

Scotland 2026

May 2 – May 22

This trip report dives into way too much detail for most people, then ends with a few reflections on what we'd have done differently with hindsight. We have been to both Shetland and Orkney previously, so all the “must see” attractions are missing from this visit, as we've been there – done that. Between all the flying and the terrible exchange rate, there was some sticker shock as I'm writing this and paying bills.

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The Details

This trip had lots of moving parts, with lots of places where problems might derail the entire itinerary.

We had a fairly uneventful long-haul flight(s) from Oregon to Glasgow. I say “fairly” because all sorts of things happened, but we arrived roughly on time. The short hop from home to Seattle was easy enough, then we discovered that when I bought our tickets, autofill had substituted Jim for James, since I normally go by Jim. Icelandair rejected our check-in, and only after a very protracted intervention by the gate supervisor, she managed to change the tickets, getting us on the flight at the very last minute. This would impact things a little later. On the third leg (Keflavik to Glasgow) we “won” the ClassUp bidding (with a minimum bid) but they informed me as I boarded that they reneged on one of us, meaning Kathy got 1st Class while I got a window seat in the back. We didn’t get food in advance since it would be plentiful in 1st class, so I starved while Kathy had a few free drinks. This would further complicate things later.

Day 2 – Dundee

Arriving in Glasgow, we took a taxi to Queen Street Station to board the train to Dundee. The taxi fare had doubled since 2022, so I should have considered the slower bus service. We shared a table on the train with a nice lad and had a pleasant exchange on all sorts of subjects as the train slowly filled with women dressed for a party as we progressed on the route. I had seen a Steve Marsh YouTube about Dundee that made it sound like they were trying to make the place more attractive to tourists. A wrong turn after leaving Dundee station resulted in a much longer than necessary walk to the Premier Inn.



After checking into our room, we headed out to find dinner and found ourselves in a flood of drunken teenagers, the girls all in full punk. It turns out it was the annual “Dance Night” in Dundee, which made every bar a crowded mess and kept bouncers busy keeping the teenagers at bay. We hoped to find a trad singing session at The Bank Bar, but there was nothing to be seen. It turns out, the next night we discovered we had been in The Old Bank Bar (different place!) and there *had* been something to enjoy – drat!

Day 3 – More Dundee

After a nice breakfast at the hotel, it was off to the nearby Discovery Point to peruse the excellent museum followed by an exploration of the RSS Discovery, the vessel that first got Shackleton to Antarctica. Interesting story!

Then it was on to the also nearby VA Dundee, a relatively new museum and art space. Although it was an interesting architecture building, we found the exhibits rather sparse, and a little too artsy-fartsy for our pedestrian tastes.

Planned to have lunch at the Flame Tree, but being a bank holiday, it was overflowing, so after a nice lunch at The Old Bank Bar, we walked around the city finding most of the many statues of the Penguins, Poor Willie, etc. before eventually deciding to add the McManus Gallery & Museum to our walk, enjoying very diverse displays and art. Then it was on to the



Verdant Jute Museum. The museum was super with all the relevant machines and detailed histories of each phase of Dundee's history. Unfortunately, being a bank holiday meant none of the machines were operating. Bad planning!

Unraveling the Old and not-Old Bank Bars, we found the correct one, learned that we missed the previous night's music, and enjoyed a nice dinner and some slightly anemic live music.

Day 4 – Shetland

After another good breakfast, followed by a short taxi to Dundee airport, we boarded a LoganAir flight to Sumburgh (Shetland). The stewardess asked about our trip so far, and after saying Dundee, she made a face and asked what we thought of it. When Kathy exclaimed it was great, the stewardess replied "said the first person ever!". I guess Dundee is underappreciated.

After the short flight, we picked up a rental car, then headed to hike The Ness of Burgi, which is a short coastal walk, where we failed to see puffins, but there were plenty of other birds and nice views

We then drove to Lerwick to check into Varis House (where we had stayed two years earlier). We then headed to The Dowry for a meal, getting the last table for those without reservations. Excellent meal, as we've had there before. After a phone call to The Marlex to make sure there was no music



(despite Facebook claims), we had a quick beer/whisky at The Lounge before heading back to the B&B.

Day 5 Shetland - Noss

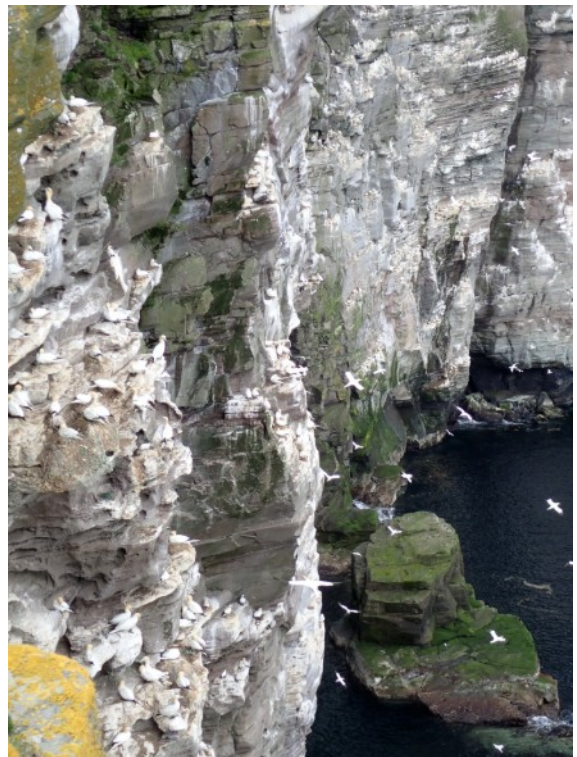


Varis House has changed to a continental breakfast, which was a little disappointing, but still pleasant.

This was our third attempt at seeing Noss, the first time having picked a Thursday when they were closed, and the second time facing a weather cancellation of the small boat to Noss and we had scheduled the Noss Boat non-landing tour as an alternative, and it was canceled due to engine trouble. Stopping at the Co-op to get a sack lunch for the hike we came out to find ourselves in the middle of a snow/ice storm. We proceeded to board the ice-covered ferry for the short trip to Bressay, where we drove over to the Noss Pier.

