

Explore

North Coast 500

Days out in Highland time



Scottish Natural Heritage
Dualchas Nàdair na h-Alba

All of nature for all of Scotland
Nàdar air fad airson Alba air fad





The North Coast 500 is an iconic route around the coast of the North Highlands, taking in landscapes of breath-taking beauty, endless opportunities for getting close to nature and plenty of chance to relax at the end of the day with warm hospitality and delicious local produce.

Three dramatically different coasts await you. Refresh your senses among the spectacular mountains, experience the power of the elements on dramatic headlands and wander along deserted beaches to really connect with nature.

The rugged splendour of the west coast inspires with breath-taking mountains, ancient pinewoods, scenic coastal villages and a wealth of wildlife.

The north coast is a paradise of white sandy beaches and spectacular landscapes, giving way to the fertile farmlands and rich archaeological heritage of Caithness where you will find the most northerly point on the British mainland and stunning sea views.

The east coast entices with sea cliffs, wildlife-filled estuaries, salmon rivers, historic fishing villages and lovely woodlands. As you move south, rolling and productive farmland provides seasonal patterns and colours in the landscape.

This special area includes a UNESCO Biosphere, a UNESCO Global Geopark and in the vast peatlands of Caithness and Sutherland, a candidate for a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The north Highlands are also home to five National Scenic Areas – Scotland’s finest landscapes - and five National Nature Reserves – which are recognised as being among the best nature reserves in Scotland.

This area is too beautiful to rush! Slow down and experience the North Coast 500 in Highland time.

There are some truly lovely hidden gems awaiting you in the North Highlands. Use this booklet to help you get off the beaten track. We've suggested some great days out and places to see around the route.

Each area is different and distinctive. Why not set up a base from which to explore all the route has to offer! Spend a few nights in each area and get to know the different regions that make up the route.

The area is paradise for walkers, cyclists, wild-swimmers and kayakers, as well as offering a host of family-friendly options and relaxing days out.

The incredible sights and sounds of nature are easy to find and there so many opportunities to get close to some of the Highland's iconic wildlife.

Come in late spring or early summer – the best time for nesting seabirds and abundant wildflowers.

Acknowledgements:

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Summer brings a chance to see ospreys fishing and seal pups sunning themselves on rocks and sandbanks.

Stags in the rut and spectacular colours of woodland and hillsides are a treat for the autumn.

Crisp beautiful sunny days and impressive crashing storms make a visit in winter a real pleasure to be savoured round the fire at night.

Wester Ross

Refresh your senses among the spectacular mountains, experience the power of the elements on dramatic headlands and wander along beautiful deserted beaches to really reconnect with nature.



Wester Ross has a landscape of incredible beauty and diversity fashioned by a fascinating geological history.

Mountains of strange, spectacular shapes rise up from a coastline of diverse seascapes. Wave battered cliffs and crevices are tempered by sandy beaches or salt marsh estuaries; fjords reach inland several kilometres.

The rugged mountain splendour is tempered by sweeping open moorland, pockets of native woodland, myriad of fresh water lochans and crofting townships.

Wester Ross is a UNESCO Biosphere – an area where conservation and sustainable development go hand in hand.

The UNESCO North West Highlands Geopark takes in the north of Wester Ross. The area boasts two National Scenic Area designations and three National Nature Reserves.

The communities of Wester Ross are mostly scattered in villages and crofting townships along the seaboard, historically combining use of the land and sea and are today thriving and dynamic places with a superb quality of life.

Dine on local seafood, hike the old routes, breathe deep in the ancient pinewoods, savour the miles of empty beaches and scan the high ridges for eagles. Enjoy lush gardens, get close to wild red deer, survey incredible mountain views and enjoy an evening of traditional music.

North West Sutherland

Experience some of the most rugged and spectacular scenery in the country. White sandy beaches, iconic mountains and incredible wildlife blend with rich cultural heritage in an unforgettable place.



North West Sutherland is famed for exceptional geology and outstanding scenery and is home to the UNESCO Northwest Highlands Global Geopark.

It is a vast area of extraordinary mountains set in ancient rock, moorland and heather-clad hill. The spectacular coast road weaves its way around numerous sea lochs and mountains and takes you through a traditional crofting landscape.

The traditional heartland of the Clan MacKay is in North West Sutherland. The Mackay Country, or Dùthaich Mhic Aoidh, is today home to less than 2000 people and is one of the most sparsely populated areas in Europe.

The northern coast offers a rich variety of scenery, from tall storm-swept cliffs to gentle sandy bays. The interior offers equally dramatic contrasts between low-lying windswept bogs and dramatic mountain peaks. Rivers, famous for salmon and sea trout, empty into the sea on north and west coasts.

Explore the dark pools of the peatlands which stretch mile upon mile in front of you. Climb a mountain to survey the incredible landscapes laid out before you, scan the waters of the Minch for whales, porpoises and dolphins and enjoy the sights and sounds of a seabird colony. Here you can surf on some of the best waves in Europe, fish in limestone lochs and explore the rich plant life of coastal dunes.

Caithness

Famous for archaeological treasures and engaging Norse history, this northern county is rich in wildlife. The vast open landscape of the Flow Country gives way to rich fertile farmland and a dramatic coastline.



Huge open skies and wide rolling expanses are to be found in Caithness. The generally flat landscape is fringed at the coast by vertically-faced headlands jutting out into the wild waters of the Pentland Firth. Soaring sea stacks, raucous colonies of sea birds and wildflower-rich coastal heath are to be found around this coastline. Ruins of medieval castles cling to the clifftops while the seas below are a great place to look for whales and dolphins.

The vast peatlands of the Flow Country – a potential UNESCO World Heritage Site – are home, in early summer to nesting greenshank, golden plover, dunlin and many other species of wading bird, that raise their broods on the teeming insect life of the blanket bogs.

Migratory and over-wintering geese roost on lochs dotted among fertile farmland and are an incredible sight at dawn and dusk.

Chambered cairns, standing stones and defensive brochs are visible traces of the Pictish people who lived in the province of the Cait, while the later Norsemen left their legacy in place-names across the county. Caithness harbours were at the heart of the North Sea herring boom a little over 100 years, with Wick one of the principal fishing ports in Scotland.

Stand on the headlands with wind in your hair, clamber inside a pre-historic cairn, explore a picturesque harbour and dine on the produce of land and sea that the area is renowned for.

East Sutherland

Enjoy a gentler coastline of small harbours, bustling villages and coastal links. Inland, the patterned landscape of crofting communities are set among winding rivers and beautiful woodland.



This enduring and beautiful landscape is home to ancient brochs and medieval castles, mixed woodland and wide flowing rivers and estuaries. Most of the population of Sutherland is to be found near the east coast – a pattern created by clearances for sheep-farming in the 19th century. Now, the area is known for links golf courses, some great mountain-biking, rich wildlife and close-knit, active communities, with a good range of local events.

The coastal fringe is rich with sea-life. Seals are easy to find basking on rocks on the shore, or sunning themselves on estuary sand banks at low tide. Late in the season the intertidal flats are a staging post of migratory wildfowl and wading birds arrive for food and shelter over the winter months.

Some famous salmon rivers are found in East Sutherland, the Helmsdale and the Oykel being the most well-known. On many rivers, waterfalls lie within beautiful wooded glens and are popular for watching salmon leaping as they migrate upstream. Red squirrels can be found, if you look carefully and deer, red and roe, are widespread.

Wander through stunning native woodlands, catch a glimpse of salmon heading upstream, run the length of a sandy beach and marvel at the coastal carpet of wildflowers. Explore brochs and deserted townships, take in some contemporary art and visit an impressive castle in a beautiful setting.

Easter Ross

Famous for its coast and landscapes, its rich cultural heritage and its varied and abundant wildlife. It is particularly known for the chance to see bottlenose dolphins at close range.



From sheltered firths and craggy headlands and charming towns to forests and hilltop walks the area has something for everyone. The Fearn peninsula was an important Pictish centre and many fascinating traces remain. The historic seaboard villages have a rich social history connected to fishing and seafaring.

The Cromarty Firth hosts an important deep water port. As well as being a centre for offshore industries, the firth is a fantastic place for wildlife, particularly wildfowl and wading birds, who make use of the extensive mudflats and saltmarsh.

