The Northern Isles
ORKNEY & SHETLAND SEA KAYAKING

Their relative isolation, stunning scenery and Norse history make Orkney and Shetland a very special place. For the sea kayaker island archipelagos are particularly rewarding ... none more so than these.

Illustrated with superb colour photographs and useful maps throughout, this book is a practical guide to help you select and plan trips. It will provide inspiration for future voyages and a souvenir of journeys undertaken.

As well as providing essential information on where to start and finish, distances, times and tidal information, this book does much to stimulate interest in the environment. It is full of facts and anecdotes about local history, geology, scenery, seabirds and sea mammals.

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Foreword

The Northern Isles are undiscovered treasures to rival any paddling destination. I've paddled all over the world filming sea kayaking and Orkney and Shetland remain amongst my favourite places.

Brimming with wildlife, ancient culture, rugged scenery and hospitality ... these islands have it all. Close enough to mainland Scotland to make them easy to get to but far enough away to have their own character, this is ‘accessible wilderness’. Within an hour of pushing off from a beach or slipway you can be craning your neck up at huge cliffs with seabirds flying all round you and seals swimming beneath you.

The landscape is incredibly varied, with Britain's highest cliffs, caves over 100m long, miles of white sandy beaches, heather moorland and fertile farmland. It’s usually always possible to find sheltered waters in the long inlets known as ‘voes’ or, if you prefer, there are often challenging conditions on the west coasts and in the fast flowing narrow channels between islands.

Each of the islands has its own character and a kayak is the perfect way to explore their nooks and crannies. With thousands of ancient burial chambers, standing stones and brochs, it’s easy to pull up on a beach and be the only people exploring a 5,000 year old settlement. Even better news is that it’s almost always free to look around this living museum. Modern island life is equally fascinating. On North Ronaldsay they have built a wall around the whole island to keep the sheep on the beach where they survive on seaweed.

I've never seen as many birds day-after-day as in the Northern Isles. Fair Isle is an undoubted highlight, a beautiful place to observe the eighteen different species of seabird that nest there. There are thousands of squawking birds on the sandstone cliffs of Orkney; and on Noss in Shetland, 20,000 gannets nest on a jagged precipice. If it’s calm you can land on a ledge right beneath them and have your lunch.

I've been to Orkney paddling three times and to Shetland once. On my last visit, I paddled from mainland Scotland to Shetland, via Orkney and Fair Isle. I couldn't have asked for a better mix of wilderness, wildlife, culture and sea conditions. I’ll be back!

Justine Curgenven
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Scottish Outdoor Access Code

Access to the outdoors in Scotland is encouraged; visitors and locals have a right of responsible access. Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) is responsible for promoting and publicising the Scottish Outdoor Access Code (SOAC).

Where you have access rights to is not shown on Ordnance Survey maps, or any other map in Scotland. The Scottish Outdoor Access Code deals with the land and freshwater access which is pertinent to the sea kayaker as you have to gain access to the sea over land or down a river and then again land to camp, walk or rest.

You are completely free to kayak on the sea; there is no limit how far offshore you can travel. However, for safety rather than access reasons, the further you travel offshore, during a crossing to an island for example, the more reason there is to contact the Coastguard and let them know your plans.

The Scottish Outdoor Access Code is based on three key principles and these apply equally to the public and to land managers.

Respect the interests of other people
Acting with courtesy, consideration and awareness is very important. If you are exercising access rights, make sure that you respect the privacy, safety and livelihoods of those living or working in the outdoors, and the needs of other people enjoying the outdoors. If you are a land manager, respect people’s use of the outdoors and their need for a safe and enjoyable visit.

Care for the environment
If you are exercising access rights, look after the places you visit and enjoy, and leave the land as you find it. If you are a land manager, help maintain the natural and cultural features which make the outdoors attractive to visit and enjoy.

Take responsibility for your own actions
If you are exercising access rights, remember that the outdoors cannot be made risk-free and act with care at all times for your own safety and that of others. If you are a land manager, act with care at all times for people’s safety.

