many delectable lobster dishes.

Stagecoach Inverness runs from Tain to Portmahomack (30 minutes, at least three daily Monday to Friday).

BONAR BRIDGE & AROUND

The A9 crosses the Dornoch Firth, on a bridge and causeway, near Tain. An alternative route goes around the firth via the tiny settlements of **Ardgay**, where you'll find a train station,

THE HIGHLANDS' JURASSIC PARK

In a pristine spot in the northern Highlands a revolutionary project is changing the concept of wildlife conservation in Scotland. **Alladale Wilderness Lodge & Reserve** (☎ 01863-755338; www.alladale.com; Ardgay), home to the country's most northerly tuft of ancient Scots pine forest, is releasing formerly extinct species to roam on its vast estate. Wildlife on the reserve now includes red deer, roe deer, wild boar, wild ponies and golden eagles. In 2007 capercaillie, red squirrel, bison and moose were all due for release. Longer-term plans include former predators, once abundant in Scotland, such as grey wolves, European brown bears and Eurasian lynx.

Visitors can stay in the lodge, where accommodation is very exclusive; there are eight luxury rooms accommodating 16 guests and it's usually available to groups only. However, some dates from April through to August are reserved for couples booking a four-night stretch for £800, all-inclusive. Call the lodge or see the website for details. Activities include guided nature walks, 4WD safaris, fishing and mountain biking. There were no wildlife safaris at the time of writing, but when they are introduced day trips will be £45/18 for adults/children for six hours. This gives people not staying in the lodge the opportunity to see the reserve.

Alladale is approximately 40 miles north of Inverness. Drop into **Alladale Country Store** (☎ 01863-766323; Ardgay; ☺ 9am-5pm Mon-Sat, 10am-4pm Sun) for information on the reserve including the progress of species introduction. If safaris haven't started but you're keen for a look around, they may well take you up there for a tour.

shop and hotel, and **Bonar Bridge**, where the A836 to Lairg branches west.

From Ardgay, a single-track road leads 10 miles up Strathcarron to **Croick**, the scene of notorious evictions during the 1845 Clearances (see the boxed text, p360). You can still see the sad messages scratched by refugee crofters from Glencalvie on the eastern windows of Croick Church.

If a youth hostel could attract a five-star rating, opulent **Carbisdale Castle Youth Hostel** (SYHA; ☎ 0870 004 1109; Culrain; dm adult/child £16/12.50; ☺ Mar-Sep) would score six. Carbisdale Castle was built in 1914 for the dowager duchess of Sutherland – it is now Scotland's biggest and most luxurious hostel, its halls studded with statues and dripping with opulence. It's 10 minutes' walk north of Culrain train station. Advance bookings are recommended.

Trains from Inverness to Thurso stop at Ardgay and Culrain (£12.10, two or three times daily), half a mile from Carbisdale Castle.

LAIRG

☎ 01549 / pop 900

Lairg is an attractive village, although the tranquillity can be rudely interrupted by the sound of military jets heard whining and cracking overhead. At the southern end of Loch Shin, it's the gateway to the remote mountains and loch-speckled bogs of central Sutherland. The A836 from Lairg to Tongue passes Ben Klipbreck (961m) and Ben Loyal (764m).

Lairg has a seasonal **tourist office** (☎ 402160; Ferrycroft Countryside Centre; ☺ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat Apr, 10am-5.30pm Mon-Sat May, Sep & Oct, 9.30am-5.30pm Mon-Sat Jun-Aug & 11.30am-5.30pm Sun Jul-Aug; ☺) on the far side of the river from the village. There are also shops, a bank (with ATM) and a post office.

From June to September, just south of Lairg, you can watch salmon leaping the **Falls of Shin** on their way upstream to spawn.

Sleeperzzz (☎ 01408-641343; www.sleeperzzz.com; Rogart Station; r per person £12; ☺ Mar-mid-Nov), nine miles east of Lairg is a charming and unique hostel. Ten compartments in two 1st-class railway carriages have been fitted with two comfortable bunks each; there's also a compartment with a little kitchen and another with a dining room.

Rooms are surprisingly modern and very good value at the solid **Nip Inn** (☎ 402243; www.nipinn.co.uk; Main St; r per person £27-32). The décor is bright, en suites are sparkling and the inn caters for solo travellers. The restaurant's open for lunch and dinner (£10 to £14) and bar meals are available (£8).

Stagecoach Inverness buses run from Inverness to Tain (£6.30, one hour, frequent); MacLeods then picks up the link from Tain to Lairg (30 minutes, four daily Monday to Saturday). Buses also run to Helmsdale (one hour, three daily Monday to Friday).

Trains from Inverness to Thurso stop at Lairg (£12.10, 1¾ hours) and Rogart (£12.10,

two hours) two or three times daily in each direction.

DORNOCH

☎ 01862 / pop 1200

It's difficult to believe that Scotland's last executed witch perished in a vat of boiling tar in Dornoch in 1722, because today this graceful village is all happy families. On the coast, 2 miles off the A9, this symphony in sandstone bewitches visitors with flowers, greenery and affable locals at every turn.

The **tourist office** (☎ 255121; Castle St; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9.30am-5pm Sat, call for winter hrs; 🗺) is in the Highland Council Building next to Dornoch Castle Hotel and has limited information, plus internet access.

Sights

The town is clustered around the 13th-century **Dornoch Cathedral**, which is shaped like a crucifix. The crisscross of light streaming through adjacent stained-glass windows creates a powerful effect. The original building was destroyed in 1570 during a clan feud. Despite some patching up, it wasn't completely rebuilt until 1837.

If you've struck Dornoch on a sunny day make sure you have a walk along its golden sand **beach**, which stretches for miles.

South of Dornoch, seals are often visible on the sand bars of **Dornoch Firth**.

Sleeping & Eating

Trevoise Guest House (☎ 810269; trevoise@amserv.net; Cathedral Sq; s/d £25/50) A gorgeous early-19th-century stone cottage claiming primo location, spilling out onto the village green across from the cathedral. Firm mattresses and a selection of shared and en-suite bathrooms make this place a good choice, and there's a smokers' guest lounge. Watch the low roofs.

Dornoch Castle Hotel (☎ 810216; www.dornochcastlehotel.com; Castle St; garden s/tw from £50/65, castle s/d from £70/110, suite £210) Fancy a night in a castle? Then try this grand, 16th-century former bishop's palace. The stately rooms vary considerably, but you're unlikely to be disappointed no matter what you choose – ask for a room number at random! In the evening toast your toes in the cosy bar before dining in style at the first-rate restaurant (dinner mains £15 to £18) tucking into dishes such as the duo of pheasant and pigeon, and served with black and white pudding torte with a brandy onion jus.

The restaurant's open for lunch and dinner; bar meals are also available (£6 to £8).

Eagle Hotel (☎ 810008; Castle St; bar meals £8-10; ☎ lunch & dinner) Chow down at this top little boozier complete with eccentric ornamentation and man-sized meals. Look out for two- and three-course lunch specials. Wash it all down with a Dornoch Ale.

2 Quail Restaurant (☎ 811811; Castle St; 4-course dinner £37; ☎ dinner Tue-Sat Apr-Oct, Fri & Sat Nov-Mar) A tiny restaurant that excels in fine dining – one of the best in this part of the Highlands. Bookings are essential.

Also recommended:

Rosslyn Villa (☎ 810237; Castle St; r per person £19) The best B&Bs come with simplicity and a smile. No breakfast.

Auchlea (☎ 811524; www.auchlea.co.uk; B9168; r per person £22.50-30) A purpose-built lodging with three en-suite rooms; near the A9 turn-off to Dornoch, about 1.5 miles from town.

Getting There & Away

Scottish Citylink has services to/from Inverness (£7.20, 1¼ hours, four to five daily) and Thurso (£11, 2¼ hours, four to five daily), stopping in the square at Dornoch.

GOLSPIE

☎ 01408 / pop 1400

Golspie is an attractive town off the main drag, and would be a congenial option for a day or two (particularly if you feel like pulling on the walking boots or exploring a castle).

One mile north of town is mighty **Dunrobin Castle** (☎ 633177; adult/child £7/5; ☎ 10.30am-4.30pm Mon-Sat, noon-4.30pm Sun Apr, May & Sep-mid-Oct, 10.30am-5.30pm Mon-Sat, noon-5.30pm Sun Jun-Aug), the largest house in the Highlands (187 rooms). Although it dates back to around 1275, most of what you see today was built in French style between 1845 and 1850. One of the homes of the earls and dukes of Sutherland, it's richly furnished and offers an intriguing insight into their opulent lifestyle. The house also displays innumerable gifts from farm tenants (probably grateful they weren't victims of the Clearances – see the boxed text, p360).

Golspie is the starting point for some good walks. One trail leads north along the coast for 5 miles to Brora, passing the remains of the Iron Age broch (defensive tower) of **Carn Liath** about halfway along. The other trail climbs steeply above the village to the summit of **Ben Bhraggie** (394m), which is crowned by a

massive monument to the duke of Sutherland that was erected in 1834 and is visible for miles around.

On the approach into town from Dornoch is **Blar Mhor** (☎ 633609; geordie@blarmhor.fsnet.co.uk; A9; s/d £25/40; 🗺), an excellent guesthouse with large beautifully kept rooms (our fave is the double opposite the lounge) in a towering Victorian mansion. There are landscaped gardens and the lounge offers a chance to relax in the evening and socialise with other guests.

Buses between Inverness and Thurso stop in Golspie. There are also trains from Inverness (£13.50, two hours, two or three daily).

HELMSDALE

☎ 01431 / pop 900

Backed by yellow gorse-bedecked hills and set on a wide river mouth, Helmsdale has an enviable location. It's surrounded by stunning, undulating coastline and the River Helmsdale – one of the best salmon rivers in the Highlands.

For tourist information and internet access, go to the **Strath Ullie Crafts & Information Centre** (☎ 821402; The Harbour, Shore St; 🗺), which was being renovated at the time of research.

Sights & Activities

The excellent **Timespan Heritage Centre** (☎ 821327; Dunrobin St) has a gallery relating the Gartymore Story – when hundreds of families were forcibly removed from their native homes by the House of Sutherland in the early 19th century. The gallery is intriguing because it's a collection of stories based on people in the area, their possessions and, importantly, their memories. The centre was closed for renovation when we passed through.

Helmsdale is known for its salmon fishing and if you feel like throwing in a line, drop into **River Helmsdale Fishing Tackle** (☎ 07780-861466; Dunrobin St; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon, Tue, Thu & Fri, 9am-12.45pm Wed & Sat).

Sleeping & Eating

Helmsdale Youth Hostel (☎ 821636; cnr A9 & Old Caithness Rd; dm £15; ☎ May-Sep; 🗺) This hostel has had a major refurbishment and is in very good nick – there's an open fire, excellent eight-bed dorms and en-suite family rooms. It gets busy; book well ahead for July and August.

Belgrave Arms Hotel (☎ 821242; enquiries@belgravearmshotel.com; cnr Dunrobin St & A9; s/d from £24/44) The

Belgrave, a small family-run hotel, has a genuine feel to it, with a slightly musty odour and creaky floorboards. Importantly, though, the rooms are fresh and well maintained.

Bridge Hotel (☎ 821100; www.bridgehotel.net; Dunrobin St; s/d £75/105; 🗺) Ideally located, this early-19th-century lodging is a top place to stay. The suite (£145) is more like a mini flat and the luxurious doubles with polished-wood furniture have great hill and river views. For some, the only drawback may be the hunting theme, with numerous 'trophies' on the wall. Doggy beds are available on request. Call for discounts on tariffs listed above.

La Mirage (☎ 821615; 7 Dunrobin St; light meals £3-5, mains £8-15; ☎ lunch & dinner) Former proprietor Nancy Sinclair has gone to great lengths to become Barbara Cartland's double (Cartland holidayed here for over 60 years). Accordingly, her restaurant's décor oozes pink kitsch, and is a drawcard in itself. The menu boasts standard grills and vegetarian options, as well as good-value fish cooked with class.

Getting There & Away

Buses from Inverness and Thurso stop in Helmsdale, as do trains (from Thurso £12.50, 1¼ hours, four daily).

HELMSDALE TO LATHERON

About 7 miles north of Helmsdale, a 15-minute walk east from the A9 (signposted) takes you to **Badbea**. It's here that the ruins of crofts are perched on the cliff top. The **Berriedale Braes**, 2.5 miles beyond the Badbea parking area, is a difficult section of the A9, with steep gradients and hairpin bends.

Dunbeath has a spectacular setting in a deep glen – it makes a good stop on the way to the northern towns. There are a couple of shops and a **heritage centre** (☎ 01593-731233; www.dunbeath-heritage.org.uk; The Old School; adult/child £2/free; ☎ 10am-5pm Apr-Sep, Mon-Fri Oct-Mar), with displays about the history of Caithness, including crofting and fisheries. There are also exhibitions, including one on the crash of the Sunderland flying boat near Dunbeath in 1942.

The friendly and laid-back **Kingspark Llama Farm** (☎ 01593-751202; Berriedale; s/d from £22/45), a working llama farm, 4 miles south of Dunbeath, has cosy rooms with low-slung ceilings and shared bathrooms. Guests are greeted with a cheery smile and sent on their way with a happy stomach.

At the **Clan Gunn Heritage Centre & Museum** (☎ 01593-741700; adult/child £2.50/1; 🕒 11am-1pm & 2-4pm Mon-Sat Jun & Sep, 11am-1pm & 2-4pm Mon-Sat, 2-4pm Sun Jul & Aug) in Latheron, 3 miles northeast of Dunbeath on the A9, you'll learn that a Scot, not Christopher Columbus, discovered America – but you might take this claim with a pinch of salt! Even if you don't want to go in, it's worth pulling into the car park on a fine day to admire the stunning views.

LYBSTER

☎ 01593

Lybster is a purpose-built fishing village dating from 1810, with a stunning harbour area surrounded by grassy cliffs.

The major crowd-pleaser here is the **Waterlines Visitor Centre** (☎ 721520; adult/child £2.50/50p; 🕒 11am-5pm May-Sep; ♿ ♻️). It has a heritage

exhibition, a smokehouse (giving visitors a whiff of the kippering process) and CCTV beaming live pictures of nesting sea birds from nearby cliffs. After a visit you can sit on outdoor benches and munch on some home baking while admiring the views across the stunning harbour setting.

The warm and welcoming **Portland Arms Hotel** (☎ 721721; www.portlandarms.co.uk; s/d £75/86), on the A9 main road in town, is an atmospheric old pub with log fires and a farmhouse feel. There's a mix of older and refurbished rooms – all are pretty good.

Scottish Citylink buses between Thurso and Inverness run via Lybster (one hour, up to four daily), Latheron and Dunbeath. Rapsons/Highland Country runs four times daily from Wick to Ulbster, Lybster, Dunbeath and Berriedale.

CROFTING & THE CLEARANCES

In many parts of the Highlands and islands you will see clusters of ruined cottages crumbling amid the bracken – all that remains of deserted farming communities. Up until the 19th century the most common form of farming settlement here was the *baile*, a group of a dozen or so families who farmed the land granted to them by the local chieftain in return for military service and a portion of the harvest. The arable land was divided into strips called *rigs*, which were allocated to different families by annual ballot so that each took turns at getting the poorer soils; this system was known as *runrig*. The families worked the land communally, and their cattle shared the grazing land.

But this lifestyle was swept away in the wake of the Highland Clearances, which took place between around 1750 and the 1880s. Following the ban on private armies, clan chiefs no longer needed military service from their tenants, and saw sheep farming as far more profitable than collecting rent from poverty-stricken farmers. Tens of thousands of tenant farmers were evicted from their homes and their land.

Those who chose not to emigrate or move to the cities to find work were forced to eke a living from narrow plots of marginal agricultural land, often close to the coast. This was a form of smallholding that became known as crofting. The small patch of land barely provided a living, and had to be supplemented by other work such as fishing and kelp-gathering. The close-knit community of the *baile* was replaced by the widely scattered cottages of the crofting settlements that you can still see today.

When economic depression hit in the late 19th century, many crofters couldn't pay their rent. This time, however, they resisted expulsion, instead forming the Highland Land Reform Association and their own political party. Their resistance led to several of their demands being acceded to by the government; the Crofters' Holdings Act of 1886 provided for security of tenure, fair rents and eventually the supply of land for new crofts.

Today the Scottish Highlands are, in many parts, a graveyard of broken communities, communities that ceased living and breathing more than 200 years ago. Evidence of the cruel evictions is everywhere and the human tragedy has scarred this majestic landscape. While economic recovery is in full swing, the human cost is irrecoverable and the desolation of the countryside is in harmony with the poor souls lost to starvation, poverty and estrangement from their ancestral lands.

Crofting tenancies still exist and complex regulations now protect the crofters. The Land Reform Act, passed in 2003, gave crofters the absolute right to buy their tenancy, and a law abolishing feudal tenure come into effect in late 2004, ending 900 years of feudalism.

AROUND LYBSTER

At Ulbster, 5 miles north of Lybster on the A99, is **Whaligoe Steps**, a spectacular staircase cut into the cliff face. It provides access to a tiny natural harbour ringed by vertical cliffs and echoing with the cackle of nesting fulmars. The path begins at the end of the minor road beside the telephone box, opposite the road signposted 'Cairn of Get'. The **Cairn o'Get**, a prehistoric burial cairn, is a mile northwest of Ulbster. From the car park cross the stile and follow the black-and-white marker poles for approximately 1 mile. Wear decent shoes as the ground is boggy.

There are several interesting prehistoric sites near Lybster. Five miles to the northwest of Lybster, on the minor road to Achavanich, just south of Loch Stemster, are the unsigned 30 **Achavanich Standing Stones**. In a desolate setting, these crumbling monuments of the distant past still capture the imagination with their evocative location. It's all about colours: blue skies, a steely grey loch, and the soft browns and greens of the land. The setting and absence of modern tourism makes this place special.

A mile east of Lybster on the A99, a turn-off leads north to the **Grey Cairns of Camster**. Dating from between 4000 BC and 2500 BC, these burial chambers are hidden in long, low mounds rising from an evocatively desolate stretch of moor. The Long Cairn measures 60m by 21m. You can enter the main chamber, but must first crawl into the well-preserved Round Cairn, which has a corbelled ceiling. From the site you can then continue 7 miles north on this remote road to approach Wick on the A882.

Back on the A99, the **Hill o'Many Stanes**, 2 miles beyond the Camster turn-off, is a curious, fan-shaped arrangement of 22 rows of small stones that probably date from around 2000 BC. Staggeringly, there were 600 in the original pattern. On a sunny day, the views from this hill are stunning.

WICK

☎ 01955 / pop 7400

While we wouldn't quite say that Wick has turned a corner, the town appears to be a little less dismal than it once was. That said, take a walk around Wick Harbour or High St mall and you'll see the weird (and depressing) thing about this town – it's just too quiet for a place this size. In any case, you should spend at least a night, as it takes a wee while to

dig under the town's economically depressed façade to enjoy its fascinating history, grittiness and admirable attractions.

Information

Bank of Scotland (Bridge St) Has ATM.

Royal Bank of Scotland (Bridge St) Has ATM.

Tourist office (McAllans; 66 High St; 🕒 9am-5.30pm Mon-Sat) Unattended station in McAllans Clothing Store.

Wick Carnegie Library (☎ 602864; Sinclair Tce; 🕒 10am-6pm Mon & Thu, 10am-8pm Tue & Fri, 10am-1pm Wed & Sat) Free internet access.

Sights

WICK HERITAGE CENTRE

The town's award-winning local **museum** (☎ 605393; 18-27 Bank Row; adult/child £3/50p; 🕒 10am-5pm Easter-Oct, outside these months call for hrs) deserves all the praise heaped upon it. Tracking the rise and fall of the herring industry, it displays everything from fishing equipment to complete herring fishing boats. It's a fantastic museum – without doubt one of the best in the country – and is absolutely huge inside, crammed with memorabilia and extensive displays describing the days of the mid-19th century when Wick was the largest herring port in Europe.

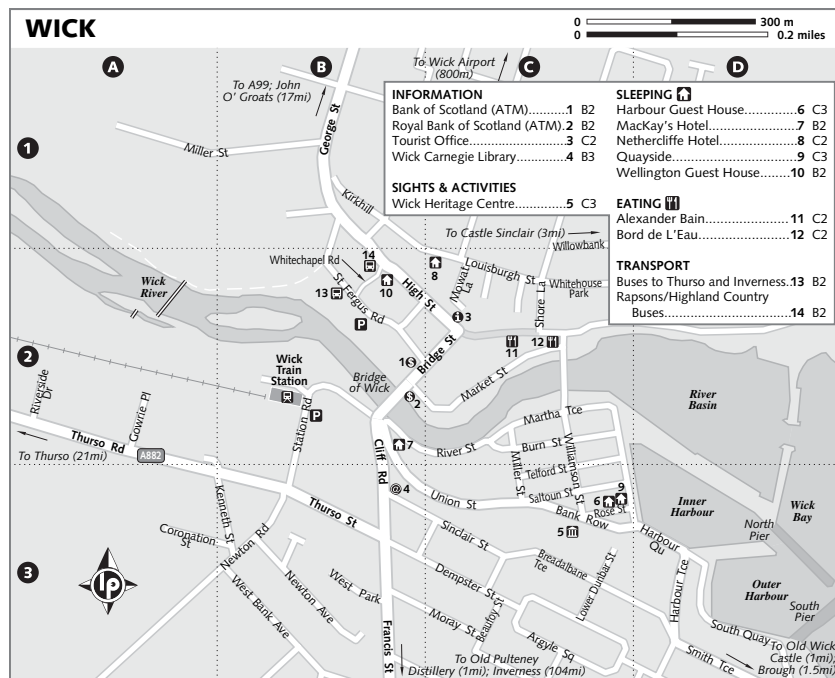
The Johnston photographic collection is the museum's star exhibit. From 1863 to 1977, three generations of Johnstons photographed everything that happened around Wick, and the 70,000 photographs are an amazing portrait of the town's life. Prints of the early photos are for sale.

CASTLES

A path leads a mile south of town to the ruins of 12th-century **Old Wick Castle**, with the spectacular cliffs of the **Brough** and the **Brig**, as well as **Gote o'Trams**, a little further south. In good weather, it's a fine coastal walk to the castle, but take care on the final approach. Three miles northeast of Wick is the magnificently located cliff-top ruin of **Castle Sinclair**.

DISTILLERY

Old Pulteney (☎ 602371; www.oldpulteney.com; Huddart St) is the most northerly distillery on mainland Scotland and runs excellent tours (£3.50) at 11am and 2pm from Monday to Friday (closed in July). Old Pulteney whisky has a light, earthy character with a hint of sea air and sherry. The visitors centre is free and gives an interesting, abbreviated account of the distilling process.



Sleeping & Eating

Wick has a shortage of B&B accommodation and while it's not exactly flooded with visitors during summer it can often be difficult to jag a room. Solution: book ahead.

Quayside (☎ 603229; www.quaysidewick.co.uk; 25 Harbour Quay; r per person £22-28) This place should be your first port of call for accommodation – they've been in the business for many years and know what they're doing. It overlooks the harbour, has a large range of neat rooms and is handy for the heritage centre and the chippy a couple of doors down. There's a self-catering option (£50 for two), as well. Note that the single is very small. Book ahead. Motorcyclists welcome.

MacKay's Hotel (☎ 602323; www.mackayshotel.co.uk; Union St; s/d £65/90; 📺) The renovated MacKay's is Wick's best hotel. Rooms vary in layout and size so ask to see a few; prices drop if you're staying more than one night. The 2.75m-long Ebenezer Pl, the shortest street in Britain, runs past one end of the hotel. The bistro here is a fine-dining option for lunch or dinner. Service is friendly and the ingredients are sourced locally.

Alexander Bain (☎ 609920; Market Pl; dishes £5-8; 🍷 lunch & dinner) This is the only pub in town that serves food on weeknights. It's a cavernous place in the middle of the pedestrianised High St, attracting a mix of tourists, families and ragtag locals. It's probably the best place to see a cross section of Wick in the evening. After all where else do you go? Cheap but average food includes pastas, salads, burgers, steaks and wraps. A beer and burger is £4.25 while the Sunday roast is £7.

Bord de L'Eau (☎ 604400; 2 Market St; starters £5, mains £11-13; 🍷 lunch Tue-Sat, dinner Tue-Sun) This serene, upmarket French restaurant is the best place to eat in Wick. It overlooks the river and serves dishes such as *escargot*, and grilled lamb fillets with a thyme and honey jus. The menu is very meat based.