Despite its name, the Black Isle is a peninsula, surrounded on three sides by water, with the Rivers Conon and

Beaully marking its western edge. Long famous for its rich farmland and the annual Black Isle Show, it's now also well known as a great place to enjoy wildlife - from dolphins to deer, from osprey to otters, from seals to Scots Pine. It's also steeped in history, with castles, cairns and even a cathedral and three museums to enjoy. There are beautiful views - you can see Ben Nevis on a clear day - and a network of quiet roads and forest tracks. It's a wonderful place to explore, relax, unwind.

Watch dolphins leap as they follow fish on the incoming tide, see red kites dance above you, enjoy peaceful woodland walks and or marvel at the craftsmanship of our Pictish ancestors.

This booklet hopes to introduce you to some of the off-the-beaten tracks destinations around the North Coast 500. To help you plan your adventure, there is lots more information in the websites listed below each attraction and also on the back cover.

Outdoor access:

Know the Code before you go... Enjoy Scotland's outdoors responsibly!
Find out more at **www.outdooraccess-scotland.com**

Nature:

Scottish Natural Heritage is the government agency looking after all of Scotland's nature and landscapes, across all of Scotland, for everyone. Find out more at **www.nature.scot**

National Nature Reserves are magical places where you can experience the incredible sights and sounds of Scotland's natural world. Located throughout Scotland, National Nature Reserves are open to everyone to visit and enjoy. Find out more at **www.nnr.scot**

Wildlife watching:

Please visit the following websites for tips on responsible wildlife watching and to find accredited wildlife tour operators which offer a high quality experience: www.marinecode.org and **www.wild-scotland.org.uk** and **www.dolphinspace.org**

Travel:

Many of the roads in the area are single track with passing places.
Please drive considerately and use passing places.

Rail timetables and information on national and local bus routes can be found on **www.travelinescotland.com**

The National Cycle Network Route 1 passes through the area - from John O' Groats via Tongue to Lairg and then into Easter Ross. Find out more at **www.sustrans.org.uk**

Our Explore leaflet series suggest itineraries for some great days out across the country. Find them at **www.nature.scot/explore**





1

The Cat's Back and Knockfarrel Hill Fort

Cnoc Fearghalaigh (meaning 'hill fort')

This superb walk follows paths across the flanks of the hill overlooking Strathpeffer before climbing up to the ridge to visit the site of an Iron Age vitrified fort on the hilltop of Knockfarrel. It was constructed around 2500-3000 years ago with a timber framework to hold the stone walls together. When this framework was burnt, either by accident or enemy action, the stones forming the core of the walls melted in a process known as vitrification. The neighbouring ridge is known as the Cat's Back - you'll see why when you get there! Both can be climbed from various directions but the easiest approach is from the Blackmuir Wood car park at the western edge of Strathpeffer. For less mobile visitors, a narrow road continues past the sign for Tollie Red Kites from the main A835 road to an unsurfaced car park near the ridge. Please note that the final 200 metres is a dirt track unsuitable for low vehicles, trailers or caravans. The ridge is a great place for watching soaring red kites and buzzards and the views are spectacular.

Grid reference: NH502583

www.rossandcromartyheritage.org



2

Tollie Red Kites RSPB Visitor Centre

With stunning views across Easter Ross to Ben Wyvis, Tollie Red Kites visitor centre provides a magnificent opportunity to watch Scotland's most graceful bird of prey, especially during feeding time. Red kites were re-introduced to the north of Scotland in the early 1990s, after an absence of more than 100 years. Volunteers feed the birds every afternoon from a specially-converted farm building and a viewing screen outside provides great opportunities for taking photographs. Ospreys, which breed nearby, often fly over during the summer. The colder months are the busiest for red kites at the feeding centre. Tollie Red Kites is a partnership between RSPB Scotland and the Brahan Estate.

Donations welcome.

Visitor centre open from 9am-5pm; access to outdoor viewing screens at all times; Feeding times: daily at 2.30pm in summer and 1.30pm in winter (Feeding times change when the clocks change).

Grid reference: NH514563

Tel: 01463 715000

www.rspb.org.uk





3

Rogie Falls

Eas Rothagaidh

The impressive Rogie Falls on the Blackwater River are surrounded by mixed woodland with some lovely short walking trails. The woodland is home to pine martens and red squirrels and is a good place to enjoy the scents and sounds of the forest and, as you get closer, the river. The falls are best viewed from a suspension bridge over the river – quite wobbly, but well made! In late summer, there are superb views of salmon leaping the falls. An artificial channel has been created to give the fish some assistance. Visit after heavy rain or snow, when water gushes and tumbles from the slopes of Ben Wyvis and Rogie Falls are even more sensational. The car park lies beside the A835 road, 2 miles/3 km west of Contin. Toilets are available here during the summer months.

Grid reference: NH443586

Tel: 0300 067 6100

www.forestryandland.gov.scot



4

Ben Wyvis National Nature Reserve

Tèarmann Nàdair Nàiseanta Beinn Uais
(meaning 'high hill')

A constant brooding presence on the skyline, the mountain of Ben Wyvis – at the gateway to the Wester Ross Biosphere - dominates the local area and is affectionately called 'The Ben'. Stand on the summit and you'll feel like you're on the roof of the world, with spectacular views in all directions. The mossy cover on the summit hides many secrets, including summer nesting dotterel and the incredibly camouflaged ptarmigan which turns pure white in winter. On the lower slopes a unique mix of plants have adapted to the harsh conditions of this mighty mountain. The 6 hour walk to the summit and back **requires good footwear, warm and waterproof clothing and a reasonable level of fitness.**

The weather can change quickly at any time of year, so it is essential to be properly prepared. Access is from a car park at Garbat on the A835. You can walk part way up the track to get a view of the eastern end of the hill. On the summit ridge please keep to the centre of the main route to help preserve this precious habitat, as the sensitive mosses are easily damaged by trampling.

Grid reference: NH411672

Tel: 01445 760254

www.nnr.scot





5

Coulags to Torridon Walk

Na Cùileagan (meaning 'the little nooks')

Toirbheartan (meaning 'isthmus')

Tradition has it that this old route, connecting Glen Carron to Glen Torridon was used as a drove road, possibly by drovers taking cattle from the Gairloch area, heading south or east to market. The 8 mile / 13km path starts at Coulags Bridge (4.5km north of Strathcarron Station, on the A890) and follows a well-defined route up the east side of the river Fionn-abhainn. In a few kilometres, you will pass the Coire Fionnaraich bothy before reaching a junction of paths. The most direct way continues north up the glen past Loch Coire Fionnaraich, climbing to the Bealach na Lice (420m) and then down to Loch an Eion. From the loch an easy walk for 4.5km down a good path leads to Annat (An Annaid, meaning 'early church') at the head of Loch Torridon. This walk is in remote country and it's likely you will see no-one else on the route, so please ensure you are properly prepared with good footwear, warm and waterproof clothing, a map (Landranger 25) and enough food and drink for the day. **There is no public transport between Coulags and Torridon, so please plan either to return by the same route or arrange transport.**

Grid reference: N957450 (Coulags).

NG893544 (Annat)

www.heritagepaths.co.uk



6

Attadale Gardens

Atadal (of Norse origin, possibly

meaning 'fight dale')

These spectacular gardens were started in Victorian times and have been lovingly developed over the last 40 years. The varied grounds feature extensive water gardens which extend along the driveway up to the house, Japanese gardens and well-hidden sculptures throughout. This is a place of ever-changing interest, whatever the season. The paths take you through 20 acres of botanical bliss, over bridges, waterfalls and exotically planted ponds. Well-behaved dogs on a short lead are welcome provided they are kept under control.

Admission Charge

Open – April to end October

Grid reference: NG926389

Tel: 01520 722603

www.attadalegardens.com





7

Lochcarron

Loch Carrann

(meaning 'loch of the rough water')

This picturesque lochside village provides great opportunities for fishing, walking, climbing and sailing. As soon as you're off the beaten track on one of the many walking routes in the area, there's a good chance you'll catch sight of red squirrels, pine marten, deer, eagles or seals. The narrows at Strome (An Sròm; meaning the current, from Norse) create strong tidal currents resulting in rich marine communities - bottlenose dolphins can sometimes be seen in the loch and it's a great place for underwater photography - the flame shell reef here was recently declared a Marine Protected Area. The exposed estuary at low tide also makes it a great place for the keen bird watcher and oystercatcher, curlew, redshank and greenshank are regularly found here. The village offers a range of local services and the Lochcarron Producers' days (last Friday of every month, April - October) offers a chance to buy top quality local produce. There's a vibrant community in Lochcarron and the community-owned Kirkton Woodland and Smithy Hub provide many facilities and activities for visitors and locals alike.

