

ORKNEY

See you at the weekend

A TIME OF SAGAS

Welcome to Viking Orkney. One thousand years ago, Orkney was not part of the Scottish kingdom, and even today the Viking legacy lives on in many local place names.

Such was Orkney's importance as the heart of a powerful Viking Earldom, the history of the earls of Orkney was told in its own chronicle – the Orkneyinga Saga.

Follow this itinerary to get a glimpse of a time of sagas.

OUTLINE

- 1 BIRSAY**
AN EARLY POWER CENTRE AND PLACE OF PILGRIMAGE
- 2 MAESHOWE**
PART OF AN ANCIENT LANDSCAPE, SHELTER FOR VIKING CRUSADERS AND AN ASSEMBLY-PLACE FOR LAW AND GOVERNMENT
- 3 ORPHIR**
AN EARL'S HALL AND FARM, AND A ROUND CHURCH INSPIRED BY A TRIP TO JERUSALEM
- 4 DEERNESS**
A VIKING ESTATE AND CLIFFTOP VANTAGE POINT IN TIMES OF SAGA SEA-BATTLES
- 5 KIRKWALL**
VIKING CAPITAL AND RESTING PLACE OF TWO SAINTS



VIKING ITINERARY



Longship at Orkneyinga Saga Centre



Brough of Birsay



Inside Maeshowe Chambered Cairn

YOUR ITINERARY

AUTUMN/WINTER
TIME: 1 DAY'S TOURING
DISTANCE: 55 MILES

1 BIRSAY

We can only imagine how the Pictish inhabitants of Orkney felt when the first Viking ships began to appear in the 8th century. By the end of the 9th century the Viking takeover was complete and Birsay had probably become the principal power centre of the new earldom. The most powerful of Orkney's rulers - Earl Thorfinn the Mighty (c1009-c1065) had his seat here, either on the tidal island called the **Brough of Birsay** or in what is now Palace village. **St Magnus Church** in the village stands on the site of the earliest cathedral in Orkney.

At low tide, walk along the wonderful beach and take the causeway to the Brough. Wander amongst the remains of Viking houses, barns, a church and monastery and even a sauna. **Historic Environment Scotland's** small visitor centre is closed between 1 October and mid-June but the site is always open. **Do make sure to check tide times before visiting.**

2 MAESHOWE

The chambered tomb of **Maeshowe** in Stenness, part of the **Heart of Neolithic Orkney World Heritage Site**, is one of the treasures of Stone Age Orkney. By the time of the Vikings it was already 4,000 years old but still a place of reverence. In the mid 1100s groups of Viking crusaders took shelter in the tomb, whiling away the time by carving runes on the walls. The runes form one of the largest such collections in Europe and include ribald graffiti, the legend of a lost treasure,

and incised drawings, the best known of which is the so-called Maeshowe Dragon. Maeshowe is in the custody of **Historic Environment Scotland** and is open every day for guided tours only. Spaces are limited and you should book online well in advance.

3 THE EARL'S BU AND ROUND CHURCH, ORPHIR

Overlooking Scapa Flow's sheltered waters lie the fragmentary remains of an **Earl's Bu** – a hall and farm - a small part of a much larger high-status Viking settlement still buried underground. There is an excellent artist's impression of the site in the **Orkney Museum**, Kirkwall. The Bu features in the Orkneying Saga as the location of the murder of Sweyn Breastrope by the notorious Sweyn Asliefsson amidst accusations of unfair drinking.

The adjacent ruinous **Round Church** is thought to have been modelled on the rotunda of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, another indication of just how well-travelled the Vikings were. The **Orkneying Saga Centre** is open daily from April to September and at other times by arrangement. **Contact the Kirkwall iCentre for more information.**

4 DEERNESS

Deerness on the eastern coast of the Mainland was another important Viking estate, probably home to Thorkel Fostri, Earl Thorfinn's foster-father.

Park in the **Mull Head** car park and you can walk along scenic windswept cliffs to the **Brough of Deerness**, a peninsula accessible by a narrow path and steps hugging the side of the cliff. Be careful going up and down, especially in wet weather. On the top of the Brough there are the outlines of up to 30 Viking buildings, a defensive wall, a well and a chapel which was first used in Pictish times. Displays in the **Mull Head Nature Reserve** visitor centre (open year round) help make sense of the overgrown remains.

5 KIRKWALL

Kirkjuvagr, church bay, as the Vikings knew it, was probably a minor settlement until Earl Rognvald Brusason, who briefly shared the Earldom with Thorfinn the Mighty, took up residence here in the early 11th century and built **St Olaf's Church** on land extending behind what is now Shore Street. It was here that the body of one of Orkney's two saints, Saint Magnus (1080-1115) was brought from its first resting place in Birsay. The Church was rebuilt several times over the centuries but all that remains today is a 16th century gateway in St Olaf's Wynd.

Kirkwall grew in importance and when St Magnus's nephew Rognvald Kali Kolsson (c1103-1158) became Earl in 1136 he decided to build a cathedral to commemorate his uncle. Construction began the following year but Earl Rognvald, a crusader and poet, died in 1158 and never saw the cathedral completed. He was canonised in 1192. The bones of Orkney's two saints are interred in matching pillars in the magnificent sandstone **St Magnus Cathedral**.

Nearby **Orkney Museum** is open every Monday to Saturday and tells the story of Orkney and the development of Kirkwall from its humble beginnings.

Perhaps the simplest yet most important Viking treasure in the museum is the wooden reliquary in which the bones of St Magnus were placed in the cathedral which bears his name.

OTHER PLACES TO VISIT IF YOU HAVE MORE TIME

There is lots to see and do in every corner of Orkney whatever the season; the quieter months are the ideal time to sightsee at a slower pace. If you have time to explore further, leaflets and guide books will guide you to many more sites throughout these Viking islands. There are good **ferry** and **air connections** to the outer islands where there is a lot of evidence of Viking settlement, some of it named in the sagas.

If you are a keen walker, the **St Magnus Way** is a 55 mile pilgrimage trail through the West Mainland.

FINDING OUT MORE

Local bookshops have a good selection of new and classic books about the Vikings and Viking Orkney, including translations of **The Orkneying Saga**.

Our one day itineraries are designed to give you a taste of Orkney. We hope that your short break will inspire you to come back for a longer stay and further explore Orkney.

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St Magnus Cathedral



Round Kirk