Also recommended:
Harbour Guest House (☎ 603276; harbour.guesthouse@supanet.com; 6 Rose St; s/d £23/46) Decent digs for a decent price.

Wellington Guest House (☎ 603287; High St; s £30-35, tw £45-55; 📺) This place probably wouldn't make it in this book in other towns. But in Wick – well, choice is limited. Aged rooms are average with cramped en suites.

However, it is clean and there's a splash of colour and modern décor to brighten things up in the rooms.

Nethercliffe Hotel (☎ 602044; fax 605691; Louisburgh St; s/d £50/65; 📺) A very friendly, small hotel with good-value rooms exhibiting warmth and flowery old-fashioned décor.

Getting There & Away

Wick is a transport gateway to the surrounding area. **Logan Air** (☎ 602294; www.loganair.co.uk) flies between Edinburgh and Wick airport (from £120 return, one hour, one daily Monday to Saturday) and on to the Orkney Islands. **Eastern Airways** (☎ 01652-680600; www.easternairways.com) flies to Aberdeen (£110 return, 35 minutes, three Monday to Friday).

Scottish Citylink operates buses to/from Inverness (£15, three hours, four daily) and Thurso (£6, 40 minutes, four daily).

Rapsons/Highland Country runs the connecting service to John o'Groats (40 minutes, up to five daily Monday to Saturday) for the passenger ferry to Burwick, Orkney. Also connects up with the Gills Bay ferry to St Margaret's Hope, Orkney.

Trains service Wick from Inverness (£14.60, four hours, one or two daily).

JOHN O'GROATS

☎ 01955 / pop 500

We've tried – we really have. Readers have written to us pointing out the error of our ways – 'you're too harsh on John o'Groats' they say. Well sorry...but we still can't find anything endearing to say about the place – it's horrible. Scotland's worst and most embarrassing tourist attraction, it's falsely believed to be the most northerly point on the British mainland (it's actually Dunnet Head; right), has been milking this geographical extremity for years. The main attraction is basically a car park surrounded by shoddy craft and souvenir shops. The only thing making a trip here remotely worthwhile is jumping on board **North Coast Marine Adventures** (☎ 611797; www.northcoast-marine-adventures.co.uk), which runs scenic wildlife trips. Seals, whales, dolphins and seabirds can all be spotted and these guys minimise disturbance of the environment. For accommodation, try Wick (opposite), Mey (right) or Thurso (p366), all nearby.

Two miles east of John o'Groats is the much better **Duncansby Head**, which is home to many sea birds at the start of summer. A path leads to **Duncansby Stacks**, spectacular natural rock

formations soaring 60m above the sea. There is a series of narrow inlets and deep coves on this wonderful stretch of coast.

Getting There & Away

Rapsons/Highland Country runs buses between John o'Groats and Wick (40 minutes, up to five daily Monday to Saturday). There are also up to five services Monday to Saturday to/from Thurso.

From May to September, the passenger ferry MV **Pentland Venture**, operated by **John o'Groats Ferries** (☎ 611353; www.jogferry.co.uk), shuttles across to Burwick in Orkney (adult/child return £26/13); a coach tour of Orkney mainland, including the ferry fare, is £38/19. Ninety-minute wildlife cruises to the island of Stroma or Duncansby Head cost £15.

MEY

☎ 01847 / pop 200

Mey is a very small village scattered along the A836. **Castle of Mey** (☎ 851473; www.castleofmey.org.uk; adult/child £7.50/3; 🕒 10.30am-4pm May-late-Jul & mid-Aug-Sep), a big crowd-puller, is about 6 miles from John o'Groats, off the A836 to Thurso. It's the former home of the late Queen Mother, and hardened royal buffs will get a kick out of items of memorabilia and pictures of the Queen Mum, but for everyone else there's not that much to see inside. Outside in the castle grounds, though, there's an unusual walled garden that's worth a stroll around, and there are lovely views over the Pentland Firth.

The nearby **Castle Arms Hotel** (☎ 851992; www.castlearms.co.uk; s/d £57/90), a former 19th-century coaching inn, has a friendly bar downstairs and decent (if slightly pricey) rooms upstairs. Or try **Hawthorns** (☎ 851710; www.thehawthornsbnb.co.uk; s/d £30/50), where rooms are huge and the owner's cheery smile is just as big.

The Tea Cosy (☎ 01955-611770; East Mey; sandwiches £4; 🍷 lunch), the most northerly tearoom on mainland Scotland, is worth popping into for some freshly prepared gourmet sandwiches, quiches or a ploughman's lunch. The owners aim to please and will make you something up on request (if they can!). There are also magnificent views out to the North Sea.

DUNNET HEAD

Let's put a common misconception to rest. Contrary to popular belief, naff John o'Groats is not the British mainland's most northerly

point; that honour goes to Dunnet Head, 10 miles to the west. The head is marked by a lighthouse dating from 1832.

Not only is Dunnet Head the real 'most northerly point', it's also well worth coming out here for the views of the startling sea cliffs and the vista over to Orkney and beyond, all near the lighthouse. The lonely car park (with plaques about local flora and fauna and a self-guided tour of the area) is a welcome relief from the con of John o'Groats.

Just southwest of Dunnet Head there is a magnificent stretch of sandy beach, at the southern end of which lies the tiny harbour of **Castlehill**. It's here that a heritage trail explains the evolution of the local flagstone industry.

NORTH & WEST COAST

Quintessential Highland country such as this, marked by single-track roads, breathtaking emptiness and a wild, fragile beauty, is a rarity on the modern, crowded, highly urbanised island of Britain. You could get lost up here for weeks – and that still wouldn't be enough time.

Carving its way from Thurso to Glencoul, the north and northwest coastline is a feast of deep inlets, forgotten beaches and surging peninsulas. Within the rugged confines, the deep interior is home to vast, empty spaces, enormous lochs and some of Scotland's highest peaks.

The remarkable thing about the landscape is that it makes you feel special. Whether it's blazing sunshine or a murky greyness, the character of the land is totally unique and constantly changing – for that window of time in which you glimpse it, you capture an exclusive snapshot of this ancient area in your mind (or on your camera). Park the car and gaze. This northernmost slab of the Highlands is the stuff of coastal-drive dreams.

Getting Around

Public transport in the northwest is, well, pretty awful. There's no doubt that this region is best explored by car – you'll be able to reach the sites and towns far more easily and, doing it all in your own time, you'll get a lot more from the experience. Getting to Thurso or Kyle of Lochalsh by bus or train is easy, but following the coast between these

places, especially from October to May, is when the fun really starts. **Royal Mail postbuses** (☎ 0845 774 0740; www.postbus.royalmail.com) run year-round; fares vary, but long journeys are usually good value at around £4 or £5. See its website for details of routes, which cover most towns in this section. **Rapsons/Highland Country** (☎ 01847-893123) runs services to major towns.

To travel across the north coast, from Thurso to Durness, the Monday to Saturday postbus services are your only option.

From late April to late September, **Tim Dearman Coaches** (☎ 01349-883585; www.timdearmancoaches.co.uk) runs buses from Inverness to Durness (£17, five hours, one daily Monday to Saturday, plus Sunday in July and August) via Ullapool and Lochinver.

An alternative is to come up from Inverness via Lairg. Apart from trains, **Stagecoach Inverness** (☎ 01463-239292) operates to/from Tain (£6.30, 1½ hours, hourly or two hourly) and **MacLeods Coaches** (☎ 01408-641354) operates a connecting service to Lairg (£3.50, 45 minutes, four daily Monday to Saturday). A postbus will then get you from Lairg through to Tongue (one daily Monday to Saturday).

There are regular Scottish Citylink buses between Inverness and Ullapool.

Rapsons/Westerbus (☎ 01571-84473) runs every Monday, Wednesday, Thursday and Saturday between Ullapool and Gairloch.

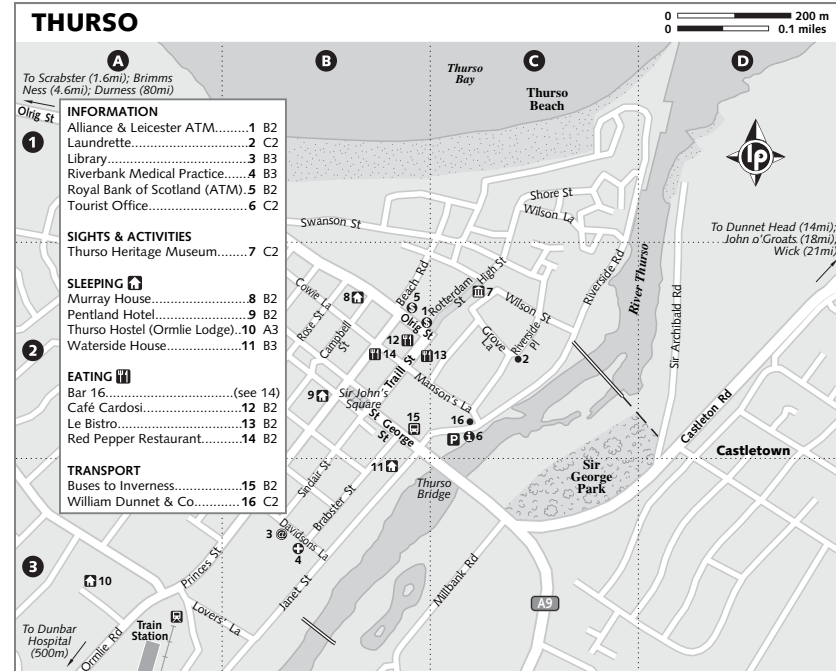
The once-daily (except Sunday) Westerbus service from Inverness to Gairloch, runs via Achnasheen and Kinlochewe, or via Dundonnell on Monday, Wednesday and Saturday. The route via Dundonnell provides a link between Ullapool and Gairloch (via Braemore Junction). The Achnasheen–Kinlochewe–Torrison postbus can be used in conjunction with the Westerbus, taking you from Gairloch to Kinlochewe and Torrison (at least one day after the Ullapool to Gairloch leg).

From Torrison, the **MacLennan** (☎ 01520-755239) bus service goes to Strathcarron (£3.50, once daily Monday to Saturday from June to September), or call for times for the rest of the year.

THURSO & SCRABSTER

☎ 01847 / pop 7800

The mainland's most northerly town, Thurso can seem bleak and rather depressing, though a new tourist development called Caithness Horizons, some classy eating options and a



wide range of accommodation are fighting against the tide. In the evening the young come out to play: note the teens doing bog laps of the centre in their little cars, music blaring.

Thurso is useful as a service centre too, and as an overnight stop en route to Orkney – the view across Pentland Firth to Hoy beckons visitors to a more appealing location. Ferries cross from Scrabster, 2.5 miles west of Thurso, to Orkney. Tiny Scrabster, little more than a collection of BP oil storage containers, revolves around its port.

Information

Alliance & Leicester ATM (cnr Orlig & Rotterdam Sts)

Dunbar Hospital (☎ 893263; Ormlie Rd)

Laundrette (Riverside Pl; small wash £3; ☎ 9am–6pm Mon–Fri, 10am–5.30pm Sat)

Library (☎ 893237; Davidson's Lane; ☎ 10am–6pm Mon & Wed, to 8pm Tue & Fri, to 1pm Thu & Sat) Free internet access.

Riverbank medical centre (☎ 892027; Janet St)

Royal Bank of Scotland (Orlig St) ATM.

Tourist office (☎ 892371; Riverside Rd; ☎ Mon–Sat Apr–May & Sep–Oct, daily Jun–Aug)

Sights & Activities

Thurso Heritage Museum (☎ 892459; High St), in the old Town Hall, displays Pictish and Christian fossils and carved stones, and a reconstruction of a croft interior. It was closed at the time of research for a major renovation and will reopen as Caithness Horizons in late 2008, featuring a museum, tourist office, visitor displays and a café.

Thurso is an unlikely **surfing** centre, but the nearby coast has arguably the best and most regular surf on mainland Britain. There's an excellent right-hand reef break on the eastern side of town, directly in front of Lord Thurso's castle (closed to the public), and another shallow reef break 5 miles west at Brimms Ness.

Thurso's idyllic country **riverside walk** will make you feel miles away from town. Access is near Waterside House and you can walk upstream, retracing your footsteps to come back (there was a bridge you could cross to come back on the other side, but it has been washed out). It's a beautiful walk, taking about 45 minutes at a stroll, and is a very popular local pursuit in decent weather. You can also walk all the way to Scrabster (40 minutes)

along cliffs for brilliant views. Take care in windy weather.

Sleeping

Thurso Hostel (Ormlie Lodge; ☎/fax 896888; Ormlie Rd; s/d £10/17) This scruffy hostel is a students' hall of residence a few minutes' walk from the train station. It has an excellent, if slightly ragged, range of budget accommodation, and is great value. Rooms are small, but well cared for and well equipped: you get a fridge and small desk.

Waterside House (☎ 894751; www.watersidehouse.info; 3 Janet St; r per person £19-25) Not what it used to be, this old girl is starting to show her age. Nonetheless we like this B&B. It's a good, casual setup and in a great position opposite the river – just a short walk from everything in town. Not sheer luxury granted, but hands-down winner for location and the feel-good factor.

Murray House (☎ 895759; www.murrayhousebb.com; 1 Campbell St; s/d £30/60) This 19th-century town house has five en-suite rooms and storage for bikes, making it popular with cyclists. Rooms are spick-and-span, modern if floral (it's an obsession in this country!), and the ones on the top floor have more space and draw in the best light.

Pentland Hotel (☎ 893202; www.pentlandhotel.co.uk; Princes St; s £40-45, d £70-80) The business-style rooms in this place are great value. They're big enough to have a couch and a separate nook with a desk. It's a stylish place, and surprisingly tranquil inside, given its central location. There are plenty of open areas for lounging around while you wait for the ferry to Orkney.

Eating

Café Cardosi (☎ 896212; cnr Olrig & Traill Sts; dishes £3-4; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Sat) Stylishly decked out in warm colours and a trendy, minimalist décor, Cardosi pumps out decent coffee, salads, light hot meals and sandwiches. The decadent home-baked cakes are a standout, but the best thing about this joint is people-watching, both inside and on the busy street outside.

Le Bistro (☎ 893737; 2 Traill St; lunch £5-8, dinner mains £10-13; ☎ lunch Tue-Sat, dinner Wed-Sat) One of our faves in northern Scotland, this bright, Mediterranean-style bistro with top-notch food wins our 'best place to eat in town' award, hands down. The kitchen whips up both traditional and exotic fare, and service comes with a smile. Seafood dishes feature on

NORTHERN LUXURY

our pick **Forss House Hotel** (☎ 01847-861201; www.forsshousehotel.co.uk; Forss by Thurso; s £70-80, d £105-135) Tucked into a thicket of trees 4 miles west of Thurso is elegant accommodation in an old Georgian mansion that has both character and style. Besides, any place with tartan carpets gets our vote. Sumptuous upstairs rooms are much better than basement rooms as they have lovely views of the garden. There are also separate, beautifully appointed Woodlands suites in the garden itself, which provide both privacy and a sense of tranquillity. And as an added incentive...300 malt whiskies await.

the blackboard, meals are made to order and vegetarians are catered for.

Bar 16 (The Holborn; ☎ 892771; 16 Princes St; bar meals £7-10; ☎ lunch & dinner) This is Thurso trying to get tarted up. It attracts a mix of tourists and locals looking for something a bit classier than trawling the scruffy local pubs in town. A modern space with couches and comfy chairs possessing a hint of minimalism, it's a bit sterile but there's a little sun-filled courtyard perfect for an evening drink. Steer clear of the seafood salad but try the chicken fajitas or sirloin steak baguette for a winner.

Red Pepper Restaurant (The Holborn; ☎ 892771; 16 Princes St; starters £5, mains £9-14; ☎ lunch & dinner) A step up again in the local dining scene. A simple dining room with lots of wood, good lighting and, most importantly, well-prepared food with generous portions and lots of local produce. Try the smoked chicken and spinach linguine followed by homemade cheesecake.

Getting There & Around

Thurso is 130 miles from Inverness and 21 miles from Wick. From Inverness, Scottish Citylink buses operate via Wick to Thurso (£15, 3½ hours, three to five daily). Rapsons/Highland Country runs a service to Wick (45 minutes, hourly) and also to John o'Groats (one hour, five Monday to Friday, three Saturday).

There are two or three daily train services from Inverness in summer (£14.60, 3½ hours), but space for bicycles is limited so book ahead.

It's a 2-mile walk from Thurso train station to the ferry port at Scrabster, or there

are buses from Olrig St. **William Dunnet & Co** (☎ 893101; Manson's Lane; ☎ 8am-5.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm Sat) rents cars; a small car starts at £25 per day, plus 10p per mile – you can drop it off in Wick if you're heading that way.

THURSO TO DURNESS

It's 80 winding and often spectacular coastal miles from Thurso to Durness.

Dounreay & Melvich

On the coast 10 miles west of Thurso is the **Dounreay Nuclear Power Station**. The plant is being decommissioned and cleaning up the site and storing the waste safely will take until 2036; the cost will run into billions of pounds (see p66). Just beyond Dounreay, **Reay** has a shop and an interesting little harbour dating from 1830. **Melvich** overlooks a fine beach and there are great views from **Strathy Point** (a 2-mile drive from the coast road, then a 15-minute walk).

Bettyhill (Am Blaran Odhar)

☎ 01641 / pop 550

The panorama of a sweeping, sandy beach backed by velvety green hills with bulbous, rocky outcrops makes a sharp contrast to the sad history of this area. Bettyhill is a crofting community of resettled tenant farmers kicked off their land during the Clearances (see the boxed text, p360).

Bettyhill tourist office (☎ 521244; ☎ 10.30am-5pm Mon-Thu, to 7.30pm Fri & Sat Apr-Oct) has limited information on the area, but if you're after a bite to eat, Elizabeth's Cafe (mains £6) here serves good home-cooked food (such as local Bettyhill crab). There's also a shop and post office.

Strathnaver Museum (☎ 521418; Clachan; adult/child £2/50p; ☎ 10am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Sat Apr-Oct, by arrangement at other times), in an old church, tells the sad story of the Strathnaver Clearances. The museum contains memorabilia of Clan Mackay, various items of crofting equipment and a 4000-year-old beaker.

Bettyhill Hotel (☎/fax 521352; enquiries@bettyhill.info; s/d from £25/50; ☎ lunch & dinner) has a range of renovated rooms with en suites – they're stylishly decorated and emit a cool summer feel. There are rip-roaring views from some (such as No 2) over the sandy beach fringing Torrisdale Bay. The restaurant (mains £9) here churns out some interesting cuisine, catering for vegetarian, vegan and gluten-free diets. It's a very friendly, down-to-earth hotel.

From Bettyhill, the B871 turns south for Helmsdale, through **Strathnaver**, where the Clearances took place.

Coldbackie & Tongue

☎ 01847 / pop 450

Coldbackie has outstanding views over sandy beaches, turquoise waters and offshore islands. If you haven't seen that magical Scottish light at work yet, there's a good chance you'll see it here – park the car for a few minutes and watch. Only 2 miles further on is Tongue, with the evocative 14th-century ruins of **Castle Varrich**, once a Mackay stronghold. To get to the castle, take the trail next to the Royal Bank of Scotland, near Ben Loyal Hotel – it's an easy stroll. Tongue has a shop, post office, bank and petrol station.

Having just undergone a major refurbishment, **Tongue Youth Hostel** (☎ 01847 611 789; Tongue; adult/child £12.50/9.50; ☎ Apr-Sep) is the top budget option in the area with two- to seven-bed dorms. Huge windows draw light and sublime views into the lounge, dining area and many of the rooms. Check out the delicious, home baking on site – drop in for a bit of chocco cake.

our pick **Strathongue Old Manse** (☎ 01847-611252; www.strathongue.co.uk; Tongue; r per person £25), just a half-mile east of Coldbackie and set back from the A836, is a ripper of a B&B. The host knows her business and there's a choice of an en-suite double or a double and twin sharing a private bathroom (good for families). It's a real nook-and-cranny house and there's loitering ducks on hand to greet new arrivals.

At the junction of the A836 and A838 and within stumbling distance of two pubs is charming **Tigh-nan-Ubhal** (☎ 611281; www.spanglefish.com/tigh-nan-ubhal; Main St; r per person £25-30; ☎). There are snug, loft-style rooms with plenty of natural light, but the basement double with spa is the pick of the bunch – it's the biggest en suite we've seen in northern Scotland. There's also a fixed caravan out the back sleeping up to four people – perfect for families.

Ben Loyal Hotel (☎ 611216; www.benloyal.co.uk; Main St; r per person £35-40; ☎ lunch & dinner) has great rooms with magic views (room No 1 is a fave). In the restaurant (mains £7 to £16), try the local Kyle of Tongue oysters.

Vying for the position of best-located B&B in Scotland, **Cloisters** (☎ 601286; www.doistertal.demon.co.uk; Talmine; s/d from £27.50/45; ☎) has three

en-suite twin rooms with brilliant views over the Kyle of Tongue and offshore islands. Tastefully furnished, this place would suit older visitors or families. To get here from Tongue, cross the causeway and take the turn-off to Melness, almost immediately on your right.

Tongue to Durness

From Tongue it's 37 miles to Durness – you can take the causeway across the **Kyle of Tongue** or the beautiful old road that goes around the head of the kyle. A detour to **Melness** and **Port Vasgo** may be rewarded with the sight of seals on the beach.

Continuing west, the road crosses a desolate moor past **Moine House** (a ruin built as a shelter for travellers in 1830) to the northern end of **Loch Hope**. A 10-mile detour south along the loch leads to **Dun Dornaigil**, a well-preserved broch in the shadow of **Ben Hope** (927m). If you'd like to bag this Munro, it's a 4.5-mile, four-hour round trip along the route from the car park, which is 2 miles before the broch, near a large barn. It's a relatively easy walk but often cold at the exposed top.

Beyond Loch Hope, on the main road, **Heilam** has stunning views out over **Loch Eriboll**, Britain's deepest sea inlet and a shelter for ships during WWII.

DURNESS (DIURANAI)

☎ 01971 / pop 350

The scattered village of Durness (www.durness.org) is strung out along cliffs, which rise from a series of pristine beaches. It has one of the finest locations in Scotland. When the sun shines the effects of blinding white sand, the cry of sea birds and the lime-coloured seas combine in a magical way. The only blight is the sometimes constant thumping from the Ministry of Defence (MOD) artillery range on Cape Wrath, which can shatter the tranquillity of this northern outpost.

Orientation & Information

What's known as Durness is really two villages strung along the main road: Durness, in the west, and Smoo, a mile to the east.

Durness has two stores (Spar supermarket has an ATM).

Durness Community Building (1 Bard Tce; per 30min £1) Self-serve internet access, opposite MacKays Hotel.

Health centre (☎ 511273)

Tourist office (☎ 511368; durness@visitscotland.com;

☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat Apr, May & Oct, 10am-5pm Mon-Sat, to 4pm Sun Jun-Sep) Organises guided walks in summer.

Sights & Activities

A mile east of the village centre is a path, near the SYHA hostel, down to **Smoo Cave**. The vast cave entrance stands at the end of an inlet, or geo, and a river cascades through its roof into a flooded cavern, then flows out to sea. There's evidence the cave was inhabited about 6000 years ago. You can take a **boat trip** (adult/child £3/1.50) into the floodlit cave (contact the tourist office for more info), although after heavy rain the waterfall can make it impossible to get in. The village has several beautiful **beaches**. One of the best is Sangobeg, but there's also a 'secret beach' just to the east, which can't be seen from the road. Around the coast, there are wrecks, caves, seals and whales. Inquire at the tourist office for **trout-fishing** permits.

The old radar station at **Balnakeil**, less than a mile up a minor road from Durness, has been turned into a hippy craft village, with a bookshop, restaurants and art-and-craft workshops.

Sleeping & Eating

Sango Sands Oasis (☎ 511222; Durness; adult/child camp sites per person £5/2.50) Pitch your tent on the northern edge of the country and dangle your feet over the precipice, admiring the sweeping views over the Atlantic's twinkling waters.

Lazy Crofter Bunkhouse (☎ 511202; fiona@durnesshostel.com; Durness; dm £12) This hostel has excellent clean facilities and a lofty position overlooking the water. A bothy vibe gives it a Highland feel and it's really geared for groups. Note that some mattresses are pretty average.