Grid reference: NG910403

www.lochcarron.org.uk and

www.lochcarroncommunity.wordpress.com



8

Strome Castle walk

An Sròm (of Norse origin,

meaning 'a strong current')

An easy 4 mile / 6.5km walk or cycle along the single track road from Lochcarron takes you to the ruins of Strome Castle. Perched on a rocky outcrop at the end of Loch Carron, the castle occupied a strategically important position, guarding the north side of the Strome Narrows. It was built in the 14th century and changed hands many times over the centuries, until finally, in the 1600s, it was besieged (and blown up) by Kenneth MacKenzie, Lord of Kintail. Until the 'Stomeferry Bypass' as it's known locally, was completed in the 1970s, a ferry plied the route from North Strome to Stomeferry on the other side of the loch. There are fantastic views from here to the Isle of Skye.

Grid reference: NG862354

www.nts.org.uk





9

Applecross Heritage Centre & Clachan Church

*Applecross is of Pictish origin
(meaning 'mouth of the Crossan river')
An Clachan (meaning 'the village')*

With archaeological remains dating back over 9,000 years, Applecross has a long history of human habitation, and internationally significant connections with the early Christian church. The Irish monk Mael Rubha founded a Christian settlement in Applecross in 673 and for some 120 years there was a thriving monastery here. The surrounding district is known as a' Chomraich, 'the sanctuary' in Gaelic.

Applecross was only accessible by boat until the early 20th century, and for many years after that the only road access was over the spectacular Bealach na Ba ('Pass of the Cattle'), which crosses the peninsula and climbs to a height of 626 m, meaning it is regularly closed in wintry weather.

Applecross Heritage Centre was created from a derelict building to ensure that the historical, religious and cultural background of this highland community was retained. This centre gives a good insight and understanding into the community of this peninsula, which is currently engaged in a wide range of development projects, and how it has been shaped over the centuries. Just beyond the Heritage Centre is Clachan Church and the unmarked site of Mael Rubha's burial.

Grid reference: NG711457

www.applecrossheritage.org.uk



10

Applecross Broch & the Archaeological Trail

The Applecross Broch, thought to be Iron Age, has been the site of many archaeological digs over the years. Only the ruins are visible but it remains a fine example of Applecross history. Detailed information, and some of the 'finds' can be found in the Heritage Centre. The Broch, along with two restored Hebridean Barns, and a reconstruction of an Iron Age roundhouse, form part of the Archaeological Trail that winds its way throughout a woodland.

Applecross offers wonderful wildlife watching opportunities on a wider network of walking and cycling paths and trails. Sea birds, eagles, waders and wildfowl can be seen on the estuary while otters and heron hunt on both river and sea. There are also some great outdoor recreational activities available in the area, from hiking and biking to sea kayaking and wild swimming.

Grid reference: NG711443

www.applecrossheritage.org.uk and
www.applecross.org.uk





11

Shildaig Peninsula and Island

Sildeag (of Norse origin, meaning 'herring bay')

The village of Shildaig is in a superb location and is perhaps best viewed from across the loch on the Applecross coast road. From here the village can be seen sitting below the mighty mountains of Torridon. Shildaig was established in 1800 as a planned fishing village to encourage families into fishing and to build up a stock of trained seamen for the Royal Navy, during the Napoleonic wars. Grants from the Admiralty for house and boat building stopped in 1815 but Shildaig continued to grow because the loch was well-known for its herring.

The distinctive pine trees on Shildaig Island, were planted to provide poles for drying fishermen's nets but now provide a nesting site for a pair of white-tailed eagles (sometimes called sea eagles). From the front of Shildaig village common seals can be seen at close quarters, along with eider ducks, oystercatchers and shags. The village has a range of tourist services and marine wildlife watching tours can be taken from the pontoon. From the north of the village there is a good path that takes you around the Shildaig peninsula. Allow around an hour for the walk which has many lovely spots to admire the shoreline and look for otters and herons.

Grid reference: NG815539

www.walkhighlands.co.uk



12

Torridon Countryside Centre and Deer Museum

Toirbheartan (meaning 'isthmus')

With some of the most spectacular mountain scenery in Scotland, Torridon is a magnet for walkers, geologists and naturalists. The rugged mountains are incredibly old – the Torridonian sandstone that forms the bulk of all the mountains dates back 750 million years, while to the west, the hilly and loch-strewn landscape is even older. There's a great choice of walking and climbing routes in Torridon, with over 18 miles of paths to choose from and there's an impressive variety of flora and fauna, including important plant colonies, rare mosses and lichens, and the elusive pine marten and golden eagle.

Torridon Estate is owned and managed by the National Trust for Scotland. In the countryside centre, which serves as an introduction to the estate, you can find out more about the area, its wildlife and history. The Deer Museum is a short walk along the track from the Countryside Centre. Built up by local ranger Seamus McNally over many years, it gives an insight into the lives of wild red deer and those who manage them.

Countryside Centre Open: Easter to end Sept.

10am – 5pm. (Closed on Saturdays)

Deer Museum Open All Year

Grid reference: NG905557

(Countryside Centre)

Tel: 01445 791368 / Ranger Tel: 01445 791221

www.nts.org.uk





13

Beinn Eighe and Loch Maree Islands National Nature Reserve

Tèarmann Nàdair Nàiseanta Beinn Eighe
(meaning 'file mountain')

Magnificent landscapes of mountain, pine wood, islands and loch greet visitors to Beinn Eighe. Rising to more than 1000m and harbouring some of Scotland's most iconic wildlife, it's no wonder this was the first National Nature Reserve established in the UK and is now a core area of the Wester Ross Biosphere. The heart of the NNR is the ancient Caledonian pine woodland that cloaks the lower slopes of Beinn Eighe and the islands of Loch Maree. This woodland is home to wildlife such as pine martens, eagles, red deer, crossbills and divers. Waymarked trails leave from the visitor centre or from the Coille na Glas-Leitir car park on the shores of Loch Maree. Look out for woodland birds like crossbills, tree pipits and siskins, as well as dragonflies and damselflies. A spectacular mountain trail of around 4 miles / 6km climbs steeply from the pinewoods up onto a bare, ice-scraped plateau of quartzite rocks. You might catch sight of dippers splashing in the burns and alpine plants clinging to the higher slopes. Allow 3–4 hours for this route. You'll need sturdy footwear, a reasonable level of fitness and wind and waterproof clothing.

Visitor Centre Open April to October:

10am – 5pm. Tel. 01445 760258

Grid reference: NH019630

Office: 01463 701660

www.nnr.scot and www.wrb.scot



14

Flowerdale Glen

Am Baile Mor (meaning 'the big village')

The well-sheltered Flowerdale Glen is home to a wide variety of plant and animal life and owes its English name to the impressive display of wildflowers which can be seen in spring and summer. A gentle walk passes Flowerdale House, built by the MacKenzies of Gairloch, in 1738, who still own much of the surrounding area. In the woods keep a look out for woodland birds such as great spotted woodpecker and spotted flycatcher. Follow the path marked 'Waterfall Walk' for a longer, and delightful, waymarked walk (3 miles / 4.75km) up the glen. On the return from the waterfall, you pass a memorial to Iain Dall MacAoidh – the blind piper of Gairloch (Am Piobaire Dall), who was a famously-talented hereditary piper to the MacKenzies. He succeeded his father in the role and was succeeded by his son and grandson – these four MacKay pipers spanning two centuries as pipers to the MacKenzie lairds of Gairloch. The car park is opposite the turning for the harbour, across the bridge from the Inn. Cormorants, shags and black guillemots can often be seen around the harbour.