Getting more advice and information

The Scottish Outdoor Access Code cannot cover every possible situation, setting or activity. Free information and advice on access rights and responsibilities, and on who to contact in your local authority, is available online at:

www.outdooraccess-scotland.com
Important Notice

As with many outdoor activities that take place in remote and potentially hostile environments, technical ability, understanding of the environment and good planning are essential. The sea is one of the most committing environments of all, and with this considered it should be treated with the constant respect that it deserves. This guide is designed to provide information that will inspire the sea kayaker to venture into this amazing environment, however it cannot provide the essential ingredients of ability, environmental awareness and good planning. Before venturing out on any of the trips described in this book ensure that your knowledge and ability are appropriate to the seriousness of the trip. If you are unsure, then look for appropriate advice before embarking on the trips described. The book is purely a guide to provide information about the sea kayaking trips. For the additional essential knowledge of safety at sea, personal paddling, environmental considerations and tidal planning the authors recommend gaining the appropriate training from experienced and qualified individuals.

**WARNING**

Sea kayaking is inherently a potentially dangerous sport, and with this considered, users of this guide should take the appropriate precautions before undertaking any of the trips. The information supplied in this book has been well researched, however the authors can take no responsibility if tidal times differ or information supplied is not sufficient. Conditions can change quickly and dramatically on the sea and there is no substitute for personal experience and judgement when kayaking or during the planning stages of a sea trip.

The guide is no substitute for personal ability, personal risk assessment and good judgement. The decision on whether to go out sea kayaking or not, and any consequences arising from that decision, remain yours and yours alone.

Acknowledgements

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Thanks also to those who have sponsored the authors in their endeavours: Sea Kayaking UK (seakayakinguk.com); Lendal Paddles (lendal.com); Reed Chillcheater (chillcheater.com).

Photographs

A special thanks is due to those who allowed us to use their photographs. All photographs are acknowledged in the accompanying captions.
How to Use the Guide

To use the guide you will need an up-to-date tide timetable of the relevant area, the appropriate Ordnance Survey map and the knowledge to use them. Unlike many inshore journeys in the UK, The Admiralty Tidal Stream Atlas is an important source of information for planning journeys around the northern isles, particularly in Orkney where there are complicated tidal streams.

Each of the fifty trip chapters is set out into six sections:

- **Tidal & Route Information** - This is designed as a quick reference for all the ‘must know’ information on which to plan the trip.
- **Introduction** - This is designed to give the reader a brief overview of what to expect from the trip and whet the appetite.
- **Description** - This provides further detail and information on the trip including the coastline, launching/landing points, the wildlife and environment, historical information and places of interest to visit.
- **Tide & Weather** – Offering further tidal information and how best to plan the trip which takes the tides, weather and local knowledge into consideration.
- **Map of Route** – This provides a visual outline of the route’s start/finish points, landing places, points of interest and tidal information.
- **Additional Information** – This section provides further information (including Admiralty Charts and other useful maps) that will complement the trip, or be of interest if in the local area.

Using the Tidal & Route Information

Each route begins with an overview of pertinent details beginning with the following information: grade of difficulty, trip name, route symbols, and trip number.

- **Grade A** | Relatively easy landings with escape routes easily available. Offering relative shelter from extreme conditions and little affected by ocean swell. Some tidal movement may be found, but easy to predict with no tidal races or overfalls.

- **Grade B** | Some awkward landings and sections of coastline with no escape routes should be expected. Tidal movement, tidal races, overfalls, crossings, ocean swell and surf may be found on these trips. They will also be exposed to the weather and associated conditions.

- **Grade C** | These trips will have difficult landings and will have no escape routes for the long sections of the trip. Fast tidal movement, tidal races, overfalls, extended crossings, ocean swell and surf will be found on all these trips. They will be very exposed to the weather and conditions, therefore require detailed planning and paddlers to be competent in rough water conditions. With this considered, the journey may require good conditions for the trip to be viable.
Distance: Total distance for the trip.

Time: Total average hours of paddling involved if paddling at an average of 5km an hour including short rest periods (this may take place over more than one day).

OS Sheet: Number of Ordnance Survey 1:50,000 Landranger map required.

