

Scotland's Northern Highlands and Orkney 22nd – 29th April 2026

Our group of 30 departed from Alton on Wednesday morning with our wonderful coach driver Doug and our organiser, Mary. After a smooth journey to York, we arrived at the Hampton by Hilton Hotel early afternoon and checked in for our 1-night stay. Some of us booked an evening river cruise with a fish and chips supper which was a great way to spend a sunny early evening and see the city from the river. When some of the party missed the boat, the staff went out of their way to make amends, rebooking them for the next morning and giving them refreshments to the value of the supper. A wonderful example of true customer service which was prevalent throughout the trip. Stuart and I found a little bar with a live jazz quartet performing later in the evening, so enjoyed that with a glass of wine. Next morning we took the open top bus City tour and had coffee in Sophie's café on the bridge.



In the afternoon we boarded the train to Inverness and enjoyed a 6-hour journey with fantastic scenery on our way north. The coach met us at Inverness station for the short drive to the Palace Hotel in Inverness, our base for the next 3 nights. Lovely hotel with pool and gym for those who wanted exercise. The hotel was on the banks of the river Ness and a short walk from the cathedral and the castle.

Friday morning we explored the castle in beautiful sunshine. The afternoon featured a cruise on Loch Ness, again in beautiful sunshine. I hadn't packed a sun hat (northern Scotland in April – no need I thought!) so wore my rainhat as a sun hat on the boat. I had packed sunscreen thank goodness. No sightings of the monster reported but stunning scenery and some people

spotted the osprey.

Saturday Doug drove us across the highlands, past some stunning scenery with snow still sitting on top of the mountains. A beautiful clear day so reflections in Loch Broom as we passed were spectacular. We reached Ullapool, a lovely fishing harbour on the west coast by late morning and spent time exploring the town. Doug took a different route home, again through some stunning scenery.



On Sunday morning we boarded the coach for the drive further north. Slight change of plans for pick up point as Doug couldn't get to the front entrance because the road was closed for a big cycle event. We were able to watch a bit of the race while waiting to set off. We later stopped at Dunrobin Castle, the ancestral home of the Dukes of

Sutherland. Some people enjoyed the falconry display in the grounds. We explored the castle itself and had lunch in one of the rooms in the café that contained an old fire engine.



After lunch we drove up to John O'Groats and had the obligatory group photo by the signpost. Here was the first time we'd really needed our warm coats and hats, very chilly wind up there! Next stop was Scrabster where we were to catch the ferry to Stromness. Doug had to check-in 90 minutes before departure, so we were directed to the departure lounge, a rather bleak room with a very dead looking coffee machine. Eventually there were 3 members of staff trying their best to get it to work. Sadly there was no coffee available, there were tea bags apparently, but no milk. Stuart tried the hot chocolate which was disgusting. Once on board we headed for the restaurant, which had a good choice of food and drink.

Excellent fish and chips. No sightings of Orcas on the journey across unfortunately but we did see the Old Man of Hoy, though shrouded in mist. It was a short drive from Stromness to our hotel in Kirkwall. Check in here was a little bit chaotic with only 1 member of staff, a very small check-in area, and a requirement to order the next day's evening meal as well. However we did all eventually get a room. We had a room overlooking the harbour. Breakfast in the hotel was good, as all the breakfasts had been.

Then we boarded the coach for our trip around Orkney with our local guide Marlene who was born and brought up on Orkney. Interesting commentary from her on our drive round the island where we visited several interesting and varied sights. Sadly no Puffins to be seen and very few trees but plenty of sheep.

We saw the Catholic chapel built by Italian POWs from Nissen huts and decorated beautifully inside by talented artists, metal workers, stonemasons and others from amongst the PoWs using scavenged materials, some from the sunken wrecks in Scapa Flow. The 5000 year old Neolithic village Skara Brae was amazing. We explored the beach at the Brough of Birsay where the sand was gritty, like broken sea shells.



We returned to our hotel in time to explore Kirkwall for a couple of hours before dinner at the hotel. After dinner we boarded the coach for the very short journey to the ferry terminal. 2 hour check in requirement this time so another wait in the departure lounge, but at least the drinks machine was working!



Once on board we found our cabins and I think most people settled down for the night as it was around 11.30 pm. The cabins were tiny but well equipped with ensuite bathroom, single beds and tea and coffee supplies. Luckily there was obviously plenty of accommodation available, so although we'd booked a 2 berth which would have required 1 of us climbing into the top bunk, we were allocated a 4 berth which meant we could use 2 lower bunks. I think most of us were the same. Very smooth crossing and we docked in Aberdeen at 7 a.m. the next morning.

Tuesday's journey was from Aberdeen to Glasgow, stopping for brunch in St. Andrews as we hadn't breakfasted on the ferry. Then on across Scotland to Glasgow. Although we arrived early, our rooms were ready so we were able to check-in, before heading out to explore Glasgow. We visited the Willow Tea rooms, designed by Charles Rennie Mackintosh but could only manage a cup of tea though the renowned afternoon tea looked delicious. We then met friends who live in Paisley for an evening meal before returning to the hotel. A lot of renovation work going on around the station area because of the fire at Central Station a while ago. Wednesday morning was free to explore so we caught the open-top sight-seeing bus for a tour around the outskirts and visitor attractions of Glasgow.



We boarded our train around 1.30 and settled in for the journey to Birmingham. Our lack of hot drinks curse followed us on to the train as they announced the coffee machine was broken! Doug and the coach were waiting for us at Birmingham International station and we settled in for the journey home. A quick stop at Warwick services for those gasping for a hot drink and then onwards to Alton.

It was a delightful holiday, a little complicated by the 2 train journeys and 2 ferry journeys as well as the coach journeys but we all thoroughly enjoyed ourselves. We had amazing weather throughout with only a drop of rain on Orkney and sunshine most days. Special thanks to Mary for her usual excellent organisation and patience and of course to Doug, our amazing coach driver.

Mandy Nash