Grid reference: NG810751

www.walkhighlands.co.uk





15

Gairloch Museum

Geàrrloch (meaning 'short loch')

The excellent Gairloch Museum, housed in a converted Cold War era Anti-Aircraft Operations Room, showcases the history, culture and natural heritage of this beautiful area. The collection includes ancient artefacts, such as the Bronze Age Poolewe Hoard and a Pictish carved stone depicting a fish, alongside objects from more recent times. These include the original lens from the Stevenson-built Rua Reidh lighthouse as well as farming and fishing implements and domestic utensils which provide a glimpse into life in the area in the past. The museum holds a Gaelic language and literature collection which is highly regarded by scholars and the in-house art gallery hosts regularly changing exhibitions. Local crafts are available in the shop and a café has wonderful views down the loch.

There is wealth of activities on offer in Gairloch including marine wildlife tours, a golf course and pony trekking, while there are plenty of opportunities for the enthusiastic birdwatcher. Fresh local seafood is landed in the harbour in Charlestown and can be enjoyed in restaurants locally.

Open Easter-October, Mon-Sat 10am-5pm.
Grid reference: NG804766 (Museum)
Tel: 01445 712287

www.gairlochmuseum.org



16

Tollaidh to Slattadale walk

Tollaidh (meaning place of the holes and hollows)

Sléiteadal (of Norse origin Sléttr dalr, possibly 'even dale')

This fine 5 mile / 8km linear walk follows a broad hill path over a low moorland pass, and gives great views over Loch Maree's islands and their fine Scots pine, as well as the mountains of Letterewe and Torridon. This route appears on old maps as the road connecting Poolewe and Loch Maree. Start from a parking area on the A832 about 1.5 miles south of Poolewe from where the path (signposted with a small sign) climbs steadily for 1.6 miles / 2.5 km to a viewpoint that overlooks Loch Maree. The loch provides a sheltered, undisturbed location for the black-throated diver to nest. The descent to Slattadale crosses moorland, enters a forest and follows the lochside giving closer views of the islands. **Return is by the same route** and is worth doing as the views are different in each direction. Alternatively, parking is also available at Slattadale and the route can be done in the opposite direction with the option of adding a few miles to walk into the village of Poolewe.

Grid reference: Tollaidh (A832 South of Poolewe) NG858789. Slattadale NG889720.
www.walkhighlands.co.uk





17

Inverewe Garden

Inbhir Iùbh

(meaning 'mouth of the river yew')

A lush, tropical oasis perched on a peninsula at the edge of Loch Ewe amid the rugged landscape of Wester Ross, this world-famous 21 hectare (52 acre) historic garden is one of Scotland's most popular botanical attractions. Bare rock, thin soil and a few scrub willows were all that was on the site in 1862, when Osgood MacKenzie bought the estate. Over his lifetime and subsequently his daughter's, the exposed peninsula was transformed into this exceptional garden, full of colourful and exotic plants from around the world. Himalayan blue poppies, rare Wollemi pines, New Zealand daisy bushes and Tasmanian eucalypts are just some of the unusual plants you'll find at Inverewe. Enjoy the interactive museum, or join any of a programme of events in the garden. There are daily guided walks in the summer season and year-round exhibitions in the gallery, reflecting the characteristics of the garden and surrounding environment. Lose yourself in the lush setting and enjoy unrivalled views across Loch Ewe.

Admission Charge

Garden open daily from dawn to dusk, all year. (May be closed for safety reasons in bad weather). Visitor Centre, restaurant, café & Inverewe House, open daily from Mar - Oct.
Grid reference: NG863821

Tel: 01445 781229

www.nts.org.uk



18

Mellon Udrigle Bay

Meallan Udraigil

(meaning 'knoll of Udraigil')

With its white sands, shallow turquoise sea and natural shelter from westerly winds this beautiful beach is an ideal place for all the family. But what makes it really special are the views across the sea to Assynt, Coigach and the Summer Isles. The sheltered bay attracts foraging waders, gulls, grey heron and red throated diver. There's a lovely way-marked coastal walk to the top of the peninsula, Rubha Beag and the estuary at Opinan (Na h-Òbaidhnean meaning 'the place of little bays') which is alongside the route is a great place to find wading birds in winter. The 2.5 mile / 4 km route is circular, starting and finishing from the beach car park.

Grid reference: NG890959





19

Laide chapel and graveyard and Laide Wood

An Leathad (meaning 'the slope')

Just south of Laide, the Laide Wood is an 85 hectare community woodland featuring deep watercourses, two lochans and a beautiful cascading waterfall. There's an array of wildlife, especially dragonflies and five waymarked trails of varying length.

There is some mystery surrounding the origins of Laide Chapel, which sits by the shore, overlooking Gruinard Bay. Also known as the Chapel of Sand of Udrigil, legend has it that it was built by Saint Columba. Others say it was constructed by George MacKenzie of Gruinard in the 1700's. However, it is most likely the later work was a restoration of the early chapel. The chapel, now a Scheduled Ancient Monument, was abandoned in the 19th Century and services were held at a nearby cave.

Laide Wood Grid reference: NG897906

Laide Chapel Grid reference: NG901920

www.laidewood.org.uk and

www.ambaile.org.uk



20

Corrieshalloch Gorge NNR

Tearmann Nàdair Nàiseanta Coire Shalach (meaning 'ugly hollow')

The sheer-sided spectacle of Corrieshalloch Gorge carries the river Droma down a series of thundering falls, the most dramatic of which is the 45m Fall of Measach (Easan na Miasaich, meaning 'fall of the place of the platters'. This is a reference to the smooth, rounded boulders, or platters, which occur in the river bed above the falls. A good path leads from the car park to this extraordinary natural feature. The heart-stopping highlight of any visit is to cross the gorge via a suspension bridge above the falls, from where the path leads you to a cantilevered viewing platform. The bridge itself has links to industrial heritage, being designed by one of the engineers of the iconic Forth Railway Bridge. The humidity and shelter provided by the gorge sides allows a range of special plants to thrive. A full range of visitor services, including some excellent places to eat and hear live music, are available in nearby Ullapool.

Parking Charges

Open all year round.

Grid reference: NH204780

Tel: 01445 781229

www.nts.org.uk and www.nnr.scot



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21

Knockan Crag NNR

Tèarmann Nàdair Nàiseanta Creag a' Chnocain
(meaning 'crag of the small hill')

Knockan Crag – which lies within the North West Highlands UNESCO Global Geopark – is a globally important geological site. Geologists first learned that rocks can move vast distances when continents collide through studying the rocks of the North West Highlands and geologists have used Knockan Crag to help demonstrate this for more than 100 years. There is stunning sculpture and the evocative poetry of Norman MacCaig carved into the rock. Trails offer you a chance to get higher in this exceptional landscape, enjoy breathtaking scenery and place your hands either side of the Moine Thrust, where older metamorphic rocks lie over the top of younger limestone. The famous survey geologists of the nineteenth century Ben Peach and John Horne, who unravelled the mysteries of the area's geology are celebrated with statues at Knockan Crag. The unmanned visitor centre has excellent interactive, family-friendly information and displays on the landscape and geology of the area. You can pick up details of the Rock Route, which takes you on a deeper exploration of the North West Highlands Geopark. **Good footwear is recommended for the circular walk on the crag.**

Open daily, all year round
Grid reference: NC187090
Tel. 01463 701600

www.nnr.scot and www.nwhgeopark.com



22

Stac Pollaidh

An Stac (the pinnacle). Pollaidh is a river name of Norse origin, (meaning 'pools' or 'holes')

One of the most popular hills in Scotland to climb, due to its relative ease and spectacular location, the steep slopes of Stac Pollaidh rise from the roadside towards impressive pinnacles. The peak has a rocky crest of Torridonian sandstone, with many pinnacles and steep gullies. These were formed when the ridge was exposed to weathering above the ice sheet during the last Ice Age, while the ice flow carved and scoured the smooth sides of the mountain. There is a circular route which will take you around the base of the pinnacles, with an optional ascent up to the ridge from where there are breath-taking views over Assynt to the north and Achiltibuie and the Summer Isles to the south. Although steep, the hill is actually relatively simple to climb, thanks to the well-made, pitched path. Allow 2- 3 hours for the complete circuit. You will need good footwear and warm and waterproof clothing as the weather can change quickly.

