

# Shetland trip possibilities 2025

After some thought I've come to the conclusion that the Shetlands offer the best possibilities for a group trip. A trip of a week could start and finish with overnight ferry trips between Aberdeen and Lerwick. Or with 10 days could take in both the Shetlands, and the Orkneys on the way back (e.g. for a visit to Scapa Flow museum), but that would be a longer ride back from the ferry terminal on the north Scottish coast to Newcastle.

Why Shetlands? Main reason is the views, which can be stunning in all weathers. Sea all around of course, beaches (if you like that kind of thing), but also wildlife (e.g. on Unst I saw live otters for the first time) and puffins. You can also apparently book a trip Orca-watching. <https://www.shetland.org/blog/21-great-reasons-to-visit-shetland>

Newcastle to Aberdeen is easily doable in one day, in time for the overnight ferry to the Shetlands.

250 miles in say 5 hours.

## **Mainland (main island) Shetland**

Basing ourselves in capital Lerwick, which is small and can mostly viewed in a couple of hours.

Get there by overnight ferry from Aberdeen. Cabin best, otherwise seats with sleeping bag. Visit possibilities from there to sites on the main island include:

- Sumburg Head lighthouse, at south end of mainland. Good visitor centre with great sea views around lighthouse, which also has interesting signalling history. <https://www.sumburghhead.com/>
- Coastal town of Scalloway, charming small port on the west coast, with an interesting WW II history.
- Eshaness Cliffs, on south mainland, pretty spectacular (don't actually need to walk very far from bikes). <https://www.shetland.org/visit/do/outdoors/walk/eshaness-circular>
- **Simmer Dim bike rally**. Britain's most northerly bike rally – Simmer Dim – midsummer solstice nearest weekend in June. Camping. <https://www.shetland.org/visit/events/simmer-dim-rally>
- St Ninians island, small island via beach <https://www.visitscotland.com/info/see-do/st-ninians-isle-p2571251>
- Location spotting from the Shetland TV series, <https://www.shetland.org/blog/iconic-locations-from-bbc-crime-drama-shetland>
- Shetland Islands Folk Festival, 2-5 May, in Lerwick and around.
- View Shetland Ponies, everywhere!
- Play golf at Britain's northernmost golf course (if you like golf of course, the rest of us can go to the pub).

Accommodation includes the rather good Shetland council run youth hostel Islesburgh House, <https://www.shetland.gov.uk/islesburgh>, which I'd recommend as it has good facilities, a large tarmac car park, is in Lerwick town centre and because council-run doesn't put up with any nonsense. Has lots of rooms, but would have to check on size of group. Otherwise spread across various B&Bs and hotels. Or, of course, camping!

## **Unst island**

Two short ferry rides from Lerwick on main island. Unst really feels like a remote place, early Viking settlements, old Scottish settlements such as Collaster, all deserted. Ruined castle or two, tiny rocky bays. A hotel, no restaurants (Chinese curry night delivered once a month!), one tea-room, Victoria's, actually pretty good.

We could visit Unst, for say 2 -3 days, as accommodation here might have to be self-catering. Unst is an easy day's ride from Lerwick with two small ferry trips (each ½ hour, where you stay with the bike). Once on Unst, we can:

- Visit Muckle Fludda, northernmost point in the UK. Short ½ hour ride, then walk 3 miles on wood-planked path to the lighthouse of Muckle Fludda. Take a picnic if weather good, maybe look at the puffin nests on the cliffs, then return 3 miles on similar walk back to bikes (this is Hermaness nature reserve area, so no roads closer to the lighthouse). The planked path crosses one of the largest upland peat bogs in the UK!
- Uyeasound, where the youth hostel is on the south east side of the island, claims to have BT's most northern working phone box in UK – at least that's what the sign says, and it does have dial tone! You can also see otters quite frequently here in the bay and foreshore.
- Visit the upcoming Unst Spaceport, hour's ride from wherever staying (Unst is a small island) – we could probably get an organised tour of the facilities – it's an ex-RAF listening station from the Cold War – if we ask nicely. I think it's interesting, especially if we can visit or view from a distance one of the launch pads. <https://saxavord.com/>, [info@shetlandspacecentre.com](mailto:info@shetlandspacecentre.com), 01479 782030 ([media@shetlandspacecentre.com](mailto:media@shetlandspacecentre.com)).

Unst has 3 general stores, all in centre of island – the locals tend to shop on Thursdays, when there's been a fresh truck delivery. Otherwise there are no shops as such. So unless staying in a hotel we would be self-catering, best to bring food with us from a supermarket on main island.

### **Accommodation on Unst**

Assuming a 12-strong group, we could take over a large house on the island, but would have to cook for ourselves – there are no, I mean no, restaurants. Alternative hotel would be more expensive – hotels probably minimum around £100 pn. Or the Youth Hostel at Uyeasound, which is basic (like the old YHA hostels used to be) but comfortable enough, with a large kitchen and shared dorms. With 12 or more we'd have to book in advance, and probably the earlier in the year the better.

### **Riding environment**

Roads in the Shetlands are generally good, thanks to oil money. The side roads can be narrow, but even then generally good surfaces. Weather is the issue – waterproofs need to be worn or carried always, since few days are always sunny. In addition winds can be high and gusty, worth remembering for those with panniers and topboxes. Sheep are generally no more suicidal that you'll find in deepest Northumbria!

## **Getting there**

**Getting there 1** – Newcastle to Aberdeen 253 miles, then overnight ferry to Lerwick. Cabin best, ferry has special 'pod' seats in darkened lounge, but I didn't sleep that well – think reclining seats with sleeping bag and eye mask would have been just as good, or even flat on the bench seat with sleeping bag.

