Shetland in Style

Naturetrek Itinerary

Outline Itinerary

Day 1 Overnight ferry from Aberdeen to Lerwick

Day 2/7 Shetland archipelago; stay at Burrastow House

Day 8/9 Lerwick and overnight ferry to Aberdeen

Departs

June or July

Focus

Birds, mammals, cetaceans

Grading

B – expect to cross over stiles, uneven ground and some steep hills may have to be walked.

Dates and Prices

See www.naturetrek.co.uk (tour code GBR315)

Highlights

- Stay at the lovely Burrastow House in West Mainland
- Visit vibrant seabird colonies from both land and sea
- Mammals include Grey and Common Seals and Otter
- Passing cetaceans may include Orca
- Visit the archipelago's most dramatic seascapes
- Visit a number of outer islands too
- Led by a Shetland regular

From top: Puffins, Red-necked Phalarope, Unst (images courtesy of Shutterstock)

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Introduction

The Shetland archipelago consists of approximately 100 islands situated between the Atlantic and the North Sea, located to the north-east of Orkney and 280 km from the Faroe Islands. These remote and starkly beautiful islands are one of Britain's most exciting wildlife destinations. Only 15 of the islands are inhabited and the capital, Lerwick, is situated on the largest of these, which is known as 'Mainland'. This single-centre holiday (based at Burrastow House in West Mainland) is timed to coincide with long daylight hours, hopefully excellent weather and the height of the seabird breeding season.

We commence the holiday by taking the overnight ferry from Aberdeen to Lerwick. Upon arrival into Lerwick Harbour, we will drive out of the town and enjoy our first day on Mainland as we settle into our surroundings. Remote villages and fabulous landscapes await us as we travel farther afield from Shetland's main hub. Shetland Ponies should soon be spotted, and we won't fail to notice the many displaying wading birds, particularly Redshank and Curlew, on the open moors.

Our base for this 'In Style' holiday is in West Mainland, at the lovely Burrsatow House guesthouse, overlooking the sound of Vaila. We can expect comfortable rooms, and beautiful views from this most tranquil setting, located close to the shoreline of the voe.

During this holiday, we search for Shetland's finest wildlife: bustling seabird colonies comprising of Puffins, Razorbills, Guillemots and Kittiwakes, breeding Red-necked Phalaropes, Otters and Grey Seals in sheltered voes and Mountain Hares on the higher moorland areas. Offshore, we hope to encounter cetaceans which pass through or feed off this archipelago. In recent years, Orca have been fairly numerous in the summer months, as are Minke and Humpback Whale. White-beaked Dolphin and plentiful Harbour Porpoise also abound here, although cetacean sightings can never be guaranteed.

Shetland's regular inter-island ferry service ensures we have access to many of the outer islands. The weather and local timetable of each sailing will determine which island we end up on.

St Ninian's Isle

Itinerary

NB. Please note that the itinerary below offers our planned programme of excursions. However, adverse weather and other local considerations can necessitate some re-ordering of the programme during the course of the tour, though this will always be done to maximise best use of the time and weather conditions available.

Day 1 Overnight ferry (Aberdeen to Lerwick)

We assemble at the ferry terminal at Aberdeen docks to make our overnight journey aboard a NorthLink ferry to Shetland. This is a spacious, comfortable and well-appointed vessel and includes lounges, a cafeteria and a restaurant; most people manage to divide up their time happily between these facilities.

As we depart Aberdeen Harbour, Bottlenose Dolphins are frequently showing off at the entrance to the North Sea, while avian life may include a mixture of auks, Manx Shearwaters, Arctic Terns, Arctic Skuas and Common Eiders.

Included in the overall tour price is a private cabin (subject to availability).

Day 2 Arrive Shetland

Due to almost 24-hour sunlight, early risers will be able to take full advantage of the scenic views as we enter Shetland waters. In the distance, Sumburgh Head (home to thousands of seabirds) will become visible and, with land approaching, seabird activity will increase dramatically. Expect to see Puffins and other auks whizzing past the ship; Arctic Skuas and Bonxies (Great Skua) should also be on the wing and it's worth keeping an eye out for dorsal fins in this area, with no fewer than seven species of cetacean possible on our approach.