I guess third time's the charm, as the cold rainy weather subsided to just cold, and we found ourselves on Noss, at last. Enjoyed a brief orientation at the Visitor's Center, then did the anti-clockwise circumnavigation on the entire island with occasional sun breaks to dramatize the gannet cliffs.

The ranger stated that the first few puffins were seen on-shore the day before, and we found the numbers had expanded to a few score, and we saw one pair retreat into a nest cavity. Most of the puffins were at least 10 yards away, so interactions were not in the cards.



Puffins

Traveling in early May has it's risks. Depending on sea conditions in the North Atlantic, local weather, sand eel populations, and other factors such as bird flu, the puffins first arrive forming large rafts on the water, where they are apparently seeking their long-time mates. They eventually move on shore, to check on the condition of their favorite burrows, then the pair moves into the nest, laying a single egg, and then sharing the duties of incubating and scavenging for sand eels (their favorite food).

After completing the island circuit, it was another raft trip back to Bressay, then we drove over to the Bolt "castle", where Kathy's ancestors lived, and she re-visited the ruin while I nursed my sore feet in the car.

We were first in line for the ferry back to Lerwick, after which we returned to the B&B for a power nap before heading out to the Fort Cafe Fish & Chips for a helping of their namesake. Their dine-in area was closed, so we ended

up eating the messy meal on a bench at the harbor, fighting with a Herring gull for every bite. Not as good as we remembered it, but maybe it was the cold weather? Headed over to The Lounge Bar for the upstairs bar for a repeat of the great session we enjoyed two years earlier. Multiple accordions, fiddles, guitars, and the piano, a bodhrán and the best seats in the house. Stayed until the bitter end (11:45pm) before wandering back to the B&B. This was the best day so far.

Day 6 – More Shetland

Another continental breakfast and then a fast shopping trip where Kathy bought a few books, a pair of binoculars (which were left at home), and another sack lunch for the day's hikes. We headed to Culswick Broch, although the location of the car park was a little ambiguous. We parked at the end of the road and took the only obvious trail, which led us to a dead end on the beach. Retracing our steps and re-reading the WalkHighlands info, we found a small turnout (next to the phone booth) which led us to the trail to the Broch. We hunkered down in the ruins to get out of some of cold wind to eat lunch, then because Kathy was wearing the wrong shoes, we retraced our route rather than doing the full loop over wetter ground.



We then proceeded with a few navigation snafus to Da Gardains, a small

collection of gardens and forest. The original owners were past, but the family was attempting to maintain the progress made earlier. It was slightly overgrown, but there was an interesting assortment of grasses, surprising plants for the climate, and forest paths.



We then headed back to Lerwick for another quick nap before heading to Saffron for excellent Indian cuisine, then across the street to the Marlex to find a deserted bar. We had one drink, saw another couple arrive, also expecting music, and then we gave up and headed back to the B&B where we watched an Attenborough special in honor of his 100th.

Day 7 - Yell/Fetlar

Checked out of the B&B after breakfast, and headed for the Toft ferry to Yell. Arrived in plenty of time, despite the expansive road works. While waiting in the ferry line, the ferry workers came off the ferry and started running up the road, one mentioning to us that there had been a car accident up around the corner. Apparently, only the ferry captain had been able to see the accident from his high perch on the bridge. Being a doctor, my wife charged after them and ended up being the only trained medic on



scene, so she did the usual physical and neurological workup for a nasty rollover accident. One of the ferry workers walked back and stopping at our car, informed me that she'd be tied up until the ambulance arrived, and that I should pull out of line and see what evolved.

Luckily, I had planned a leisurely trip across Yell to the Gutcher ferry, rather than the precise connection most vehicles attempt. Not only was the ferry very late (because the crew were all distracted with the accident), but the ferry took a long time to depart. When Kathy finally returned, we followed our instructions to jump the line of boarding cars for the next ferry. Again with luck, early May is not a full house on the ferries, or it might have bumped someone else.

After getting off in Ulsta, we headed over to the Old Haa museum and tearoom where we had a pleasant coffee/tea and carrot & toffee cakes. The museum has a surprising range of geologic, historical exhibits and art. From there we planned on a several mile hike to the White Wife monument, but found that the gate was open, which allowed us to drive most of the way, to another car park near a farm. It was then a short walk down to



the monument to the four dead crew members of the German training ship Bohus, which sank just off the statue in 1924.



The shortened walk put us back on our pre-ferry incident timetable, so we swung by the Shetland Gallery to admire the wonderful photography and art. The owner was very friendly, and it was hard to resist making some sort of purchase, though being at the beginning of a long trip made it impossible. We also had time to make a quick drive to Brekon Sands beach for a very short walk before

returning to get in the Gutcher ferry line to Fetlar after the intermediate stop in Belmont.

I spent most of the ferry ride on the phone with IcelandAir, since receiving a text saying my meal requests and upgrade bids had been canceled, since my reservation was canceled(?). The confirmation still showed Kathy's ticket, but not mine. As a result of the reneged ClassUp I mentioned at the beginning, I was moved to a different confirmation number, so momentary panic was aborted though my meal request eventually failed.

Arriving at Gord House, we found a note on the door with a room number, which we found easily enough (there are only three rooms). We took a pre-dinner walk to the Leagarth House, made famous in a book by Jane Coutts. The house was dilapidated, cold, and dark. Returning to Gord for dinner, we met our hostess Lucy, and were served a nice lamb entree. I had somehow miss-communicated Kathy's vegetarian diet, and Lucy pulled a pasta meal out of thin air in short order. Lucy also runs the Fetlar Shop next door and was able to unlock the store to get us a nice bottle of wine to go with dinner. Off for a quiet evening and early sleep.

Day 8 - Fetlar

After a nice full breakfast, we headed off to do the Funzie (pronounced “finay”) Loop Walk. The car park features a geologic rock wall, featuring a large serpentine segment reminiscent of home, and begins the 5 mile loop walk around Funzie Lough and The Snap.