Wild Orchid Guest House (☎ 511280; wildorchidguesthouse@hotmail.co.uk; rd to Ullapool; r per person £30) Just up the road from MacKays is a guest-house with cool, contemporary rooms. Doubles are much better than the twins, which are pokier and plainer. Conveniently, a tearoom is right next door.

MacKays Hotel (☎ 511202; www.visitmackays.com; Durness; s £45, d £80-90) This refurbished hotel has tastefully decorated rooms with rustic Highland furnishings and an air of sophistication. The deluxe rooms have super king-size beds and big showers – they're worth the extra 10 quid.

Loch Croispol Bookshop & Restaurant (☎ 511777; Balnakeil Craft Village; lunch & snacks £4-8; ☎ 10am-5pm

Mon-Sat, to 4pm Sun; ☎) At this place you can feed your body and your mind. Set among books featuring all things Scottish are a few tables where you can enjoy an all-day breakfast, and sandwiches and other scrumptious fare at lunch, such as fresh Achiltibuie salmon.

Also recommended:

Glegolly B&B (☎ 511255; Durness; r per person £25-30) Quaint, cottage-style rooms. Worrying collection of ceramic dogs.

Cocoa Mountain (☎ 511233; Balnakeil Craft Village; hot choc £2.50, 9 truffles £6.50; ☎ 9am-6pm summer, 10am-5pm winter) Handmade chocolates include a chilli, lemongrass and coconut white-chocolate truffle and many more unique flavours.

Balnakeil Bistro (☎ 511335; Balnakeil Craft Village; mains £8-10; ☎ lunch & dinner; ☎) Dine on rainbow trout, Lochinver pies and nut loaf. Come for the food, not the décor.

DURNESS TO ULLAPOOL

It's 69 miles from Durness to Ullapool, with plenty of diversions along the way. The road to Ullapool has jaw-dropping scenery – dangerous on single-track roads as drivers struggle to tear their eyes away from vast, desolate plains spiced with rivulets of burns (streams), towering peaks and giant rocky outcrops.

Rugged **Cape Wrath** is crowned by a lighthouse (dating from 1827) and stands close to the sea-bird colonies on **Clo Mor Cliffs**, the highest coastal cliffs on the mainland. Getting to Cape Wrath involves a **ferry** (☎ 01971-511376) ride across the Kyle of Durness (£4.70 return, 10 minutes one way) and a connecting **minibus** (☎ 01971-511287) for the 11 miles to the cape (£7.50 return, 40 minutes one way). Contact the tourist office before setting out to make sure the ferry is running.

Kinlochbervie was one of Scotland's premier fish-landing ports and there's a lovely beach at **Oldshoremore**, a crofting settlement about 2 miles northwest of Kinlochbervie. South of Cape Wrath, **Sandwood Bay** boasts one of Scotland's best and most isolated beaches, guarded at one end by the spectacular rock pinnacle Am Buachaille. Sandwood Bay is about 2 miles north of the end of a track from Blairmore (approach from Kinlochbervie), or you could walk south from the cape (allow eight hours) and on to Blairmore. Sandwood House is a creepy ruin reputedly haunted by the ghost of a 17th-century shipwrecked sailor.

The outlook from the **Kinlochbervie Hotel** (☎ 01971-521275; www.kinlochberviehotel.com; r per

person £35-55) must be the envy of almost every hotel in Scotland. Traditionally furnished, room Nos 1 and 2 are the best with simply magnificent water views. Meals are available (mains £8 to £11).

Braeside (☎ 01971-521325; r per person £23) is a friendly, well-established B&B in a modern bungalow. There's no surcharge for solo travellers.

Scourie is a pretty crofting community. If you're looking to spoil yourself, **Scourie Lodge** (☎ 01971-502248; s/d £50/80), in a gorgeous building overlooking the bay, has three luxurious rooms and a garden with possibly the most northerly palm trees in the world. Dinner is available (£22).

Ferries (adult/child £10/5, on demand, 9.30am to 2pm Monday to Saturday, April to early September) go to the important **Handa Island** sea-bird sanctuary from Tarbet, 6 miles north of Scourie; call ☎ 07768-167786.

Kylesku & Loch Glencoul

☎ 01971

Cruises on Loch Glencoul pass treacherous-looking mountains, seal colonies and the 213m-drop of **Eas a'Chual Aulin**, Britain's highest waterfall. In summer, the **MV Statesman** (☎ 502345) runs two-hour trips twice daily (except Saturday) from Kylesku Old Ferry Pier for £15/5 per adult/child to see waterfalls and baby seals. There are also trips to the lovely **Kerrachar Gardens** (www.kerrachar.co.uk; ferry £12, admission £3), which are only accessible by boat from Kylesku.

While you wait for the ferry you can toast your toes by a log fire, enjoy a pint (decent ales on tap) and tuck into a superb bar meal at the **Kylesku Hotel** (☎ 502231; www.kyleskuhotel.co.uk; Kylesku; mains £8-13; ☎ lunch & dinner), overlooking the pier. Seafood is the speciality including local mussels and smoked haddock and salmon fish cakes. If you fancy bunkering down for the night, rooms are available (single/double £60/90).

Old Man of Stoer

It's roughly a 30-mile detour off the A894 to the **Point of Stoer** and the **Rhu Stoer Lighthouse** (1870) and back to the main road again. Along the coast road you need to be prepared for single-track roads, blind bends, summits and sheep. The rewards are spectacular views, pretty villages and excellent beaches. From the lighthouse, it's a good one-hour cliff walk to the Old Man of Stoer, a spectacular sea stack.

There are more good beaches between Stoer and Lochinver, including one at Achmelvich. **Achmelvich Youth Hostel** (SYHA; ☎ 0870 004 1102; dm adult/child £12.50/9.50; ☹ Apr-Sep) is about 1.5 miles from the Lochinver–Drumbeg postbus route, and 4 miles from Lochinver. Sheltered by rocky hills and found close to the beach, it's a small rustic place with basic dorms.

Lochinver & Assynt

☎ 01571

The distinctive region of Assynt comprises a landscape of spectacular peaks rising from the moorland. Lochinver (population 639) is the main settlement. The busy little fishing port is a popular port of call for tourists, with its laid-back attitude, good facilities, striking scenery and award-winning visitor centre.

The **tourist office & visitor centre** (☎ 0845 225 5121; Main St; ☹ 10am–5pm Mon–Sat, 10am–4pm Sun Jun–Aug, 10am–5pm Apr–May & Sep–Oct) has an interpretive display on the story of Assynt, from flora and fauna to clans, conflict and controversy. There's a supermarket in town, as well as a post office, bank (with an ATM), petrol station and **doctor** (☎ 844755).

Using local landscapes as inspiration **Highland Stoneware** (☎ 844376; Lochinver) ensure that you can relive the majesty of the northwest every time you look into the bottom of your teacup. Even better are the mosaics outside, especially the car.

The Lochinver–Lairg road (A837) meets the Durness road (A894) at **Skiag Bridge**, by Loch Assynt, about 10 miles east of Lochinver. Half a mile south of here, by the loch, there's

the ruin of the late 15th-century MacLeod stronghold, **Ardreck Castle**. There are wonderful summer sunsets over the castle and the loch.

The stunningly shaped hills of Assynt are popular with walkers and include peaks such as Sulven (731m), Quinag (808m), Ben More Assynt (998m) and Canisp (846m). The tourist office has a leaflet with brief details of walks in the area called *Walks Around Assynt* (50p). For a more in-depth guide, pick up a copy of *Walks: West Sutherland* (£3).

SLEEPING & EATING

Ardglas (☎ 844257; www.ardglas.co.uk; Inver, Lochinver; r per person £22) The comfortable Ardglas is a bastion in the hospitality trade with modern rooms, a decent-sized single and top views from the guests' lounge. Room No 8 is a good choice with a small couch and lovely water views. All rooms share a bathroom.

Inchnadamph Lodge (☎ 822218; www.inch-lodge.co.uk; Inchnadamph; dm/d £15/22; ☎) By the Lochinver–Lairg road, this place is a friendly 50-bed lodge with lots of rustic accommodation. Most rooms are spacious and clean and there's a separate music/TV lounge for late partying. The facilities are excellent and it's very popular with groups. There's also a self-catering cottage (£65 to £85 per night depending on the number of nights; sleeps up to six). Tip: don't try booking accommodation over the internet – it doesn't work.

Culag Hotel (☎ 844270; Lochinver; s/d £39/53) This old waterfront hotel was formerly a smokehouse for herring; less fishy these days, this sprawling mansion has gracious rooms with huge en suites. A cooked breakfast will hit your pocket to the tune of £7.

Albannach (☎ 844407; www.thealbannach.co.uk; Bad-darroch, Lochinver; d per person £120–165) The Albannach is sheer indulgence, on a grand scale. You'll discover roaring fireplaces, furniture found only in antique shops and a demure, sophisticated atmosphere. The restaurant here uses organic, wild produce and is highly recommended (tariff includes dinner).

Lochinver Larder & Riverside Bistro (☎ 844356; 3 Main St; pies £5.75, mains £10–13; ☹ 10am–8.30pm) With an outstanding ensemble of inventive food made with local produce, Lochinver pies are a particular standout here and are famous in this part of the world: try the smoked haddock, or wild boar and apricot – very tasty. The bistro here also churns out delicious seafood dishes

in the evening, including monkfish goujons. If you get addicted to the pies, don't worry – they deliver throughout Britain.

Inverpollly Nature Reserve

The Inverpollly Nature Reserve has numerous glacial lochs and the three peaks of Cul Mor (849m), Stac Pollaidh (613m) and Cul Beag (769m). **Stac Pollaidh** provides one of the most exciting walks in the area, with some good scrambling on its narrow sandstone crest. It takes just three hours on a round trip from the car park at Loch Lurgainn.

Achiltibuie

☎ 01854 / pop 300

With sheep nibbling the grassy roadside verges, the gorgeous Summer Isles moored just off the coast and the silhouettes of mountains skirting the bay, this town personifies idyllic Scottish beauty and is the perfect place for some serious relaxation.

Summer Isles Cruises (☎ 622200) operates boat trips to the Summer Isles from Achiltibuie – you'll see some magnificent island scenery. The 3½-hour trips cost £20/10 per adult/child, and you get one hour ashore on **Tanera Mor**, where the post office issues its own stamps.

Summer Isles Hotel (☎ 622282; www.summerisleshotel.co.uk; Achiltibuie; s £85–165, d £135–200; ☹ Easter–Oct) is the Russian caviar of country hotels, exuding class, comfort and rustic sophistication. It makes a great spot to take a break from urban dwelling. The bar has quality bar meals (£5 to £12) ranging from sandwiches to the local speciality – seafood (try the platter for a taste of everything), or you might like to tuck into the five-course dinner (£51).

The rudimentary 20-bed **Achinver Youth Hostel** (SYHA; ☎ 0870 004 1101; Achinver, Achiltibuie; dm adult/child £12.50/9.50; ☹ May–Sep) is designed for walkers and outdoor enthusiasts – you have to walk half a mile off the main road to reach it. Its remote, serene location has to be one of the best in the country.

There are buses Monday to Saturday from Reiff, Badenscallie (half a mile from the hostel) and Achiltibuie to Ullapool (1½ hours, one or two daily Monday to Friday, one Saturday).

ULLAPOOL

☎ 01854 / pop 1400

Ullapool's harbourside façade is postcard-perfect and, on a sunny day, its surrounding rocky slopes are mirrored in the glassy veneer

of the bay. A ferry service links Ullapool to Stornoway on the Isle of Lewis, churning a consistent trade of overnighters in its wake. There are few attractions, but heaps of great walking, piles of accommodation, mountains of delectable seafood and a couple of good watering holes.

Information

Bank of Scotland (West Argyle St) Has an ATM.

Laundrette (Broomfield Holiday Park; wash £2.50)

Library (☎ 612543; Mill St; ☹ 9am–5pm Mon, Wed & Fri, 9am–5pm & 6–8pm Tue & Thu, closed Mon & Wed during holidays) Free internet access.

Royal Bank of Scotland (cnr Ladysmith & Argyle Sts) Has an ATM.

Tourist office (☎ 613031, 0845 225 5121; ullapool@visitscotland.com; 6 Argyle St; ☹ 9am–4.30pm Apr–May, 9am–5pm Mon–Sat, 10am–4pm Sun Jun–mid-Sep, 10am–5pm Mon–Sat mid-Sep–late-Oct, call for hours Nov–Mar) Service standards have dropped.

Ullapool Bookshop (☎ 612918; Quay St; ☹ 9am–9pm Mon–Fri, 9am–6pm Sat, 10am–6pm Sun; ☎) Lots of books on Scottish topics, and maps of the area. Internet access available.

Sights

Ullapool Museum & Visitor Centre (☎ 612987; 7–8 West Argyle St; adult/child £3/50p; ☹ 10am–5pm Mon–Sat Apr–Oct) is in a converted Telford Parliamentary church. An audiovisual presentation, interactive exhibits and various other displays chart the history of Loch Broom and its people.

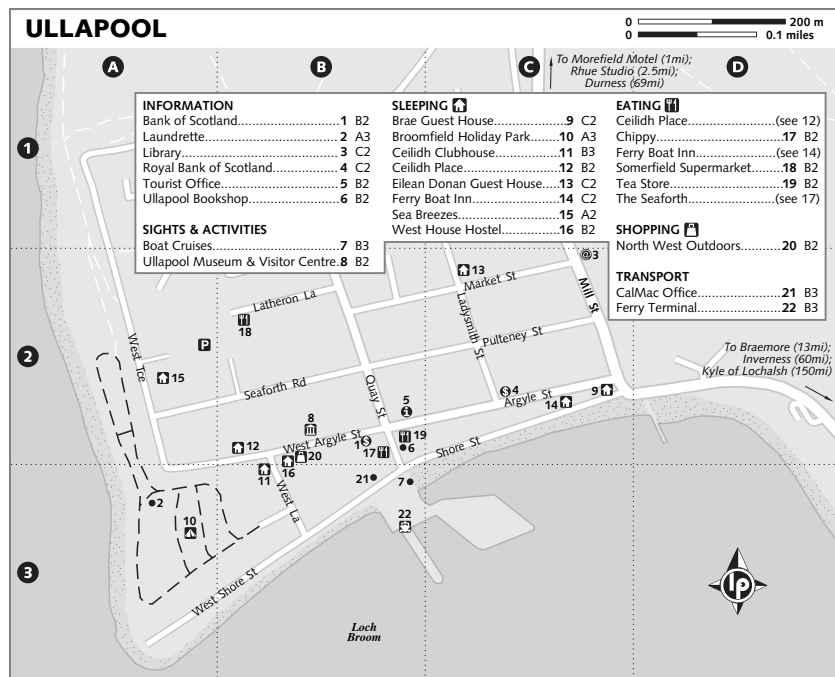
Rhue Studio (☎ 612460; www.rhueart.co.uk; Rhue; admission free; ☹ 10am–6pm Mon–Sat Apr–Sep, call for details Oct–Mar), 2.5 miles northwest of Ullapool, displays and sells the excellent art of contemporary landscape painter James Hawkins. The vivid and reflective works take a moment to adjust to, but they are wonderful interpretations. His work on the Outer Hebrides is breathtaking.

Activities

Ullapool is a great centre for hill walking. A good path up **Gleann na Sguuib** heads for the top of **Beinn Dearg** from Inverlael, at the inner end of Loch Broom. Ridge-walking on the **Fannichs** is relatively straightforward and many different routes are possible. The tourist office can supply you with all the information and maps you need. Good walking books sold at the tourist office include *Walks in Wester Ross* (£2.50), or you can pick up a copy of the freebie guide to local woodland walks.

NAKED NO LONGER

A pleasant surprise of touring around the northern Highlands is the number of forests and woods, contrary to the perception that the northern Scottish landscape, though beautiful, is stark naked. There are fine walking trails that explore these forests, often gentle in nature, and the surrounds change character with the season. High-lights can include wildlife and ancient ruins, as well as survivors of the ancient forests that once carpeted this area. For detailed walking advice grab a copy of *The Forests of the Far North* brochure, free at tourist offices and produced by the Forestry Commission (www.forestry.gov.uk/scotland).



Tours

There are regular **boat cruises** to the Summer Isles departing from the ferry terminal (adult/child £24/12, four hours), as well as two-hour wildlife cruises.

Sleeping

Note that during summer Ullapool is very busy and finding accommodation can be tricky – if you're looking for a single it's virtually impossible unless you are willing to pay a high surcharge (£35 for a room) – the answer: book ahead.

Broomfield Holiday Park (☎ 612664; West Lane; camp sites £9-13; ☽ May-Oct) On an inviting verge of Loch Broom, this camping ground has pesky midges, good facilities (including a laundrette) and lawns manicured with nail scissors.

West House Hostel (Scotpackers; ☎/fax 613126; www.scotpackers-hostels.co.uk; West Argyle St; dm/d £14/35, self-catering cottage £80; ☑) This is a brilliant place to stay and one of the best backpackers in northern Scotland. Small, spacious dorms (some with en suite) have comfy bunks, and doubles have TV and hot-drink facilities. It's

clean, well run and very friendly – the owner has the right attitude.

Sea Breezes (☎ 612148; 2 West Tce; s/d £18/50) The recommended Sea Breezes is a brilliant choice – you couldn't buy better views from the ensuite double room, and the single is small but very good value. It's personable, laid-back and virtually impossible to leave disappointed. Booking ahead is advisable.

Brae Guest House (☎ 612421; Shore St; r per person £22-28) This is a traditional, comfy place worth trying when things are busy in town. The location is excellent and rooms along the seafront have magnificent views as they're raised from the busy street level. You can even watch fishermen bringing in their catch.

Eilean Donan Guest House (☎ 612524; edonan@ullapoolholidays.com; 14 Market St; s/d £30/55) This top-class guesthouse has an open fire in the sitting room for those blustery evenings, a full-blown restaurant (two-/three-course dinners £17/22) and excellent rooms with bathroom. It's in a lovely, tree-lined street a few minutes' walk from the seafront.

Ferry Boat Inn (☎ 612366; www.ferryboat-inn.com; Shore St; r per person £40) The vivacious Ferry Boat

is the liveliest place in town. The stylish, tastefully furnished rooms – a contrast to the grubby corridors – get snapped up quickly in summer. Book in advance if you want a room with a view across Loch Broom (Nos 1, 3 and 4); the alternative is looking at a brick wall.

Ceilidh Place (☎ 612103; reservations@ceilidh.demon.co.uk; 14 West Argyle St; r per person £48-68; ☑) Take your pick from the individually designed rooms in this nook-and-cranny hotel that exudes warmth and class. Price depends upon size, position (view), facilities and how long you stay – there are good specials in the off season. Nearby, **Ceilidh Clubhouse** (☎ 612103; West Lane; dm £15-20) has upmarket, poky, rustic-style dorms with reputedly the best showers in Scotland.

Eating & Drinking

Chippy (Quay St; fish & chips £4.75; ☽ 9am-9.30pm) A previous winner of a best UK takeaway award. The grub here really is a cut above your average greasy chippy – the chips are freshly sliced and the fish is freshly cooked.

Tea Store (☎ 612995; Argyle St; snacks & light meals £2-5; ☽ 8am-5pm Mon-Sat, 10am-4pm Sun) A decent coffee nook for a light meal and a read of the newspaper. It serves filled rolls, toasties, jacket spuds and is also good for breakfasts (including vegetarian options).

The Seaforth (☎ 612122; Quay St; mains £7.50-10; ☽ lunch & dinner) Accolades for the seafood dishes at this place are growing, which include homemade fish pie, a platter of creel-caught langoustines and crayfish tails with apple salad. Eat in the bustling pub downstairs with its booth seating, or for more sedate dining venture upstairs to the bistro where a tastefully furnished room and another bar is a good setup for families or groups.

Ferry Boat Inn (☎ 612366; Shore St; bar meals £8, mains £7-12; ☽ lunch & dinner) This cosy pub is the best watering hole in town and the spot to pull up a bar stool and nurse a local ale. It usually has a great cross section of tourists and locals.

Morefield Motel (☎ 612161; North Rd; mains £8-14; ☽ lunch & dinner) This sedate motel serves an outstanding medley of local seafood, including langoustine, salmon, swordfish and lobster, in its lounge bar. It has a deservedly fine reputation and is popular with locals and tourists alike. There's not much atmosphere, so come for the food not the buzz. If you can't decide from the extensive menu and specials board, choose the seafood sampler. The motel

is off the A835, a mile north of the harbour (follow Mill St).

Ceilidh Place (☎ 612103; 14 West Argyle St; light meals £7, mains £14-20; ☽ breakfast, lunch & dinner) The restaurant of this hotel serves inventive dishes catering for most palates. The mushrooms are shiitake and the sauce is vermouth. The restaurant's soulless setting lets the place down, but it comes to life in summer, serving as Ullapool's main entertainment centre and pouring some excellent local ales.

For self-catering, you'll find a large Somerfield supermarket next to the car park north of Seaforth Rd.

Shopping

North West Outdoors (☎ 613323; West Argyle St) Good for outdoor equipment.

Getting There & Around

Ullapool is 215 miles from Edinburgh and 60 miles from Inverness. Scottish Citylink has three daily buses, Monday to Saturday, from Inverness to Ullapool (£9, 1½ hours), connecting with the ferry. CalMac runs a ferry service to Stornoway on the Isle of Lewis; see p390 for details. Tickets can be purchased from the CalMac office.

Bikes can be hired from West House Hostel (opposite).

ULLAPOOL TO THE EAST COAST

The A835 goes south from Ullapool to Braemore Junction, then continues over the wild Dirrie More to the Glascarnoch dam, with great views of Beinn Dearg on the way. This section is sometimes closed by snow in winter.

Five miles south of Inchbae, there's a junction where the A832 goes west to Gairloch through pleasant **Strath Braan**. The A835 continues southeast, past Garve village and Loch Garve to **Contin**.

Coul House Hotel (☎ 01997-421487; www.coulhousehotel.com; Contin; s/d £80/150) is a very fine country mansion dating from 1821. Set in its own private wilderness, this charming country hotel with blazing log fire will entice you to linger. Luxury rooms include mountain views and four-poster beds. Its restaurant is open for dinner (mains £16 to £18) and serves eclectic modern fusion. Interpreted: everything's delicious.

Ullapool to Inverness buses follow this route and stop off at Contin, Garve and

Aultguish. Trains from Inverness to Kyle of Lochalsh stop at Garve.

ULLAPOOL TO KYLE OF LOCHALSH

Although it's less than 50 miles as the crow flies from Ullapool to Kyle of Lochalsh, it's more like 150 miles along the circuitous coastal road – but don't let that put you off. It's a deliciously remote region and there are fine views of beaches and bays backed by mountains all the way along.

Falls of Measach

The A832 doubles back to the coast from the A835, 12 miles from Ullapool. Just after the junction, the Falls of Measach ('ugly' in Gaelic) spill 45m into the spectacularly deep and narrow Corrieshalloch Gorge. You can cross from side to side on a wobbly suspension bridge, built by Sir John Fowler of Braemore. The thundering falls and misty vapours rising from the gorge are very impressive – a shame about the logging in the plantation forest bordering the falls.

Dundonnell & Around

☎ 01854 / pop 200

Dundonnell appears half-drowned after a good soaking, with a combination of imposing ridges overlooking the lowlands of this tiny settlement. **An Teallach** (1062m) is a magnificent mountain – the highest summit can be reached by a path starting less than 500m southeast of the Dundonnell Hotel (six hours return). Traversing the ridge to Sail Liath is a more serious proposition, with lots of scrambling in precarious places and difficult route-finding. Carry Ordnance Survey (OS) map No 19, food, water and waterproofs – it's amazing how quickly the weather can turn foul here.

Badrallach Bothy (☎ 633281; www.badrallach.com; Croft 9, Badrallach; bothy per person £5, camp sites per 2 people £9, r per person £30), 7 miles from the A832, has a good range of accommodation, as well as boats, bikes and fishing gear for hire. It's the perfect place to get away from it all and acquaint yourself with the rural beauty of this country.

Dundonnell Hotel (☎ 633204; www.dundonnellhotel.com; Dundonnell; r per person £40-55) provides good refuge from the elements and has elegant, traditionally furnished rooms; the loch-and mountain-facing premier rooms have great views. Adventurous menus (three-course

dinner £18) and attentive service ensure an enjoyable culinary experience too. Try the clam chowder or the local mussels.