Grid reference: NC107095 (car park)
www.walkhighlands.co.uk



23

Achnahaird Bay

Bàgh Achadh na h-Àirde (meaning 'bay of the field by the headland')

This narrow inlet is a wonderful place to spend a day at the beach and a great place for birdwatching, with seabirds and waders regularly seen. At low tide an extensive tidal estuary of sand flats and salt marsh is exposed, fringed by dunes, and past that, machair. These habitats support a diversity of liverworts, mosses and the rare petalwort. Lapwings nest in the wetter sections of dune grasslands, while the lime-rich machair provides excellent grazing for sheep. Ringed plover and common sandpiper also nest around the bay. Two coastal walks, one to the north of the car park and one to the east offer good views, interesting geology and wildlife spotting opportunities. The bay is one of the locations on the North West Highlands Snorkel Trail, which includes a rich and diverse array of marine habitats and species and has been put together by the Scottish Wildlife Trust.

Grid reference: NC015140

www.scottishwildlifetrust.org.uk



24

Falls of Kirkaig

Eas Chirceig (Kirkaig is of Norse origin, meaning church bay)

A rewarding walk into the heart of this amazing landscape starts at Inverkirkaig. The path starts at the car park by the river and leads 2 miles / 3.2km up a beautiful wooded glen, full of birch, rowan and hazel, then on to open moorland towards the Falls of Kirkaig. Ahead you can see Suilven, the iconic 'sugarloaf' mountain that rises spectacularly behind Lochinver. The path descending to view the falls is steep and great care is needed. The return is by the same route.

A memorial in the car park by the river, to poet Norman MacCaig, many of whose poems were inspired by the landscape of Assynt is inscribed with verses from his poem 'Climbing Suilven': "I nod and nod to my own shadow and thrust a mountain down and down. Between my feet a loch shines in the brown, its silver paper crinkled and edged with rust."

A few miles away is Lochinver (Loch an Inbhir, meaning 'the loch of the river mouth'). As well as being an excellent base for exploring the local area, the village has a busy and interesting fishing harbour, a famous pottery and some great dining options.

Grid reference: NC085193 (car park) and NC11178 (falls)

www.walkhighlands.co.uk and www.discoverassynt.co.uk





25

Achmelvich Beach

Achadh Mhealbhaich (Achadh, meaning a meadow. Mhealbhaich (mel vik) is of Norse origin meaning sandy bay).

The fine white sandy beach and turquoise water of the bay are a stark contrast to the rugged beauty of the surrounding Assynt area. Sand castle builders, swimmers, kayakers, fishing enthusiasts and snorkelers alike are a common sight in and around this beautiful bay. Achmelvich is a good place to see black-throated and red-throated divers throughout the year and sometimes great northern divers in winter. Minke whales and porpoises can sometimes be seen from the shore. From the camp site, there is a beautiful coastal walk - rich with orchids in summer - to the ruined meal mill at Altanabradhan.

Grid reference: NC058248

www.discoverassynt.co.uk



26

The Old Man of Stoer

Bodach an Stòir

The Stoer Head Lighthouse is the starting point for a spectacular two mile / 3.2 km walk along sandstone cliff tops to a 200ft / 61m high sea stack, the Old Man of Stoer. The tall cliffs with stacks, caves and arches are regularly used by a variety of breeding seabirds and grassland might hold birds such as snipe, lapwing and skylark. Look out for whales, dolphins and porpoises which are regularly seen round the headland below the lighthouse. On a clear day there are fantastic views across the Minch to the Outer Hebrides. The lighthouse itself is operated, remotely these days, by the Northern Lighthouse Board and is part of a network of nearly 200 lights keeping shipping safe round Scotland's coastline.

Grid reference: NC004327 (car park)

www.discoverassynt.co.uk





27

Loch Glencoul *Loch Gleann Cùil*

Loch Gleann Cùil Kylesku - An Caolas Cumhang, (meaning 'the narrow strait') Kylestrome - Caol Sròim, a Gaelic/Norse name, (meaning 'the strait of the - current')

The distinctive curving bridge linking Kylesku and Kylestrome is sometimes described as one of the most beautiful bridges in world. It sits in an amazing location, in the heart of the North West Highlands Geopark, and carries traffic over the strongly tidal stream. In the summer months, a boat trip from the old ferry slip in Kylesku gives you a chance to enjoy the spectacular scenery and get a great view of the highest waterfall in Britain, Eas a Chual Aluinn, (meaning 'waterfall of the beautiful tresses') at the head of Loch Glencoul. A lovely short walk around the back of Kylesku village gives good views of Loch Glencoul and the Kylesku Bridge. The Geopark Rock Stop in Unapool, one mile south of the bridge, has an exhibition on the rocks and landscapes of the North West Highlands and is a great spot for viewing the Glencoul Thrust, where older rocks have been heaved upwards by tremendous forces within the earth and have come to rest on top of younger rocks.

Grid reference: NC230338 (Kylesku slipway) and NC237327 (Rockstop)

www.nwhgeopark.com



28

Handa Island

Handa is of Norse origin (meaning 'sand isle')

For an unforgettable day trip, the island of Handa is hard to beat. The island is internationally renowned for its nesting seabird colonies and magnificent sea cliffs. Each May, June and July the cliffs come alive when a big proportion of the UK's razorbills and guillemots gather to breed alongside thousands of kittiwakes and fulmars and hundreds of puffins. Great skuas and arctic skuas also gather on the island in great numbers. Visitors to this lovely island may also be rewarded with sightings of whales and dolphins offshore, as well as grey seals and otters on the shoreline. The paths on Handa can be steep and rough in places, so sturdy footwear is essential, as are warm and waterproof clothes as the weather can change quickly. The passenger ferry goes from Tarbet pier and the ticket price includes a donation to the Scottish Wildlife Trust which manages the island as a reserve together with Scourie Estates.

Admission charge for ferry crossing
Ferry runs from April - September, Monday to Saturday - last departure to Handa at 1400 hours.

Grid reference: NC163488 (Tarbet pier)
www.scottishwildlifetrust.org.uk and
www.handa-ferry.com





29

Sandwood Bay

Bagh Seannabhad

(from Norse, 'Sand vatn' meaning 'sand water')

A good, well-constructed path will take you 4 miles / 6km over moorland to one of the North West's most remote beaches. A mile long bay, bordered by rugged cliffs and sand dunes with an impressive sea stack – Am Buachille (the shepherd) – standing sentinel at the southern end of the beach, Sandwood Bay is a place of inspiration, solitude and stories. The bay is exposed to the Atlantic swell and before the lighthouse was built at Cape Wrath was the scene of many historical shipwrecks. The cliffs are rich with birdlife, attracting fulmars, guillemots, razorbills, puffins and shags. It is believed that Viking longboats were pulled across the sand dunes and into the freshwater of Loch Sandwood, which lies behind the dunes. The beach feels incredibly secluded and the sea seems enormous, making it a fabulous walk on a stormy day. Local legends include a sighting by a local crofter, of a reclining mermaid of ravishing beauty on the rocks in the bay in 1900. John Muir Trust owns Sandwood Estate and maintains the path, which starts from and returns to Blairmore, on the road to Sheigra, where there is a car park and toilets and refreshments available in the summer.

Grid Reference: NC194600

(car park at Blairmore)

www.johnmuirtrust.org



30

Balnakeil Beach & Faraid Head

Baile na Cille,

(meaning 'place of the sanctuary')

Rubha na Faraid,

(meaning 'headland of the watch place or lookout')

Balnakeil, a little over a mile north west of the village of Durness, is a magical place. The beach is wide and white and is backed to the east by a huge expanse of tall dunes covered in marram grass. Overlooking the bay are Balnakeil House, at one time seat of the Clan MacKay, and Balnakeil Church, which is thought to be built on the site of an 8th century monastery founded by the Irish monk, Mael Rubha. A magnificent walk takes you north to Faraid Head. Seals and even minke whales can be seen all round the headland and in summer the cliffs are thronged with seabirds. Look out for rare and beautiful flowers such as the Scottish primrose and Grass of Parnassus. The headland is also home to military installations connected with the naval gunnery ranges towards Cape Wrath. As you return to Durness from Balnakeil Bay, keep a look out on your right for the collection of old military buildings that have for many years housed the Balnakeil Craft Village.