Approaching Lerwick Harbour

We will dock at approximately 7am, no doubt being greeted by summer-plumaged Black Guillemots and raucous Arctic and Common Terns. Time will be needed for the tour leader to collect the 9-seater minibus before we drive on a north-westerly trajectory towards our base for the next six nights – the Burrastow House.

Our lovely guesthouse is situated on the picturesque shores of Vaila sound. Once our bags have been dropped off, we can then further explore the land of West Mainland, taking in such dramatic sites of Esha Ness. The geology of this storm-shaped coastline is remarkable, and whilst we enjoy this, the local

bird life should also entertain, with breeding-plumaged Golden Plovers, 'bubbling' Curlews and passing Gannets, which fly past this landmark in their hundreds, if not thousands. Singing Skylark, Meadow Pipit and Rock Pipit will be a constant feature here and our return journey may yield a Red Grouse on the moorland.

We will return to the accommodation in good time to allow for a rest, before the first of many convivial dinners.

Days 3 – 7 Shetland

Our time on Shetland shall remain flexible, to account for local conditions when visiting the many accessible islands. Below are some of the locations we hope to visit, but please note the listing below is subject to change, based on weather conditions and inter-island ferry times, so this is only a rough guide. We may end up visiting some locations more than once.

Curlew

Fetlar

We will aim to venture to Fetlar – one of the archipelago's remotest islands. Home to no more than 50 people, this sheep-grazed island has a few untouched refuges scattered amongst the lush grasslands and this is where we can hope to come across the Red-necked Phalarope in its splendid breeding plumage. Approximately 20 pairs breed here and if we are lucky, they can show extremely well. Our time here will no doubt be memorable for the other breeding waders, with 'drumming' Snipe, as well as Curlew and Whimbrel all making an appearance. A small café along the 'main road' will be a welcome lunch stop and from here we will be able to scan the spectacular shoreline below in the hope of finding a cetacean, with Minke Whale and Risso's Dolphin both likely here, amongst others.

South Mainland

Fulmar

Located at the Mainland's southern tip, Sumburgh Head is home to one of Scotland's famous seabird colonies. Here, Puffins are just yards away from the visitors, all while Razorbills, Guillemots, Fulmars and relentless Arctic Skuas are flying past at eye level! The various vantage points from around the headland give way to some of Shetland's most beautiful landscapes and one can even see Fair Isle in the distance to the south. With vast ocean views, cetaceans should be high on the agenda, and we may chance upon a passing pod of White-beaked

Dolphin, Risso's Dolphin or Atlantic White-sided Dolphin, although the latter are still rare here. This is also a great location to encounter a pod of Orca, should there be any in the vicinity.

Elsewhere in the south, we can explore the many freshwater lochs that hold breeding Red-throated Diver, while on the open hillsides, Arctic Skuas and Great Skuas (locally known as Bonxie) are sparsely scattered and we could come across a few of the remaining Whooper Swans that summer here. There are many options for us in South Mainland, and we will split our time accordingly over the coming days to ensure we visit as many locations as we can.

Great Skua

On one of the evenings, after dinner, we will board a small vessel and steam towards the uninhabited island of Mousa (subject to weather conditions). Home to over 10,000 breeding pairs of European Storm-petrels, we will stand below the towering and intact Mousa Broch where a small percentage of these diminutive seabirds breed, and where we will be treated to one of the UK's most spectacular avian sights – for those that take part in this optional excursion, this will hope to be the highlight of our time on Shetland. The evening will end at around midnight (dependent upon how cloudy the evening is).

