40 fascinating facts about the Machars

1. This whole south west corner of Scotland was **Gaelic speaking** into the early middle ages. In fact the Gaelic language was spoken as far south as parts of Cumbria at one time.
2. **Galloway** is a Gaelic-derived name: 'Tir nan Gall' means land of the stranger since the early inhabitants of the area were a mix of Irish & Norse.
3. 'The **Machars**' is another Gaelic name, meaning an extensive, low-lying fertile plain.
4. The name Stranraer is from the Gaelic for **'fat nose'** and refers to the shape of the Galloway peninsula.
5. **Minnigaff**, near Newton Stewart comes from 'Muillin an Ath' or mill on the ford, indicating one of the earliest industries of the town.
6. There's a famous local story of a bet in which someone was challenged to name **five kingdoms** visible from the Machars. The five kingdoms reeled off were Scotland, England, Ireland, Mann, and Heaven.
7. In the 5th century, **Christianity** came to Scotland via St Ninian when he set up a community known as Candida Casa in Whithorn to spread the gospel.
8. St.Ninian was Scotland's **first saint**.
9. The **Southern Uplands** have been heavily sculpted and rounded by the effects of glaciation to leave a series of gently rolling hills with occasional rocky outcrops. There are no summits above 3000ft (914m), but over 80 rise above 2000ft (610m), offering some fine hill walking.
10. The **Southern Upland Way** is Britain's first official coast-to-coast long distance footpath. It runs 212 miles (340 kms) from Portpatrick on the southwest coast of Scotland to Cockburnspath on the eastern seaboard. It one of four national long distance routes.
11. **Portpatrick** was for almost 200 years in the period 1661-1849 the main harbour for the crossing to Northern Ireland but was superseded by steamships using Stranraer. It was officially chartered as a burgh under the name 'Montgomerie' but that name failed to stick.
12. It was from **Portpatrick** that most of the original 'Plantation' or Ulster Scots set off for their new lands. They were Scottish Protestant farmers offered land in what is now Northern Ireland by the king to help establish farming and quash local Catholic populations who opposed him and the reformed Church.
13. **Portwilliam** was a planned settlement laid out and set up by Sir William Maxwell of Monreith in the 1770s.
14. The long coastline of the **Solway Firth** welcomes over 40,000 wildfowl and 83,000 waders each winter making Dumfries & Galloway an ornithologist's paradise. Places such as WWT Caerlaverock and Mersehead Nature Reserve make it easy to get close to flocks of thousands of barnacle geese, which travel every year from Norway to winter on the wetlands of the Solway.
15. **Robert Burns** is said to have composed the song 'Scots Wha Hae' while riding from St Mary's Isle to Gatehouse of Fleet on 1st August 1793 and is thought to have written it down when he arrived at the Murray Arms Hotel in the town.
16. **Wigtown** has been 'Scotland's National Book Town' since 1997 with numerous bookstores and book-related businesses. There is a spring book festival in May with the main festival in September.
17. The village of **Garlieston** is associated with the 'Mulberry Harbour Tests' during World War II, when floating harbours were constructed for the D-Day landings.
18. **Glenluce** was home to an airship base for a time during World War.
19. An ancient **broch** [circular, double-walled tower house] stands at Stairhaven on Luce Bay.
20. **Glenluce Abbey**, in the care of the National Trust for Scotland, stands a few miles north of Glenluce village. It was a Cistercian abbey and dates from around 1190.
21. Author **Gavin Maxwell** was born in Elrig, near Monreith in Dumfries and Galloway in 1914. In 1960 he published *Ring of Bright Water*, the story of his life in the West Highlands of Scotland with two pet otters, and for which he is best known.

22. You can see **otters** in the Machars. The most likely places are at Monreith Animal World, Golf Course Monreith, Wood of Cree, Port William Harbour, Physgill Glen and the Lochan at Gallows Outon.
23. At Gavin Maxwell's family home at Monreith there is a rare **plantation** of Monkey Puzzle trees (Chilean Pines).
24. According to legend, the White Loch near Monreith only freezes one half at a time.
25. You can view **ospreys** from the County Buildings in Wigtown.
26. **Galloway Forest Park** is the largest forest park in Britain covering over 300 square miles of spectacular forest, moorland and lochs rise towards the rugged grandeur of the granite mountains. The forest provides good opportunities to view wildlife with red squirrel and red kites firm favourites with visitors.
27. **Mountain biking trails** have been extensively developed, graded and way-marked at Kirroughtrees, within the park north of Newton Stewart. The centre there is part of the 7 Stanes network of downhill mountain biking centres that stretch across Dumfries & Galloway and the Borders.
28. As early as 1831 regular steamers served **Stranraer**, eventually becoming a major ferry port with links to Larne and Belfast in Northern Ireland.
29. The **Murray Isles** are two small uninhabited islands in the Islands of Fleet, off Carrick Point, Wigtown Bay. They belong to the National Trust for Scotland and are home to breeding colonies of cormorants and gulls. Visitors are permitted from August to end April.
30. Whauphill in the central Machars is named after the many curlews to be found around there. 'Whaup' in Scots means curlew.
31. The highest point in the district is Culvennan Fell, at 214m.
32. Scotland's most southerly malt **whisky distillery** is at Bladnoch, near Wigtown. It has a visitor centre and whisky academy where you can learn about different types of malts.
33. The **'Angel's Share'** is the name given to the (not inconsiderable!) amount of whisky lost to evaporation during the years it spends maturing in barrels prior to being bottled.
34. The **Wigtown Martyrs** are commemorated by a monument above the town. They were four women tried for [essentially] heresy in 1685 and condemned to death by drowning. Two were granted mercy but 2 were tied to stakes in the mouth of the river Bladnoch and left to die as the tide came in.
35. **Newton Stewart** was originally known as Fordhouse of Cree but was renamed by the second earl of Galloway, after the Castle Stewart estate. In the late 1700s it was renamed again to Newton Douglas after the estate was bought by William Douglas but that name failed to stick.
36. There's an impressive **stone circle** at Torhouse, with 19 large granite boulders and 3 in line across the centre. It's around 65 feet across and some of the stones are up to 11 feet tall.
37. The southern part of the Machars is peppered with **ancient remains** of one sort or another, from mottes, to standing stones, to hillforts, to ancient Christian sites. Many have been archaeologically excavated over the years and relics from various are in the National Museum of Scotland.
38. Galloway Astronomy Centre is a great place to get a good look at the starry starry night. Unique in Scotland, the Centre is located in open farmland with a night sky free of light pollution. It offers courses, accommodation, telescopes and 'Dark Sky Tourism'. www.gallowayastro.com (2009 is International Year of Astronomy, too.)
39. The **Isle of Whithorn**, 3 miles south of Whithorn, is linked to the mainland now by a causeway and in the middle ages was the port of entry for Irish and Manx pilgrims to Whithorn. They came to visit the sites associated with St.Ninian.
40. Whithorn was so popular as a **place of pilgrimage** that the practice even survived the Reformation. It was finally finished off by an act of Parliament in 1581.