Gairloch & Around

☎ 01445 / pop 1100

Gairloch is a group of villages (comprising Auchtercairn, Strath and Charlestown) around the inner end of a loch of the same name. The surrounding area has beautiful sandy beaches, good trout-fishing and bird-watching. Hill walkers also use Gairloch as a base for the Torridon hills and An Teallach.

The **tourist office** (☎ 712071; ☹ daily May-Sep) is at the car park in Auchtercairn, next to the museum, where a road branches off to the main centre at Strath.

The **Gairloch Marine Life Centre** (☎ 712636; Pier Rd, Charlestown; admission free; ☹ 10am-4pm Easter-Sep) has audiovisual and interactive displays, lots of charts and photos, and knowledgeable staff.

Gairloch Marine Cruises (☎ 712636; www.porpoise-gairloch.co.uk; cruises per adult/child £20/10) run from the centre and sail up to three times daily (weather permitting) from Easter to October; during the two-hour trips you may see basking sharks, porpoises and minke whales.

Rua Reidh Lighthouse Hostel (☎ 71263; ruareidh@tiscali.co.uk; dm/d £10/30), by Melvaig, and 13 miles from Gairloch (at the end of the road), is an excellent hostel and will give you a taste of a lighthouse-keeper's life. Buses from Gairloch run as far as Melvaig, then it's a 3-mile walk along the road to the lighthouse. En-suite doubles, twins and family rooms are also available.

If you're looking for a place to hole up for the night in town, **Wayside Guest House** (☎ 712008; Strath; s/d £30/50) has water views from two cosy rooms, which share a bathroom. Another double and family room have no view but are en suite. It's right next to Strath Stores.

The rustic **Old Inn** (☎ 01445-712006; www.theoldinn.net; Charlestown; s/d £45/90) has a range of excellent snug rooms, some (such as No 4) with four-poster beds. Downstairs, the bar is an atmospheric nook-and-cranny affair, with the best pint of ale in town, and serves recommended bar meals (£7 to £14) of the delectable seafood variety. The inn is just opposite Gairloch Pier.

The Mountain Coffee Company & Hillbillies Bookshop (☎ 712316; Village Sq, Strath; mains £3-6; ☹ breakfast & lunch) is a shrine to all things mountaineering and has a lazy, chilled-out vibe. It sells excel-

lent hearty food for walkers, best consumed in the attached conservatory. Besides, how can you go past a place that sells a mars bar cappuccino, New York bagels and mountain scones?

Loch Maree & Victoria Falls

Loch Maree is sprinkled with islands, and a series of peaks line its northern shore, culminating in 980m-high **Slioch**. The A832 runs alongside the loch.

The Victoria Falls (commemorating the visit of Queen Victoria in 1877) tumble down to the loch between Slattadale and Talladale. Look for the 'Hydro Power' signs to find it.

Kinlochewe & Around

☎ 01445

Tiny Kinlochewe is a good base for outdoor activities. You'll find an outdoor-equipment shop, a petrol station with a tearoom and a shop/post office that runs a café in summer. Check out the **Beinn Eighè Visitor Centre** (☎ 760254; admission free; ☹ 10am-5pm Easter-Oct), a mile north of Kinlochewe, with interactive displays (good for kids, too) on local geography, ecology, flora and fauna, and walking routes.

There's a basic, free **camping ground** (☎ 760254) 1.5 miles north of the village. **Hillhaven** (☎ 760204; www.kinlochewe.info; Kinlochewe; s/d £35/56) is an excellent, friendly B&B that organises hawk-flying displays. The bright rooms here have lovely, contemporary furnishings, are en suite and look out over the garden.

Kinlochewe Hotel (☎ 760253; www.kinlochewehotel.co.uk; Kinlochewe; dm £10, r per person £40) has pulled up its socks and now offers big, soft, heavy-linen hotel rooms (No 8 is the best double). There's also a bunkhouse with one no-frills 12-bed dorm, a decent kitchen and clean bathrooms. Bring a towel and sleeping bag. Lunch and dinner is served daily (bar meals £6 to £13), except Monday nights.

East of Kinlochewe, the single-track A832 continues to Achnasheen, where there's a train station.

Torridon & Around

Southwest from Kinlochewe, the A896 follows **Glen Torridon**, overlooked by multiple peaks, including Beinn Eighè (1010m) and Liathach (1055m). The drive along Glen Torridon is one of the most breathtaking in Scotland. Mighty, brooding mountains, often partly ob-

scured by clumps of passing clouds, seemingly drawn to their peaks like magnets, loom over the tiny, winding, single-track road.

The road reaches the sea at Torridon, where there is a **Countryside Centre** (☎ 01445-791221; Torridon Mains; donation adult/child £3/2; ☹ 10am-5pm Easter-Sep) offering information on flora, fauna and walks in the rugged area. There's an unstaffed **Deer Museum** (☹ daylight hours year-round) nearby, which contains a collection of photos and odds and ends put together by a previous ranger.

The **camping ground** (☎ 01381-621252; Torridon; camp sites free) here has good showers and you get a grassy patch to pitch your tent, along with stunning views and wide-open, exhilarating space.

The modern, squat **Torridon Youth Hostel** (SYHA; ☎ 0870 004 1154; Torridon; dm adult/child £13.50/10.50; ☹ Mar-Oct) is in a magnificent location near the Countryside Centre and is used mainly by outdoor enthusiasts.

Ferroc (☎ 01445-791451; www.ferroc.co.uk; Annat, Loch Torridon; s/d £45/66), just southwest of Torridon village, is a guesthouse that, once you've woken up to the views, you'll never want to leave.

Magnificent **Loch Torridon Country House Hotel** (☎ 01445-791242; www.lochtorridonhotel.com; Torridon; s £160, d £300, 4-course dinner £48; ☹), complete with clock tower, is a class act and one of the best places to stay in Scotland. Everything about this property screams luxury...in a very quiet, refined way. Rates include dinner, but non-guests can dine here too. Check the website for special offers.

The A896 continues westwards to lovely **Shieldaig**, which boasts an attractive main street of whitewashed houses. **Tigh an Eilean Hotel** (☎ 01520-755251; Shieldaig; bar meals £8-13, 3-course dinner £43; ☹ lunch & dinner) dishes out locally caught seafood so fresh that it may still be squirming on your plate.

Applecross

☎ 01520 / pop 200

A long side trip abandons the A896 to follow the coast road to the delightfully remote seaside village of Applecross. Or you can continue a bit further down the A896 to one of the best drives in the country (best in terms of the remote and incredibly rugged and spectacular scenery, not the actual road, which winds and twists and balances on sheer precipices). The road climbs steeply to the **Bealach na Ba pass**

(626m), then drops dramatically to the village. This drive is pure magic and a must if you're in the area. Note, this road can be closed in winter. Applecross itself is a delightful wooded village gazing across to the peaks of Skye.

You can pitch your tent at the **Applecross Camp Site & Flower Tunnel** (☎ 744268; camp sites for 2 from £12), which also has a licensed pizza restaurant (pizzas from £5) in a flower-filled conservatory.

The family-run **Applecross Inn** (☎ 744262; applecrossinn@globalnet.co.uk; Shore St; s/d £70/100; 🍷)

is the kind of pub you could easily spend all day in. You will find excellent food (bar meals £8 to £10), real ales (Red Cuillen on tap) and usually a decent mix of locals and tourists. You couldn't ask for a better place to hole up.

Back on the main road, the A896 runs south from Shieldaig to **Kishorn**, where there's a general store and post office, and spectacular views westwards to the steep sandstone Applecross hills.

TALES FROM A CHAMPION MUNRO BAGGER: STEVEN FALLON

Steven Fallon, a hill walker, fell runner and qualified Mountain Leader who lives in Edinburgh, is the world's most prolific Munro bagger, having climbed all of Scotland's 284 Munros (peaks of 3000ft and higher) no fewer than 13 times. At the time of writing, he only had 62 more to climb to complete his 14th round, and was halfway to ticking off the Corbetts (peaks from 2500ft to 2999ft) as well.

How long have you been bagging Munros, and what got you interested in the first place? For Christmas 1988 my parents gave me the Scottish Mountaineering Club guidebook *The Munros* – I hadn't realised there were so many fabulous peaks in Scotland! So off I went and ticked them off one by one. This took me to so many wonderful parts of Scotland that I would never have visited otherwise, and once I'd 'completed' (ie bagged all the Munros), I started on the Corbetts with the intention of repeating only my favourite Munros. But before I knew it I was well through my second round of Munros and, well, the rest is history.

Do you have a favourite, and/or least favourite Munro? As to my favourites, practically anything in the northwest Highlands could feature – they tend to be pointy with great views. I'd single out Slioch by Loch Maree (p375); Beinn Alligin, Liathach and Beinn Eighe in Torridon (p375); the Five Sisters of Kintail (p378); and all of the mountains in the Cuillin of Skye (p383). However, my most-most-favourite has to be Ladhair Bheinn (p349) in the Knoydart Peninsula. It's pretty remote and to reach it requires a long walk-in along the southern shore of Loch Hourne. It's just so beautiful there. The mountain itself is complex with corries and ridges, and the summit has great views over Eigg to Skye and beyond. I'm pining just thinking about it!

My least favourite, without debate, has to be Ben Klibreck, the most northerly Munro after Ben Hope. It rises above a desolate area where the ground is wet, tussocky and tiring to move over. The last pull up to the summit builds you up to expect wonderful views, but the vista from the summit is really quite disappointing, looking over flat ground in most directions.

Which is the easiest Munro, and which is the hardest? With only 430m of ascent over 5km, the easiest Munros have to be the Cairnwell and Carn Aosda from the Glenshee ski resort (p230). Good paths and ski-tows make for simple navigation over these two peaks, and if you time it right, you'll be back at the café in time for something to eat. Check out my website (www.stevenfallon.co.uk) for the 10 easiest Munro walks.

The hardest peak depends entirely on your thinking. A'Mhaighdean in Wester Ross is the most remote, and most people have to backpack in over two or three days to tick this one off. Well worth it though! The most difficult technically has to be the aptly named Inaccessible Pinnacle in the Cuillin Hills on Skye. It's a clamber up a long fin of rock with sensational, tremble-inducing exposure, followed by an abseil down a short but vertical drop. Most Munro-baggers will have to enlist the help of their rock-climbing friends or hire a guide.

For more information about bagging Munros, see the boxed text, p62.

Lochcarron

☎ 01520 / pop 950

The appealing, whitewashed village of Lochcarron is a veritable metropolis with two supermarkets, a bank (with an ATM), post office and petrol station. A long shoreline footpath at the loch's edge provides the perfect opportunity for a stroll to walk off breakfast.

The Old Manse (☎ 722208; www.theoldmanse.lochcarron.com; Church St; s/d £25/50, tw with loch view £55) is a top Scottish guesthouse beautifully appointed and in a prime lochside position. Rooms are simply gorgeous and the twin overlooking the water is larger and well worth the extra £5. The owner loves his whisky, especially Glenmorangie (Madeira-wood finish, of course). This is a refined, quite luxurious place to stay and would really suit couples: it's made for snuggling.

Clisham Guesthouse (☎ 722995; www.dishamguesthouse.co.uk; Main St; d £50, self-catering chalet per person £20) is very friendly and has a chalet with great privacy behind the guesthouse. It sleeps three comfortably (one twin and a fold-out futon). Inside there are three doubles, one with seaweaves.

If you stay at the small, quiet **Rockvilla Hotel** (☎ 722379; rockvillahotel@btinternet.com; Main St; r £65-75) choose room Nos 1 or 2 – they are slightly cheaper, and have private facilities and dreamy views. Open for lunch and dinner (mains £8 to £13), the hotel kitchen serves some wonderful fresh seafood and is renowned for its scallops.

Plockton

☎ 01599 / pop 450

Plockton is so idyllic that it could be designed by Hollywood, but there's nothing fake about the grandeur and beauty of this set. The place is overrun with tourists and its design around the harbour – a small, protected bay dotted with mini islands – means it gets cramped. It's especially popular with over-55s and we'd recommend a visit out of season (ie not in summer).

Cycling is a great way to explore the area and **Plockton Cycle Hire** (☎ 544255; Plockton Cottages, Frithard Rd) rents bikes for £9/14 per half-/full day.

Calum's Seal Trips (☎ 544306; cruises adult/child £7/4.50) runs seal-watching cruises. There are swarms of the slippery fellas just outside the harbour and the trip comes with an excellent commentary. Trips leave daily at 10am, noon, 2pm and 4pm. You may even spot an otter.

Plockton Station Bunkhouse (☎ 544235; mickcoe@btinternet.com; Nessun Dorma; dm £11-12) is in

the former station building with excellent, clean facilities and comfy four- and six-bed dorms. It's modern, and very convenient for the train.

The black-painted **Plockton Hotel** (☎ 544274; www.plocktonhotel.co.uk; Harbour St; starters £4.50, mains £7-13; 🍷 lunch & dinner) has a selection of comfy rooms (per person £35 to £50) overlooking the bay and serves up classy pub food – think rustic dining in an elegant pub setting. Bench seating grazing the loch shore makes it the best place for a drink on a warm evening.

KYLE OF LOCHALSH

☎ 01599 / pop 750

Before the Skye Bridge opened, Kyle of Lochalsh (normally just called Kyle) was the main jumping-off point for trips to the Isle of Skye. Now, however, its many B&B owners watch most of their trade whizz past without stopping.

The **tourist office** (☎ 534198, 534390; 🕒 9.30am-5pm Mon-Fri, 10am-4pm Sat & Sun Easter-Oct), beside the main seafarer car park, stocks information on Skye.

There's a string of B&Bs just outside of town on the road to Plockton. **Claire an Torrain** (☎ 530205; Church Rd; s/d £35/55) has two excellent, en-suite rooms in a rustic, down-to-earth, friendly environment. It's all very homely, unlike some of the more soulless B&Bs in this town.

For a bit more luxury, **Kyle Hotel** (☎ 534204; Main St; r per person from £40) has deluxe doubles with spa bath that are deliciously decadent.

The best place to eat is the **Waverley** (☎ 534337; Main St; starters £6, mains £12-17; 🍷 dinner, closed Thu). This superb restaurant is an intimate place with excellent service; try the taste of land and sea, combining Aberdeen Angus fillet steak with fresh local prawns.

Kyle can be reached by bus from Inverness (£14, 2½ hours), and by three daily direct Scottish Citylink buses from Glasgow (£25.50, 5½ hours).

The 82-mile train ride between Inverness and Kyle of Lochalsh (£16.50, 2½ hours, up to four daily) is one of Scotland's most scenic rail routes.

KYLE TO THE GREAT GLEN

It's 55 miles southwest via the A87 from Kyle to Invergarry, which lies between Fort William and Fort Augustus, on Loch Oich.

Eilean Donan Castle

Photogenically sited at the entrance to Loch Duich, near Dornie village, **Eilean Donan Castle** (☎ 01599-555202; Dornie; adult/child £5/2; 🕒 10am-6pm mid-Mar–mid-Nov, from 9am Jul & Aug) is one of Scotland's most evocative castles, and must be represented in millions of photo albums. It's on an offshore islet, magically linked to the mainland by an elegant, stone-arched bridge. It's very much a re-creation inside with an excellent introductory exhibition. Keep an eye out for the photos of castle scenes from the movie *Highlander*. There's also a sword used at the battle of Culloden in 1746. The castle was ruined in 1719 after Spanish Jacobite forces were defeated at the Battle of Glenshiel, and it was rebuilt between 1912 and 1932.

Scottish Citylink buses from Fort William and Inverness to Portree stop opposite the castle and by the bridge at Dornie.

Glen Shiel & Glenelg

From Eilean Donan Castle, the A87 follows Loch Duich into spectacular Glen Shiel, with 1000m-high peaks soaring up on both sides of the road. At Shiel Bridge, a narrow side road goes over the **Bealach Ratagain** (pass) to Glenelg, where there's still a ferry to Skye.

There are several good walks in the area, including the low-level route from Morvich to Glen Affric Youth Hostel (p325), via spectacular **Gleann Lichd** (17 miles). A traverse of the **Five Sisters of Kintail** is a classic and none-too-easy expedition; start a mile east of the Glen Shiel battle site and finish at Shiel Bridge (eight to 10 hours). For more information on these walks, contact the tourist office at Kyle of Lochalsh.

From the Bealach Ratagain, there are great views of the Five Sisters. Continue past Glenelg in the direction of Arnisdale to the two fine ruined Iron Age **brochs** – Dun Telve and Dun Troddan. Dun Telve still stands to a height of 10m, making it the second-best-preserved broch in Scotland, after Mousa (p430) in the Shetlands.

From Glenelg round to the road-end at **Arnisdale**, the scenery becomes even more spectacular, with great views across Loch Houran to Knoydart.

Ratagan Youth Hostel (SYHA; ☎ 0870 004 1147; Shiel Bridge; dm adult/child £12.50/9.50; 🕒 May-Oct; 📺) is a particularly good hostel. It has excellent facilities and a to-die-for spot by Loch Duich. If you want a break from Munro bagging, this

is the place. There's at least one local bus a day from the Kyle of Lochalsh to the hostel (half hour).

Kintail Lodge Hotel (☎ 01599-511275; www.kintail.lodgehotel.co.uk; Shiel Bridge; bunkhouse bed £13.50, r per person £40-57) has two bunkhouses, with self-catering facilities, sleeping six people each. With 10 of the 12 fine rooms facing the loch, you'd be unlucky not to get a decent outlook from a room inside the hotel. The tasty bar meals (£10), including local venison and seafood, are available for lunch and dinner.

Scottish Citylink buses between Fort William, Inverness and Skye operate along the A87. There's a postbus operating once daily, except Sunday, from Kyle to Arnisdale via Shiel Bridge and Glenelg.

Cluanie Inn

Beyond the top of Glen Shiel, the A87 passes the remote, but welcoming, **Cluanie Inn** (☎ 01320-340238; www.cluanieinn.com; Glenmoriston; r per person £32-60), which has a great lived-in feel to it, providing shelter and good cheer from the elements. It's a classy lodge and very popular with outdoor enthusiasts. There's even a four-poster bed, spa and sauna in here. At lunch and dinner time there's bar meals (£7 to £15) for hungry walkers, including freshly shot haggis. From the inn, you can walk along several mountain ridges, bagging Munros to your heart's content. There's a low-level route through to Glen Affric Youth Hostel (p325), which takes three hours, but it gets very wet at certain times of year.

ISLE OF SKYE

pop 9900

The Isle of Skye (an t-Eilean Sgiathanach in Gaelic) takes its name from the old Norse *sky-a*, meaning 'cloud island', a Viking reference to the often mist-enshrouded Cuillin Hills. It's the biggest of Scotland's islands, a 50-mile-long smorgasbord of velvet moors, jagged mountains, sparkling lochs and towering sea cliffs. The stunning scenery is the main attraction, but when the mist closes in there are plenty of castles, crofting museums and cosy pubs and restaurants to retire to.

Along with Edinburgh and Loch Ness, Skye is one of Scotland's top three tourist destinations. However, the hordes tend to stick to Portree, Dunvegan and Trotternish, and it's

almost always possible to find peace and quiet in the island's farther-flung corners. Come prepared for changeable weather: when it's fine it's very fine indeed, but all too often it isn't.

Information

Portree and Broadford are the main population centres on Skye.

INTERNET ACCESS

Columba 1400 Community Centre (☎ 01478-611400; Staffin, Trotternish; per 30min £1; 🕒 10.30am-4.30pm Mon-Sat)

Island Outdoors (☎ 01478-611073; The Green, Portree; per 15min £1; 🕒 9am-5.30pm daily Apr-Oct, closed Sun Nov-Mar)

Portree tourist office (☎ 01478-612137; Bayfield Rd, Portree; per 20min £1; 🕒 9am-6pm Mon-Sat & 10am-4pm Sun Jun-Aug, 9am-5pm Mon-Fri & 10am-4pm Sat Apr, May & Sep, limited opening Oct-Mar)

Sligachan Hotel (☎ 01478-650204; www.sligachan.co.uk; Sligachan; per 15min £1)

South Skye Computers (☎ 01471-898222; Old Corrie Industrial Estate, Broadford; per 15min £1.25; 🕒 10am-5pm Mon-Fri)

MEDICAL SERVICES

Hospital (☎ 01478-613200; Portree) There's a casualty department and dental surgery here.

MONEY

Only Portree and Broadford have banks with ATMs. Portree's tourist office has a currency exchange desk.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Broadford tourist office (☎ 01471-822361; The Car Park, Broadford; 🕒 10am-5pm Mon-Fri, 11am-4pm Sat Apr-Oct)

Dunvegan tourist office (☎ 01470-521581; 2 Lochside, Dunvegan; 🕒 10am-5pm Mon-Sat Jun-Oct, plus 10am-4pm Sun Jul & Aug, 10am-5pm Mon-Fri Apr & May, limited opening Nov-Mar)

Portree tourist office (☎ 01478-612137; Bayfield Rd, Portree; 🕒 9am-6pm Mon-Sat & 10am-4pm Sun Jun-Aug, 9am-5pm Mon-Fri & 10am-4pm Sat Apr, May & Sep, limited opening Oct-Mar)

Activities

WALKING

Skye offers some of the finest – and in places the roughest and most difficult – walking in Scotland. There are many detailed guidebooks available, including a series of four walking

guides by Charles Rhodes, available from the Aros Centre and the tourist office at Portree. You'll need Ordnance Survey (OS) 1:50,000 maps 23 and 32. Don't attempt the longer walks in bad weather or in winter.

Easy, low-level routes include: through Strath Mor from Luib (on the Broadford–Sligachan road) to Torrinn (on the Broadford–Elgol road, allow 1½ hours, 4 miles); from Sligachan to Kilmarnie via Camasunary (four hours, 11 miles); and from Elgol to Kilmarnie via Camasunary (2½ hours, 6.5 miles). The walk from Kilmarnie to Coruisk via Camasunary and the 'Bad Step' (allow five hours, 11 miles round trip) is superb but slightly harder (the Bad Step is a rocky slab poised above the sea that you have to scramble across; it's easy in fine, dry weather, but some walkers find it intimidating).

Skye Walking Holidays (☎ 01470-552213; www.skye.walks.co.uk; Duntulm Castle Hotel, Trotternish) organises three-day guided walking holidays for £340 per person, including four nights of hotel accommodation.

CLIMBING

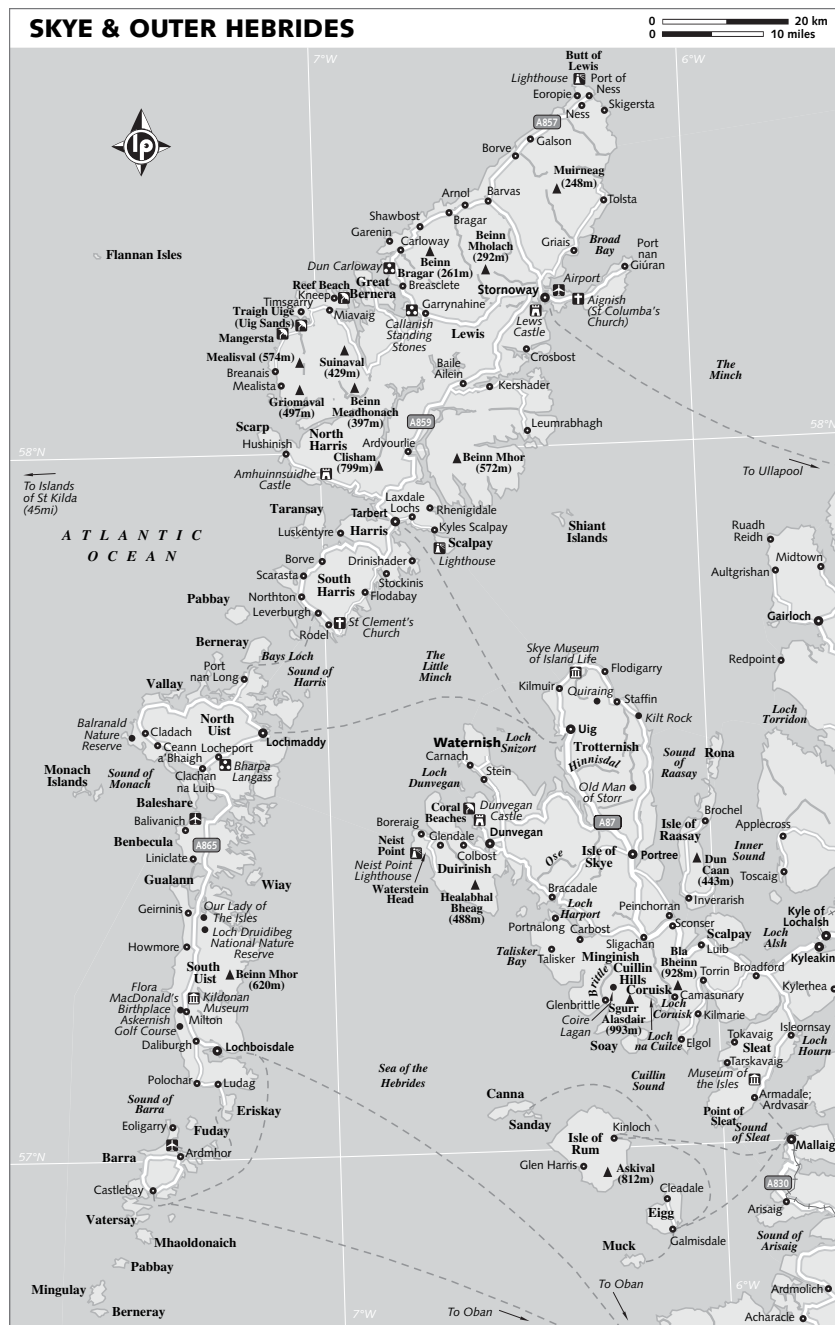
The Cuillin Hills is a playground for rock climbers, and the two-day traverse of the Cuillin Ridge is the finest mountaineering expedition in the British Isles. There are several mountain guides who can provide instruction and safely introduce inexperienced climbers to the harder routes. Agencies include **Cuillin Guides** (☎ 01478-640289; www.cuillin-guides.co.uk) and **Skye Guides** (☎ 01471-822116; www.skyeguides.co.uk). A five-day basic rock-climbing course costs around £300, and a private mountain guide for one or two clients can be hired for around £90 a day.

