Discovery Tours with Pride of Passion FOR SCOTLAND

Fifty Fascinating Facts About Orkney!

Unique to Orkney

1. Orkney is in the Guinness Book of Records for the **world's shortest scheduled flight**; Westray to Papa Westray, with a flying time of less than 2 minutes.
2. The Orkney vole! The **Orkney vole** is a subspecies of the common vole and is found only in Orkney. It is larger than the common vole, and is similar in appearance to the field vole but has shorter paler fur. Like all voles it has a stocky body with a blunt, rounded snout. Probably arrived in Orkney with the first settlers over 5000 years ago. Favourite prey of the Hen harrier and Short-eared Owl.
3. **North Ronaldsay sheep**! Another ancient species, probably around 3000 years old and native to the island of North Ronaldsay where it feeds on seaweed. Virtually fat-free and very tender meat.
4. The **Orkney Chair**! Traditionally made of driftwood with a hand-stitched straw back the Orkney Chair kept its occupant warm through generations. Orkney Chairs are still hand made in Orkney and available to buy.
5. The **Bride's Cog**: a handmade wooden vessel with either two or three handles. It contains a potent mixture of beer and spirits, which traditionally is passed round all guests at a wedding by the bride and groom. No Orkney wedding is complete without one.
6. **Orkney's Flag** is called the St Magnus Cross. A red cross on a yellow background, it represents Orkney's close connections with both Scotland and Norway. The colours represent Scotland - they are the same as the Lion Rampant and the design is like all the Scandinavian flags.
7. Europe's best-preserved Stone Age village is in Orkney: **Skara Brae**. Europe's oldest standing house: the Knap of Howar on Papa Westray is 5,500 years old.
8. Britain's **most northerly natural woodland** is in the valley of Berriedale, on Hoy where species of hazel, rowan and birch grow. It is probably around 10,000 years old and is relict woodland remaining from after the last ice age. Before the arrival of man and his herbivores much of Orkney was probably wooded.
9. Balfour Castle on Shapinsay is the world's **most northerly castle hotel**.
10. Orkney has amongst the largest wrecks in the world to dive upon within 30m of water. In 1919 Admiral von Reuter ordered the German High Seas Fleet to scuttle and 7 of the ships remain on the seabed of Scapa Flow where they support a thriving diving industry.

Orkney Firsts

11. 2004 **Burray windmill** was Scotland's first commercial scale grid connected turbine under local ownership.
12. 2004 The European Marine Energy Centre (EMEC), in Stromness Orkney opens and is the first of its kind in the world! Provides a unique one-stop facility for the industry to test potential **wave energy** generators.
13. 2004 First offshore wave powered electricity is supplied to UK grid from Orkney. It comes from the Pelamis machine at EMEC Stromness. Pelamis was the world's **first commercial scale wave energy converter**.
14. The first oil flowed into Orkney in 1977. **Flotta oil terminal** handles oil from the North Sea and Atlantic. Scapa Flow is also used for ship-to-ship transfers of oil from Norwegian oil fields.

Complied by Kathleen Hogarth with thanks to Charles Tait for comments & revisions.

15. The **most northerly** station of the world's first ever active operational **radar installations** was in Orkney at Netherbutton in Holm and was working by 1940. Netherbutton was the most northerly station of a string, which ran to Cornwall Chain Home High.
16. The first civilian to lose his life in the Second World War was Orcadian James Isbister, near the Brig o Waithe, Stenness.
17. Orkney's **first hospital** opened in 1845 and was in the building now known as the West End Hotel. The hospital remained there for 81 years before moving to the nearby present site. The building was then converted from hospital to hotel.
18. Leading Light! The old **lighthouse on North Ronaldsay** was one of the first four to be established in Scotland. It was built by Thomas Smith, assisted by his son-in-law, Robert Stevenson. Stevenson's nephew, Alan, built the present-day lighthouse in 1854.
19. Scotland's **first free lending library** opened in Orkney in 1683, in 2003 a new building opened in Kirkwall to house Orkney's Library and Archives.
20. The New World was most probably rediscovered by Henry Sinclair, Earl of Orkney in the 14thc, nearly a century **before Christopher Columbus**! Vikings with Orkney connections had previously been there in 1,000AD.
21. **Skara Brae** was also Scotland's first archaeological site to be given World Heritage status, along with the Ring of Brodgar, Standing Stones of Stenness and Maeshowe: the Neolithic Heartland. Skara Brae is older than the pyramids of Giza in Egypt. Orkney's Ring of Brodgar is 3 times larger and 1000 years older than the famous stone circle of Stonehenge in England.
22. Orkney was first written about by the **Greek explorer Pytheas** who circumnavigated the islands in 325BC and claimed to have seen the edge of the world, "Ultima Thule" (which may have been Foula in Shetland).
23. The huge sea stack off the west side of Hoy is called the **Old Man of Hoy**. It was first climbed in 1966 by Chris Bonnington, Tom Patey and Rusty Baillie but was made very famous by the BBC's live broadcast of subsequent ascents – by harder routes – in 1967.

