Inverness, the Highlands & the Northern Islands

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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, sun-blessed summer evenings that repay the many days of horizontal drizzle.

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 onto 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.

When to Go
In January hit the Cairngorms for skiing or the Shetland Islands for Up Helly Aa, a fiery Viking festival. The long, long evenings in June up here bathe heartachingly sublime landscapes in a dreamlike light. September is the ideal time for hiking and hill walking – midges are dying off, but the weather is still reasonably good.

Best Places to Eat
» Lime Tree (p904)
» Cross (p901)
» Albannach (p916)
» Three Chimneys (p926)

Best Places to Stay
» West Manse (p955)
» Shetland Lighthouse Cottages (p961)
» Rocpool Reserve (p890)
» Mackays Hotel (p911)
Inverness, the Highlands & Northern Islands Highlights

1. Hiking among the hills, lochs and forests of beautiful Glen Affric (p894)
2. Dipping your toes in the water at some of the world’s most beautiful beaches on Harris (p939)
3. Shouldering the challenge of the Cuillin Hills (p923), whose rugged silhouettes brood over the skyscape of Skye.
4. Picking your jaw up off the floor as you marvel at the epic scenery between Durness and Ullapool (p915)
5. Relaxing in postcard-pretty Plockton (p919), where the Highlands meet the Caribbean
6. Launching into a sea-kayak to explore the otter-rich waters of the Outer Hebrides (p927)
7. Shaking your head in astonishment at extraordinary Skara Brae (p949) and Maes Howe (p948), prehistoric perfection that predates the pyramids
8. Island-hopping Orkney’s Northern Islands (p953), where crystal azure waters lap against glittering white-sand beaches
9. Capering with puffins, spotting offshore orcas, or dodging dive-bombing skuas in the Shetland Islands’ nature reserves (p964)