Tidal Port: The port for which tide timetables will be required to work out the tidal streams.

Start: map symbol, name and six-figure grid reference of starting point.

Finish: map symbol, name and six-figure grid reference of finishing point.

HW/LW: The high and/or low water time difference between the local port nearest to the trip and the tidal port.

Tidal Times: Location or area of tidal stream movement, the direction to which the tidal stream flows and the time it starts flowing in relation to the tidal port high water.

Max Rate at Sp: The areas in which the tidal streams are fastest and the maximum speed in knots attained on the average spring tide.

Coastguard: Name of the relevant Coastguard Station.

### Map Symbols

- **△**: start & alternative start
- **○**: finish & alternative finish
- **△**: waypoint
- **△**: possible escape
- **△**: portage
- **△**: described route
- **△**: alternative route
- **△**: tidal stream direction
- **△**: time relative to Tidal Port HW
- **△**: Max Rate at Springs
- **△**: major counter-current
- **△**: areas of counter-currents / eddies
- **△**: areas of rough water / overfalls
- **△**: lateral mark buoys
- **△**: cardinal mark buoys
- **△**: lighthouse & light
- **△**: lifeboat
- **△**: ferry station
- **△**: ferry, passenger & car
- **△**: campsite & bivi site
- **△**: bunkhouse
- **△**: town / buildings
- **△**: prohibited area

**Note:** The symbols are used to indicate different features and conditions along the route. Each symbol represents a specific aspect of the journey, such as starting and finishing points, tidal conditions, and environmental features like waterways and obstacles.
About the Authors

Tom Smith

Tom was introduced to paddling by a relative on Loch Tummel in a home-made lath and canvas canoe. While doing youth work in Edinburgh he decided to join a course for instructors. During the course he found himself paddling out to the Bass Rock on a perfect summer evening. He has been a sea paddler ever since.

After a move to Easter Ross, early trips were mostly on the west and north coasts. A further move to Shetland followed in 1976. Nearly thirty years of exploring the Shetland coastline led to the decision in 2004 to set up Sea Kayak Shetland, offering guided trips, coaching and equipment sales. Tom is a BCU Level 3 Coach and Local Coaching Organiser for Shetland. Off-season he likes to travel, to paddle and walk, and just be a tourist. In addition to Shetland and the west coast of Scotland he has kayaked in places as diverse as Norway, the Greek islands and Tasmania.

Chris Jex

A school trip to North Wales was the spark for Chris’ inexhaustible passion for climbing, walking and kayaking.

Chris has worked in the outdoor industry for the past sixteen years, instructing, developing and managing outdoor activities in the Outer Hebrides, Skye, North Wales, France and Orkney. For the past seven years he has lived in Orkney, working as the Outdoor Education Advisor for Orkney Islands Council. He has paddled, dived, climbed, travelled and worked in remote and beautiful places within the UK, France, Italy, Morocco, Thailand, The Philippines, Sri Lanka and India.

Chris has shared his love of the outdoors by coaching and instructing others in a wide range of outdoor activities. He is a Level 4 Sea and Inland Coach, a Level 3 Open Canoe Coach, an Open Water Scuba Instructor and holds the Mountain Instructor Award and a Paraglider Pilot rating.
The Orkney Islands

An Introduction

Orkney is an archipelago of over seventy islands and rocky skerries, of which seventeen are currently inhabited. The island’s northerly position puts them on the same latitude as the southern tip of Greenland. Interestingly there is no landfall north, only the frozen sea-ice of the Arctic.

Orkney enjoys a relatively warm climate as a result of the Gulf Stream, seawater temperatures varying between 5°C in winter to 14°C at the height of summer. The driest months of the year are generally May and June with a settled period of weather towards the end of August and throughout September.

The land area of Orkney covers approximately 974km² measuring 86km from north to south, and 37km from east to west. The biggest island, which is referred to as the ‘Orkney Mainland’, has over three quarters of Orkney’s population of 21,000 people.