We hoped to see the rare Red-necked Phalaropes but had to put up with just all the myriads of other birds.



From there, it was on to Stranburgh (pronounced Sand-i-bow) Ness, a six mile mostly coastal walk featuring sea arches, bird filled cliffs, and lots of stiles to clamber over.

Returned to the car and met Leiga the border collie and her red ball, and while playing with her, we met Peter Coutts (the uncle of the above mentioned author) and he showed us his kitchen-craft studio, filled with puffin knickknacks made by his hand.



Returning to “town”, we once again missed the Heritage Center

opening hours, so we retired to the B&B to await dinner. A third guest joined us for dinner, describing his job for the Rough Guide writing about Shetland.



After dinner we marched off to the Interpretive Center where there was a special music gig scheduled, which also gave us some time to look through the many exhibits about Fetlar life in the past. The special gig was to introduce everyone (there are 57 residents on Fetlar) to a newly restored vintage piano and a collection of other heirloom instruments found at the Center.

After two showings so everyone had a seat, the whole population of the island moved up to the Fetlar Community Center, a ¼ walk up the hill from the museum. A Fetlar native now residing in Lerwick, Maurice (Morris) played the fiddle and a good

friend Steve played a variety of instruments. Other locals joined in and between the great music and the bar (tended by the island's minister and his wife), a good time was had by all. We were joined by an 84 year old local who kept us up to speed on who/what/where things were happening. We were the only Americans and possibly the only off-islanders.

After last call, we walked the ½ mile back to the B&B in driving sleet. Although we had raincoats with hoods, it still stung our faces and soaked one side of our water *repellent* pants. I think this was only really miserable weather induced experience on the entire trip.

Day 9 – Sumburgh

After another full breakfast, we went next door to the shop to settle our bill, then headed back to the ferry with a couple of stops along the way.



First up was the Kirk where all the figures in the Coutts book were buried, then on to Brough House, which we had heard about over the last several days as a guide point for directions. Built over Viking ruins, it was a once grand mansion gone to ruin. It appeared to be undergoing some sort of reconstruction.



Then it was time to get back on the ferry to leave Fetlar. Being a little early, we did the beginning of the Uri Ness walk, which originated at the ferry terminal. Only got a few hundred yards before we decided the warm car and or waiting room beat wind and spots of rain along with wet ground.

Uneventful ferry trip, again via Unst. The ferry schedules had eliminated all direct ferries due to a ferry breakdown a few months earlier. Getting off in Toft, there was no sign of the car accident (so there's no proof Kathy didn't imagine the whole thing). We stopped at the Grub Hub for a bone warming Cullen Skink, before continuing down the mainland to Quendale Grain Mill. This preserved mill was a cornerstone of the community in the early 1900s and is well preserved, and appears functional, although the water wheel was dry.

The next stop was the Sumburgh Hotel, far posher than our usual stay, but we had a very early morning flight out until they changed the departure time late in the planning. After checking into a very nice room, we headed over to Sumburgh Lighthouse to continue the never ending quest for puffins. We did see a few, but not like we hoped. While leaving, we met one of the rangers, who said we'd probably have better luck early in the morning. As soon as she gave us that suggestion, a puffin landed about 15 feet away.



Returning to the hotel, we had a cocktail and enjoyed a nice meal before exploring the hotel a bit, before calling it a night.

Day 10 – Orkney & Westray



After a deluxe full breakfast at the hotel, we scurried back to Sumburgh Point to try again for puffins, but there was driving snow and rain, making it a little difficult. We did see a few pairs hunkered down near their nests, but quickly gave up, returning to the hotel to checkout and move over to Sumburgh airport for a light lunch and what was a very quick and easy flight to Kirkwall. Waited about 10 minutes for the bus, and found ourselves on foot with

luggage at the Transit Center. We trundled our

luggage over to Bishop and Earl's Palace, where the desk was kind enough to stash our bags. We spent more than an hour walking through both exhibits. Retrieving our bags, we headed off to the yarn shop, eventually making it to the Orkney Museum to learn a lot about the stout infestation. Eventually made our way over to the ferry dock for the trip to Rapness on Westray. Made the 90 minute boat ride, disembarked, and got directly onto the bus to Pierowall.



We checked into our small but comfy room and headed down for dinner. Very nice menu for a small hotel, although they are the main restaurant on the island. Took a walk down to the harbor after dinner, returning as the rain started in addition to strong winds. We marveled at all the kids playing soccer in such conditions. Oh, to be young! Back to the hotel for an after dinner drink, then off to bed.

Day 11 – Papa Westray

After a great full breakfast, we walked over to the Pierowall Pier and boarded the passenger ferry to Papay. where we were met by the Papay Ranger, Jonathan for the arranged Peedie Tour. We birded from the pier for about 30 minutes before it was time to head to the airport to pick up the rest of the tour group. The other folks were from S. London and Australia, so we got along great, especially regarding US politics.

First stop was the Holland Farm, which was the home of the first laird of Westray. We were joined by Bess, a friendly border collie that wanted nothing more than for you to throw her stick. With the lack of trees on Papay, we felt terrible for poor Bess, as she had exactly one stick to her name. We



should send a box full! We walked through the farm to the Knap of Howar, dating from 3,500BC , the oldest prehistoric structure in Scotland (the farm was from 1100AD). The site included middens with their telltale kitchen scraps, millstones, and many intact walls, though little evidence of roofing. Way back then, Westray and Papay were connected, and there were trees, so the exact construction is under debate.



Next stop was the Kelp Store to look at some exhibits about early Papay, artwork, and to have a simple but welcome lunch, arranged by Jonathan.

One of the library collections was the complete history of every house on the island – they each have names that have remained unchanged since original construction.

We then did some birding on the shore nearby,

before getting in the van to drive up the East Road to the end of the road. We walked by the last house then through a field containing three “lucky wethers” (i.e. they weren’t slaughtered) including Sebastian, the friendliest sheep on earth. He walked among all of us to get his share of head scratches and butt rubs.



We continued beyond the end of the track to view birds galore along the cliffs, although the numbers are concerning, according to Jonathan. The great skuas have been heavily damaged by bird flu, and the guillemots food is in decline.



