



Central & Northern Highlands & Islands

Includes ➔

| | |
|---------------------------------|-----|
| Inverness & the Great Glen..... | 893 |
| The Cairngorms..... | 904 |
| Highland Perthshire... | 909 |
| Central Western Highlands..... | 913 |
| Northeast Coast | 919 |
| Caithness | 921 |
| North & Northwest Coast..... | 924 |
| Isle of Skye..... | 933 |
| Outer Hebrides | 938 |
| Orkney..... | 946 |
| Shetland..... | 959 |

Why Go?

Scotland's vast melancholy soul is here, an epic land whose stark beauty indelibly imprints upon the hearts of those who see it. Mist, peat, whisky, heather...and long, sunblessed summer evenings that repay the many days of horizontal drizzle.

The glorious hills and glens of western Perthshire offer a memorable first taste. The region's capital, Inverness, is backed by the craggy Cairngorms, which draw skiers and walkers to its slopes. Further north, ancient stones are testament left by prehistoric builders in Caithness, and across the water on the magical Orkney and remote Shetland Islands – where wind keeps the vegetation at a minimum – isolation makes it a haven for sea birds and more.

The most epic scenery – you really need an orchestra to do it justice – is in the far northwest, and it continues on to Skye, where the mighty Cuillin Ridge towers jaggedly in the setting sun. Beyond here, the Outer Hebrides offer the nation's best beaches and a glimpse of traditional life.

Best Places to Eat

- ➔ The Albannach (p928)
- ➔ Three Chimneys (p938)
- ➔ Lime Tree (p916)
- ➔ Côte du Nord (p925)

Best Places to Stay

- ➔ The Torridon (p931)
- ➔ Toravaig House Hotel (p935)
- ➔ Rocpool Reserve (p897)
- ➔ West Manse (p958)

When to Go

- ➔ In January hit the Cairngorms for skiing or the Shetland Islands for Up Helly Aa, a fiery Viking festival.
- ➔ Long June evenings see the Highlands at their most romantic, while Fort William hosts the Mountain Bike World Cup.
- ➔ September is the ideal time for hiking and hill walking – midges are dying off, but the weather is still reasonably good.



Activities

For outdoor fans, especially hikers and hill-walkers, the Highlands are heaven. Famous spots like Ben Nevis, Glen Coe, Skye and the Cairngorms offer endless opportunities for experienced walkers – and several options for strollers too. Long-distance walking routes include the **Great Glen Way** (www.greatglenway.com), while the **West Highland Way** and **Speyside Way** are nearby (covered in the Argyll, Central & Northeast Scotland chapter).

For touring cyclists, the roads of the Highlands are enjoyable, as car traffic is often fairly light. The islands are also ideal: Skye is ever popular, as is the end-to-end tour of the Outer Hebrides, where south-to-north (Barra to Lewis) gives you the best chance of a following wind. Gateways for mountain-biking include Fort William and Laggan. The Great Glen Way is also suitable for off-road bikes.

Other activities include sea kayaking around the islands, fishing in rivers and the sea, scuba diving (notably at Scapa Flow in the Orkney Islands) and mountaineering on Ben Nevis or the Cairngorms. The main skiing and snowboarding areas include the Cairngorms and the Nevis Range near Fort William.

Getting There & Around

Inverness is the main train hub, with connections south to England and the rest of Scotland, and lines north to Thurso and west to Kyle of Lochalsh – both passing through fabulous scenery. The West Highland line from Glasgow to Fort William and Mallaig is similarly scenic. Inverness is also the main hub for bus travel. Check details with **Traveline Scotland** (☎ 0871 200 2233; www.travelinescotland.com).

Ferries to/from the Western islands are mostly run by **Caledonian MacBrayne** (☎ 0800 066-5000; www.calmac.co.uk), with mainland ports including Mallaig and Ullapool (plus Uig on Skye), while ferries to Orkney depart mainly from three different crossings in the Thurso–John O’Groats area. The main port for Shetland is Aberdeen.

INVERNESS & THE GREAT GLEN

Inverness, one of the fastest growing towns in Britain, is the capital of the Highlands. It’s a transport hub and jumping-off point for the central, western and northern Highlands, the Moray Firth coast and the Great Glen.

The Great Glen is a geological fault running in an arrow-straight line, filled by a series of lochs, across Scotland from Fort William to Inverness. In 1822 the various lochs were linked by the Caledonian Canal to create a cross-country waterway. The modern A82 road along the glen was completed in 1933 – a date that coincides neatly with the first modern sightings of the Loch Ness Monster.

Inverness

POP 61,235

Inverness has a great location astride the River Ness at the northern end of the Great Glen. In summer it overflows with visitors intent on monster hunting at nearby Loch Ness, but it’s worth a visit in its own right for a stroll along the picturesque River Ness, a cruise on Loch Ness, and a meal in one of the city’s excellent restaurants.

Sights

★ Ness Islands

PARK

The main attraction in Inverness is a leisurely stroll along the river to the Ness Islands. Planted with mature Scots pine, pine, beech and sycamore, and linked to the river banks and each other by elegant Victorian footbridges, the islands make an appealing picnic spot. They’re a 20-minute walk south of the castle – head upstream on either side of the river (the start of the Great Glen Way), and return on the opposite bank.

Tours

Jacobite Cruises

BOAT TOUR

(☎ 01463-233999; www.jacobite.co.uk; Glenurquhart Rd; adult/child £31.50/25; ☀ daily Apr-Sep) Boats depart from Tomnahurich Bridge at 2pm for a 1½-hour ‘Discovery’ cruise along Loch Ness, followed by a visit to Urquhart Castle and a return to Inverness by coach. You can buy tickets at the tourist office and catch a free minibus to the boat. Other cruises and combined cruise-coach tours, from one to 6½ hours, are also available.

Sleeping

Inverness has a good range of backpacker accommodation, and also has some excellent boutique hotels. There are lots of guest-houses and B&Bs along Old Edinburgh Rd and Ardconnel St on the east side of the river, and on Kenneth St and Fairfield Rd on the west bank.