Access to Orkney is usually by ferry from the south. Ferries run throughout the year from Aberdeen, Scrabster, Gills’ Bay or John o’ Groats. You may wish to paddle across the Pentland Firth, or fly in from a number of Scotland’s main airports (folding boats required).

Orkney has benefited from the modern trappings of the 21st century, but distanced itself from many of the less appealing aspects of modern living. There are no traffic lights, fixed speed cameras, motorways or high-rise buildings, and crime levels are relatively low.

In stark contrast with Shetland, Orkney’s topography is relatively low lying (except the islands of Rousay and Hoy). The fertile soils produce excellent grass for cattle and sheep but it is now the tourist and leisure industry which is the major source of revenue for many residents.

The land shows many traces and remains of original dwelling houses, religious sites and historical artefacts from people living in Orkney over 6,000 years ago. It is said “You only have to scratch the surface to find evidence of the past in Orkney”. Due to the unspoilt nature of the Orkney landscape many sites are still to be discovered or excavated.

The earliest written reference regarding Orkney came from the Greek Explorer Pytheas who is thought to have circumnavigated the islands and who claimed to have seen ‘the edge of the world’. The Romans visited Orkney for a short period of time during the 1st century AD but left scant remains or evidence of their stay. Since the arrival of the Vikings in the 12th century, Orkney’s past has been well documented. Many stories and events are recounted within the Norse Sagas, which date from that period.

Orkney is predominantly made of soft sandstone which is prone to erosion from the wind and weather. This natural process has produced some amazing rock architecture along the high cliffs and coastal fringes. At peak bird breeding times in spring and early summer, many of the cliffs come alive with the noise, smell and sights of nesting birds flying back and forth collecting food and providing for their offspring. The low lying shorelines are excellent places to spot mammals including the otter, grey and common seals, whales, dolphins and a variety of wading birds. Leatherback turtles have been found washed up on beaches and are thought to frequent
these northerly waters in search of jellyfish, which are their favoured food. Although this guide concentrates on the coastline and information about sea kayaking, it is important to remember that, further inland, unique species of plants and animals may be found in Orkney.

Camping and accommodation in Orkney is relatively easy to find. Many of the wild camping locations may require permission from the local landowners who are generally more than happy to help and provide local information. A number of hostels, B&Bs and hotels are scattered amongst the islands and in the main towns and villages.

It is important to be aware of the exposed nature of the seas surrounding Orkney. Strong tidal waters, large sea swells and standing waves should be paid respect. Prior planning, timing and a realistic evaluation of a personal ability should be taken into account for all these journeys. Poor weather alternatives or sheltered sections of coastline are available for most. It is important to have an alternative plan or escape route, should the forces of nature turn against you.

A remote walk, cycle, car journey, hop onto a ferry or short flight will provide memorable options during poor weather or rest days. These alternative ways of exploring Orkney will give the land-bound paddler a fuller and more balanced picture of life within these enchanting islands.

The journeys within this section are in order from south to north from the South Isles of Orkney, through the Mainland and into the North Isles.

**SOUTH ISLES**

The South Isles offer an array of adventurous challenges to all abilities Whether it be paddling beneath the towering sea cliffs and rock stacks of Hoy, tackling the swirling waters and overfalls within the Pentland Firth, or just relaxing on the sheltered sea within Scapa Flow, you will not be short of choices.

**ORKNEY MAINLAND**

The Mainland provides a variety of journeys depending on the state of the tide, weather and wind conditions. Access to the sea is never more than 8km in any direction.

Within the West Mainland a large and sheltered inland saltwater loch system offers superb panoramas across rolling hills. Historic monuments dating back over 5,000 years can be viewed up-close and easily visited from the water’s edge.

The north and west coastlines of the Mainland are exposed to the ravages of the Atlantic Ocean, with remote cliffs and numerous caves to explore. The sea along these exposed shores is rarely flat due to rising or decaying ocean swell. Calm days on the west coast are to be taken advantage of!

To the south of the East Mainland the coastal fringes along the north shores of Scapa Flow offer excellent sheltered sea touring opportunities to all levels of ability, whereas the open sea further eastward has a number of powerful tidal races and overfalls formed by jutting headlands, shallow sounds and fast tidal streams. The varied coastline offers deep geos, blow holes, narrow caves and a plethora of historic sites which can be visited from the shoreline.