A bit farther on is a monument to the Great Auk, topped by a piece of Jonathan’s sculpture. The great auk was the interest that brought him to Papay. We then cut over the hill towards the van, searching for primula scotia, a variety of primrose. Once we saw the first one, everyone was spotting them.

After a brief stop at St. Boniface’s Kirk to look at tombstones and the recently restored church, we returned to the ferry pier to board our ferry back to Westray. When Kathy admired Jonathan’s Great Auk lapel pin, he gifted her one out of his pack. She had it on the outside of her pack

until the very last day of the trip, when it was brushed off by the baggage handling.

We got back to Westray, and walking back to the hotel, we watched a bunch of crazy old ladies from a cruise ship anchored just outside the harbor swimming in the frigid water. Brrrrr!

Got back to the hotel for our dinner reservation, and headed back to the room.

Day 12- Westray

We slept well, figured out the slightly wonky shower, ate a full breakfast, and checked out of the hotel, to find Andy and Karen (A&K) of Westraak Tours waiting at the curb. The remainder of the group were already aboard, including the English couple from the day before, two Aussies, and another American. Our first stop was A&K's home, to sit and have coffee and talk about the tour itinerary.



Piling into the van, we headed to Aikerness Craigs to learn of the several shipwrecks and watch the whirling birds. We then headed past a still occupied Viking longhouse on our way to Quoygrew, a 10th century fishing village.

We dropped Karen off at home to begin preparing lunch, while we continued to Notland Castle. This castle was started by a local megalomaniac, and never finished, so it was a little



silly. A grand staircase, huge ballroom, mostly never roofed.



We returned to A&K's home for a delicious light lunch before heading out to Nouphead Lighthouse. The farm along the way was for sale for just 1.3M pounds, sheep not included. Afterwards, we swung by the Heritage Center to see the 5000 year old Westray Wife, one of the oldest decorative pieces ever found along with the Westray Stone, a carving reminiscent of the base rocks around New Grange in Ireland.



A&K then dropped us off at the airport for our 15 minute flight to Kirkwall and we bid farewell to the others going by ferry or staying on the island.



After arriving at Kirkwall, we once again waited for the same bus as last time, this time getting off at the Tesco stop, to walk up Junction Rd. to Eskiven, our AirB&B. We immediately started a load of laundry, walked back to Tesco for some supplies, the nearby Happy Haddock chip shop for a mediocre late dinner back at Eskiven.

Day 13 – Orkney Mainland

Eskiven provided a clothes washer, but nothing but a hanging rack for drying, so we turned up the thermostat and hung wet clothes everywhere. Claiming to have “laundry” when all you have is a washer is a big flaw in booking.com’s filters. After having a simple breakfast at Eskiven, we walked into town to rent a car at Orkney Car Hire, then immediately headed to Houton for a ferry to Lyness on Hoy. After the easy ferry trip, we drove to the Rackness Car Park, where after a slight navigation misfire, we found the correct trail and headed over the hills to the Old Man of Hoy.

We are pretty fair hikers, but we were passed by several couples of a similar age, like we were standing still. I think the UK produces lots of vigorous hill-walkers. The trail is well developed, and there are lots of amazing flowers, at least in mid-May. We eventually arrived at the cliff overlooking the Old Man of Hoy. One of the speed walkers was sitting on a rock having lunch and mentioned it was unbelievable that the stack had been scaled by an eight year old climber. We also sat down on a rock and had our lunch, consisting of cheese, bread, and an orange.



Our slow pace (Kathy’s aches and pains seemed to be worse than mine today) put us a little behind against my itinerary spreadsheet. Luckily we had a strong tail wind and the rain stopped entirely.



We got back in the car and re-traced our drive to the Dwarfie Stane, a typical Neolithic tomb(?) except it is carved out of a single large stone. Remarkable work for a 5,000 year old engineering feat.

Then we made a very quick stop at Betty's Grave, a sad story about getting buried off by yourself just because you made the mistake of bearing a child out of wedlock. At least she had a nice view and was surrounded by bell berries instead of graveyard lichens.

We then drove back to Lyness and the Scapa Flow Museum, which had just undergone a major renovation. The museum clearly explains how important Orkney's inland sea was to the British Navy in both world wars and includes massive machinery from the shore installation, mostly restored to functional order. Excellent displays with equally clear signage. Very enlightening!

Our usual "ferry paranoia" kicked in, so we moved the car the short distance to the line to return to Houton a little earlier than needed. The return ferry was a little rougher than earlier, but still easy.



Driving back to Kirkwall, we changed shoes, had a short rest, then walked off to Skipper's for a nice informal dinner, and refilling our drinks, we headed upstairs for the hoped for weekly meeting of the Orkney Strathspey & Reel Society. We wandered around the second floor area of the Kirkwall Hotel finding nothing but empty rooms. The only person we found explained that the

event was probably not happening as everyone was preparing for the following week's Orkney Folk Festival. Disappointed, we turned to leave, just as a crowd of instrument carrying folks walked into the room, and after moving chairs around a bit, we found ourselves as the sole audience for what is actually a "practice session", including seven fiddles, two guitars, an accordion, and a piano player who introduced each song with a brief story. Eventually a few more people showed up in the audience, so we were no longer alone.



One of those expanded audience brought her two whippets, and we played with them a bit, explaining we had border collies at home. The owner said she had plans to add a border collie to her pack, and when Kathy said "I hope you have a good psychiatrist", she responded "I am one", so she apparently knew what she was getting into.

We walked back to Eskiven, which was like a steam-room – warm and wet. We rotated our now only damp clothes, turned the temp down to something sleep-able, and called it a night.