Orkney Through the Ages

24. Orkney is an archipelago of **70 or so islands** and currently 17 of them are inhabited.
25. **5000 years of farming**! The Skara Brae people farmed wheat and a barley over 5000 years ago. The importance of farming is reflected in many of Orkney's traditions e.g. the Peedie Boys Ploughing match which survives today only in St. Margaret's Hope, South Ronaldsay.
26. **Once part of Norway** as a result of Viking conquests, the islands became part of Scotland in 1468 when Christian I, King of Denmark (and Norway and Sweden) pledged them against the payment of his daughter's dowry when she married King James III of Scotland. King Christian failed to pay up the agreed sum - and the islands were formally annexed to Scotland on 20 February 1472.
27. Even today our **Norse** heritage is apparent in Orkney's **placenames**, over 90% of which are of Old Norse origin. The language of Norn however, once spoken in Orkney & Shetland died out in the medieval age.
28. The **St. Magnus Cathedral does not belong to the church** nor does it have a bishop. The building is maintained by Orkney Islands Council after the church was "handed" to the people of Orkney by charter of King James III of Scotland in 1486.In fact it had always belonged to the people having been largely financed by Orkney Udallers. Services are open to all and held by a minister of the Church of Scotland. It is one of the oldest cathedrals still in use in Scotland being founded in 1137 while Orkney was still under Norwegian control.

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29. Orkney could have been like the Isle of Man with its own laws and jurisdiction but in 1615 James VI, King of Scotland, **swept away all Orkney's island laws** and powers after Earl Patrick Stewart attempted rebellion. The Earldom of Orkney ended and the county of Scotland began.
30. Of the 900 workplaces in Orkney in 2003, 82% employed ten or fewer people. Conversely, there were only a small number of workplaces (2%) employing 50 or more staff, but they accounted for 30% of all employees: e.g. local government, health board.
31. Orkney is a **centre of silver & gold jewellery** businesses with over 10 different companies Orkney has more jewellery businesses than any other county in Scotland. Ortak is also Scotland's largest jewellery company. Ola Gorie was the first in Orkney, followed by Ortak then Sheila Fleet Jewellery with many others since. Besides jewellery many other craft workshops thrive in Orkney.
32. Orkney produces a range of **high quality food** and drink: Orkney Cheese, Orkney Ice Cream & Fudge, Orkney whisky: Highland Park & Scapa, Orkney Beer: including Dark Island, Northern Light, Skullsplitter. Orkney Beef is in a class of its own being entirely grass-fed. A wide variety of locally-caught shellfish is also widely available.
33. Despite having no vineyards (!) it's possible to buy **Orkney wines**. They are made from various fruit and flowers grown locally.
34. Orkney is one of the only places in the UK where an **ancient form of barley**, bere barley, is grown. It is used to bake bere bannocks, and also in bread and biscuits
35. In 1952 a terrible **hurricane** devastated an Orkney industry: Orkney's then-thriving egg industry was ruined overnight when over 7000 henhouses were wrecked and around 86,000 hens killed. Orkney was declared a disaster zone and received government aid.
36. Despite Orkney's maritime nature, it is not possible to land white fish commercially as Orkney is not a European designated landing port. The nearest ports are Lerwick and Scrabster, Peterhead and Aberdeen. Shellfish is landed locally and constitutes an important part of the economy.
37. Orkney is Scotland's busiest **cruise ship port** with over 50 cruise ships calling annually. After Dover it is the second busiest in the UK.
38. Orkney has many annual **festivals**: St. Magnus Festival, Orkney Folk Festival, Orkney Jazz Festival, Orkney Blues Festival, Orkney Science Festival; Orkney Dance Festival; Drama Festival; the Kirkwall Ba' Game.
39. The **Ba' Game** is a tradition followed with great fervour by many locals. It is a rugby-like game played with a hand crafted leather Ba' and takes place twice a year on Christmas Day and New Year's Day in the streets of Kirkwall. Up to 200 Uppies and Doonies battle for several hours to gain the trophy, while large numbers of spectators enjoy the spectacle.
40. Orkney only really has **two seasons**: a darker season of short days mid Sept-mid March and a light season of longer days mid March to mid Sept. There's only 10 degrees difference in the temperature between the coldest month of January and the warmest month of August, and some days in December can be sunnier and less windy than in July!

Famous Orkney People

41. Orcadian **John Rae** explored thousands of miles of the High Arctic in Canada and discovered the fate of the Franklin expedition in the 19th century.
42. Orkney has spawned many **men of literature**, the most widely read by the public probably being Edwin Muir and George MacKay Brown. The filmmaker, Margaret Tait has a cult following, especially in Germany.

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43. Orkney is home to the internationally acclaimed composer **Sir Peter Maxwell Davies** and local musicians Hazel and Jennifer Wrigley. The Wrigley Sister have taken Orkney music all over the world and recently established a music centre in Kirkwall.
44. The **Hudson's Bay Company** in Canada drew a vast proportion of its trappers and other men from Orkney émigrés.

Orkney Nature

45. Orkney has one **National Scenic Area**, which covers a roughly triangular area from the Bay of Skaill to Sneuk Head, south of Rackwick and north of the Loch of Kirbister. NSAs are areas of outstanding national scenic value.
46. Orkney has over 30 Sites of Special Scientific Interest which represent important examples of **habitats** and geological features in Britain.
47. Orkney has 13 RSPB (Royal Society for the Protection of Birds) **reserves**; the RSPB is one of the largest landowners in Orkney.
48. **Orkney changed colour after the Second World War**! The green revolution turned Orkney's heather landscape into fields of grass as modern machinery such as the tractor enabled more and more land to be cultivated. Over 80% of all land in Orkney is either grazing, grass for mowing or sowing. Heather on the Mainland is rare other than on the hilltops and is often under protection. The unique mixture of habitats has proved very attractive to many species of birds both in summer and winter.
49. Orkney was one of the only places the rare bird of prey the **Hen Harrier** could be found in 1900. Since then protected areas of heather and rough grazing have increased the bird's food supply (e.g. the Orkney vole!) and numbers have increased well.
50. Orkney is also home to the rare primula scotica plant. This **tiny purple flower** can be found at Yesnaby in April and May, also June. During the summer month a spectacular array of wild flowers lends colour to the Orkney landscape.

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