SEA-KAYAKING

The sheltered coves and sea lochs around the coast of Skye provide magnificent sea-kayaking opportunities. **Whitewave Outdoor Centre** (☎ 01470-542414; www.white-wave.co.uk; Linnicro, Kilmuir; 🕒 Mar-Oct) and **Skyak Adventures** (☎ 01471-833428; www.skyakadventures.com; 13 Camuscross, Isleornsay) provide kayaking instruction, guiding and equipment hire for beginners and experts. It costs around £25 for a half-day kayak hire with instruction.

Tours

There are several operators who offer guided tours of Skye, covering history, culture and



SKYE & OUTER HEBRIDES

wildlife, including **Red Deer Travel** (☎ 01478-612142) and **Isle of Skye Tour Guide Co** (☎ 01471-844440; www.isle-of-skye-tour-guide.co.uk). Rates are around £170 for an eight-hour tour for up to six people.

Getting There & Away

BOAT

Despite there being a bridge, there are still a couple of ferry links between Skye and the mainland.

CalMac (☎ 01471-844248; www.calmac.co.uk) operates the Mallaig to Armadale ferry (driver or passenger £3.40, car £18.40, 30 minutes, eight daily Monday to Saturday, five to seven on Sunday). It's very popular in July and August, so book ahead if you're travelling by car.

For details of ferries from Uig on Skye to the Outer Hebrides, see p390.

Skye Ferry (☎ 01599-522273; www.skyeferry.co.uk) runs a tiny vessel (six cars only) on the short Glenelg to Kylekha crossing (car and up to four passengers £8.50, motorcycle £5, pedestrian £1, bicycle £1.50, five minutes, every 20 minutes). The ferry operates from 9am to 7pm Monday to Saturday from Easter to October only, and 10am to 6pm Sunday from mid-May to August.

BUS

Scottish Citylink runs direct buses from Glasgow to Portree (£29, 6½ hours, three daily) and Uig via Crianlarich, Fort William and Kyle of Lochalsh. Buses also run from Inverness to Portree (£17, 3½ hours, twice daily).

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

The Isle of Skye became permanently tethered to the Scottish mainland when the Skye Bridge opened in 1995. The controversial bridge tolls were abolished in 2004 and the crossing is now free.

There are petrol stations at Broadford (open 24 hours), Armadale, Portree, Dunvegan and Uig.

Getting Around

Getting around the island by public transport can be a pain, especially if you want to explore away from the main Kyleakin-Portree-Uig road. Here, as in much of the Highlands, there are only a few buses on Saturdays, and only one Sunday service (between Kyle of Lochalsh and Portree).

Highland Country (www.rapsons.co.uk) operates the main bus routes on the island, linking all the main villages and towns. Its Skye Roverbus ticket gives unlimited bus travel for one/three days for £6/15. For timetable info, call **Traveline** (☎ 0871 200 22 33).

From May to September, the **Skye Flyer** (☎ 07780 724248) minibus service links Mallaig with Uig via Armadale, Broadford and Portree (£15, 1½ hours, one daily); bikes can be carried. At Mallaig, it connects with the West Highland Flyer to Fort William and Oban (p301).

You can order a taxi or rent a car from **Kyle Taxi Company** (☎ 01599-534323). Rentals cost from around £35 a day, and you can arrange for the car to be waiting at Kyle of Lochalsh train station.

KYLEAKIN (CAOL ACAIN)

☎ 01599 / pop 100

Poor wee Kyleakin had the carpet pulled from under it when the Skye Bridge opened – it went from being the gateway to the island to a backwater bypassed by the main road. It's now a pleasant, peaceful little place, with a harbour used by yachts and fishing boats.

The village is something of a backpacker ghetto, with four hostels in close proximity. The homely **Dun Caan Independent Hostel** (☎ 534087; www.skyerover.co.uk; Castle View; dm from £13), in a fine, old, pine-panelled house overlooking the harbour, has the most attractive location.

A shuttle bus runs half-hourly between Kyle of Lochalsh and Kyleakin (five minutes), and there are eight to 10 buses daily (except Sunday) to Broadford and Portree.

BROADFORD (AN T-ATH LEATHANN)

☎ 01471 / pop 1050

Broadford is a service centre for the scattered communities of southern Skye. The long, straggling village has a **tourist office** (☎ 822361; The Car Park; ☒ 10am-5pm Mon-Fri, 11am-4pm Sat Apr-Oct), a 24-hour petrol station, a large **Co-op supermarket** (☒ 8am-10pm Mon-Fri, 10am-4pm Sat & Sun), a laundrette, a bank with ATM, and a **hospital** (☎ 822137).

Ashaig Airstrip, 3 miles east of Broadford, is the venue for the annual **Skye Music Festival** (www.skyemusicfestival.co.uk), held over a weekend at the end of May. It's Scotland's most atmospheric music gig, with the sea on one side and the mountains on the other. Past line-ups

have included artists such as Kasabian, Primal Scream, Echo and the Bunnymen and the Buzzcocks, as well as Skye-born DJ Mylo.

Sleeping & Eating

There are lots of B&Bs in and around Broadford, and the village is well placed for exploring southern Skye by car. Recommended B&Bs include **Berabhaigh** (☎ 822372; berabhaigh@isellofksye.net; 3 Lime Park; r per person £30; ☹ closed Nov-Feb; Ⓟ), a lovely, old croft house with views over the bay, and neighbouring **Limestone Cottage** (☎ 822142; www.limestonecottage.co.uk; 4 Lime Park; r per person £37.50), a delightful, ivy-clad cottage. Both are just off the main road, near Creelers restaurant.

Broadford has several places at which to eat, but one really stands out. **Creelers** (☎ 822281; Lower Harrapool; mains £8-15; ☹ noon-10pm Mon-Sat) is a small, bustling, no-frills restaurant that serves some of the best seafood on Skye; the house speciality is a rich, spicy seafood gumbo. Book ahead, and if you can't get a table then nip around to the back door, where you'll find Ma Doyle's Takeaway, for fish and chips (£4.50) to go.

SLEAT

If you cross over the sea to Skye on the ferry from Mallaig you arrive in Armadale, at the southern end of the long, low-lying peninsula known as Sleat (pronounced slate). The landscape of Sleat itself is not exceptional, but it provides a grandstand for ogling the magnificent scenery on either side – take the steep and twisting minor road that loops through **Tarskavaig** and **Tokavaig** for stunning views of the Isle of Rum, the Cuillin Hills and Bla Bheinn.

Armadale

☎ 01471 / pop 150

Armadale, where the ferry from Mallaig arrives, is little more than a store, a post office, and a couple of houses. Just along the road is the part-ruined Armadale Castle, former seat of Lord Macdonald of Sleat and home to the **Museum of the Isles** (☎ 844305; adult/child £5/3.80; ☹ 9.30am-5.30pm Easter-Oct, gift shop only 11am-3pm Mon-Fri Nov-Easter). The museum will tell you all you ever wanted to know about Clan Donald, as well as providing an easily digested history of the Lordship of the Isles. Prize exhibits include rare portraits of clan chiefs, and a wine glass that was once used by Bonnie Prince Charlie. The ticket also gives admission to the lovely castle gardens.

Sea.fari (☎ 844787, 833316; www.seafari.co.uk) runs two-/three-hour boat trips in a high-speed RIB (rigid inflatable boat) for £25/35 per person. These trips have a high success rate for spotting minke whales in summer, with rarer sightings of bottlenose dolphins and basking sharks – even a humpback whale was spotted in August 2004.

Aird Old Church Gallery (☎ 844291; www.skyewatercolours.co.uk; admission free; ☹ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat Easter-Sep), at the end of the narrow road that leads southwest from Armadale through Arvdaras village, exhibits the powerful landscape painting of Peter McDermott. The track beyond the gallery provides a good walk to the lighthouse and pretty little beach at **Point of Sleat** (5 miles round trip).

The no-frills **Armadale Youth Hostel** (SYHA; ☎ 0870 004 1103; dm £13; ☹ Apr-Sep) has a great location on the north side of the ferry harbour, while the rustic **Flora MacDonald Hostel** (☎ 844272; www.skye-hostel.co.uk; The Glebe, Kilmore; dm/tw/q £11/28/50; Ⓟ) is 3 miles north of the ferry, on a farm full of Highland cattle and Eriskay ponies.

The **Pasta Shed** (☎ 844264; The Pier, Armadale; mains £5-10; ☹ 9am-6pm), beside the ferry pier, is a cute little conservatory with some outdoor tables. It serves good seafood dishes, pizzas, fish and chips, crab salads and coffees – you can sit in or take away.

There are six or seven buses a day (Monday to Saturday) from Armadale to Broadford and Portree.

Isleornsay

This pretty harbour, 8 miles north of Armadale, is opposite Sandaig Bay on the mainland, where Gavin Maxwell lived and wrote his much-loved memoir *Ring of Bright Water*. **Gallery An Talla Dearg** (☎ 01767-650444; admission free; ☹ 10am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-4pm Sat & Sun Apr-Oct) exhibits the works of artists inspired by Scottish landscape and culture.

Hotel Eilean Iarmain (☎ 01471-833266; from s/d £120/140; Ⓟ) is a charming old Victorian hotel with log fires, an excellent restaurant and 12 luxurious rooms, many with sea views. The hotel's cosy, wood-panelled An Praban bar serves delicious, gourmet-style bar meals (£6 to £9) – try the haddock in beer batter, venison burger or vegetarian lasagne.

our pick **Toravaig House Hotel** (☎ 01471-820200; www.skyehotel.co.uk; Sleat; r per person £75-85; Ⓟ), 3 miles south of Isleornsay, is one of those places

where the owners know a thing or two about hospitality – as soon as you arrive you'll feel right at home, whether relaxing on the plump sofas by the log fire in the lounge, or admiring the view across the Sound of Sleat from the lawn chairs in the garden. The spacious bedrooms – ask for room No 1 (Eriskay), with its enormous sleigh bed – are luxuriously equipped, from the rich and heavy bed linen to the huge, high-pressure shower-heads, and the elegant Iona restaurant (mains £13 to £18; open for lunch and dinner) serves the best of local fish, game and lamb. After dinner, you can retire to the lounge with a single malt and flick through the yachting magazines, or try your hand at tickling the ivories on the baby grand in the corner.

ELGOL (EALAGHOL)

On a clear day, the journey along the road from Broadford to Elgol is one of the most scenic on Skye. It takes in two classic postcard panoramas – the view of Bla Bheinn across Loch Slapin (near Torrin), and the superb view of the entire Cuillin range from Elgol pier.

Bella Jane (☎ 0800 731 3089; www.bellajane.co.uk; ☹ Easter-mid-Oct) offers a three-hour cruise (adult/child £18/6) from Elgol harbour to the remote **Loch na Cuilce**, an impressive inlet surrounded by soaring peaks and acres of bare rock slabs. On a calm day, you can clamber ashore here to make the short walk to **Loch Coruisk** in the heart of the Cuillin Hills. You get 1½ hours ashore, and visit a seal colony en route. The prettier and more traditional wooden launch **Misty Isle** (☎ 01471-866288; www.mistyisleboattrips.co.uk) offers similar cruises for £12.50/5 (no Sunday service).

Aquaxplore (☎ 0800 731 3089; www.aquaxplore.co.uk) runs 1½-hour high-speed boat trips from Elgol to an abandoned shark-hunting station on the island of Soay (adult/child £18/12). There are longer trips (£38/26, four hours) to Rum, Canna and Sanday to visit breeding colonies of puffins, with the chance of seeing minke whales on the way.

Bus 49 runs from Broadford to Elgol (40 minutes, three daily Monday to Friday, two Saturday).

CUILLIN HILLS

☎ 01478

The Cuillin Hills are Britain's most spectacular mountain range. Though small in stature (**Sgurr Alasdair**, the highest summit, is only

993m), the peaks are near-alpine in character, with knife-edge ridges, jagged pinnacles, scree-filled gullies and acres of naked rock. While they are a paradise for experienced mountaineers, the higher reaches of the Cuillin are off limits to the majority of walkers.

The good news is that there are also plenty of good, low-level hikes within the ability of most walkers. One of the best (on a fine day) is the steep climb from Glenbrittle camping ground to **Coire Lagan** (6 miles round trip; allow at least three hours). The impressive upper corrie contains a lochan for bathing (for the hardy!), and the surrounding cliffs are a playground for rock climbers – bring along your binoculars.

There are two main bases for exploring the Cuillin – **Sligachan** to the north, and **Glenbrittle** to the south.

Sleeping & Eating

Sligachan Hotel (☎ 650204; www.sligachan.co.uk; Sligachan; dm/s/d £12/65/90; Ⓟ) The Slig, as it has been known to generations of climbers, is a near village in itself, encompassing an overpriced hotel, a bunkhouse, self-catering cottages, a big barn of a bar (complete with kids playroom) and an adventure playground.

Seamus's Bar (mains £7-10; ☹ food served 5-11pm) This place dishes up decent bar meals, including haggis, neeps and tatties, steak and ale pie, and spicy bean casserole, and serves real ales from its own microbrewery (plus a range of 200 malt whiskies), but service can be a tad indifferent.

Across the road from the hotel is a basic **camping ground** (☎ 650333; tent sites per person £4), but be warned – this spot is a midge magnet.

At the southern end of the Cuillin you have the choice of the Scandinavian-style, timber **Glenbrittle Youth Hostel** (SYHA; ☎ 0870 004 1121; Glenbrittle; dm £12.50; ☹ Apr-Sep), or the excellent **camping ground** (☎ 640404; tent sites per adult/child £5/3) down by the sea. As at Sligachan, the midges can be diabolical.

Getting There & Away

Sligachan, on the main Kyle-Portree road, is easily accessible by bus; Glenbrittle is harder to reach. Bus 53 runs five times a day Monday to Friday (once on Saturday) from Portree to Carlost via Sligachan (50 minutes); from there, you'll have to hitch or walk the remaining 8 miles to Glenbrittle (this can be slow, especially late in the day).

MINGINISH

☎ 01478

Loch Harport, to the north of the Cuillin, divides the Minginish peninsula from the rest of Skye. On its southern shore lies the village of Carbost, home to the smooth, sweet and smoky Talisker malt whisky, produced at **Talisker Distillery** (☎ 614308; Carbost; guided tour £5; ☎ 9.30am-5pm Mon-Sat Easter-Oct, 2-5pm Mon-Fri Nov-Easter). This is the only distillery on Skye; the guided tour includes a free dram. Magnificent **Talisker Bay**, 5 miles west of Carbost, has a sandy beach, sea stack and waterfall.

The **Old Inn** (☎ 640205; Carbost; dm/s/d £12/34/65; P) is an atmospheric wee pub, offering accommodation in bright B&B bedrooms and an appealing chalet-style bunkhouse. The bar is a favourite with walkers and climbers from Glenbrittle – there's an outdoor patio at the back with great views over Loch Harport – and between noon and 10pm, it serves excellent pub grub (£5 to £10), from French onion soup and haddock and chips, to wicked homemade cranachan (traditional Scottish dessert made with cream, whisky, raspberries and toasted oatmeal).

Three miles northwest of Carbost is the **Skyewalker Independent Hostel** (☎ 640250; Fiskavaig Rd, Portnalong; dm £12; P), housed in the old village school. There's a tiny **camping ground** (tent sites per person £3) out the back.

There are five buses a day on weekdays (one on Saturday) from Portree to Carbost via Sligachan.

PORTREE (PORT RIGH)

☎ 01478 / pop 1920

Portree is Skye's largest and liveliest town. It has a pretty harbour lined with brightly painted houses, and there are great views of the surrounding hills. Its name (from the Gaelic for King's Harbour) commemorates James V, who came here in 1540 to pacify the local clans.

Information

Bank of Scotland (☎ 0845 720 3040; Somerled Sq;

☎ 9am-12.30pm & 1.30-5pm Mon-Fri) Has an ATM.

Hospital (☎ 01478-613200; Portree) Has casualty department and dental surgery.

Island Outdoors (☎ 01478-611073; The Green, Portree; ☎ 9am-5.30pm daily Apr-Oct, closed Sun Nov-Mar) Outdoor equipment shop with internet access for £1 per 15 minutes.

Post office (☎ 612533; Wentworth St; ☎ 9am-5.30pm Mon-Sat) Offers currency exchange.

Royal Bank of Scotland (☎ 612822; Bank St; ☎ 9.15am-4.45pm Mon, Tue, Thu & Fri, 10am-4.45pm Wed) Has ATMs.

Tourist office (☎ 612137; Bayfield Rd; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Sat & 10am-4pm Sun Jun-Aug, 9am-5pm Mon-Fri & 10am-4pm Sat Apr, May & Sep, limited opening Oct-Mar) Provides internet access (£1 per 20 minutes) and currency exchange.

Sights & Activities

On the southern edge of Portree, the **Aros Experience** (☎ 613649; Viewfield Rd; ☎ 9am-5.30pm) is a combined visitor centre, book and gift shop, restaurant, theatre and cinema. The visitor centre (adult/child £3/2) offers a look at some fascinating, live CCTV images from local sea eagle and heron nests, and a viewing of a strangely commentary-free wide-screen video of Skye's impressive scenery (it's worth waiting for the aerial shots of the Cuillin). The centre is a useful rainy-day retreat, with an indoor, soft play area for children.

An Tuireann Art Centre (☎ 613306; www.antuireann.org.uk; Struan Rd; admission free; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat), half a mile west of town on the B885, is an appealing gallery that hosts changing exhibitions of contemporary art. It also has an excellent café.

The **Lady B Boat Trips** (☎ 612093; www.skyeboats.com) offers two-hour boat excursions from Portree harbour to the Isle of Raasay (adult/child £12/6, Monday to Saturday), offering the chance to see seals, porpoises and – if you're lucky – white-tailed sea eagles.

Festivals & Events

The annual **Isle of Skye Highland Games** (www.skye-highland-games.co.uk) are held in Portree in early August.

Sleeping

Portree is well supplied with B&Bs, but many of them are in bland, modern bungalows that, though comfortable, are often lacking in character. Accommodation fills up fast in July and August, so be sure to book ahead.

BUDGET

Torvaig Camping (☎ 612209; Torvaig; tent sites per person £3; ☎ Apr-Oct) This is the closest camping ground to Portree; there's no shop on site, so bring your own supplies. It's a mile north of town on the A87 to Uig.

our pick Bayfield Backpackers (☎ 612231; www.skyehotel.co.uk; Bayfield; dm £13; P) Clean,

central and modern, this hostel provides the best backpacker accommodation in town. The owner really makes you feel welcome, and is a font of advice on what to do and where to go in Skye.

Bayview House (☎ 613340; www.bayviewhouse.co.uk; Bayfield; r per person from £20; P) This is a modern house with spartan but sparklingly clean rooms, some with sea and mountain views, and bathrooms with power showers. At this price and location, it's a bargain.

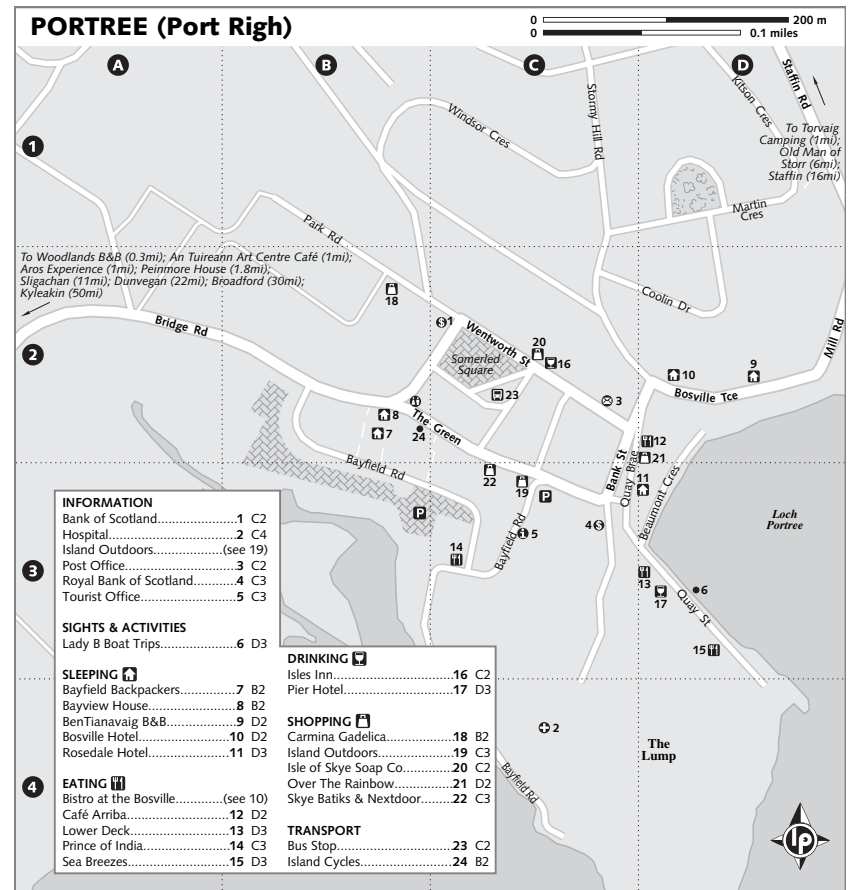
MIDRANGE

Woodlands B&B (☎ 612980; jmaccallumwoodlands@hotmail.com; Viewfield Rd; r per person £25-30) A great location, with views across the bay, and unstinting hospitality make this modern B&B,

a half-mile south of the town centre, a good choice.

our pick Ben Tianavaig B&B (☎ 612152; www.ben-tianavaig.co.uk; 5 Bosville Tce; r per person £30; P) A warm welcome awaits from the Aussie/Brit couple who run this appealing B&B bang in the centre of town. All four bedrooms have a view across the harbour to the hill that gives the house its name.

Peinmore House (☎ 612574; www.peinmorehouse.co.uk; r per person £35-45; P) Located around 2 miles south of Portree, this former manse has recently been cleverly converted into a stylish and comfortable guesthouse with a spectacular, oak-floored lounge, enormous bedrooms, excellent breakfasts and panoramic views.



TOP END

Rosedale Hotel (☎ 613131; www.rosedalehotelskye.co.uk; Beaumont Cres; s/d £60/110; ☞ Mar–Nov) The Rosedale is a cosy, old-fashioned hotel – you'll be welcomed with a glass of whisky or sherry when you check in – delightfully situated down by the waterfront. Its three converted fishermen's cottages are linked by a maze of narrow stairs and corridors, and the excellent restaurant has a view of the harbour.

