

Orkney's St Magnus Festival: Sound of the summer

Orkney's St Magnus Festival gives visitors to the islands the chance to experience sublime music in striking surroundings. Just don't forget to try the fresh seafood while you're there, says Amanda Holloway

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Residents of Orkney do a good line in self-deprecation. When asked to pinpoint their island home, the traditional response appears to be: "The bit under the big black cloud on the BBC weather map." What they don't mention is that when the sun shines – and it does, frequently – this beautiful archipelago off the north coast of Scotland is a glorious place to visit. After all, if it were so grim, why would everyone, from Stone Age man to the Picts, the Vikings and the Scots, all have wanted to live here? While Nordic raiders fought over its fertile soil, visitors today are drawn by the promise of unspoiled beaches, castles and cairns, abundant birdlife and delicious food, including fresh salmon and Orkney beef.

Though Orkney is only six miles from mainland Scotland, it's nothing like the wild and rugged Highlands. Flying in from Aberdeen, the 70-odd islands in the archipelago look like an illustration in a children's book, each with rolling green fields and gentle hills. Some are mere rocks in the North Sea; only 18 of the larger islands are inhabited and the majority of the Orkney's population of 20,000 live on the largest island, known as the Mainland.

At first I was underwhelmed by the sight of these flat, featureless isles lying peacefully in a mild blue sea. But on the drive into the islands' capital, Kirkwall, I started to appreciate the glorious wideness of the sky and the emerald chain of islands stretching as far as the eye could see. Somewhere out there was the Old Man of Hoy, a rocky outcrop carved by the sea into the shape of a giant tent-peg; on the north coast lay the sea-lashed cliffs of Yesnaby, and scattered across every island, Neolithic remains linked us with our 5,000-year-old ancestors.

Hardy Orcadians, with barely a tree to protect them from the wind and the waves, are used to making their own entertainment. Whatever time of year you visit, there's likely to be a festival, a celebration, or just a convivial gathering at the pub with a fiddle group. I was drawn here by the St Magnus Festival, founded 31 years ago by Orkney's most celebrated resident, composer Sir Peter Maxwell Davies.

Held every year in late June, when the days are long and the sunsets spectacular, the festival brings out the community spirit in everyone. A circus tent springs up in the car park, symphony concerts are held in the sports centre, and churches on far-flung islands host chamber concerts with both audience and performers arriving on the same ferry.

Orcadians, it seems, are welcoming to strangers, particularly at festival time when orchestra members are billeted in homes all over the mainland and the streets are full of people with violins strapped to their backs. This year, the resident band will be the Scottish Chamber Orchestra, bringing with them guest soloists such as young Russian violinist Ilya Gringolts. The beauty of this remote festival is that performers don't fly in and out in a day; they have a chance to let their hair down. Last year soprano Lisa Milne sang a searing Bach cantata in the cathedral one night and a Janis Joplin set in a smoky hall the next. This year you might be lucky and see pianist Paul Lewis or cellist Matthew Barley jamming in the Festival Club after hours.

Kirkwall itself is a huddle of stone buildings clustered round the raw-red sandstone cathedral of St Magnus. On the high street, outnumbering the Fifties-style wool shops, are gourmet delis and windows full of arty silver jewellery. It's worth hiring a car to follow a Craft Trail across the islands and see artists at work in their studios. There's an excellent British modern art collection at the recently refurbished Pier Arts Centre in Stromness, which includes pieces by Ben Nicholson, Barbara Hepworth and more contemporary talents. While the Pier Arts Centre looks to the future, the narrow main street of old Stromness, which hugs the contours of the harbour, has hardly changed in 300 years.

Something that does change, constantly, is the weather. During one cliff walk I was stung by

hailstones, drenched, then dried by a brilliant sun on the way back to my car. Such dramatic changes in light make Orkney a favourite destination for painters and photographers. So, too, does the extraordinary sense of history that permeates the landscape. The islands are pitted with Neolithic remains: great sandstone megaliths rise out of the fields, dragged there around 2750BC for reasons we can only guess at. Orcadians motor past these marvels every day but, for a visitor, the first sight of the Standing Stones of Stenness or the magic Ring of Brodgar has the same impact as coming over the ridge on Salisbury Plain and seeing Stonehenge for the first time.

There are over 1,000 recorded archaeological sites on Orkney, so it's worth spending a morning with a guide who can introduce you to the highlights. John Grieve, of Discover Orkney Tours, drew a group of us deeper into the mysteries of the Stenness Stones by demonstrating their magnetic qualities with a bent coathanger. We all had a go at "divining" and, although I was sceptical at first, there was no denying the way the coathanger dragged my arms in the direction of the "altar" stone, where human sacrifice was said to have been carried out. The Stenness Stones and the nearby Ring of Brodgar, a 340-foot circle of 27 megaliths, are part of a prehistoric ritual complex which is now one of Unesco's World Heritage Sites, along with Stonehenge and Egypt's famous pyramids.