Grid reference: NC391686

(car park at Balnakeil beach)

www.durness.org and

www.walkhighlands.co.uk





31

Smoo Cave

Smoo is thought to be of Norse origin, ('smjugg' or 'smuga', meaning 'a hole' or 'hiding-place')

This spectacular limestone cave on the outskirts of Durness is at the head of a narrow coastal inlet and combines a chamber formed by the action of the sea with inner chambers created by freshwater. At more than 100ft / 30m wide, the outer cave has the largest sea cave entrance in Britain and was thought to have been large enough to shelter and repair Viking ships. Archaeological investigations have turned up Norse and Iron Age artefacts, and an ancient midden suggests the cave may have been used by Stone Age man, more than 6000 years ago. The cave is a Scheduled Ancient Monument on account of its prehistoric human occupation. A wooden pathway extends into the cave and allows viewing of the second chamber, where the Allt Smoo falls as a 65ft / 20m waterfall. The cave is located a mile east of the village of Durness and access to the cave is by stairs and walkways from the car park above.

Grid reference: NC418671

www.durness.org and
www.mackaycountry.com



32

Castle Varrich

*Caisteal Bharraich
(the origin of the name is unclear)*

Castle Varrich is a prominent ruined castle in a superb location overlooking the Kyle of Tongue and with great views of the mountains of Ben Hope and Ben Loyal. Much of the history of the ruined tower is unknown but it is thought to have been the seat of the Clan MacKay (MacAoidh) and the site may also have connections with 11th century Norse occupation of the area. The name 'Tongue' is said to come from the Norse 'Tunga' meaning land projecting into a loch. A lovely footpath from the village leads up to the castle ruin and is well worth the effort for the spectacular views alone. Some recent work has been undertaken on the castle - which is a scheduled monument - to make it safe and more accessible. Park in the village, where there are a range of services for visitors, and follow the sign for Castle Varrich.

Grid reference: NC580567

www.historicenvironment.scot and
www.mackaycountry.com





33

Torrisdale Bay and Broch, Invernaver

*Torrisdale is from Norse (Thor's dale)
Inbhir Nabhair (meaning 'mouth of the Naver')*

An outstanding beach with superb dunes, Torrisdale Bay is reached by a rewarding walk from Invernaver. This beautiful beach, just to the west of the historic village of Bettyhill, is situated on a headland between the mouths of two well-known salmon rivers – the Naver and the Borgie. It's a popular place with surfers who enjoy the challenging conditions. The headland is an important area for wildlife and, due to the exposure of the site, rare plants that would normally be found on mountain sides can be found here at sea level. The raised beach above the River Naver contains a number of archaeological sites including the remains of ancient hut circles, enclosures and cists. There is a superb 5 mile / 8km walk which takes in this spectacular beach, dunes, riverside and moorland, as well as an iron-age broch with stunning views. Fishing permits can be obtained for salmon fishing on the lower association beat of the river.

Grid reference: NC710602 (parking area at the bridge over the River Naver)

www.walkhighlands.co.uk



34

Strathnaver Museum

Srath Nabhair (meaning 'the valley of the Naver'). Naver is an ancient name and was mentioned by the Egyptian writer, Ptolemy in the 2nd century AD.

Strathnaver is the fertile valley of the River Naver, a famous salmon river that flows from Loch Naver to the north coast. It also refers to the ancient province of Strathnaver, which covers nearly 2000sq km of North West Sutherland, informally known as the Mackay Country (Dùthaich MhicAoidh). Strathnaver Museum is a volunteer-led, rural history museum which explores the social history of the area through exhibitions, workshops and events. Based in the former Parish Church of Columba in Bettyhill, the main story told by the museum is the story of the Highland Clearances and the building is itself an important piece in this story. It was from the pulpit which still dominates the main room that Rev David Mackenzie was obliged to read out eviction notices to his congregation during the main Strathnaver Clearances of 1814-19. The museum is the starting point for the Strathnaver Trail, linking and interpreting 29 archaeological sites which create a powerful picture of life in Strathnaver through several millennia.

Admission charge

Museum opening hours April – Oct,
10am – 5pm, Monday – Saturday.

Grid reference: NC714622

Tel. 01641 521418

www.strathnavermuseum.org.uk





35

Forsinard Flows National Nature Reserve

Tèarmann Nàdair Nàiseanta Fors An-Àird (a combination of Norse 'fors' meaning 'the torrent' and Gaelic 'airde', meaning 'upper'). Flow comes from the Norse word 'floi' (meaning 'wet' or 'marshy')

The Flow Country is an internationally important area of blanket bog – a globally-rare type of peatland – which covers a large area of Sutherland and Caithness. The peatlands are a vast, open landscape with scattered pool systems that are home to specialist plants, insects and wildlife. Birds that depend on this wild, unspoilt environment include red-throated and black-throated divers, golden plover and greenshank. Bogs are also home to many species of insects and spiders, as well as amphibians, reptiles and small mammals. The Flow Country is on the UK's tentative list for UNESCO World Heritage Site status and is considered to be the best peatland of its type anywhere in the world. It stores an incredible amount of carbon (400 million tonnes!). The best time to see peatland birds is April to June, but all summer there is a variety of different plants and wildlife to discover. Self-guided trails and a distinctive lookout tower allow you to explore the mosaic of pools, while information is available in the visitor centre (open Apr – Oct), in the former railway station.

The reserve and tower are open all year.
Tel. 01641 571225 www.rspb.org.uk and
www.theflowcountry.org.uk



36

Dunnet Head

Rubha Dhùnaid (the origin of the name is unclear)

This rugged Caithness peninsula has the honour of being the most northerly point of mainland Britain. It's a wild and untamed landscape, with stunning sea cliffs and coastal grasslands which are home to puffins, razorbills, guillemots, fulmars and kittiwake. The trip of a few miles from the sweeping sand dunes and beach at Dunnet village to the lighthouse rewards the visitor with magnificent cliff-top views of Orkney and west along the coast to Cape Wrath. In early summer, the cliffs are alive with seabirds nesting on the steep ledges. A walk along the cliff top through flower-rich heathland gives you a chance to experience the ferocity of the Pentland Firth as it rounds this headland. Dunnet Head is managed as a nature reserve by the RSPB.

Grid reference: ND202766
Tel. 01463 715000
www.rspb.org.uk





Castle of Mey

The 16th century Castle of Mey was originally built by the Earl of Caithness. It was restored by Queen Elizabeth, The Queen Mother who visited regularly and created the beautiful walled gardens. The Castle, which is now run as a 5 star visitor attraction, is complemented by an animal centre. In an initiative to support farmers and food producers in the area around the Castle of Mey, Prince Charles (or The Duke of Rothesay as he is known in Scotland) launched, in 2005, the Mey Selections label for local, high quality produce. Look out for the label!

The nearby Loch of Mey attracts thousands of wildfowl in winter. Barnacle, greylag and Greenland white-fronted geese roost here and may be seen from a small hide.

Admission charge.

Open from May - mid October,
10.20am - 4pm.

Grid reference: ND290739

Tel. 01847 851473

www.castleofmey.org.uk



Duncansby Head

Ceann Dhunnagain (from Norse, meaning 'Dungal's farm')

Duncansby Head is the most north-easterly part of the British mainland and is a must-see for anyone who likes their scenery both natural and dramatic. From a well-trodden path starting at the lighthouse, a short walk brings you first to the Geo of Sclaites, a huge cleft bitten deeply into the cliffs. In summer, the cliffs are alive with the sounds and smells of seabirds. Fulmar, shags, kittiwakes and puffins are seen here in summer. A little further across the clifftop fields, and you come to the day's highlight, the stunning view south to Thirle Door and the Stacks of Duncansby. The first is a rocky arch, the second a group of large jagged sea stacks, isolated by the retreat of the sea. This is a spot you will want to savour, with a view that varies as you move along the clifftop path. Superb views can be had from the coastal path and it is well worth continuing a short distance along the path to reach the point nearest to the stacks where the best views of the huge seabird colonies on these cliffs can be gained. There are a range of visitor services in nearby John O' Groats.