Bosville Hotel (☎ 612846; www.bosvillehotel.co.uk; 9-11 Bosville Tce; s/d from £110/118) The Bosville brings a little bit of metropolitan style to Skye with its designer fabrics and furniture, flat-screen TVs, fluffy bathrobes and bright, spacious bathrooms. It's worth splashing out a bit for the 'premier' rooms, with leather recliner chairs from which you can lap up the view over the town and harbour.

Eating

ourpick Café Arriba (☎ 611830; Quay Brae; light meals £4-6, dinner mains £10-13; ☞ 7am-10pm May–Sep, 8am-5.30pm Oct–Apr) This funky little café, brightly decked out in primary colours, has the best choice of vegetarian grub on the island, ranging from a veggie breakfast fry-up to Indian-spiced bean cakes with mint yoghurt, as well as carnivorous treats such as slow-cooked haunch of venison with red wine and beetroot gravy.

An Tuireann Art Centre Café (☎ 613306; Struan Rd; mains £4-8; ☞ snacks 10am-4.30pm, lunch noon-2pm Mon–Sat) It's worth the short journey out of town (a mile west on the B885) to eat at this organic café, where you can enjoy homemade soups (such as sweet potato, parsnip, or *Cullen skink*) and imaginative vegetarian and vegan dishes, as well as a few seafood and chicken specials. There's also a good kids menu.

Bistro at the Bosville (☎ 612846; 7 Bosville Tce; mains £8-15; ☞ noon-2.30pm & 5.30-10pm) This hotel bistro sports a relaxed atmosphere, an award-winning chef, and a menu that makes the most of Skye-sourced produce including lamb, game, seafood, cheese, organic vegetables and berries, and adds an original twist to traditional dishes – how about haddock fried in a cumin and sesame seed batter?

Sea Breezes (☎ 612016; 2 Marine Buildings, Quay St; mains £12-18; ☞ noon-2.30pm & 5.30-10pm Tue–Sun, closed Nov, Jan & Feb) A good choice for seafood, Sea Breezes is an informal, no-frills restaurant specialising in local fish and shellfish fresh from the boat – try the impressive seafood platter, a small mountain of langoustines,

crab, oysters and lobster. Book early, as it's often hard to get a table.

Portree's favourite fish-and-chip shop is **Lower Deck** (Quay St; ☞ noon-2.30pm & 6-9pm) down by the harbour. For a curry (takeaway or sit-in), try **Prince of India** (☎ 612681; Bayfield Rd; mains £6-10; ☞ noon-midnight Jul–Sep, noon-2pm & 5-11.30pm Oct–Jun).

Drinking

Isles Inn (☎ 612129; Somerled Sq) Portree's pubs are nothing special, but the Isles Inn is more atmospheric than most. The Jacobean bar, with its flagstone floor and open fires, pulls in a lively mix of young locals, backpackers and tourists.

Pier Hotel (☎ 612094; Quay St) You can almost guarantee a weekend sing-song at this nautical-themed waterfront bar.

Shopping

Skye Batiks & Nextdoor (☎ 613331; The Green; ☞ 9am-6pm May, Jun & Sep, 9am-9pm Jul & Aug, 9am-5pm Mon–Sat Oct–Apr) Skye Batiks is a cut above your average gift shop, selling a range of interesting crafts such as carved wood, jewellery and batik fabrics with Celtic designs, with lighting, kitchenware and all kinds of interesting stuff in the adjoining Nextdoor.

Over the Rainbow (☎ 612555; Quay Brae) Crammed with colourful knitwear, tweeds and country and casual clothing, as well as glassware, crafts and all kinds of interesting gifts.

Island Outdoors (☎ 611073; The Green; ☞ 9am-5.30pm Apr–Oct, closed Sun Nov–Mar) This store stocks a good range of equipment, clothing, books and maps for climbing, walking, camping and kayaking; it also has public internet access.

Isle of Skye Soap Co (☎ 611350; Somerled Sq; ☞ 9am-5.30pm Mon–Fri, 9am-5pm Sat) A sweet-smelling gift shop that specialises in handmade soaps and cosmetics made using natural ingredients and aromatherapy oils.

Carmina Gadelica (☎ 612585; 4 Wentworth St; ☞ 9am-5.30pm Mon–Sat, 9am-8pm Jul & Aug) Browse the shelves here for CDs of Gaelic music and books on local subjects.

Getting There & Around

The main bus stop is in Somerled Sq. There are six Scottish Citylink buses a day, including Sundays, from Kyle of Lochalsh to Portree (£10, one hour) and on to Uig.

Highland Country Buses services (Monday to Saturday only) run from Portree to Broad-

ford (40 minutes, at least hourly) via Sligachan (15 minutes); to Armadale (1¼ hours, connecting with the ferries to Mallaig); to Carbost (40 minutes, four daily); to Uig (30 minutes, six daily); and to Dunvegan Castle (40 minutes, five daily Monday to Friday, three on Saturday). There are also five or six buses a day on a circular route around Trotternish (in both directions) taking in Flodigarry (20 minutes), Kilmuir (1¼ hours) and Uig (30 minutes). See p381 for details of buses from the mainland.

You can hire bikes at **Island Cycles** (☎ 613121; The Green; ☞ 9am-5pm Mon–Sat) for £8/12 per half-/full day.

DUNVEGAN (DUN BHEAGAIN)

☎ 01470

Skye's most famous historic building, and one of its most popular tourist attractions, is **Dunvegan Castle** (☎ 521206; Dunvegan; adult/child £7/4; ☞ 10am-5pm Easter–Oct, 11am-4pm Nov–Easter), seat of the chief of Clan MacLeod. It has played host to Samuel Johnson, Sir Walter Scott and, most famously, Flora MacDonald (p388). The oldest parts are the 14th-century keep and dungeon, but most of it dates from the 17th to 19th centuries.

In addition to the usual castle stuff – swords, silver and family portraits – there are some interesting artefacts, most famous being the **Fairy Flag**, a diaphanous silk banner that dates from some time between the 4th and 7th centuries. Bonnie Prince Charlie's waistcoat and a lock of his hair, donated by Flora MacDonald's granddaughter, share a room with **Rory Mor's Drinking Horn**, a beautiful 16th-century vessel of Celtic design that could hold half a gallon of claret. Upholding the family tradition in 1956, John Macleod – the 29th chief, who died in 2007 – downed the contents in one minute and 57 seconds 'without setting down or falling down'.

From the end of the minor road beyond Dunvegan Castle entrance, an easy walk of 1 mile leads to the **Coral Beaches** – a pair of blindingly white beaches composed of the bleached exoskeletons of coralline algae known as maerl.

On the way to Dunvegan from Portree you'll pass **Edinbane Pottery** (☎ 582234; www.edinbane-pottery.co.uk; Edinbane; ☞ 9am-6pm, closed Sat & Sun Nov–Easter), one of the island's original craft workshops, established in 1971, where you can watch potters at work creating beautiful and colourful stoneware.

DUIRINISH & WATERNISH

☎ 01470

The **Duirinish** peninsula to the west of Dunvegan, and **Waternish** to the north, boasts some of Skye's most atmospheric hotels and restaurants, plus an eclectic range of artists' studios and crafts workshops. Portree tourist office provides a free booklet listing them all.

It's worth making the long drive beyond Dunvegan to the west side of the Duirinish peninsula to see the spectacular sea cliffs of **Waterstein Head**, and to walk down to **Neist Point lighthouse** with its views to the Outer Hebrides.

At Stein on the Waternish peninsula is **Dandelion Designs** (☎ 592218; Captain's House, Stein; ☞ 11am-5pm Easter–Oct), an interesting little gallery with a good range of colour and monochrome landscape photography, lino prints by Liz Myhill, and a range of handmade arts and crafts.

A few miles north of Stein you'll find **Shiladair Yarns** (☎ 592297; www.shiladair-yarns.co.uk; Camach; ☞ 10am-6pm Apr–Oct). The couple who run this place moved to Skye in 1971 and now raise sheep, hand-spin woollen yarn, and hand-dye a range of wools and silks using natural dyes. You can see the dyeing process in the workshop behind the studio, which sells finished knitwear as well as yarns.

Sleeping & Eating

ourpick Stein Inn (☎ 592362; www.steininn.co.uk; Stein, Waternish; bar meals £6-9; ☞ food served noon-4pm & 6-9.30pm Mon–Sat, 12.30-4pm & 6.30-9pm Sun Easter–Oct; ☐) This old country inn dates from 1790 and has a handful of bedrooms (per person £26 to £36) all with sea views, a lively little bar, and a delightful beer garden – a real suntrap on summer afternoons – beside the loch. The bar serves real ales from the Isle of Skye Brewery, and does an excellent crab sandwich for lunch.

Three Chimneys (☎ 511258; www.threechimneys.co.uk; Colbost, Dunvegan; 3-course lunch/dinner £28/48; ☞ 12.30-2pm Mon–Sat Mar–Oct, 6.30-9pm daily year-round; ☐) In Colbost, halfway between Dunvegan and Waterstein, is another superb romantic retreat combining a gourmet restaurant in a candle-lit crofter's cottage with sumptuous five-star rooms (double £255) in the modern house next door. Book well in advance, and note that young kids are not welcome in the restaurant in the evenings.

Lochbay Seafood Restaurant (☎ 592235; Stein, Watermish; mains £10-21, lobster £30-40; 🕒 11am-2pm Tue-Sat, 6.30-9pm Mon-Sat) Just along the road from the Stein Inn is one of Skye's most romantic restaurants, a cosy farmhouse kitchen with terracotta tiles and a wood-burning stove, and a menu that includes most things that either swim in the sea or live in a shell. Best to book ahead.

TROTTERNISH

☎ 01470

The Trotternish peninsula to the north of Portree has some of Skye's most beautiful – and bizarre – scenery.

East Coast

First up is the 50m-high, potbellied pinnacle of crumbling basalt known as the **Old Man of Storr**, prominent above the road 6 miles north of Portree. Walk up to its foot from the car park in the woods at the northern end of Loch Leathan (round trip 2 miles). This seemingly unclimbable pinnacle was first scaled in 1955 by English mountaineer Don Whillans. North again, near Staffin (Stamhain), is spectacular **Kilt Rock**, a stupendous cliff of columnar basalt whose vertical ribbing is fancifully compared to the pleats of a kilt.

Staffin Bay is dominated by the dramatic basalt escarpment of the **Quiraing**, whose impressive land-slipped cliffs and pinnacles constitute one of Skye's most remarkable landscapes. From a parking area at the highest point of the minor road between Staffin and Uig you can walk north to the Quiraing in half an hour. The adventurous (and ener-

getic) can scramble up to the left of the slim pinnacle called the **Needle** to find a hidden, grass-topped plateau known as the **Table**.

SLEEPING & EATING

Dun Flodigarry Hostel (☎ 552212; www.hostelflodigarry.co.uk; Flodigarry; dm/tw £12.50/28; 📍) If the local hotel is too expensive for you, this nearby hostel shares the same superb views, and you can still visit the hotel bar for afternoon tea – it's only a 100m walk away.

Flodigarry Country House Hotel (☎ 552203; www.flodigarry.co.uk; Flodigarry; d £100-190; 📍) Flora MacDonald (see below) lived in a farmhouse cottage at Flodigarry in northeast Trotternish from 1751 to 1759. The cottage and its pretty garden are now part of this delightful hotel – you can stay in the cottage itself (there are two bedrooms), or in the more spacious rooms in the hotel itself. The bright, modern bistro (mains £9 to £18) has great views over the Inner Sound, and serves lunch and dinner featuring local produce such as langoustines, lobster, lamb and venison.

West Coast

The peat-reek of crofting life in the 18th and 19th centuries is preserved in thatched cottages at **Skye Museum of Island Life** (☎ 552206; Kilmuir; adult/child £2.50/50p; 🕒 9.30am-5pm Mon-Sat Easter-Oct). Behind the museum is Kilmuir Cemetery, where a tall Celtic cross marks the **grave of Flora MacDonald** (see below); the cross was erected in 1955 to replace the original, of which 'every fragment was removed by tourists'.

Whichever way you arrive at **Uig** (pronounced oo-ig), the picture-perfect bay,

ringed by steep hills, rarely fails to impress. If you've time to kill while waiting for a ferry to the Outer Hebrides, visit the **Isle of Skye Brewery** (☎ 542477; The Pier, Uig; 🕒 9am-5pm Mon-Fri), which sells locally brewed cask ales and bottled beers.

Just south of Uig, a minor road (signposted 'Shearer and Balnacknock') leads in a mile or so to the **Fairy Glen**, a strange and enchanting natural landscape of miniature conical hills, rocky towers, ruined cottages and a tiny roadside lochan.

There's a cluster of B&Bs in Uig, as well as the **Uig Youth Hostel** (SYHA; ☎ 0870 004 1155; Uig; dm £13.50; 🕒 late-Apr–Oct) and a lovely old coaching inn, the **Uig Hotel** (☎ 542205; Uig; s/d from £50/100; 📍).

ISLE OF RAASAY

☎ 01478 / pop 160

Raasay is the rugged, 10-mile-long island that lies off Skye's east coast. There are several good walks here, including one to the flat-topped conical hill of **Dun Caan** (443m). Forest Enterprise publishes a free leaflet (available from the tourist offices in Portree or Kyle of Lochalsh) with suggested walks and forest trails.

The extraordinary ruin of **Brochel Castle**, perched on a pinnacle at the northern end of Raasay, was home to Calum Garbh MacLeod, an early-16th-century pirate. At the battle of Culloden in 1746, Raasay supplied Bonnie Prince Charlie with around 100 fighting men and 26 pipers, but the people paid dearly for their Jacobite sympathies when victorious government forces arrived and proceeded to murder, rape and pillage their way across the island.

Sleeping

Raasay House, which has been home to **Raasay Outdoor Centre** (www.raasayoutdoorcentre.co.uk) for more than 20 years, was taken into community ownership in 2007 and is undergoing a major renovation. It should reopen in spring 2009, when it will once again provide outdoor activity courses and hostel accommodation.

Raasay Youth Hostel (SYHA; ☎ 0870 004 1146; Creachan Cottage; dm £13.50; 🕒 May-Sep) Set in a rustic cottage high on the hill overlooking Skye, this hostel is a fair walk from the ferry pier (2.5 miles) but is a good base for exploring the island.

Other island accommodation includes the picturesquely situated **Isle of Raasay Hotel**

(☎ 660222; www.isleofraasayhotel.co.uk; Borodale House, Inverarish; s/d £50/80; 📍) just above the ferry pier, and **Churchton Guest House** (☎ 660260; Suisnish; r per person £35), half a mile to the north.

Getting There & Away

A CalMac ferry (bicycle/passenger/car £1.10/2.75/10.70) runs from Sconser, on the road from Portree to Broadford, to the southern end of Raasay (15 minutes, hourly Monday to Saturday, twice daily Sunday). There are no petrol stations on the island.

OUTER HEBRIDES

pop 26,500

A professor of Spanish and a professor of Gaelic met at a conference and began discussing the relative merits of their respective languages. 'Tell me,' said the Spanish professor, 'do you have a Gaelic equivalent for the Spanish phrase *mañana, mañana*?' The Hebridean professor thought for a while, then replied, 'No, I do not think that we have in Gaelic a word that conveys such a pressing sense of urgency'.

An old joke perhaps, but one that hints at the slower pace of life you can expect to find in the Gaelic-speaking communities of the Outer Hebrides, a place where the morning papers arrive in the afternoon and almost everything – in Lewis and Harris at least – closes down on Sundays.

The Outer Hebrides – also known as the Western Isles, or Na h-Eileanan an Iar in Gaelic – are a 130-mile-long string of islands lying off the northwest coast of Scotland. There are 119 islands in total, of which the five main inhabited islands are: Lewis and Harris (two parts of a single island, although often described as if they are separate islands), North Uist, Benbecula, South Uist and Barra. The middle three (often referred to simply as 'the Uists') are connected by road-bearing causeways.

The ferry crossing from Ullapool or Uig to the Western Isles marks an important cultural divide – more than a third of Scotland's registered crofts are in the Outer Hebrides, and no less than 60% of the population are Gaelic speakers. The rigours of life in the old island *blackhouses* (low-walled stone cottages with turf roofs and earthen floors) are still within living memory.

FLORA MACDONALD

Flora MacDonald, who became famous for helping Bonnie Prince Charlie escape after his defeat at the Battle of Culloden, was born in 1722 at Milton in South Uist, where a memorial cairn marks the site of one of her early childhood homes.

In 1746, she helped Bonnie Prince Charlie make his way from Benbecula to Skye disguised as her Irish maidservant. With a price on the prince's head their little boat was fired on, but they managed to land safely and Flora escorted the prince to Portree where he gave her a gold locket containing his portrait before setting sail for Raasay.

Waylaid on the way home, the boatmen admitted everything. Flora was arrested and imprisoned in the Tower of London. She never saw or heard from the prince again.

In 1747, she returned to Skye, marrying Allan MacDonald and having nine children. Dr Samuel Johnson stayed with her in 1773 during his trip to the Western Isles, but later poverty forced her family to emigrate to North Carolina. There her husband was captured by rebels. Flora returned to Kingsburgh on Skye where she died in 1790. She was buried in Kilmuir churchyard, wrapped in the sheet on which both Bonnie Prince Charlie and Dr Johnson had slept.

Religion still plays a prominent part in public and private life, especially in the Protestant north where shops and pubs close their doors on Sundays and some accommodation providers prefer guests not to arrive or depart on the Sabbath. The Roman Catholic south is a little more relaxed about these things.

The name Hebrides is not Gaelic, and is probably a corruption of Ebudae, the Roman name for the islands. But the alternative derivation from the Norse *havbredey* – ‘isles at the edge of the sea’ – has a much more poetic ring, alluding to the broad vistas of sky and sea that characterise the islands’ often bleak and treeless landscapes. But there is beauty here too, in the machair (grassy, wildflower-speckled dunes) and dazzling white-sand beaches, majesty in the rugged hills and sprawling lochs, and mystery in the islands’ fascinating past. It’s a past signalled by Neolithic standing stones, Viking place names, deserted crofts and folk memories of the Clearances (p360).

If your time is limited, head straight for the west coast of Lewis with its prehistoric sites, preserved *blackhouses* and beautiful beaches. As with Skye, the islands are dotted with arts and crafts studios – the tourist offices can provide a list.

Information

INTERNET ACCESS

Community Library (☎ 01871-810471; Community School, Castlebay, Barra; ☎ 9am-4.30pm Mon & Wed, 9am-4.30pm & 6-8pm Tue & Thu, 9am-3.30pm Fri, 10am-12.30pm Sat) Free access.

Stornoway Public Library (☎ 01851-708631; 19 Cromwell St, Stornoway, Lewis; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Wed & Sat, 10am-6pm Thu & Fri) Free access.

Taigh Chearsabhagh (☎ 01876-500293; Lochmaddy, North Uist; per 20min 50p; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat Feb-Jun & Sep-Dec, 10am-5pm Mon-Thu & Sat, to 8pm Fri Jul & Aug)

MEDICAL SERVICES

Both hospitals have casualty departments.
Uist & Barra Hospital (☎ 01870-603603; Balivanich, Benbecula)

Western Isles Hospital (☎ 01851-704704; MacAulay Rd, Stornoway, Lewis)

MONEY

There are banks with ATMs in Stornoway (Lewis), Tarbert (Harris), Lochmaddy (North Uist), Balivanich (Benbecula), Lochboisdale (South Uist) and Castlebay (Barra). Elsewhere, some hotels and shops offer cashback facilities.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Castlebay tourist office (☎ 01871-810336; Main St, Castlebay, Barra; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Sat, noon-4pm Sun Apr-Oct)

Lochboisdale tourist office (☎ 01878-700286; Pier Rd, Lochboisdale, South Uist; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Fri, 9.30am-5pm Sat, 9-9.30pm Tue & Thu Apr-Oct)

Lochmaddy tourist office (☎ 01876-500321; Pier Rd, Lochmaddy, North Uist; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Fri, 9.30am-1pm & 2-5.30pm Sat, 8-9pm Mon, Wed & Fri Apr-Oct)

Stornoway tourist office (☎ 01851-703088; 26 Cromwell St, Stornoway, Lewis; ☎ 9am-6pm & 8-9pm Mon, Tue & Thu, 9am-8pm Wed & Fri, 9am-5.30pm & 8-9pm Sat year-round)

Tarbert tourist office (☎ 01859-502011; Pier Rd, Tarbert, Harris; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Sat, plus 8-9pm Tue, Thu & Sat Apr-Oct)

Getting There & Away

AIR

There are airports at Stornoway (Lewis), and on Benbecula and Barra.

There are flights to Stornoway from Edinburgh, Inverness, Glasgow and Aberdeen. There are also two flights a day (weekdays only) between Stornoway and Benbecula.

There are daily flights from Glasgow to Barra and Benbecula. At Barra, the planes land on the hard-sand beach at low tide, so the timetable depends on the tides.

Airlines serving the Western Isles:
British Airways/Loganair (☎ 0870 850 9850; www.britishairways.com)

Eastern Airways (☎ 0870 366 9100; www.easternairways.com)

Highland Airways (☎ 01851-701282; www.highlandairways.co.uk)

BOAT

Ferry

CalMac (☎ 0870 565 0000; www.calmac.co.uk) runs car ferries from Ullapool to Stornoway (Lewis); from Uig (Isle of Skye) to Lochmaddy (North Uist) and Tarbert (Harris); and from Oban to Castlebay (Barra) and Lochboisdale (South Uist).

Crossing	Duration	Car	Driver/Passenger
Ullapool-Stornoway	2¼hr	£73	£15
Uig-Lochmaddy	1¾hr	£47	£10
Uig-Tarbert	1½hr	£47	£10
Oban-Castlebay	4¾hr	£79	£22
Oban-Lochboisdale	6¾hr	£79	£22

From Monday to Saturday there are two or three ferries a day to Stornoway, one or two a day to Tarbert and Lochmaddy, and one a day to Castlebay and Lochboisdale; on Sundays there are ferries (same frequency) to Castlebay, Lochboisdale and Lochmaddy, but none to Tarbert and Stornoway. You can also take the ferry from Lochboisdale to Castlebay (car/passenger £36/6, 1½ hours, one daily Monday, Tuesday and Thursday) and from Castlebay to Lochboisdale (one daily Wednesday, Friday and Sunday).

Advance booking for cars is essential in July and August; foot and bicycle passengers should have no problems. The fare for a bicycle is £2.20 on top of the passenger fare.

CalMac has 12 different Island Hopscotch tickets for set routes in the Outer Hebrides, offering a saving of around 10% (tickets are valid for one month).

Getting Around

Despite their separate names, Lewis and Harris are actually one island. Berneray, North Uist, Benbecula, South Uist and Eriskay are all linked by road bridges and causeways. There are car ferries between Leverburgh (Harris) and Berneray, Tarbert (Harris) and Lochmaddy (North Uist), Eriskay and Castlebay (Barra), and Lochboisdale (South Uist) and Castlebay (Barra).

The local council publishes two booklets of timetables (one covering Lewis and Harris, the other the Uists and Barra) that list all bus, ferry and air services in the Outer Hebrides. Timetables can also be found online at www.cne-siar.gov.uk/travel.

BICYCLE

Many visiting cyclists plan to cycle the length of the archipelago, but if you’re one of them, remember that the wind is often strong (you may hear stories of people pedalling downhill and freewheeling uphill), and the prevailing direction is from the southwest – so south to north is usually the easier direction. There are few serious hills, except for a stiff climb on the main road just north of Tarbert.

Bikes can be hired for around £8 to £10 a day or £35 to £45 a week in Stornoway (Lewis), Leverburgh (Harris), Howmore (South Uist) and Castlebay (Barra). **Rothan Cycles** (www.rothan.com) offers a delivery and pick-up service at various points between Eriskay and Stornoway.

BUS

The bus network covers almost every village in the islands, with around four to six buses a day on all the main routes; however, there are no buses at all on Sundays. You can pick up timetables from the tourist offices, or call **Stornoway bus station** (☎ 01851-704327) for information.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

Away from the fast, two-lane road between Tarbert and Stornoway, most roads are single-track. The main hazard is posed by sheep wandering about or sleeping on the road. Petrol stations are far apart (almost all of those on Lewis and Harris are closed on Sunday), and fuel is about 10% more expensive than on the mainland.

There are petrol stations at Stornoway, Barvas, Borge, Uig, Breacleit (Great Bernera), Ness, Tarbert and Leverburgh on Lewis and Harris; Lochmaddy and Cladach on North Uist; Balivanich on Benbecula; Howmore, Lochboisdale and Daliburgh on South Uist; and Castlebay on Barra.