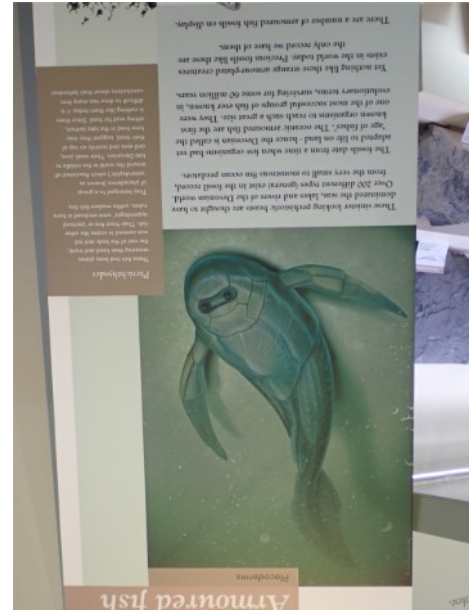
Day 14 – Orkney



Slept in a bit, rotated our less-damp clothes, had another simple breakfast, then into the car to visit the Mull Head Center before hiking to the Gloup. The hike included lots of sea cliffs, birds, signs of stoat traps, all in very strong winds. Luckily it was blowing on-shore so being knocked over the cliff was not a threat. Access to the nearly free standing Brough of Deerness was via a fairly steep trail down to the beach and another back up to the church ruins. Given the wind and our aches and pains, we opted out of the trip over, and proceeded north. Taking shelter in an old sheep shelter, we had some cookies and water for lunch. The wind continued to blow, but we eventually turned away from

the coast and enjoyed a nice tailwind. Arriving back at the Visitor Center, we added seven new birds to their sightings list.

The next stop was the Orkney Fossil & Heritage Museum, where we had a nice lunch in the attached cafe, then examined the impressive collection of fossils and signage in addition to a full education about Scapa Flow and the Churchill Barriers. This was a



really nice museum, but then they all seem to be. Kathy had to buy some N. Ronaldsay yarn (where the sheep live on a seaweed diet) in the gift shop.



We then drove across the mainland to Stromness, and eventually found the Stromness Museum and a parking spot. We had a close call with driving the car over a deep curb – dang these bifocals! The museum features everything from A to Z, including botanical and zoological specimens, more info about Scapa Flow and the wars, and many ship models from the maritime history of Stromness.

We drove back to Kirkwall, re-fueled the rental, and turned it back in. We walked back to Eskiven, dealt with the last of the clothes drying, took a short nap, and headed out to a nearby Indian Garden Restaurant. Again, we got the last table available without reservations, enjoying a delicious meal. Then it was over to the Auld Motor Hoose in case they might have music, but settled for a drink and some border collie head scratching. Then home for packing for a morning departure to the airport.

Day 15 – Orkney to Barra

After carefully curating Google Maps and the Stagecoach website, I “knew” the bus to the airport would stop at 6:50am to get us to the airport at least 10 minutes before check-in closes. As it approached 7am, I realized the route data must have changed, and I called both taxi companies, getting answering machines. Stressing out, one of them returned my call, and appeared at the curb in less than five minutes. We raced to the airport, rushed to the airline counter, where the agent was just closing up. He checked his computer and informed us we made it by less than 30 seconds before the computer would have blocked us, with no kindly agent intervention possible. With a huge sigh of relief, we went through security and eventually boarded our near empty flight to Glasgow. Why LoganAir has a 40 minute cutoff is beyond me, at least for the smaller airports. It was 30 minutes in 2024 which seemed perfectly adequate.



After a one hour layover in Glasgow, we took another flight to Benbecula. I had originally wanted to fly to Barra, but the reservations didn't become available until about two weeks before our departure, the smaller plane is much more weather dependent, and the tides (since the plane lands on the beach) create a really erratic schedule. On top of that, the rental car companies charge a bunch for pickup or drop-off at Barra. Besides, we have enough small plane experience with friends at home.

Walking out of the airport, our rental car was waiting in the parking lot (with the keys above the visor).

Because no one in the western isles will rent to a 76 year old, Kathy had her first wrong-side experience. It was a very nice hybrid automatic Suzuki compact SUV from ASK Car Hire. It was vastly cheaper than the larger vendors.



We headed south, with our first stop at Flora MacDonald's Home, although it was just a monument, and it might not even be accurate if she lived nearby.

Then it was down to Lochboisdale for a planned lunch at what turned out to be a permanently shuttered Croft and Cuan Restaurant. Luckily, there was South Uist Bakery a few doors down, where we had a nice lunch. Next door was the Pitstop Gothic Gift Shop which had a crazy selection

of dark Gothic jewelry, puzzles, costumes, some remarkable Lego items, like a lantern fish and axolotl. Also lots of death related stuff, and Kathy bought an “It's OK to Decay” lapel button.

Outer Hebrides Unearthed

This is a cool phone app that when triggered by scanning a QR code on a small post, as you hold up your phone, it provides a virtual reality image of the fully intact structure, complete with burning firepit, sleeping dog, and various remains and artifacts located where they were found by archaeologists. The app mixes your camera view with the VR view, so you can see a companion walking around in the space.

Having been told the Eriskay ferry was slightly delayed, we took the extra time to visit Cladh Hallan Roundhouse, one of the Outer Hebrides Unearthed (phone app) sites.



We played with the app around the site for as long as we could risk, given our inherent ferry anxiety, and headed off to the ferry to Barra, arriving in time to get moved onto the slightly late earlier ferry, putting us on Barra an hour earlier than expected. We drove to the Hillside B&B, where Doreen greeted us with everything we could possibly want to know. Our room overlooked a granite hillside behind the house that would improve dramatically a little later. We napped briefly, then headed over to the Castlebay Hotel for dinner. Despite a reservation, they stuck us at a small table behind a houseplant

next to the women's loo. I guess the nicer tables went to hotel guests? Nice meal nonetheless, although they were a little "gourmet" for our taste (expensive and tiny portions).

We adjourned to the bar to total havoc as both the local and regional football teams had won today. Lots of very drunk men and women in Celtics team shirts and continuous toasting. One of the not quite so drunk women welcomed us to the bar and explained why things were so berserk. Starting about 8pm, the "Last Minute Ceilidh Band" mounted the small stage and played for several hours with a mix of traditional Scottish tunes and some more modern covers. One of the band members had been playing for several hours at the hotel down the road, so he was having a hard time not passing out from too many beers. Kathy did her usual job of meeting people in the bar, and one woman was invited to visit Oregon since she was a biologist – she was one of few people that knew that Oregon wasn't near Florida. Another drunken fellow said he was on Lady of Avenal, a three masted schooner anchored in the bay, that was in the middle of a "session cruise" apparently designed for musicians and enthusiasts. Everyone in the bar was friendly, polite, and seemed to care about each other very much. Of course they were largely locals that had to go to work the next day with their fellow drunks. Headed home at 11:15pm while the band was still playing.