Jarlshof

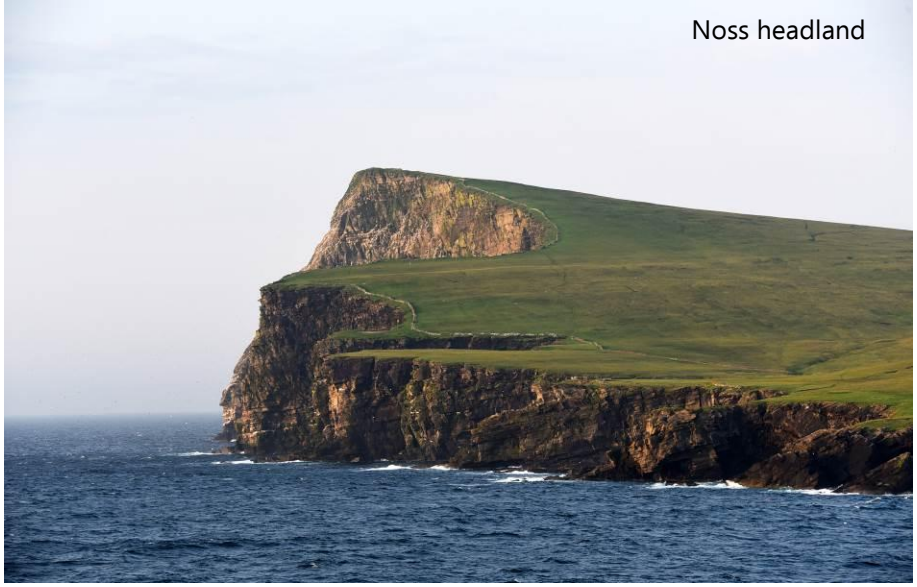
We will also make time for the many archaeological sites in the south too. Jarlshof is described as one of the most remarkable archaeological sites ever excavated on UK soil. We will also venture to the other various still standing brochs, where myriad orchids also reside and comprise two full species (Northern Marsh and Heath Spotted) and one hybrid (Northern Marsh x Heath Spotted Orchid).

Out Skerries

The ferry journey bypasses Whalsay before heading out into the open ocean and along the way we can expect some wonderful fly pasts of auks and Great Skuas. Setting foot on the islands that form the most eastern point of Scotland will be a special treat. The settlement comprises only a handful of houses;

when we land here, we'll take a gentle walk around the main island, enjoying the wonderful flora and the island's remoteness. This is sure to be a memorable day on Shetland's most eastern outpost. Please note that travel to the Out Skerries will only be possible if there are scheduled ferries at suitable times.

Isle of Noss


Noss headland

The Isle of Noss is situated off south-east Mainland and is usually accessible from Bressay, however, we will have a special opportunity to visit Noss from a vessel, affording stunning views of the huge seabird colony from below. Witnessing the mass of Gannets launching themselves off the high-rising cliffs above is another truly iconic wildlife moment can be experienced around these magnificent islands. In addition to the thousands of Gannets breeding here, there are also large numbers of Fulmar and Razorbill, along with smaller numbers of Puffin.

Unst

Otters

The UK's most northerly outpost is a spectacular setting. With fewer than 700 residents on Shetland's third largest island, one can get a true sense of remoteness when visiting here. The island has a large Otter population, and we will concentrate our efforts around the various voes to see if we can catch a glimpse of this delightful mustelid. Shetland's famous Viking Longboat will be paid a brief visit, before we continue onwards to the UK's most northern settlement of Burravoe (having already passed the UK's most northern post office, petrol station and bus stop!), before commencing a gradually ascending walk of around 45 minutes to Hermaness National Nature Reserve. From here, the views of the thousands of seabirds below will be a memorable experience, as well as the Puffins which casually go about their business just yards away. On a clear day, the lighthouse of Muckle Flugga below gives way to an empty North Sea beyond.

In addition to all of the above, our itinerary will set out to visit the many more isolated areas, ensuring that we get the most out of our visit to Shetland; please note that all the 'off Mainland' visits are subject to inter island ferry times and weather conditions.

Day 8 Overnight ferry (Lerwick to Aberdeen)

We will enjoy a final day on Mainland today, before an evening departure from Lerwick. If it's an earlier departure, we will pass fairly close to Fair Isle, so it's worth staying up to catch a good view of this remote island.

Day 9 Arrive Aberdeen

Our tour ends at approximately 7am this morning, upon our arrival in Aberdeen Harbour. We recommend pre-booking a taxi from here if you require one. There is a bus that can take you to the airport, departing the ferry terminal at approximately 7.30am and this journey takes roughly 45 minutes.

Images courtesy of Shutterstock & A Steel

Tour Grading

Grade B. Generally straightforward, but with some moderately strenuous walking in places, climbing stiles, some potentially long days too. Walking distances are fairly low (a few miles each day), but the terrain can be hard going at times.