Cars can be hired from around £26 per day from **Lewis Car Rentals** (☎ 01851-703760; www.lewis-car-rental.co.uk; 52 Bayhead St, Stornoway) and **Ask Car Hire** (☎ 01870-602818; enquiries@askcarhire.com; Linidate, Benbecula).

LEWIS (LEODHAIS)

☎ 01851 / pop 18,600

The northern part of Lewis is dominated by the desolate expanse of the Black Moor, a vast, undulating peat bog dimpled with glittering lochans, seen clearly from the Stornoway-Barvas road. But Lewis’ finest scenery is on the west coast, from Barvas southwest to Mealista, where the rugged landscape of hill, loch and sandy strand is reminiscent of the northwestern Highlands. The Outer Hebrides’ most evocative historic sites – Callanish Standing Stones, Dun Carloway, and Arnol Blackhouse Museum – are also to be found here.

The old *blackhouses* of this region may have been abandoned, but an increasing number are being restored as holiday homes. Most crofts still follow a traditional pattern dating back to medieval times, with narrow strips of land, designed to give all an equal share of good and bad soil, running from the foreshore (with its valuable seaweed, used as fertiliser), across the machair (the grassy sand dunes that

KEEPING THE SABBATH

Religion still plays a major role in island life, especially on predominantly Protestant Lewis and Harris where the Sabbath is still widely observed by members of the 'free churches'.

The Calvinist Free Church of Scotland (known as the 'Wee Frees'), and the even more fundamentalist Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland (the 'Wee Wee Frees'), which split from the established Church of Scotland in 1843 and 1893 respectively, are deeply conservative, permitting no ornaments, organ music or choirs. Their ministers deliver uncompromising sermons (usually in Gaelic) from central pulpits, and precentors lead the congregation in unaccompanied but fervent psalm singing. Visitors are welcome to attend services, but due respect is essential.

The Protestants of the Outer Hebrides have succeeded in maintaining a distinctive fundamentalist approach to their religion, with Sunday being devoted largely to religious services, prayer and Bible reading. On Lewis and Harris, the last bastion of Sabbath observance in the UK, almost everything closes down on a Sunday. But a few cracks have begun to appear.

There was outrage when British Airways/Loganair introduced Sunday flights from Edinburgh and Inverness to Stornoway in 2002, with members of the Lord's Day Observance Society spluttering that this was the thin end of the wedge. They were probably right – in 2003 a Stornoway petrol station began to open on a Sunday, and now does a roaring trade in Sunday papers and takeaway booze. Then in 2006 the CalMac ferry from Berneray to Leverburgh in Harris started a Sunday service, despite strong opposition from the residents of Harris (ironically, they were unable to protest at the ferry's arrival, as that would have meant breaking the Sabbath).

provide the best arable land) to the poorer sheep-grazing land on hill or moor. Today, few crofts are economically viable, so most islanders supplement their income with fishing, tweed-weaving, and work on oil rigs and fish farms.

Stornoway (Steornabhagh)

pop 6000

Stornoway is the bustling 'capital' of the Outer Hebrides and the only real town in the whole archipelago. It's a surprisingly busy little place, with cars and people swamping the centre on weekdays. Though set on a beautiful natural harbour, the town isn't going to win any prizes for beauty or atmosphere, but it's a pleasant enough introduction to this remote corner of the country.

Stornoway is the Outer Hebrides' administrative and commercial centre, home to the Western Isles Council (Comhairle nan Eilean Siar) and the islands' Gaelic TV and radio stations. It turns into a bit of a ghost town on Sundays, especially between 11am and 12.30pm when almost everyone is at church.

INFORMATION

There are banks with ATMs near the tourist office.

Baltic Bookshop (☎ 702802; 8-10 Cromwell St; ☎ 9am-5.30pm Mon-Sat) Good for books and maps.

Post office (☎ 0845 722 3344; 16 Francis St)

Sandwich Rd Petrol Station (☎ 702304; Sandwich Rd) The only shop in town that's open on a Sunday (from 10am to 4pm); the Sunday papers arrive around 2pm.

Stornoway Public Library (☎ 708631; 19 Cromwell St; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Wed & Sat, 10am-6pm Thu & Fri) Free internet access.

Tourist office (☎ 703088; www.visithebrides.com; 26 Cromwell St; ☎ 9am-6pm & 8-9pm Mon, Tue & Thu, 9am-8pm Wed & Fri, 9am-5.30pm & 8-9pm Sat) A short walk from the ferry pier.

SIGHTS

The modern, purpose-built **An Lanntair Art Centre** (☎ 703307; www.lanntair.com; Kenneth St; admission free; ☎ 10am-11pm Mon-Wed, 10am-midnight Thu & Sat, 10am-1am Fri), complete with art gallery, theatre, cinema and restaurant, is the centre of the town's cultural life; it hosts changing exhibitions of contemporary art, and is a good source of information on cultural events.

The **Museum nan Eilean** (☎ 703773; Francis St; admission free; ☎ 10am-5.30pm Mon-Sat, shorter winter hours) strings together a loose history of the Outer Hebrides from the earliest human settlements some 9000 years ago to the 20th century, exploring traditional island life and the changes inflicted by progress and technology.

The **Lewis Loom Centre** (☎ 704500; 3 Bayhead; adult/child £1/50p; ☎ 9am-5.30pm Mon-Sat) houses an exhibition on the history of Harris Tweed; the 40-minute guided tour (£2.50 extra) includes spinning and weaving demonstrations.

Lewis Castle, the Baronial mansion across the harbour, was built in the 1840s for the Matheson family, then owners of Lewis. It was gifted to the community by Lord Leverhulme in 1923 and was home to the local college for 40 years, but has lain empty since 1997 (the college now occupies modern buildings in the castle grounds); it is now slated for development as a museum and hotel. The beautiful grounds are open to the public, and host the Hebridean Celtic Festival (right).

The roofless ruin of the 14th-century **St Columba's Church** (Aignish; admission free; ☎ 24hr), 4 miles east of town on the Eye peninsula, features the grave slabs of Roderick McLeod, 7th clan chief (around 1498), and his daughter (1503).

FESTIVALS

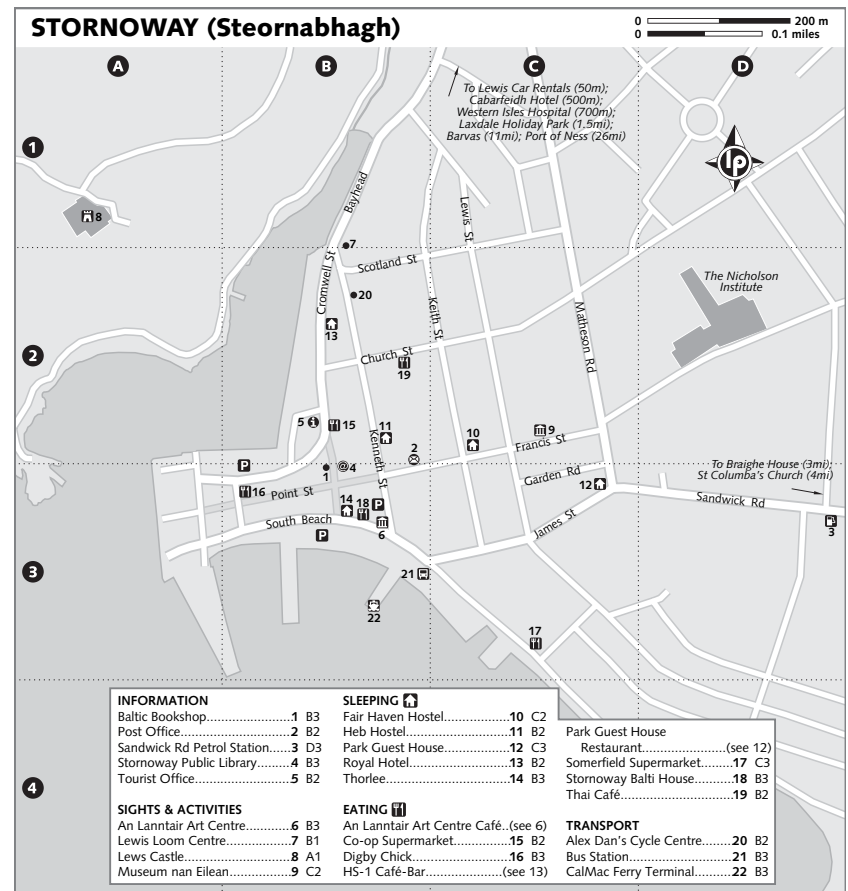
The **Hebridean Celtic Festival** (www.hebceltfest.com) is a four-day extravaganza of folk/rock/Celtic music held in the second half of July.

SLEEPING

Budget

Laxdale Holiday Park (☎ 703234; www.laxdaleholidaypark.com; 6 Laxdale Lane; tent £5-7 plus per person £2, dm/d £12/45; ☎ Apr-Oct; Ⓟ) This camping ground, 1.5 miles north of town off the A857, has a sheltered woodland setting, though the tent area is mostly on a slope – get there early for a level pitch. There's also a bunkhouse that stays open year-round.

Heb Hostel (☎ 709889; www.hebhostel.co.uk; 25 Kenneth St; dm £15; Ⓟ) The recently opened Heb is a



friendly, easy-going hostel close to the ferry, with comfy wooden bunks, a convivial living room with peat fire, and a welcoming owner who can provide all kinds of advice on what to do and where to go.

Thorlee (☎ 705466, 706300; www.thorlee.com; 1-3 Cromwell St; d from £35; (P)) The family-oriented Thorlee has bright and cheerful rooms and a great central location with views over the harbour – an absolute bargain. If there's no answer at the guesthouse, ask at the Stag Bakery next door.

Fair Haven Hostel (☎ 705862; hebsurf@madasafish.com; 28 Francis St) This sociable and well-equipped hostel, aimed mainly at surfers, was closed for renovations at the time of research, but should be open by spring 2008.

Midrange & Top End

Braighe House (☎ 705287; www.braighehouse.co.uk; 20 Braighe Rd; per person from £35; (P)) This spacious and comfortable guesthouse, 3 miles east of the town centre on the A866, has stylish, modern bedrooms and a great seafront location.

Park Guest House (☎ 702485; www.theparkguesthouse.co.uk; 30 James St; s/d from £44/76; (P)) A charming Victorian villa with a conservatory and eight luxurious rooms (mostly en suite), the Park is comfortable and central and has the advantage of an excellent restaurant. Rooms overlooking the main road can be noisy on weekday mornings.

Royal Hotel (☎ 702109; www.royalstornoway.co.uk; Cromwell St; s/d £69/99; (P)) The 19th-century Royal is the most appealing of Stornoway's hotels – the rooms at the front retain period features such as wood panelling, and enjoy a view across the harbour to Lewis Castle. Ask to see your room first, though, as some are a bit cramped.

Cabarfeidh Hotel (☎ 702604; www.cabarfeidh-hotel.co.uk; Manor Park; s/d £92/125; (P) (♿)) Owned by the same company as the Royal, the Cabarfeidh is bigger and more luxurious and is handy for the golf course, but lacks the Royal's old-fashioned character.

EATING

Our pick **Thai Café** (☎ 701811; 27 Church St; mains £5-7; ☎ noon-2.30pm & 5.30-11pm Mon-Sat) Here's a surprise – authentic, inexpensive Thai food in the heart of Stornoway. This spick-and-span little restaurant has a genuine Thai chef, and serves some of the most delicious, best-value Asian food in the Hebrides. There's no liquor licence, so BYOB (bring your own bottle).

An Lanntair Art Centre Café (☎ 703307; Kenneth St; snacks £2-6, mains £8-11; ☎ breakfast 10am-noon, lunch noon-2.15pm, dinner 5.30-9pm Mon-Sat) The stylish and family-friendly restaurant at the art centre serves a broad range of freshly prepared dishes, from tasty bacon rolls at breakfast, to burgers, baguettes or mince and tatties pie for lunch, to Thai curry, beef and Guinness pie or nut roast for dinner.

Park Guest House Restaurant (☎ 702485; 30 James St; mains £14-18; ☎ 6.30-8.30pm Tue-Sat) The restaurant at the Park Guest House specialises in Scottish seafood, beef and game (plus one or two vegetarian dishes), simply prepared, allowing the flavour of the food to speak for itself. It offers a good-value, three-course dinner for £16 between 5pm and 6.30pm.

Digby Chick (☎ 700026; 5 Bank St; mains £16-19; ☎ noon-10pm Mon-Sat) A modern restaurant that dishes up bistro cuisine such as haddock and chips, honey-glazed pork belly or sweet potato, broccoli and goat cheese frittata at lunchtime, the Digby Chick metamorphoses into a candle-lit gourmet restaurant in the evening, serving dishes such as grilled langoustines, seared scallops, roast lamb and steak. You can get a two-course lunch for £8 (11.30am to 2pm), and a three-course dinner for £15 (5.30pm to 6.30pm only).

Most restaurants in Stornoway are closed Sundays, but the few options for a sit-down meal include the **HS-1 Café-Bar** (☎ 702109; Royal Hotel, Cromwell St; mains £6-10; ☎ noon-4pm & 5-9pm) and the **Stornoway Balti House** (☎ 706116; 24 South Beach; mains £7-13; ☎ noon-2.30pm & 6-11pm), a decent curry restaurant.

For self-catering, there's a **Somerfield supermarket** (Ferry Rd; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Sat) and a **Co-op supermarket** (Cromwell St; ☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Sat).

GETTING THERE & AROUND

The bus station is on the waterfront, next to the ferry terminal. Bus W10 runs from Stornoway to Tarbert (one hour, four or five daily Monday to Saturday) and Leverburgh (two hours).

The Westside Circular bus W2 runs a circular route from Stornoway through Callanish, Carloway, Garenin and Arnol; the timetable means you can visit one or two of the sites in a day. A one-day Westside Rover ticket costs £6.50.

For details on CalMac ferries, see p390.

You can hire bikes from **Alex Dan's Cycle Centre** (☎ 704025; www.hebrideancycles.co.uk; 67 Kenneth St).

Butt of Lewis (Rubha Robhanais)

The Butt of Lewis (no snickering, please) – the extreme northern tip of the Hebrides – is windswept and rugged, with a very imposing lighthouse, pounding surf and large colonies of nesting fulmars on the high cliffs. There's a bleak sense of isolation here, with nothing but the grey Atlantic between you and Canada.

Just before the turn-off to the Butt at Eoropie (Eoropaidh), you'll find **St Moluag's Church** (Teampull Mholuidh), an austere, barn-like structure believed to date from the 12th century but still used by the Episcopal Church. The main settlement here is **Port of Ness** (Port Nis) with its attractive harbour. To the west of the village is the sandy beach of **Traigh**, which is popular with surfers and has a kids adventure playground nearby.

Arnol

One of Scotland's most evocative historic buildings, the **Arnol Blackhouse** (HS; ☎ 710395; adult/child £5/2.50; ☎ 9.30am-5.30pm Mon-Sat Apr-Sep, to 4.30pm Mon-Sat Oct-Mar, last admission 30min before closing; ♿) is not so much a museum as a perfectly preserved fragment of a lost world. Built in 1885, this traditional *blackhouse* – a combined byre, barn and home – was inhabited until 1964 and has not been changed since the last inhabitant moved out. The staff faithfully rekindle the central peat fire every morning so you can experience the distinctive peat-reek; there's no chimney, and the smoke finds its own way out through the turf roof, windows and door – spend too long inside and you might feel like you've been kippered! The museum is just off the A858, about 3 miles west of Barvas.

At nearby **Bragar**, a pair of whalebones form an arch by the road, with the rusting harpoon that killed the whale dangling from the centre.

Garenin (Na Gearrannan)

The picturesque and fascinating **Gearrannan Blackhouse Village** is a cluster of nine restored thatch-roofed *blackhouses* perched above the exposed Atlantic coast. One of the cottages is home to the **Blackhouse Museum** (☎ 643416; adult/child £2.20/1; ☎ 9.30am-5.30pm Mon-Sat Apr-Sep), a traditional 1955 *blackhouse* with displays on the village's history, while another houses the **Taigh an Chocair Restaurant** (☎ 643416, 710506; mains £3-6; ☎ 11am-5pm Mon-Sat, dinner Thu-Sat). Dinner is by booking only.

Garenin Crofters' Hostel (www.gatliff.org.uk; dm adult/child £9/6) occupies one of the village *blackhouses*, and is one of the most atmospheric hostels in Scotland (or anywhere else for that matter).

The other houses in the village are let out as self-catering **holiday cottages** (☎ 643416; www.gearrannan.co.uk; per week for 2 people £273-385) offering the chance to stay in a unique and luxurious, modernised *blackhouse* with attached kitchen and lounge. There's a minimum five-night let from June to August.

Carloway (Carlabagh)

Dun Carloway (Dun Charlabhaigh) is a 2000-year-old, dry-stone broch, perched defiantly above a beautiful loch with views to the mountains of North Harris. The site is clearly signposted along a minor road off the A858, a mile southwest of Carloway village. One of the best-preserved brochs in Scotland, its double walls (with internal staircase) still stand to a height of 9m and testify to the engineering skills of its Iron Age architects.

The tiny, turf-roofed **Doune Broch Centre** (☎ 643338; admission free; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat late-May-mid-Sep) nearby has interpretative displays and exhibitions about the history of the broch and the life of the people who lived there.

Callanish (Calanais)

The **Callanish Standing Stones** (☎ 621422; admission free), 15 miles west of Stornoway on the A858 road, form one of the most complete stone circles in Britain and are one of the most atmospheric prehistoric sites anywhere. Its ageless mystery, impressive scale and undeniable beauty leave a lasting impression. Sited on a wild and secluded promontory overlooking Loch Roag, 13 large stones of beautifully banded gneiss are arranged, as if in worship, around a 4.5m-tall central monolith. Some 40 smaller stones radiate from the circle in the shape of a cross, with the remains of a chambered tomb at the centre. Dating from 3800 to 5000 years ago, the stones are roughly contemporary with the pyramids of Egypt.

The nearby **Calanais Visitor Centre** (☎ 621422; admission free, exhibition £1.85; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Sat Apr-Sep, to 4pm Mon-Sat Oct-Mar) is a *tour de force* of discreet design. Inside is a small **exhibition** that speculates on the origins and purpose of the stones, and an excellent café (snacks £1 to £5).

If you plan to stay the night, you have a choice of **Eshcol Guest House** (☎ 621357; www.eshcol

.com; 21 Breasleit; r per person £37; (P) and neighbouring **Loch Roag Guest House** (☎ 621357; www.lochroag.com; 22a Breasleit; r per person £33-44; (P)), half a mile north of Callanish. Both are modern bungalows with the same friendly owner who is very knowledgeable about the local area.

Tigh Mealros (☎ 621333; Garrynahine; mains £9-15; ☎ 7-9pm Mon-Sat), a private family home set in a sculpture garden, offers a tasty à la carte menu featuring seafood, steak and vegetarian dishes, including not-to-be-missed local scallops. Bookings are essential.

Great Bernera

This rocky island is connected to Lewis by a bridge built by the local council in 1953 – the islanders had originally planned to destroy a small hill with explosives and use the material to build their own causeway. On a sunny day, it's worth making the long detour to the island's northern tip for a picnic at the perfect little sandy beach of **Bosta** (Bostadh).

In 1996 archaeologists excavated an entire Iron Age village at the head of the beach. Afterwards, the village was re-buried for protection, but a reconstruction of an **Iron Age house** (☎ 612331; Bosta; adult/child £2/50p; ☎ noon-4pm Mon-Fri May-Sep) now sits nearby. Stand around the peat fire, above which strips of mutton hang to be smoked, while the custodian explains the domestic arrangements – truly fascinating, and well worth the trip.

There are five buses a day between Stornoway and the hamlet of Breacleit (one hour, Monday to Saturday) on Great Bernera; two or three a day will continue to Bosta on request. Alternatively, there's a signposted 5-mile **coastal walk** from Breacleit to Bosta.

Miavaig (Miabhaig) & Mealista (Mealasta)

The B8011 road (signposted Uig, on the A858 Stornoway–Callanish road) from Garrynahine to Timsgharry (Timsgearraidh) meanders through scenic wilderness to some of Scotland's most stunning beaches. At **Miavaig**, a loop road detours north through the Bhaltois Estate to the pretty, mile-long white strand of **Reef Beach**; there's a basic **camping ground** (per person £2) in the machair behind the beach.

From April to September, **Sea Trek** (☎ 672464; www.seatrek.co.uk; Miavaig Pier) runs two-hour boat trips (adult/child £30/20; Monday to Saturday) to spot seals and nesting sea birds, and more-adventurous, all-day trips (£90 per per-

son; two per month, June and July only) in a high-speed RIB to the **Flannan Isles**, a remote group of tiny, uninhabited islands 25 miles northwest of Lewis. Puffins, seals and a ruined 7th-century chapel are the main attractions, but the isles are most famous for the mystery of the three lighthouse keepers who disappeared without trace in December 1900.

From Miavaig the road continues west through a rocky defile to Timsgharry and the vast, sandy expanse of **Traigh Uige** (Uig Sands) – the famous 12th-century Lewis chesspieces made of walrus-ivory were discovered in the sand dunes here in 1831. Of the 78 pieces, 67 are in the British Museum in London, with 11 in Edinburgh's Museum of Scotland (p86); you can buy replicas at various outlets on the island.

There's a very basic **camp site** (☎ 672248; per person £2) on the south side of the bay (signposted 'Ardroil Beach'; toilet only, no showers). If you fancy dining or staying somewhere really special, head to **Bonaventure** (☎ 672474; www.bonaventurelewis.co.uk; Aird Uig; 3-course dinner £27; ☎ 6.30-9pm daily, closed Nov & Feb), possibly the most remote French restaurant in Europe. It's housed in a converted, pine-clad military prefab that's perched above a wild, cliff-bound Atlantic cove 3 miles north of Timsgharry. The food is superb – local seafood, lamb and venison prepared by the resident French chef/owner – and the setting unique. Booking is essential. If you want to stay the night, there are three comfy double rooms (from £25 per person).

The minor road that continues south from Timsgharry to **Mealista** passes a few smaller, but still spectacular, white-sand beaches; beware, though – the surf can make swimming treacherous.

HARRIS (NA HEARADH)

☎ 01859 / pop 2000

Harris, to the south of Lewis, is the scenic jewel in the necklace of islands that comprise the Outer Hebrides, a spectacular blend of rugged mountains, pristine beaches, flower-speckled machair and barren rocky landscapes. The isthmus at Tarbert splits Harris neatly in two – North Harris is dominated by mountains that rise forbiddingly above the peat moors to the south of Stornoway – Clisham (799m) is the highest point; South Harris is lower-lying, fringed by beautiful white-sand beaches on the west, and a convoluted rocky coastline to the east.

FOR PEAT'S SAKE

In the Outer Hebrides, where trees are few and far between and coal is absent, peat has been the main source of domestic fuel for many centuries. Although oil-fired central heating is now the norm, many houses have held on to their peat fires for nostalgia's sake.

Peat in its raw state is extremely wet and can take a couple of months to dry out. It is cut from roadside bogs, where the cuttings are at least a metre deep. Rectangular blocks of peat are cut using a long-handled tool called a *tairsgeir* (peat-iron); this is extremely hard work and can cause blisters even on hands that are used to manual labour.

The peat blocks are carefully assembled into a *cruach-mhonach* (peat stack), each balanced on top of the other in a grid pattern thus creating maximum air space. Once the peat has dried out it is stored in a shed.

Peat burns much more slowly than wood or coal and produces a not unpleasant smell, but in the old *blackhouses* (which had no chimney) it permeated every corner of the dwelling, not to mention the inhabitants' clothes and hair, hence the expression 'peat-reek' – the ever-present smell of peat smoke that was long associated with island life.

Harris is famous for Harris Tweed, a high-quality woollen cloth still hand-woven in islanders' homes. The industry employs around 400 weavers; staff at Tarbert tourist office can tell you about weavers and workshops that you can visit.

Tarbert (An Tairbeart) pop 480

Tarbert is a harbour village with a spectacular location, tucked into the narrow neck of land that links North and South Harris. It has ferry connections to Uig on Skye.