Day 16 – Barra and Vatersay

While having a continental breakfast and chatting with the other three guests, we found out they were separately bicycling the West Hebridean Way with a support van to shuttle their bikes back and forth from the B&B. We eventually headed over to Vatersay. The dashboard GPS wasn't too clear on where we were going, but we eventually found a place to park to hike to Bagh A'Deas, and when we returned to the car, we heard corncrakes in all the brush. Never managed to see them, but spectacular audio display.



After giving up on actually seeing a corncrake, we headed off to see the Catalina Memorial for the crashed plane during World War 2 that killed the entire crew. The plane parts were still scattered on the hillside. We Americans really escaped the brunt of the war.



From there, it was on to Traigh a Bhaigh, another gorgeous beach. It was just nearby to the Vatersay Community Hall, which was unfortunately closed Sundays. We ran into many folks that were embarking on either the hike or bike-ride on the West Hebridean Way, which starts there.

We then headed for Dun A' Chaolais, a hilltop ruin that's a short scramble up from the road with some great views of all the surrounding islands.

Returning to the car, we returned to Barra, looking to go to the co-op for lunch things, but instead

stumbled on the Fish Box food truck with an open flag. Very limited menu, but we ordered pan-fried scallops and were treated to a very good lunch. After lunch, with the co-op now open, we went to get some cough drops for me and chocolate for Kathy, eventually returning to Hillside for a brief nap. Still early, we circumnavigated Barra (anti-clockwise).



We had no luck finding access to any of the archaeological sites on the drive but we did at least stop to look at the beach airstrip. Although the windsock was up, the plane had landed an hour earlier, so there was nothing to see. We drove a

little further up the road until we ran into a lorry versus camper van impasse. Since we really didn't need to go that way, we made a quick U-turn while the backed up traffic figured out how to get the right vehicle to the right passing place.



As we returned to Castle Bay, we stopped for the short Herring Walk along the shoreline. While walking, the Lady of Avenal was pulling up anchor and sailing out of the bay with music drifting across

the water. We returned to the B&B for a short nap before thinking about killing some time before dinner. We opted to walk up to the Church behind the Castlebay Hotel, used as a set in the 1949 Whisky Galore, one of our all-time favorite films.



Given the perfect sunny weather, we walked around the harbor a bit, before getting to the Cafe Kismul for our dinner reservation. Huge portions, like most Indian restaurants, but leftovers don't really work while traveling, so we braved on and cleaned our plates.

We then headed up to the Castlebay Hotel again, expecting the advertised music, but the bar was completely empty except for the two of us. We had one drink, then headed over to the Craighard Hotel bar where there were two very drunken men playing their accordions. Three more men joined them, and they passed the instruments around, each being better than the last. The bartender assured us that he was the only regular that didn't play an excellent accordion.

There were several women in the room as

well, and although they didn't take a turn on the accordion, they did talk each other into joining in with an expert highland fling. As a curious distraction, while all this music was happening, the "Complete Freddy Mercury Story" was playing on the large screen TV (muted), adding video to the traditional music. Interesting juxtaposition.



One of the players was one of the two brothers composing the Vatersay Boys music duo, and the other brother had just had a very serious industrial accident and had been helicoptered to the mainland with a grim prognosis. I can't blame anyone for having an extra drink or three. We ran out of gas about 11pm and stumbled up the hill to Hillside.

Day 17 – Barra to Mingulay to Benbecula



Finally a bright sunny day with no rain in the forecast and mild winds, perfect for our plans. Kathy opened the window to try to unsteam the bath, and was elated to hear more Corncrakes – if only we had known a few days earlier! Had another continental breakfast, then settled the bill, drove over to the co-op for some sandwiches, and parked at the marina, waiting for further instructions on our trip to Mingulay. The group grew to the limit of ten passengers, and the eleventh hopeful was told by Skipper Angus that he just can't break the rules. He hadn't expected to get aboard, since he knew they were booked, and he cheerfully saw us off on the boat. First Mate (also) Angus dealt with boarding, safety briefing, etc.

while Skipper Angus pointed out the various beaches and islands as we motored along. He also stated

that despite the seemingly good weather, our landing might be wet and he was canceling the remainder of the week's trips.

Landing required multiple trips in a rubber dinghy, where it was nudged onto a rock, and the passengers steps from the slippery rubber pontoon onto the moss covered bolder. Most performed the act on all fours. We were on our own to see the island, although there was a retired Ranger that greeted us, who pointed out trails, structures, and not-to-miss stuff.



With all of us finally ashore, we started walking up the rocks to the trail when some keen

observer pointed overhead at what was essentially a murmur of puffins. Such a thing is actually called a "circus" of puffins, but most people know what a murmur looks like. The puffins were dive-bombing us, landing near us, and numbering into more than a

thousand birds. They were just starting to land and claim nests, having already re-established relationships while on the sea. They were beginning to spend more time on land, but every time the oyster catchers made an alarm, they all took flight. Didn't seem to care about us. Best puffin experience ever.

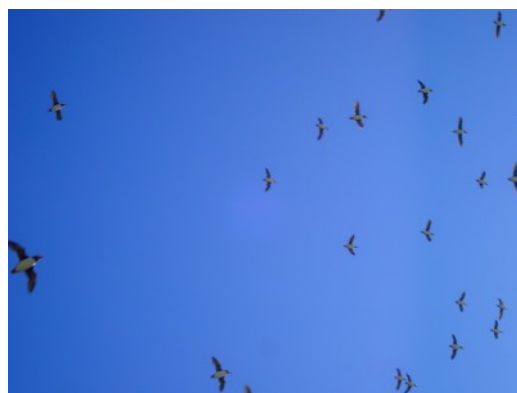
We did poke around into most of the homesteads and the church abandoned in 1912. The school building was the only intact structure, which served as lodging for the summer rangers. Some of the passengers walked up to the cliffs on the other side of the island, but we opted to just sit down among the puffins, have lunch and enjoy the fine weather. After about four hours on Mingulay, the dinghy returned and we started back to the boat.