Grid reference: ND405733

(car park at the lighthouse)

www.visitjohnogroats.com





39

Wick Heritage Centre

Wick is of Norse origin, 'Vik' (meaning 'bay')

This award-winning and captivating museum documents the history of the town and its importance in the herring fishery. It displays everything from fishing equipment to a complete herring fishing boat - the beautifully restored 19th century fishing boat, Isabella Fortuna, which is normally berthed in Wick Harbour. The centre-piece of the museum is a superb collection of 70,000 photographs taken by 3 generations of one family between 1863 and 1977. The photographs document an era when Wick was the herring capital of Europe and show the herring industry in various stages from setting sail to packing barrels of salt herring for export all over the world. Boat builders, coopers and rope makers are also documented in this fascinating social history.

Museum open Easter - end October,
10am - 3.45pm, Monday - Saturday.
Grid reference: ND365506 (Bank Row)
Tel. 01955 605393

www.wickheritage.org



40

Grey Cairns of Camster

Camster is of Norse origin, (meaning 'ridge-farm')

A little-visited, but truly fascinating site, for anyone interested in early occupants of this country, the Grey Cairns of Camster are amongst the best-preserved Neolithic chambered cairns in the British Isles and comprise a round cairn and a long cairn. Built around 3500 BC, the cairns are thought to have been in use as burial chambers and as ritual sites for several hundred years thereafter. When the cairns were excavated pottery, skeletons, burnt bone and flint tools were recovered from the round cairn. There is one central chamber in the round cairn, which retains its original roof, and two burial chambers in the long cairn. Careful restoration has made the cairns accessible to visitors. The cairn complex is now in the care of Historic Environment Scotland. The cairns lie on the road between Watten and Occumster.

Open all year.

Grid reference: ND26144

www.historicenvironment.scot





41

Badbea

*Am Bad Beithe
(meaning 'village of the birches')*

The former clearance village of Badbea is perched on the edge of the cliffs south of Berriedale in a spot with great views over the Moray Firth. The village was settled in the late 18th and early 19th centuries by families evicted from their homes when the straths of Langwell, Ousdale and Berriedale were cleared for the establishment of sheep farms. According to legend, Badbea was so windswept that those living here had to tether their cattle, hens and even their children to prevent them being blown over the cliffs. One resident, John Sutherland, 'John Badbea' has been credited with doing much to help the survival of the community in his role as a preacher, doctor and all-round leader. The last resident left the village in 1911 and a monument to those who lived there was erected by the son of a former inhabitant. Badbea is accessible by foot from a signposted car park on the seaward side of the A9. Good footwear is recommended as the walk can be wet underfoot.

Grid reference: ND085204 (car park on A9)
www.walkhighlands.co.uk



42

Timespan, Helmsdale

Helmsdale is of Norse origin, (Hjalmundal, meaning 'Dale of the Helmet'). The village is known as Gaelic as Bun Ildh, (meaning the foot of the River Ildh. The Ildh is an ancient name, earlier than Gaelic or Norse, and evidence of long habitation in the area.)

Timespan Museum and Arts Centre is a vibrant meeting place between our past and our future; linking culture, heritage, the arts, people and their ideas. There is an award winning museum, a contemporary art programme, an art gallery, storytelling room, café, shop and riverside garden of Scottish herbs and flowers. Timespan commissions four major projects each year, each aligned with broader social movements and has an active programme of events as well as supporting artists in residence. A nice walk up the river- famous for its salmon fishing - starts just across the bridge from Timespan and a short walk in the other direction takes you to the active harbour. There is a range of visitor services available in Helmsdale.

Admission charge

Grid reference: ND026153
Open Easter - October, 10am - 5pm.
Tel. 01431 821327
www.timespan.org.uk and
www.helmsdale.org





43

Brora to Golspie Coastal Walk and Carn Liath Broch

*Brùra, of Norse origin,
(meaning 'river with a bridge')
Goillspidh, of Norse origin,
(meaning 'gully village')*

Seals, seabirds, an Iron Age broch and Dunrobin Castle are among the attractions of this lovely coastal walk between the villages of Brora and Golspie. From the attractive harbour and fishing village at the mouth of the River Brora, the route is signposted along the shore, passing a Cold War listening station and historic salt pans.

Offshore, you might see Manx shearwaters, gannets and storm petrels. Moving at times between path, field edge and beach, the walk takes you towards Sputie Burn, a small waterfall, near a popular hauling out place for seals. Further on, towards Golspie, the Carn Liath broch – an Iron Age defensive tower, sits above the shore. This impressive structure survives to first floor level and is surrounded by signs of a small settlement. Dunrobin Castle, with its fairy-tale spires and turrets, rises spectacularly above the castle woodland and becomes more impressive as you walk towards it. Walled gardens sit below the castle and the woods are rich in bluebells in spring. The village of Golspie is a mile further along the shore. From here you can catch a train or bus back to the start in Brora.

Grid reference: NC908039 (Brora Harbour),
NC870013 (Carn Liath broch)

www.historicenvironment.scot

www.dunrobincastle.co.uk

www.broravillage.scot



44

Loch Fleet National Nature Reserve

Tèarmann Nàdair Nàiseanta Loch Fleòid

The estuary, coastline and spectacular pine woodland at Loch Fleet is a great place to see wildlife, whatever the season or time of day. Fast-flowing currents empty the tidal basin of water on every tide leaving sandbanks exposed. Here you can spot seals and their pups hauled out on the banks or when the tide is high, watch the intense feeding activity of hungry wading birds from the bird hide on the shore in Balblair Bay. Keep your eyes peeled for the elusive osprey diving for fish in summer and impressive numbers of other wader and wildfowl species in winter. There are a range of easy walks around the Reserve, which take you through the coastal dunes on a carpet of wild flowers or into the pine woodlands. Listen out for siskin, redstart and crossbills in the tall pines. It's an easy walk or cycle from the village of Golspie to the woods, and the bird hide is around half a mile from the entrance to the woodland. Little-ferry at the end of the road is a great place for a picnic and is a tranquil spot with an old pier and an icehouse nestling among a cluster of houses.

Open all year

Grid reference: NH814976

(car park at the entrance to the woods)

Tel. 01463 701608

www.nnr.scot





45

Embo beach

Earabol (from Norse, possibly meaning 'Eyvind's farm' with 'bol' meaning a farm on good ground)

This broad beach of golden sand stretches from the attractive former fishing village of Embo to the mouth of the River Fleet, and its whole length is flanked by high sand dunes. Fine yellow sand and crystal clear water make this an ideal beach for a visit with the family or a long romantic stroll. Behind the beach there is a network of paths through the high sand dunes, which are a great place to find rare plants including the spectacular burnet rose and frog orchids. The links are home to more than 30% of the world population of the rare Fonseca's seed fly and in summer you'll find birds such as skylark, swallows, swifts and willow warblers in the dunes. The car park, overlooking the beach, is at the north east corner of the village which has a range of facilities for visitors, including a community-run shop and café in the former school.

Grid reference: NH818929

www.visitdornoch.com



46

Ledmore and Migdale Wood

*Coille Dharaich an Leathaigh Mhòir (the oakwood of the big slope)
Migdale (Migealan in Gaelic) is of Norse origin (meaning boggy valley)*

This beautiful spot offers an enriching and magical experience to visitors looking for fantastic walks and a vast array of wildlife. The ancient Ledmore oak wood and the spectacular Migdale pinewood sit in a rugged landscape of rocky crags, bog and heather moorland. The river tumbling through the glen from Loch Migdale brings tranquillity to this lovely spot, popular with walkers and picnickers. Red squirrels have recently been reintroduced to the woodland and it's also possible to spot red, roe and sika deer, as well as pine martens or otters by the burn if you are lucky. Once owned by Andrew Carnegie (the Scottish-born American industrialist) it is now the property of the Woodland Trust. A walk through this woodland reveals a long history with ancient burial chambers and traces of medieval industries. The priceless Bronze Age 'Migdale Hoard' was found just to the west of Loch Migdale. Among many trails of varying length, there is a delightful way-marked trail of about 4 miles which takes you high above the glen and offers lovely views. Visitor services are available in the nearby villages of Bonar Bridge and Ardgay.