The ancient magic of the place is at its most potent on Midsummer night, when sunset and sunrise merge into one. One of the highlights of my stay was a post-concert drive out to the Ring of Brodgar at midnight. Hip-flask at the ready, I joined other shadowy figures huddling around the megaliths, to watch a piper saluting the setting sun as an eerie light bathed the lochs and the sea.

A few miles down the road is the magnificent chambered cairn of Maeshowe, built in about 2750BC. It's not for the claustrophobic: you have to crawl down a tunnel to the burial chamber, where you can marvel at the builders' skill. Thousands of years before computers, they managed to align the entry passage so that the setting midwinter sun shines down the passage and strikes the back wall of the chamber. In the 12th century, Norse lager-louts broke in and wrote graffiti on the inner chamber, leaving a priceless collection of runes; the Viking equivalent of "Kilroy was here".

At the western end of the mainland lies Skara Brae, an astonishingly preserved Neolithic village, concealed for thousands of years under a protective coating of sand. In 1850 a big storm blew away the sand, revealing a settlement that included a street, a workshop and six houses complete with proper drains, a damp-proof course, beds and cupboards.

Orkney has a more recent history too: its sheltered inlets played a key role in both wars, when Scapa Flow was the main base of the British Home Fleet. You can still see the rusty remains of the scuttled German First World War Fleet dotted around the bay. To get to Scapa Flow you pass the Italian Chapel, a corrugated-iron Nissen hut given an artistic makeover by Italian POWs in 1942. It's a fabulously atmospheric venue for one of the most sought-after recitals in the festival programme, this year given by lutenist Luca Marconato. The intimate setting of this makeshift chapel, lit only by candles, makes the recital almost unbearably intense. But the biggest surprise comes as you file out of the concert to find the blood-red sun still hovering on the horizon.

It's a tough call to fit in all the festival events – the concerts, the poetry readings, drama and clubbing, and to make time to explore the islands too. With limited time I took a trip from Kirkwall to the nearest island, Shapinsay. Most people take a tour of the Victorian pile, Balfour Castle, but it was a glorious sunny day so I decided to walk through fields of wildflowers to a hide, where I discovered that real twitchers bring their own binoculars. I saw plenty of oystercatchers, razorbills and unidentified marsh birds with my own eyes, and made a note to pack binoculars for my next trip

Meanwhile, the gastronomic highlight of my stay was a blowout lunch at The Smithy, a tiny restaurant opposite the jetty where the fresh salmon, crab and langoustine was simply prepared and simply delicious.

I joined a select band of orchestral players on the boat over to Flotta, site of a North Sea oil terminal (well-hidden) and a small, resonant church, where the brass section played for those who'd also made the trip out. Concerts also happen on Birsay, at the north-western tip of the Orkney mainland, and one year the local fiddle group in Sanday, home of Sir Peter Maxwell Davies, premiered his work, hot off the press.

I long to explore some of the other islands by boat or twin-prop plane; Papa Westray is a favourite

destination of anoraks wanting to take the shortest scheduled air flight in the world, while North Ronaldsay is the home of the seaweed-eating sheep. But this summer, island-hopping will vie with special events such as *The Martyrdom of St Magnus*, the opera by Sir Peter Maxwell Davies which launched the very first St Magnus Festival in 1977 and which returns to the cathedral on 25 June.

TRAVELLER'S GUIDE

Getting there

By plane via Edinburgh, Aberdeen and Inverness on British Airways (0844 493 0787; www.ba.com). Trains (08457 484950; www.nationalrail.co.uk) serve Aberdeen, from where ferries depart (six hours; 08456 000 449; www.northlinkferries.co.uk). A shorter ferry journey departs from John O'Groats (40 mins; 01955 611353; www.jogferry.co.uk).

Staying there

Lynnfield Hotel, Kirkwall (01856 872505; www.lynnfieldhotel.com). Doubles from £100, including breakfast. The Kirkwall Hotel, Kirkwall (01856 872232; www.kirkwallhotel.com). Doubles from £100, breakfast included.

Visiting there

St Magnus Festival (01856 871445; www.stmagnusfestival.com). The festival takes place from 20-28 June. Admission from free to £18; tickets on sale from May 5 and 6. For more information contact the Orkney Tourist Board on 01856 872856; www.visitorkney.com



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