**Getting there 2** – Newcastle to Thurso on north Scottish coast (about 400 miles or 8 hours), stay overnight at local B&B or hostel (some good ones), then morning ferry to Stromness, Orkneys. Explore the Orkneys for a couple of days, then overnight ferry from Kirkwall, Orkneys to Lerwick in the Shetlands. Still an overnight ferry, if slightly shorter distance than from Aberdeen. Cabin best, otherwise seats with sleeping bag.

## Timing

I suggest late April to mid May as the best time to go – out of the main tourist season, and avoiding the worst of the midges. It will be quite cool, and fleeces and waterproofs essential.

**Best time to go** - sunniest months in Shetland are April to August. Because we're so far north, from mid-May to mid-July Shetland enjoys the 'simmer dim' (summer twilight) when the sun only dips below the northern horizon for a few hours. In July and August, temperatures average between 14°C and 18°C, earlier in the year it's cooler.

### Midge briefing

Midge season in Scotland typically starts around late April or early May and lasts until October. The peak of the season is usually in late June to early August. However, the exact timing can vary depending on the weather conditions each year. Though midges are floating around pretty much all times of day during midge season, they're way more active just before dawn, and just after dusk. Also, midges are very active after any heavy rain, so it's best to stay indoors after massive downpours. It's worth noting that you don't get in midge-based trouble when you're moving. Or if it's windy. If you're hiking, walking, running, or cycling, midges will largely leave you alone. And the faster you're moving, the less trouble you'll have. But the moment you stand still, you'll get mercilessly attacked.

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## Outer Hebrides

Outer Hebrides these days are surprisingly popular, even out of season. People hike/cycle the Hebridean Way all year round. Main attractions are the island way of life, the sea views, the freshness of the rain, the whisky, etc.

The two biggest areas, Harris and Lewis, are linked by a mountain as well as a short ferry, with a further short ferry to the southernmost island Barra. Stornoway is quite a sizeable town, with hotels, restos, shops, etc.

For me the Outer Hebrides is very much worth considering as a visit alternative to the Shetlands. It is closer, and warmer. It is also more popular, partly because of a famous trekking route the West Highland Way. I visited in 2023 rather than 2024, and would have liked to stay longer.

The southernmost island is still less well known, with old fishing villages on the southern shore in what is a surprisingly warm climate. But there a few facilities here, and the back roads are seriously poor surfaces – quite dodgy sometimes for a road bike.

I'd have to do more research to come up with ideas.

### **Attractions/visit possibilities**

- Sea views, ports and harbours, Stornoway the biggest town,
- Day boat trip to St Kilda – world heritage site on a once-inhabited island.
- Barra beach airport – watch twin-engined Vikings land on Barra beach at low tide.

### **Accommodation**

Fair amount of accommodation in general, but Outer Hebrides has now been discovered by the Germans (which means everybody will be going there ...).

- Mountain bothies on Harris, for those who like things ultra simple (but winds can be strong!).
- For larger group one possibility may be to book a large house on main island and use as a base.

**Dangers** – watch out for sheep on island roads, they can be suicidal. Smaller side roads on islands, e.g. Barra, can be quite challenging for bigger heavier road bikes, Tiger 900 type bike better suited (unless you actually manage to hit a sheep, in which case Trophy or Rocket 3 probably best choice!).

## **Getting there**

**Getting there 1** – Ride to Oban from Newcastle – 253 miles or 5 hours via Carlisle. Stay Oban Backpackers Hostel – large and friendly hostel, typically rooms with 4-6 bunks each. Oban Wetherspoons best location I've seen – right on the harbourside with great view. Then easy day's ride 86 m to Mallaig – the traditional 'Road to the Isles', then take one of afternoon ferries for Skye. I prefer this route to taking the bridge – it's shorter and a beautiful route, and you arrive on south Skye and avoid much of the tourist traffic. Then ride through Skye to Uig port and take ferry for Harris in Outer Hebrides.

**NB Skye is difficult for accommodation** – we camped overnight at Portree, only possibility for accommodation on Skye as it was Midsummer's Day, then took next day ferry from Uig to Harris (this made for a relatively easy trip).

**Another plan** might to stay overnight at Mallaig on mainland, which is quite interesting little port, can watch steam train arriving from Oban for ferry, then take one of the morning ferries, then ride through Skye that day and take afternoon ferry from Uig on Skye to Harris (Outer Hebrides). This Uig ferry is just 2 hours but popular, must book ahead.

**Getting there 2 - alternative route cutting out Skye** – ride to Oban (250 miles or 5 hours), then 6 hour ferry from Oban to Barra (south island in Outer Hebrides. More relaxing – large ferry, but misses out on Road to Isles and Skye. Then 2 short ferry rides up to Harris. But Barra itself much under-explored, and I think could be interesting in itself, also warmer climate than points north. The route I took in 2023 was via Skye outgoing (but camped on Skye), then this long ferry back from Barra to Oban on the way back.

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## **Orkney Islands**

### **Attractions/visit possibilities**

Main towns – Stromness, Kirkwall – both ferry ports.

- Ring of Brodgar – ancient stone circle, pretty impressive.
- Scapa Flow museum, Hoy island. Scapa Flow was the Royal Navy Home Fleet base during two World Wars. Not much to see now unless you're a diver, but Scapa Flow museum has memorabilia.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scapa\\_Flow](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scapa_Flow) [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scapa\\_Flow\\_Museum](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scapa_Flow_Museum)

- Stromness has a tiny museum (house) dedicated to wartime aircraft and naval communications. Maintained by a couple of enthusiasts, it's surprisingly interesting.

**Accommodation** – Browns Hostel, Stromness, Orcades Hostel Kirkwall, Rackwick **Hostel**, Rackwick, Hoy.

**Best time to go** – as for Shetlands, only bit warmer.