Focus

This tour will mainly focus on birds as well as mammals, including sea mammals and cetaceans. Other wildlife and the scenery will not be ignored.

Joining the Trip at Aberdeen Ferry Terminal

Please make sure you allow plenty of time for travel to Aberdeen Ferry Terminal to ensure you meet up with the group on time (preferably a minimum of two hours prior to the departure time). If you miss the ferry, you will need to make your own way to Shetland to meet up with the group. The ferry departs at either 1700 or 1900 hours, depending on whether or not the ferry calls into Kirkwall on that crossing. This can be confirmed once the ferry timetables for the year are published.

There are plenty of accommodation options in and around Aberdeen and national rail services also terminate at Aberdeen, a mere 10 – 15 minute walk to the ferry terminal.

If flying to Aberdeen, we would advise arriving a day early in case of any cancelled/re-directed flights. Although ferry sailings rarely get cancelled due to adverse weather conditions, flights can be cancelled more frequently in windy conditions, so to avoid disappointment this is what we advise. You can also fly to Shetland from various Scottish airports, however it can be exceedingly windy on Shetland and flights

to here are more prone to being cancelled, so arriving a day or two early would be well advised. If departing Shetland by plane, you should also allow for delays with the return journey. Please contact the Naturetrek office if you would like a quote for flights.

Accommodation & Meals

Burrastow House was first constructed in 1789 and is now an excellent location for this 'in style' holiday. The shoreline is merely a short walk from the front door and may hold one or two wildlife surprises.

The service is of a high standard, the proprietor provides unpretentious meals using local ingredients and offers a well-stocked drinks cabinet. All the rooms have individually styled décor, each with private facilities. **If you wish to reserve a 'sea' view room, please enquire at the time of booking, but please note these are subject to availability.**

The first and last nights of the tour will be spent onboard the overnight ferry from/to Aberdeen. The ferry has a limited number of outside cabins with windows available, so please contact the Naturetrek office as soon as possible if you would be interested in upgrading for the ferry crossings (subject to availability on the ferry).

All meals are included in the tour price from the time of arrival in the Shetlands until departure from Lerwick. In practice, this means that meals are included from lunch on Day 2 to lunch on Day 8. Most days, lunches will be in the form of packed lunches.

Clothing

We will, of course, hope for settled, warmer weather, however Shetland can be exposed, wet and windy and your clothing should reflect this. Sturdy, waterproof footwear is essential for several of the walks involved. Warm clothing layers may well be required on the boat trip to Noss. Warm, waterproof clothing will no doubt be needed on board the ferry, too, for those who wish to look for wildlife from the deck.

Transport

The cost of all internal ferries within Shetland are included in the price of this tour, as well as the return overnight ferry between Aberdeen and Lerwick (based on either a cabin or pod for the night). Transport on Shetland is by private 9-seater minibus(es). The exact model will vary depending on what the rental company has available.

Accommodation in Aberdeen

If you arrive the night before the trip, or want to stay the night at the end of your trip, then you may like to consider the following accommodation options in Aberdeen:

Convenient for Aberdeen Station and Harbour (5 – 10 min walk away):

Jury's Inn Aberdeen
Union Square, Guild Street, Aberdeen, AB11 5RG
01224 381 200
https://www.jurysinns.com/hotels/aberdeen

Lochnagar Guesthouse
11 Affleck St, Aberdeen, AB11 6JH
01224 575 964
http://lochnagarguesthouse.com-scotland.info/

Marischal Apartments
23 Marischal St, Aberdeen, AB11 5AD
01224 581616
www.marischalapartments.co.uk

Alternatively, take a look at options on www.tripadvisor.co.uk or www.booking.com

How to Book your Place

In order to book your place on this holiday, please give us a call on 01962 733051 with a credit or debit card, book online at www.naturetrek.co.uk or, alternatively, complete and post the booking form at the back of our main Naturetrek brochure, together with a deposit of 20% of the holiday cost plus any room or ferry supplements if required. If you do not have a copy of the brochure, please do call us on 01962 733051, or request one via our website. Please stipulate any special requirements, for example extension requests, at the time of booking.

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