The **tourist office** (☎ 502011; Pier Rd; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Sat, plus 8-9pm Tue, Thu & Sat Apr-Oct) is in the car park just uphill from the ferry terminal. Village facilities include a petrol station, bank, ATM and two general stores. The **Harris Tweed Shop** (☎ 502493; Main St; ☎ 9.15am-5.30pm May-Sep) stocks a wide range of books on the Hebrides and sells gifts, crafts and the famous cloth itself.

SLEEPING & EATING

Rockview Bunkhouse (☎ 502081; imacaskill@aol.com; Main St; dm £10) This hostel on the street above the harbour is a bit cell-like with its cramped dorms and air of neglect, but it's close to the ferry; if there's no answer, ask at the post office. The Rhenigidale hostel (right) is a better bet for a longer stay.

Harris Hotel (☎ 502154; www.harrisotel.com; s/d £60/110; (P)) Run since 1903 by four generations of the Cameron family, Harris Hotel is a 19th-century sporting hotel, originally built for deer-stalkers visiting the North Harris Estates. It has spacious, comfy rooms and

a good restaurant; look out for JM Barrie's initials scratched on the dining-room window (the author of *Peter Pan* visited in the 1920s). The hotel is on the way out of the village, on the road north towards Stornoway.

Firstfruits (☎ 502439; Pier Rd; mains £3-10; ☎ 10am-4.30pm Mon-Sat Apr-Sep, 7-9pm Tue-Sat May-Aug) This is a cosy little cottage tearoom near the tourist office – handy while you wait for a ferry.

North Harris

Magnificent North Harris is the most mountainous region of the Outer Hebrides. There are few roads, but many opportunities for climbing, walking and bird-watching.

The B887 leads west to **Hushinish**, where there's a lovely silver-sand beach, passing the impressive shooting lodge of **Amhuinnsuidhe Castle**, now an exclusive hotel. Just northwest of Hushinish is the uninhabited island of **Scarp**, the scene of bizarre attempts to send mail by rocket in 1934, a story recounted in the movie *The Rocket Post* (2001), which was shot in Harris.

Rhenigidale Crofters' Hostel (www.gatliff.org.uk; dm adult/child £9/6) can be reached on foot from Tarbert (6 miles, allow three hours). It's an excellent walk, but take all the necessary supplies for a mountain hike (map, compass, protective clothing etc). Take the road towards Kyles Scalpay for 2 miles and, at a bend in the road just beyond Laxdale Lochs, veer off to the left on a signposted track across the hills (marked on Ordnance Survey maps). The hostel is a white building standing above the road on the eastern side of the glen; the warden lives in the house closest to the shore.

The remote hamlet of Rhenigidale can also be reached by road; bus W11 will take you there from Tarbert (30 minutes, two a day Monday to Saturday), but you'll have to book in advance (☎ 502250).

South Harris

If you think Scotland has no decent beaches, wait till you see the **west coast** of South Harris. The blinding white sands and turquoise waters of **Luskentyre** and **Scarasta** would be major holiday resorts if they were transported to somewhere with a warm climate; as it is, they're usually deserted.

The culture and landscape of the Hebrides are celebrated in the fascinating exhibition at **Seallam Visitor Centre** (☎ 520258; Northton; adult/child £2.50/2; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat). *Seallam* is Gaelic for 'Let me show you'. The centre, which is in Northton, just south of Scarasta, also has a genealogical research centre for people who want to trace their Hebridean ancestry.

The **east coast** is a complete contrast to the west – a strange, rocky moonscape of naked gneiss pocked with tiny lochans, the bleakness lightened by the occasional splash of green around the few crofting communities. Film buffs will know that the psychedelic sequences depicting the surface of Jupiter in *2001: A Space Odyssey* were shot from an aircraft flying low over the east coast of Harris.

The narrow, twisting road that winds its way along this coast is known locally as the **Golden Road**, because of the vast amount of money it cost per mile. It was built in the 1930s to link all the tiny communities known as 'The Bays'. The **MV Lady Catherine** (☎ 530310; www.scenic-cruises.co.uk), based at Flodabay harbour halfway down the east coast, offers three-hour wildlife cruises (adult/child £12/6) from May to September.

At the southernmost tip of this coastline stands the impressive 16th-century **St Clement's Church** (Rodel/Roghadal; admission free), which was abandoned in 1560 after the Reformation. Inside the echoing nave is the impressive tomb of Alexander MacLeod, the man responsible for the church's construction. Crude carvings show hunting scenes, a castle, a galleon, and various saints, including St Clement clutching a skull.

The village of **Leverburgh** (An t-Oib; www.leverburgh.co.uk) is named after Lord Leverhulme (the creator of Sunlight soap, and the founder of Unilever), who bought Lewis and Harris in

1918. He had grand plans for the islands, and for Obbe, as Leverburgh was then known. It was to be a major fishing port with a population of 10,000, but the plans died with Lord Leverhulme in 1925 and the village reverted to a sleepy backwater. There is a post office with an ATM, a general store and a petrol station.

SLEEPING & EATING

Am Bothan (☎ 520251; www.ambothan.com; Leverburgh; dm £15; ☎ ☎) This attractive, chalet-style hostel has small, neat dorms and a great porch where you can enjoy morning coffee with views over the creek.

Sorrel Cottage (☎ 520319; www.sorrelcottage.co.uk; 2 Glen, Leverburgh; r per person from £23) Sorrel Cottage is a pretty crofter's house, about 1.5 miles west of the ferry at Leverburgh. Evening meals can be provided (£16 a head), and vegetarians and vegans are happily catered for.

Carminish Guest House (☎ 520400; www.carminish.com; 1a Strond, Leverburgh; s/d £45/58; ☎) One of the few B&Bs in Harris that is open all year, the welcoming Carminish is a modern house with three comfy guest bedrooms. There's a view of the ferry from the dining room, and lots of nice little touches such as handmade soaps, a tin of chocolate biscuits in the bedroom, and the latest weather forecast posted on the breakfast table.

Rodel Hotel (☎ 520210; www.rodelhotel.co.uk; Rodel; s/d from £70/100; ☎) Don't be put off by the rather grey and grim exterior of this remote hotel – the interior has been refurbished to a high standard and offers four large, luxurious bedrooms; the one called Iona has the best view, across the little harbour. Open for dinner from 5.30pm to 9pm, the hotel restaurant (mains £14 to £16) serves delicious local seafood and game, with dishes such as local mussels steamed in white wine with a fennel and cream sauce.

Skoon Art Café (☎ 530268; 4 Geocrab; mains £3-7; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sat Mar-Oct, noon-4pm Wed-Sat Nov-22 Dec, lunch served 11am-4pm) Set halfway along the Golden Road, this neat little art gallery doubles as an excellent café serving delicious homemade soups (broccoli and roast almond is a favourite), sandwiches, cakes and desserts (try the marmalade and ginger cake).

GETTING THERE & AROUND

A CalMac car ferry zigzags through the reefs of the Sound of Harris from Leverburgh to

Berneray (pedestrian/car £5.60/25.50, 1¼ hours, three or four daily Monday to Saturday). You can hire bicycles from Sorrel Cottage for £10 a day.

BERNERAY (BEARNARAIGH)

☎ 01876 / pop 140

Berneray (www.isleofberneray.com) was linked to North Uist by a causeway in October 1998, but that hasn't altered the peace and beauty of the island. The beaches on its west coast are some of the most beautiful and unspoilt in Britain, and seals and otters can be seen in Bays Loch on the east coast.

The basic but atmospheric **Gatloff Hostel** (www.gatloff.org.uk; Baile; dm adult/child £9/6, camping per person £5), housed in a pair of restored *black-houses* right by the sea, is the place to stay.

In summer, snacks are available at the **Lobster Pot** (☎ Mon-Sat), the tearoom attached to Ardmaree Stores (a grocery shop near the causeway; closed Sunday). The **Nurses Cottage** (☎ 11am-3pm Mon-Fri Jun-Aug) provides tourist information.

Bus W19 runs from Berneray (Gatloff Hostel and Harris ferry) to Lochmaddy (30 minutes, six daily Monday to Saturday). For details of ferries to Leverburgh (Harris), see opposite.

NORTH UIST (UIBHIST A TUATH)

☎ 01876 / pop 1550

North Uist, an island half-drowned by lochs, is famed for its fishing but also has some magnificent beaches on its north and west coasts. For bird-watchers this is an earthly paradise, with regular sightings of waders and wildfowl ranging from redshank to red-throated diver to red-necked phalarope. The landscape is less wild and mountainous than Harris, but it has a sleepy, subtle appeal.

Lochmaddy (Loch nam Madadh)

Little Lochmaddy is the first village you hit after arriving on the ferry from Skye. There's a **tourist office** (☎ 500321; Pier Rd; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Fri, 9.30am-1pm & 2-5.30pm Sat, 8-9pm Mon, Wed & Fri Apr-Oct), a couple of stores, a bank with ATM, a petrol station, a post office and a pub.

Taigh Chearsabhagh (☎ 500293; admission free, donation requested for museum; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat Feb-Jun & Sep-Dec, 10am-5pm Mon-Thu & Sat, to 8pm Fri Jul & Aug) is a museum and arts centre that preserves and displays the history and culture of the Uists, and is also a thriving community centre, post office and meeting place. The centre's lively

café (mains £2 to £5) dishes up lovely homemade soups, sandwiches and cakes, and provides internet access at 50p for 20 minutes.

Buses from Lochmaddy to Berneray, Langass, Clachan na Luib, Benbecula and Lochboisdale run five or six times a day Monday to Saturday.

SLEEPING & EATING

Uist Outdoor Centre (☎ 500480; www.uistoutdoorcentre.co.uk; Cearn Dugaidh; dm £12; ☎ ☎) This shore-side activity centre has a smart bunkhouse with four-bed dorms and offers a range of activities including sea-kayaking, rock climbing and diving.

Old Courthouse (☎ 500358; oldcourthouse@tiscali.co.uk; Lochmaddy; r per person from £25; ☎) This charming, Georgian-style villa has four guest rooms and is within walking distance of the ferry, on the road that leads to Uist Outdoor Centre. Excellent porridge for breakfast, and kippers are on the menu too.

Lochmaddy Hotel (☎ 500331; www.lochmaddyhotel.co.uk; s/d £51/95; ☎) This is a traditional anglers' hotel (you can buy fishing permits here) with comfy, recently refurbished rooms, many with harbour views. The lively hotel bar pulls in anglers, locals and tourists, and serves excellent pub grub (mains £7 to £12) including seafood, venison and king-size steaks.

Taigh Chearsabhagh (see left) is also a good place to eat.

Bharpa Langass & Pobull Fhinn

A waymarked circular path beside the Langass Lodge Hotel (just off the A867, 6 miles southwest of Lochmaddy) leads to the chambered Neolithic burial tomb of **Bharpa Langass** and the stone circle of **Pobull Fhinn** (Finn's People); both are reckoned to be around 5000 years old. There are lovely views over the loch, where you may be able to spot seals and otters.

The delightful **Langass Lodge Hotel** (☎ 580285; www.langasslodge.co.uk; Lochport; s/d from £50/90; ☎ ☎) is a former shooting lodge set in splendid isolation overlooking Loch Langais. Recently refurbished and extended, it now offers a dozen appealing rooms, many with sea views, and one of the Hebrides' best restaurants (two-/three-course dinner £24/29), noted for its fine seafood and game.

Balranald Nature Reserve

Bird-watchers flock to this Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) nature reserve,

18 miles west of Lochmaddy, in the hope of spotting the rare red-necked phalarope or hearing the distinctive call of the corncrake. There's a **visitors centre** (☎ 510372; admission free; ☞ Apr-Sep; ☎) with a resident warden who offers 1½-hour guided walks (£3, depart visitor centre 10am on Tuesdays, May to August).

BENBECULA (BEINN NA FAOGLA)

☎ 01870 / pop 1200

Benbecula is a low-lying island whose flat, lochan-studded landscape is best appreciated from the summit of **Rueval** (124m), the island's highest point. There's a path around the south side of the hill (signposted from the main road; park beside the landfill site) that is said to be the route taken to the coast by Bonnie Prince Charlie and Flora MacDonald during the prince's escape in 1746.

The control centre for the British army's Hebrides Missile Range (located on the north-western tip of South Uist) is the island's main source of employment, and **Balivanich** (Baile a'Mhanaich) – looking like a corner of a Glasgow housing estate planted incongruously on the machair – is the commercial centre serving the troops and their families. The village has a bank with an ATM, a post office and a large **Co-op supermarket** (☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Sat, 12.30-6pm Sun).

SOUTH UIST (UIBHIST A DEAS)

pop 1900

South Uist is the second-largest island in the Outer Hebrides, and saves its choicest corners for those who explore away from the main north-south road. The low-lying west coast is an almost unbroken stretch of white-sand beach and flower-flecked machair, while the multitude of inland lochs provide excellent trout fishing. The east coast, riven by four large sea lochs, is hilly and remote, with spectacular **Beinn Mhor** (620m) the highest point.

As you drive south from Benbecula you cross from the predominantly Protestant northern half of the Outer Hebrides into the mostly Roman Catholic south, a religious transition marked by the granite statue of **Our Lady of the Isles** on the slopes of Rueval (the hill with the military radomes on its summit), and the presence of many roadside shrines.

The North

The northern part of the island is mostly occupied by the watery expanses of Loch Bee and

Loch Druidibeg. **Loch Druidibeg National Nature Reserve** is an important breeding ground for birds such as dunlin, redshank, ringed plover, greylag goose and corncrake; you can take a 5-mile self-guided walk through the reserve (pick up a leaflet from the Scottish Natural Heritage office on the main road beside the loch).

Two miles south of Loch Druidibeg is the attractive hamlet of **Howmore** (Tobha Mor), with several restored, thatched *blackhouses*, one of which houses the **Tobha Mor Crofters' Hostel** (www.gatliff.org.uk; dm adult/child £9/6).

You can rent bikes from **Rothan Cycles** (☎ 01870-620283; www.rothan.com; 9 Howmore; per day/week from £8/35) where the road to the hostel leaves the main road.

The South

Six miles south of Howmore, **Kildonan Museum** (☎ 01878-710343; Kildonan; adult/child £1.50/free; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Fri, 2-5pm Sun Easter-Oct) explores the lives of local crofters through its collection of artefacts – an absorbing exhibition of black-and-white photography and first-hand accounts of harsh Hebridean conditions. There's also an excellent tea room and craft shop.

Amid the ruined *blackhouses* of Milton, half a mile south of the museum, a cairn marks the site of **Flora MacDonald's birthplace**.

Askernish Golf Course, originally laid out by the legendary Tom Morris in 1891, was recently rediscovered among the dunes on South Uist. At the time of research it was being restored, and this classic, old-fashioned links course should be open for play once again in summer 2008.

LOCHBOISDALE (LOCH BAGHASDAIL)

☎ 01878

The ferry port of Lochboisdale is the island's largest settlement, with a **tourist office** (☎ 700286; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Fri, 9.30am-5pm Sat, 9am-9.30pm Tue & Thu Apr-Oct), a bank with ATM, a grocery store and a petrol station. There's a **Co-op supermarket** (☎ 8am-8pm Mon-Sat, 12.30-6pm Sun) at Daliburgh, 3 miles west of the village.

For details of ferries from Lochboisdale to Oban, see p390.

Sleeping & Eating

Lochside Cottage (☎ 700472; loch-side_cottage@tiscali.co.uk; r per person £25; ☎) This friendly B&B, 1.5 miles west of the ferry, has rooms with a view and a sun lounge barely a fishing-rod's length from its own trout loch.

INVASION OF THE KILLER HEDGEHOGS

In 1974, a couple of hedgehogs were introduced to South Uist by a local gardener in an attempt to control the slugs in his garden. Hedgehogs had never been native to the islands, and the incomers waddled innocently into a vacant ecological niche. They spread like wildfire, and by 2002, it was estimated that there were around 5000 of the spiny slug-munchers in the Uists. But what's more, they were posing a mortal threat to important colonies of rare ground-nesting birds – eggs are a favourite hedgehog food.

In 2002, Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) announced that a cull was the only way to preserve the bird population, and for the next few years each summer saw a battle between the SNH culling teams and animal rights organisations. While SNH combed the fields at night with flashlights, hog-spotters and lethal injections, the British Hedgehog Preservation Society and other campaign groups were offering £20 a head for live hedgehogs, which they transported to the mainland for release into the wild. The cull was ended in 2007 in favour of transporting live hedgehogs to the mainland.

If the Uist invaders had been rats rather than cute Mrs Tiggywinkles, the public reaction might have been different, as the inhabitants of Canna, in the Small Isles, will confirm. Rats were accidentally introduced to the tiny island (population 14) by a ship a century ago – by 2005 the rodent raiders numbered more than 10,000, forcing out native species including wood mice and birds – the island's population of burrow-nesting Manx shearwaters had ceased to nest there.

Canna's owner, the National Trust for Scotland, called in a crack team of rat-trappers from New Zealand, who trapped all the native wood mice and sent them for a nice holiday on the mainland, before wiping out the rats with poison bait. The plan seems to have worked. The woodmice were returned to their island home in 2006, and by summer 2007 the Manx shearwaters were nesting on Canna once more. Any public outcry? Not a squeak.

our pick Polochar Inn (☎ 700215; www.polocharinn.co.uk; Polochar; s/d £45/70; ☎) Recently taken over by local sisters Morag McKinnon and Margaret Campbell, this 18th-century inn has been transformed into a stylish and welcoming hotel with a stunning location looking out across the sea to Barra. There's an excellent restaurant and bar menu (mains £7 to £13), that includes fish chowder, haddock and chips, local salmon and Uist lamb. Polochar is 7 miles southwest of Lochboisdale, on the way to Eriskay.

Lochboisdale Hotel (☎ 700332; www.lochboisdale.com; s/d £50/90; ☎) This old-fashioned huntin'-and-fishin' hotel has spacious, modernised rooms, many of which have stunning views across the Minch. The lounge bar has a roaring fire in winter, and hosts regular traditional music sessions; it also serves decent bar meals (£8 to £12).

ERISKAY (EIRIOSGAIGH)

☎ 01878 / pop 170

In 1745, Bonnie Prince Charlie first set foot in Scotland on the west coast of Eriskay, on the sandy beach (immediately north of the ferry terminal) still known as **Prince's Strand** (Coilleag a'Phrionnsa).

More recently, the SS *Politician* sank just off the island in 1941. The islanders salvaged much of its cargo of around 250,000 bottles of whisky and, after a binge of dramatic proportions, the police intervened and a number of the islanders landed in jail. The story was immortalised by Sir Compton Mackenzie in his comic novel *Whisky Galore*, later made into a famous film.

A CalMac car ferry links Eriskay with Ardmhor at the northern end of Barra (pedestrian/car £6/18, 40 minutes, four or five daily).

BARRA (BARRAIGH)

☎ 01871 / pop 1150

With its beautiful beaches, wildflower-clad dunes, rugged little hills and strong sense of community, diminutive Barra – just 14 miles in circumference – is the Outer Hebrides in miniature. For a great view of the island, walk up to the top of **Heaval** (383m), a mile north-east of Castlebay.

Castlebay (Bagh a'Chaisteil), in the south, is the largest village. There's a **tourist office** (☎ 810336; Main St; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Sat, noon-4pm Sun Apr-Oct), a bank with ATM, a post office and two grocery stores. There's free

internet access at the **Community Library** (☎ 810471; Community School, Castlebay; 🕒 9am-4.30pm Mon & Wed, 9am-4.30pm & 6-8pm Tue & Thu, 9am-3.30pm Fri, 10am-12.30pm Sat).

Sights & Activities

Castlebay takes its name from **Kisimul Castle** (HS; ☎ 810313; Castlebay; adult/child incl ferry £4.50/2.25; 🕒 9.30am-5.30pm Apr-Sep), first built by the MacNeil clan in the 11th century. It was sold in the 19th century and restored in the 20th by American architect Robert MacNeil, who became the 45th clan chief; he gifted the castle to Historic Scotland in 2000 for an annual rent of £1 and a bottle of whisky (Talisker single malt, if you're interested).

The **Barra Heritage Centre** (☎ 810413; www.barraheritage.com; Castlebay; adult/child £2/1; 🕒 11am-4pm Mon-Sat May-Aug, 11am-4pm Mon, Wed & Fri Mar, Apr & Sep) has Gaelic-themed displays about the island, local art exhibitions and a tearoom. The centre also manages a restored 19th-century thatched

cottage, the **Black Shieling** (adult/child £2/75p; 🕒 1-4pm Mon-Fri May-Sep), 3 miles north of Castlebay on the west side of the island.

Traigh Mor (the Big Strand), in the north of the island, is a vast expanse of firm golden sand that serves as Barra's airport (a mile across at low tide, and big enough for three 'runways'), the only beach airport in the world that handles scheduled flights. Watching the little Twin Otter aircraft come and go is a popular spectator sport.

Sleeping & Eating

Accommodation on Barra is limited, so make a reservation before committing to a night on the island.

Dunard Hostel (☎ 810443; www.dunardhostel.co.uk; Castlebay; dm/d from £11/30; 📍) Dunard is a friendly, family-run hostel just five minutes' walk from the ferry terminal. The owners can organise sea-kayaking tours for £25/40 a half-/full day.

Faire Mhaoldonaich (☎ 810441; www.fairemhaol.donaich.com; Nasg; r per person £23-25; 🕒 Mar-Oct; 📍) This B&B is a modern house with spacious, comfortable rooms and great views over Bagh Beag to the isle of Mhaoldonaich; it's a mile west of Castlebay on the road to Vatersay.

Craigard Hotel (☎ 810200; www.isleofbarra.com/craigard.html; Castlebay; s/d £55/80; 📍) The Craigard has snug rooms and a conservatory restaurant (mains £7 to £11) with grand views across the harbour to the islands south of Barra; the house speciality is cockles gathered from the airport beach.

Getting There & Around

See p390 for details of CalMac ferries from Castlebay to Oban and Lochboisdale (South Uist) and flights to the Scottish mainland; see p401 for the ferry from Ardmhor, at the northern end of Barra, to Eriskay.

Bus W32 makes a regular circuit of the island, and also connects with flights at the airport.

You can hire bikes from **Barra Cycle Hire** (☎ 810284; 29 St Brendan's Rd, Castlebay).

PABBAY (PABAIDH), MINGULAY (MIUGHALAIGH) & BERNERAY (BEARNARAIGH)

These three uninhabited islands, gifted to the National Trust for Scotland (NTS) in 2000, are important breeding sites for sea-bird species such as fulmar, black guillemot, common and Arctic tern, great skua, puffin and storm petrel. There are boat trips to the islands from Castlebay, Barra, in settled weather for around £15 per person; ask at Barra tourist office for details. The puffin season lasts from June to early August.

THE EVEN FURTHER OUTER HEBRIDES

St Kilda (www.kilda.org.uk) is a collection of spectacular sea stacks and cliff-bound islands about 45 miles west of North Uist. The largest island, Hirta, measures only 2 miles by 1 mile, with huge cliffs along most of its coastline. Owned by National Trust for Scotland (NTS), the islands are a Unesco World Heritage site and are the biggest sea-bird nesting site in the North Atlantic, home to more than a million birds.

History

Hirta was inhabited by a Gaelic-speaking population of around 200 until the 19th century, when the arrival of church missionaries and tourists began the gradual breakdown of St Kilda's traditional way of life. By the 1920s, disease and emigration had seen the islands' economy collapse, and the 35 remaining islanders were evacuated, at their own request, in 1930. The people had survived here by keeping sheep, fishing, growing a few basic crops such as barley, and climbing the cliffs barefoot to catch sea birds and collect their eggs. Over the centuries, this resulted in a genetic peculiarity – St Kilda men had unusually long big toes.

Visiting St Kilda

Boat tours to St Kilda are a major undertaking. For a full listing of tour operators, check out the website www.kilda.org.uk. **Western Edge Charters** (☎ 01506-387633; www.westernedge.co.uk) operates leisurely, six-day expeditions on a 12m sailing yacht departing from Berneray (North Uist) for around £600 per person.

The only way to spend any time in the islands is to join one of the two-week NTS work parties that visit St Kilda from mid-May to August. The NTS charges volunteers for doing archaeological and conservation work in and around the village ruins – you have to be physically fit and prepared to work for up to 36 hours per week. And you have to pay for the privilege – from £555 to £645 (including transport from Oban in a converted lifeboat and full board in dorm accommodation). To get an application form, send a stamped, self-addressed envelope to St Kilda Work Parties, NTS, Balnain House, 40 Huntly St, Inverness IV3 5HR. The closing date for applications is 31 January.

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