We took the long way back, around the west side of the island, witnessing big swells bashing against the steep cliffs, and most impressing, there were climbers scaling the undercut cliffs.

There were also many more seabirds on the west side on the big cliffs.

Dancing with the idea of being seasick, we eventually got back to the marina where we all effused at Angus(s) for providing such a rewarding experience.

We jumped into the car saying goodbye to Castlebay and heading for the ferry back to Eriskay, making it with nearly 20 minutes to



spare. The ticket collector knew Oregon well from a long vacation in the States. The ferry left on time, depositing us on Eriskay for the 45 minute drive to Dark Island Hotel on Benbecula.

The Hotel was trying to be upscale, but I don't think they had the staff or the clientele to fulfill their dreams. The desk clerk seemed puzzled that we were staying three nights, as if it was unusual. After checking into the comfortable room, we headed to the dining room for a late dinner. Although they had said when I booked that guests do not need reservations, they seemed put off with the idea. We were stuck into an obscure corner and the service was sparse. Getting a second beer required walking up to the bar. But we're not that picky, so it was fine, and the food was excellent.

Day 18 – North Uist

After a good full breakfast, we set off to the north to Balranald RSPB. We actually missed a turnoff and ended up reversing two stops, visiting Scolpaig Tower first on a small island in the middle of a loch. It was high tide, and getting to the island would have been a wet endeavor.



Eventually found the turnoff and found the Visitor Center. Good info provided at the center, and we eventually found the loop trail to the western end of the island, seeing lots of the regular seabird actors, but none of the corncrakes the park was famous for. Luckily, that box was already checked. The weather was cold and wet again, but it never succeeded in interfering with our trip.

We then stopped at the Wee Cottage roadside food truck, but being one of the few food places on N. Uist, it took a long time to order then even longer for the food to be ready. Good food that was well worth the wait.

Next up was Dun an Sticir, another Unearthed location, although it was very ornery in interacting with the app and the experience was to our earlier adventure. I got it to work once, but it crashed and refused to trigger again. Probably beta testing software? It was also impossible to access at the current tide levels without a swim. One of the drawbacks of the Unearthed program is that if your app doesn't work there's rarely anything to see at all.



Then onto Dun Torcuill, a third Unearthed site on our agenda, this one worked a little better than the previous stop, but I haven't been able to come up with any good photos of the experience.



Moving on around the N. Uist, we arrived at the Barpa Langais car park, where we hiked up to the burial mound, which unfortunately suffered a cave-in, so access was restricted. We continued around the loop trail, passing a small family of red deer before eventually reaching 5000 year old Pobull Fhinn, a very large stone circle, partially obscured by the tall undergrowth.

The trail then continues past the Langass Lodge and down their access road back to the car park. We headed back to the Hotel, passing the beautiful Benbecula Distillery which, of course, we failed to get a picture of.

It's designed around a glass tower with the still within, looking sort of like a lighthouse. We didn't stop since they were still aging their first products and had nothing to sell or sample, although you could purchase a cask "future".

We went back to the restaurant within the hotel for our second dinner, and again, faced a bit of discrimination for not having a reservation. After another good meal with further confused service, on the way out, Kathy said something to the Maitre D' along the lines of "don't worry, everything will be great with a few days of training under their belts" to which he replied "everything will be great when I fire them all".

Went back to the room with whiskys, and called it a night.

Day 19 – South Uist

Breakfast format changed with a nice full buffet. After loafing around a bit, we headed south to the Kildonan Museum, delayed by about 30 minutes due to an accident on the main road. Everyone on the island knew about it at all the places we spent time the rest of the day. I don't think there were any serious injuries.

The Museum is a lot larger than it appears from the outside, with lots of exhibits describing ancient history, the details of Bonny Prince Charlie's adventures with Flora MacDonald, details about the old "blackhouses" and the truth about what health hazards they represented.

There were also lots of restored "rooms" as they might have been found in the early days. There were ferry schedules from 1850 that many of the same ferry routes with very similar timetables. We had lunch in the attached cafe which was perfectly fine.



We had a fixed target of Cnoc Sollier for a weekly trad session. The room was filled, everyone but us was speaking Gaelic (except in English for our benefit), and tea and biscuits were served to what appeared to be "regulars". Although the principal organizer was missing off island, a stand-in Mistress



of Ceremonies introduced several tunes played by harmonium, piano, and whistle. Several people from the audience volunteered songs, some of their own composition, while the audience was encouraged to sing along to an old sea chantey (which we knew well). It ended promptly in one hour, and we said goodbye to the folks at our table and headed out the next stops.

We headed west to the coast for the last two of the Unearthed sites, both located right along the Hebridean Way walking path. First, was Cill Donnan, a roundhouse that was located in the dunes adjoining a farm field. The site itself is in a low spot, where the wind let up a bit. Although the next site was almost visible, we had to go around three sides of a square in the car to avoid the farm road, livestock, and deep sand.

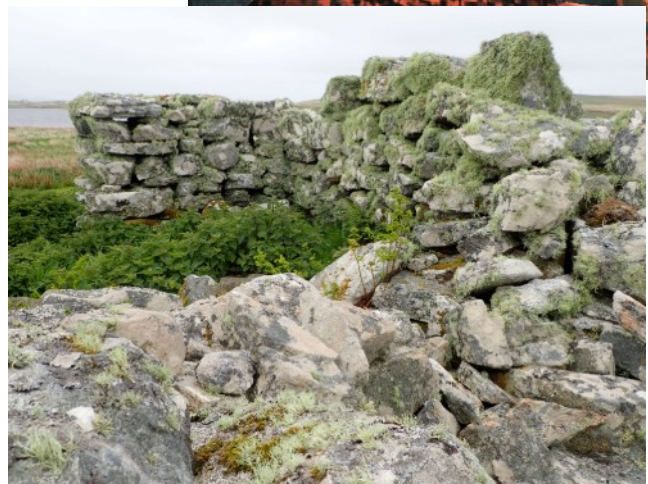
Bornais which is more like a Viking longhouse, was right in the middle of a farmer's field although the site was not plowed like all the surrounding land. The farmers that tolerate all these tourists walking around looking at their phones must get a good laugh at the bar in the evening.

