

Understand Scotland's Highlands & Islands

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What makes the headlines north of the Highland line is rarely the same as in Edinburgh.

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It's all here – Romans, Picts and Vikings, Robert the Bruce, battling clans and Bonnie Prince Charlie.

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The Highlands and islands are hard to beat when it comes to a combination of stunning scenery and spectacular wildlife.

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Forget the tired old clichés about deep-fried everything; fresh Scottish produce is among the finest in the world.

Scotland's Highlands & Islands Today

Although an integral part of Great Britain since 1707, Scotland has maintained a separate and distinct identity throughout the last 300 years, which strengthened with the return of a devolved Scottish parliament to Edinburgh in 1999. Since then, Scottish politics has diverged significantly from Westminster, culminating in 2011 when the Scottish National Party (SNP) won a landslide victory in the Scottish elections and pledged to hold a referendum on whether Scotland should become an independent country.

Best in Print

Raw Spirit (Iain Banks; 2003) An enjoyable jaunt around the Highlands and islands in search of the perfect whisky.

Mountaineering in Scotland (WH Murray; 1947) Classic account of climbing in the Highlands in the 1930s, when just getting to Glen Coe was an adventure in itself.

The Poor Had No Lawyers (Andy Wightman; 2010) A penetrating, and fascinating, analysis of who owns the land in the Highlands, and how they got it.

The Scottish Islands (Hamish Haswell-Smith; 1996) A comprehensive and beautifully illustrated guide to the geography and history of 162 Scottish islands.

Best on Film

Local Hero The 1983 film that started a tourist stampede to the Highlands in search of Ben's Beach.

Whisky Galore! Classic 1949 comedy about islanders plundering a shipwrecked cargo of whisky under the nose of the authorities.

Scottish Independence

The hot topic of 2014 was the Scottish independence referendum, which was fiercely debated across the Highlands and islands (which voted overwhelmingly for the SNP in the 2011 election). Would the Scots need a new currency, or be able to keep using the pound? Would there be border controls with England? Would Scotland be able to remain in the EU? How would North Sea oil revenues be divided? Would the Queen still be head of state? The referendum took place on 18 September 2014, posing the question: 'Should Scotland be an independent country?' The result was that 55% voted to maintain the status quo (with a turnout of 85%). What this means for the future of Scotland remains unclear. Will there be increased powers for the Scottish parliament in Edinburgh? Will there be a collapse in support for the SNP? The closeness of the result promises that there will be wrangling for years to come.

Renewable Energy

One of the central planks of the SNP's vision for an independent Scotland was its energy policy. The party leader, Alex Salmond, said that he wanted the country to be the 'Saudi Arabia of renewable energy' – becoming self-sufficient in energy by 2020, and a net exporter of 'clean' electricity.

The Highlands and islands are central to this plan. In the first half of the 20th century it was one of the first regions in the world to develop hydroelectric power on a large scale, and since 2000 wind turbines have sprung up all over the place. By 2009 renewables provided 27% of Scotland's energy consumption, a figure that rose to 40% in 2013; the government's target is to reach 100% by 2020.

But the future of Scotland's energy industry lies not on land, but in the sea: Scotland has access to 25% of Eu-