Grid reference: NH668907 (Torroy car park)

www.woodlandtrust.org.uk





47

Falls of Shin

Eas Sin

Every autumn Atlantic salmon returning from their ocean migration to spawn upstream, take on the powerful falls on the River Shin. A viewpoint overlooking the falls provides a great place to view the fish valiantly fighting their way back upstream to the spawning beds. Salmon are just one of the iconic species you might see here – the ancient woodlands around the river are alive with birdsong and in winter this lovely glen holds frost and snow making it a sparkling and magical location for a walk. Using the main car park as a base, you can enjoy a number of tranquil woodland walks suitable for all ages and abilities. Popular with locals and visitors alike, in the summer months you will find kids racing around on the grass and in the play area and families picnicking in the sun. All the trails are fairly easy to negotiate, with no steep sections. There are visitor services at Falls of Shin and in the nearby villages of Lairg, Rosehall and Bonar Bridge.

Grid reference: NH576993

Tel. 0300 067 6100

www.forestryandland.gov.scot



48

Tarbat Ness

Rudha Tairbeart

(meaning 'the point of the isthmus')

Visit the Tarbat Ness peninsula and take in the wonderful sights and sounds of the Moray Firth. Excellent views out to sea offer the opportunity to see dolphins and seals, while one of Britain's tallest lighthouses adorns the point. The site of the lighthouse used to hold a Roman fort and according to Highland folklore the site was also used as a meeting place for witches' covens. Bottlenose dolphins, fulmars and gannets can be seen all year round and this is a good place for sea-watching or exploring the unusual rock formations. During autumn and spring the area is also a landfall for migrating birds so you might catch a glimpse of these weary travellers. For keen walkers, there is an excellent coastal circuit of the Tarbat Ness headland (8.75 miles / 14 km) taking in Portmahomack and Rockfield. A range of visitor facilities are available in Portmahomack.

Grid reference: NH944873

www.walkhighlands.co.uk





Nigg Old Church & Pictish Stone

Neig (meaning 'the notch')

49

This lovely old church houses what has been described as 'the supreme masterpiece of Pictish art' – an intricately-carved, eighth century cross slab. The stone is carved with Pictish symbols and Christian imagery and is one of a series of large and spectacular Christian monuments that bound the Tarbat peninsula, centring on what was a major Pictish monastery at Portmahomack. The quality and skill of the carving making this one of the finest crosses of its period in all of Europe. The church itself is around 400 years old, but the site has been used for Christian worship for at least 1200 years. It has, to this day, an atmosphere of peace and tranquillity.

Church open 10am-5pm,
April - October.

Grid reference: NH804717

www.niggoldtrust.org.uk



Nigg Bay Nature Reserve

Bàgh Neig

50

Nigg Bay, on the Cromarty Firth, is one of the country's major stop-over points for migratory birds travelling between their breeding and wintering grounds. Visit the viewing hide any time between October and March and you're likely to see countless wading birds and waterfowl, such as bar-tailed godwits, knot, geese and widgeon on the mudflats, saltmarsh and wet grassland. During spring look out for the lapwings' tumbling display flights as they prepare to breed. The summer months bring a range of breeding birds to the wetland and saltmarsh areas and ospreys can be seen hunting in the bay. Best time to visit is two to three hours either side of high tide. The viewing hide on this RSPB reserve is open all year.

Grid reference: NH807730

Tel: 01463 715000

www.rspb.org.uk





51

Hugh Millers Cottage, Cromarty

Cromba (meaning 'little place of the bend')

Fossil hunter, folklorist, man of faith, stonemason, geologist, editor, writer and social justice campaigner – Hugh Miller was one of the great Scots of the 19th century. The museum interpreting his life and work is located in the Georgian 'Miller House' in Church Street. Hugh Miller rose from humble beginnings in Cromarty as a journeyman stonemason, to international renown. The museum includes interactive displays, fossils you can handle and the Miller's Yard 'Garden of Wonders'. The iconic Birthplace Cottage next door was built around 1698 and is the last remaining thatched cottage in Cromarty. It too has a lovely courtyard and gardens.

Admission charge

Open daily 12-5pm April - September;

Saturday-Monday in October

Grid reference: NH790673

Tel: 01381 600245

www.nts.org.uk



52

South Sutor walk

This varied and signposted walk from the historic town of Cromarty offers plenty of interest. The path climbs through woodland to the South Sutor viewpoint with fine views over the Cromarty Firth, one of the deepest harbours in Europe. In spring, the wooded hillside is carpeted with spring flowers and resounds with bird song. Near the top, the remains of gun emplacements used in both World Wars can still be seen. The path can be muddy in places and includes a couple of steep sections known locally as the "Hundred Steps". The walk there and back is approx. 3 miles / 5 km. The viewpoint can also be reached by narrow road, which leads to a small car park from where a path leads you up to the viewpoint (look out for the small sign). Cromarty is a lovely town to explore and is also known as base for viewing offshore sea life, including the Moray Firth population of bottlenose dolphins.

Grid reference: NH793672

www.black-isle.info





53

Udale Bay

Udal, (of Norse origin, meaning 'yew dale')

This peaceful intertidal bay on the Black Isle is winter home to thousands of waders, ducks and geese. In the autumn, great flocks of migrating widgeon – as many as 5000 at a time - gather in the bay to feed on abundant eelgrass. Ospreys are frequently seen during the summer, fishing in the bay. Other species include: redshank, oystercatcher, curlew, shelduck and pink-footed geese. The viewing hide at Udale Bay enables you to get good views of the birds and provides information. The best time to visit is two to three hours either side of high tide.

Viewing hide open all year

Grid reference: NH712651

Tel: 01463 715000

www.rspb.org.uk



54

Fortrose Cathedral

A' Chananaich (meaning 'the chanonry', or 'place of the Canons')

Fortrose Cathedral is thought to have been first built in the early 13th century and was the seat of the medieval Scottish diocese of Ross until the Reformation. It was extended and altered in the 14th and 15th centuries, but largely demolished on Cromwell's orders in the 17th century. Today only the chapter house and the nave's south aisle still stand and the outline of the remainder of the cathedral complex was revealed by excavations in 1873. The remains of the Cathedral are now a Scheduled Monument in the care of Historic Environment Scotland. Fortrose has a pretty harbour, reached by narrow, twisting roads and a secluded and peaceful beach. The town shares an historic golf course with the neighbouring village of Rosemarkie.

Open all year, 9.30am and 5.30pm in the summer and 10am to 4pm in the winter.

Grid reference: NH727565

Tel: 01667 460 232

www.historicenvironment.scot





55

Fairy Glen

This delightful wooded glen has a stream running through it with two attractive waterfalls. The glen is carpeted with bluebells and primroses in the spring. Look out for dipper and grey wagtails along the stream. The millpond, which is at least a couple of hundred years old, was once a source of ice for the fish-houses in the village. Fairy Glen used to be the scene of a well-dressing ceremony, where the children of the village decorated a pool, next to a spring, with flowers. This was said to ensure that the fairies kept the water supply clean. From the car park at the edge of the village follow the signs into the glen. At the second waterfall the stream is crossed by a footbridge. The path on the far side leads up to the busy main road where there is no pavement so the best option is to return the same way. The path there and back is around 2 miles / 3 km. Allow at least an hour. The paths are rugged in places.

Grid reference: NH735578

Tel: 01463 715000

www.rspb.org.uk



56

Chanorny Point

Gob na Cananaich

The Moray Firth is home to around 200 bottlenose dolphins, the most northerly population in the world. Chanorny Point is famous as the one of best places in Europe for seeing these marine mammals. The best time to look for them is on a rising tide when the dolphins play and feed on the fish coming in on the strong currents. The dolphins here are also the biggest in the world and they can be seen in groups of up to around 25 or more. Other wildlife, including harbour porpoises, seals and a variety of seabirds, can also regularly be spotted.

A stone memorial marks the site where the Brahan Seer, a prophet of Highland legend, is said to have been burnt to death in a tar barrel in the 17th century. On the opposite side of the Firth you can see Fort George, a fine example of 18th century military engineering. There is limited parking on the Point at the Lighthouse. Consider parking in either Fortrose or Rosemarkie and enjoying a lovely walk (30mins / 45mins respectively) along the shore.

Grid reference: NH748556

www.black-isle.info



Useful websites for lots of visitor information
and some more great days out.

www.northcoast500.com

www.visitwester-ross.com

www.lochcarron.org.uk

www.discoverassynt.co.uk

www.mackaycountry.com

www.visitsutherland.org

www.venture-north.co.uk

www.visitdornoch.com

www.heartofsutherland.co.uk

www.lairgandrogart.co.uk

www.exploreeasterross.co.uk

www.black-isle.info



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