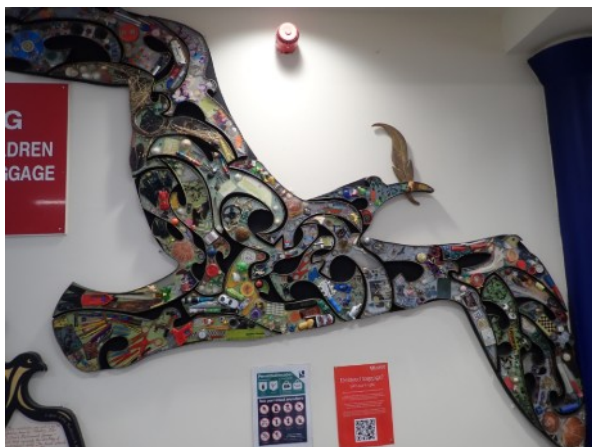
Headed back to the hotel with a stop for fuel along the way to ease the car return the next morning. Showing up again without a reservation, we were told to wait in the bar, but in just a few minutes they sat us in booth right next to a party of 16 or so, a large extended family of several generations including pre-schoolers that enjoyed playing with their hotwheels cars on our table. Very hectic meal, including more so-so service.

Day 20 – Glasgow

After a good night's sleep and another full buffet breakfast, we checked out and headed for nearby Benbecula airport. Checking in the car consisted of just leaving it unlocked in the car park. We never did see an agent at either end of the rental.

After checking our bags and passing through security, we sat and watched as the arrival board kept delaying the arrival of our plane. Looking at my phone app, I could see the plane doing large circles over the airport. Being unable to meet the 400' minimum ceiling and burning too much fuel, the plane turned back to Glasgow. The local agent eventually informed us that the other daily flight would have space for all of us IF it was able to





land. They did return our bags, but I managed to convince security to store our bags in their office so we would be free to hike around. By the time our bags were squirreled away in the corner of the office, there was a line of people hoping for the same courtesy, which they did get. While waiting for the latest news, we examined some interesting children's art projects of the story of Fichta Eun

Anyway, walking out of the airport, we found there was an old ruin of a Broch on an island in a loch just a mile away, so we set off explore. Along the way, we stopped at Charlie's Bistro for a nice salmon chowder and beer. We eventually found the right footpath past

some sheep to the island.

Kathy managed to slip on a rock while crossing to the island, soaking one leg and foot. Saw lots of birds and wildflowers out on the island along with the ruined structures. We retraced our steps back to the airport with a short detour to a gift shop along the way, then reclaimed our stored bags, went back through security, and watched with relief as the arriving flight came into view. We boarded the plane and the only casualty of the trip is Kathy lost her Great Auk pin that was on her purse.

Recovered our luggage and took a taxi to Kelvingrove Hotel, checked into our basement room. The flight changes had deleted about five hours out of our hoped for plans in Glasgow, so we missed out on the Transport Museum, Tallship Glenlee, and any walking. As a repeat trip to Glasgow, it wasn't that big a deal.



We headed out to find dinner, a quickly focused on The 78, a vegan Mexican taco shop. Very short menu (just different styles of tacos) made with very esoteric ingredients.

Headed over to the Ben Nevis Bar, squeezing into a good seat shared with mother/daughter Americans (mother visiting daughter) and had a great wide ranging conversation from politics to ribosomes. The music was underwhelming with a guitar and two fiddles and lots of

long breaks.

When our table-mates left for home, we moved on to The Park Bar which was featuring three accordions, drum, and banjo doing lots of polkas, as the Scottish trad often includes. We got really lucky to fall into the best seats in the house as some people left. We made it until 11pm before surrendering to our bones.

Day 21 – Glasgow to Home

When we checked in, the desk clerk had warned us that the hotel breakfast was mediocre and he recommended a nearby spot. I suspect his brother owned it or something. Anyway we walked



over and had a nice breakfast, although they only served fancy coffee, which we can do without, but not the caffeine! We returned to the room, packed up our stuff, and Kathy decided to abandon her worn out shoes. After hitting the sidewalk, I called a taxi, but before I could finish the call, the same company's car drove by and responded to a quick wave.



Arrived at the airport the instructed 3 hours early, but the long lines moved pretty fast, and we were into the gate area in about an hour. Had a light airport lunch, boarded our flight to Iceland, and made our way home to Medford. Long layover in Portland, but I needed it since the ticket issues experienced earlier had propagated into Alaska Airlines being unable to collect their share for the original flight, which took a gate agent, his boss, and her boss to straighten out with a convoluted series of phone calls and computer work. Good to be home!

What we'd do different

We thoroughly enjoyed the trip as it unfolded, but:

First, I shouldn't let hoped-for music have an out-sized influence on our itinerary. The expected music in Lerwick, in particular, tricked us into a three night stay when we could have spent more time on Fetlar or moved on earlier. Wednesday night at The Lounge was great while the FB posts for the Marlex were total miss-information. For this particular itinerary, we could have stayed one less night in Lerwick and maybe replaced it and the night in Sumburgh with Fair Isle or Foula, or spending some time on the other Orkney north isles.

Second, I planned too many "close calls" for the sake of efficiency. We escaped without more than heartburn, but expecting bus schedules to be reliable and all ferries and flights to operate on time, was asking for trouble. Knock wood.

Third, we've always had miserable experiences with coin-op laundries and lodging claiming "clothes washer" with no mention of dryers. It always comes to standing around or having clothes draped everywhere. It's far faster and more cost effective to pay for services. Cleaning businesses often have business hours that stab day trips in the back. We travel with just carry-ons, so carrying three weeks of clothes isn't an option.