**NORTH ISLES**

The archipelago of islands to the north of the Mainland covers a land area of approximately 350km². The narrow sounds and currents between the islands are an excellent playground for intermediate level paddlers to test their open water crossing, navigation and tidal planning skills.
## Hoy

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>No. 4</th>
<th>Grade C</th>
<th>63km</th>
<th>OS Sheet 7</th>
<th>15 hours</th>
<th>Tidal Port Dover</th>
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<tr>
<td>Start/Finish</td>
<td>⬠ Houton (318 040)</td>
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<tr>
<td>HW</td>
<td>HW at Stromness is approximately 1 hour 50 minutes before HW Dover.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tidal Times</td>
<td>The S going stream through Switha and Gutter Sound starts 5 hours before HW Dover. The weaker N going tidal stream starts 5 hours after HW Dover. The SE going stream on the SW coastline starts 5 hours before HW Dover. The weaker NW stream starts 1 hour after HW. The W going stream in Burra and Clestrian Sound starts at HW Dover. The E going stream starts 6 hours after HW Dover.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Max Rate at Sp</td>
<td>Of the Tidal streams to the W of Rysa Little, Fara and Cava is 1.5 knots. On the W and SW facing coastline is 2 knots, more around the prominent headlands. At Tor Ness, Brims and at Cantick Head is 7 knots. In Hoy Sound is 8.5 knots. In Burra Sound is 4.5 knots.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Coastguard</td>
<td>Shetland or Aberdeen</td>
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Introduction

The journey around Hoy (High Island) is an exhilarating and spectacular experience, which should be on every adventurous sea kayaker’s shortlist of places to visit. The awe inspiring cave riddled cliffs which surround Hoy include St John’s Head, one of the tallest cliff faces in the UK, and Orkney’s most recognisable landmark, the Old Man of Hoy.

Approximately two thirds of the Hoy coastline consists of remote steep cliffs. Although they do not offer easy escape to roads or emergency assistance, they do allow the paddler to get out for a break (swell permitting) onto numerous rock and boulder-strewn shorelines. The other third of Hoy’s coastline does not disappoint. It provides superb views of Scapa Flow to the north-east and an ever changing view of deserted islands and picturesque beaches.

The journey is best completed over two or three days depending on how much time you wish to spend exploring.

Description

The journey should start with good planning and the ability to forecast the conditions which may prevail on the open W-SW coastline. Contact with Shetland coastguard should be made as a matter of course.

Access onto the water is next to a large car park to the west of the pier on the edge of the Bay of Houton. After leaving the shelter of the bay, paddle south-west across the open water known as
Bring Deeps towards Scad Head where an impressive gun emplacement, observation tower and lookout posts remain. There is an excellent sandy beach to the west of the headland.

Once around Green Head, the stunning turquoise waters of Lyrawa Bay come into view. The next bay, Pegal Bay, has a hidden deep gorge leading down towards the sea. A profuse variety of native trees and bushes grow within the gorge, which also shelters a number of rare dragonflies.

A small amount of tidal movement may occur between the small islands of Fara, Rysa Little, Cava and Hoy. The red (port channel marker) buoy within Gutter Sound leads to the Lyness Naval Base museum, café and its surrounding historic remains.

On the south shore of Switha Sound there are two prominent martello towers. The second tower at Hackness is open as a museum. Both were built in 1813 during the Napoleonic Wars and were designed to protect Baltic convoys from being raided by US warships and privateers. Keep a look out for the inquisitive resident population of porpoise within Switha Sound and along this section of the coastline.
Lyness

The naval base now lies dormant and is a shadow of its former glory when over 30,000 troops were stationed there during the two world wars. This prime location was chosen because it offered a strategic deep water anchorage able to accommodate large warships.

