



# Northern Highlands & Islands

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## Why Go?

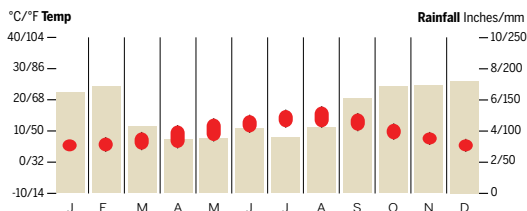
Scotland's vast and melancholy soul is here: an epic land with a stark beauty that imprints the hearts of those who journey through it. Mist and mountains, rock and heather; long summer evenings are the pay-off for so many days of horizontal rain. It's simply magical.

The chambered cairns of Caithness and structures of the Western Isles are testament to the skills of prehistoric builders; cragtop castles and broken walls of abandoned crofts tell of the Highlands' turbulent history.

Outdoors is the place to be, whatever the weather; there's nothing like comparing windburn or mud-rained boots over a well-deserved dram by the fire of a Highland pub. The landscape lends itself to activity, be it woodland strolls, thrilling mountain-bike descents, sea-kayaking, Munro-bagging, beachcombing or birdwatching. Best are the locals, big-hearted and straight-talking; make it your business to get to know them.

## When to Go?

### Portree



**Jun** Long evenings bathe achingly sublime landscapes in dreamy light.

**Jul** The Hebridean Celtic Festival is a top time to experience the culture of the Outer Hebrides.

**Sep** Less busy than summer, the midges have gone and temperatures are (maybe!) still OK.

## EAST COAST

The east coast landscapes of the old counties of Ross and Sutherland unfold real wilderness and Highland character. While the interior is dominated by mournful moor-and-mountain landscapes, along the coast great heather-covered hills heave themselves out of the wild North Sea. Rolling farmland drops suddenly into icy waters, and small, historic towns are moored precariously alongside.

### Strathpeffer

POP 1100

Strathpeffer is a charming old Highland spa town, creaking pavilions and grandiose hotels dripping with faded grandeur. It rose to prominence during Victorian times, when the fashionable flocked here in huge numbers to bathe in, wash with and drink the sulphurous waters. The tourist influx led to the construction of grand buildings and architectural follies.



### Sights & Activities

Locals have put together excellent interactive tours of Strathpeffer: download them to your phone at [www.strathpeffer.org](http://www.strathpeffer.org), or pick up a tablet from participating places around town.

The **Eagle Stone** (follow signs from the main drag) is well worth a look. It's a pre-7th-century Pictish stone connected to a figure from local history – the Brahan Seer, who predicted many future events.

There are many good signposted walking trails around Strathpeffer.

The **Strathpeffer & District Pipe Band** plays in the town square every Saturday from 8.30pm, mid-May to mid-September. There's Highland dancing and a festive air.

### Highland Museum of Childhood

MUSEUM

(☎01997-421031; [www.highlandmuseumof-childhood.org.uk](http://www.highlandmuseumof-childhood.org.uk); Old Train Station; adult/child £2.50/1.50; ☀10am-5pm Mon-Sat, 2-5pm Sun Apr-Oct) Strathpeffer's former train station houses a wide range of social-history displays about childhood, and also has activities for children, including a dressing-up box and toy train. There's a good gift shop for presents for a little somebody, and a peaceful cafe.

### Spa Pavilion & Upper Pump Room

HISTORIC BUILDINGS

([www.strathpefferpavilion.org](http://www.strathpefferpavilion.org); Golf Course Rd; ☀Pump Room 10am-5pm Jun-Aug, 1-5pm Tue-Thu & Sat-Sun Sep-May) **FREE** In Strathpeffer's heyday, the Pavilion was the social centre, venue for dances, lectures and concerts. These days it's been renovated as a performing arts venue. Alongside, the Upper Pump Room has some splendid displays showing the bizarre lengths Victorians went to for a healthy glow, and exhibitions of local art, as well as artisanal sweets and tourist information in the friendly shop.

### Square Wheels Cycles

BICYCLE RENTAL

(☎01997-421000; [www.squarewheels.biz](http://www.squarewheels.biz); The Square; half-/full day £12/20; ☀10am-6pm Tue-Sat, noon-4pm Sun) Hires out mountain bikes and gives route information; prices decrease with multiday hire.



### Sleeping & Eating

There are a couple of large hotels geared to coach tours of retirees.



### Craigvar

B&B ££

(☎01997-421622; [www.craigvar.com](http://www.craigvar.com); The Square; s/d £60/90; ☎☎) Luxury living with a refined touch is what you'll find in this delightful Georgian house in the village's heart. Classy little extras are all here, such as a welcome drink, Highland-Belgian chocolates, bathrobes and fresh fruit. The owner offers a wonderfully genuine welcome. Light, elegant rooms are great, with fabulous new bathrooms. One double has a particularly pleasing outlook and a sensational bed – you'll need to collapse back into it after the gourmet breakfast.

### Coul House Hotel

HOTEL £££

(☎01997-421487; [www.coulhouse.com](http://www.coulhouse.com); s/d £95/170; ☎☎☎) At Contin, south of Strathpeffer on the A835, Coul House dates from 1821 but has a light, airy feel in contrast to many country houses of this vintage. It's family run, and very cordial. Beautiful dining and lounge areas are complemented by elegant rooms with views over the lovely gardens; superiors look out to the mountains beyond. There are forest trails for walking or mountain biking right on the doorstep and a good restaurant. You can often find lower prices on the website.