The pump-house and one of the former oil storage tanks have been turned into an interpretation and visitor centre with an excellent indoor and outdoor display of war artefacts, an audio visual show (within the oil tank) and a café selling homemade cakes. The museum is well worth visiting and access can be made via the slipway to the west of the main ferry terminal and pier area. The future of the area is now being considered as a container hub. If plans come to fruition, the shipping in this area will dramatically increase.

Once through the overfalls within Cantick Sound, the west going current will whisk you past the cliffs which form the southerly coastline of South Walls. A number of impressive gloup, caves and arches are hidden in amongst the steep cliffs.

If, due to poor weather or rough seas, you wish to avoid the committing paddle along the west coast, it is possible to cut short the journey by paddling north into Aith Hope, passing the old lifeboat station, and portaging across The Ayre into North Bay. The shallow sandy beach is also a good place to camp.
The tidal currents and overfalls become more predominant towards the low-lying, rocky headlands at Brims Ness and Tor Nes. The steep standing waves clearly visible to the south of the headlands give the paddler an idea as to the power of water which is forced through the Pentland Firth with each tide. From here you can push on around Tor Ness towards the towering red cliffs at Berry Head, or take time out at the beach and sand dunes close to Melsetter. The beach provides an excellent camp but it is important to be aware of livestock in the field behind the dunes.

The next section is one of the highlights of this amazing journey but it has few egress points during its 13km duration. A small number of rocky beaches may give access to the shore but once out of your kayak there is a 5km walk before any assistance can be found. It doesn’t get more remote than this in Orkney.

After passing a number of grey seal colonies and the steep storm beach at Hawick, the eroded sandstone walls lead to the much higher and more spectacular cliffs beneath The Berry with its scruffy rock stack known as The Needle. The overhanging, deep red and orange coloured rock walls create an imposing setting, especially when paddling directly beneath the cliff face. This section of coastline will leave you with some amazing memories and a crick in your neck … it’s simply amazing!

Egress or an ‘uneven’ camp is possible at Little Rackwick. Shallow reefs need to be given consideration when landing here if there is any swell. The photogenic waterfall, which freefalls over the cliffs and into the sea north of Little Rackwick has a glorious backdrop of bright green algae and plant life, making it easy to spot whilst heading north-west towards Sneuk Head. The intricate rock walls and gullies culminate in a pyramid of steep, cream coloured rock which
dominates this punctuated section of coastline. A long tumbling waterfall to the north of Sneuk Head provides another stunning backdrop.

The indented ochre coloured cliffs lead to calmer turquoise water within the Bay of Rackwick, a tranquil location with its own microclimate and some of the best beach and cliff scenery in the whole of Orkney. A bothy and sheltered camping area are located mid way along the boulder-strewn beach. The best egress is on the left of the sandy beach close to the stream outlet. The camp area and bothy has running water, toilet and a fireplace. Listen out for the grinding, rasping call of the corncrake especially towards dusk, as it has been heard within the pasture areas on a number of occasions. Be warned! In nil wind or damp conditions, Rackwick can be a haven for the Orcadian midge!

The short paddle west towards Rora Head hides the next amazing cliff-lined section of this journey. The chiselled rock headland of Rora Head has a small archway and cave with a tidal race off its steep headland.

A small amount of tidal movement may be felt around the headland at the Old Man of Hoy, but should not present a problem as long as you keep close to the coast. A wide variety of seabirds including fulmars, puffins, kittiwakes, guillemots, cormorants, razorbills, Arctic skuas and the ubiquitous great skua (known locally as the bonxie) may be seen playing in the updrafts or resting on the water.

Continuing north past Hendry’s Holes, a deep chasm and gully, you come to one of the steepest and highest continuous cliff faces in the British Isles. St John’s Head, at just over 300m high, was first climbed in 1969, the route taking a number of days and nights to complete!
The Old Man of Hoy

The prominent rock stack is one of Orkney’s iconic features. In total it stands at a height of 137m with a solid grey base of volcanic basalt, which has so far saved it from collapsing or being eroded away.

If paddling during the drier months of the year it may be possible to see climbers scaling the landward side of the rock stack which offers the least resistance to attaining its summit. Historic drawings show the rock stack as part of an archway which once linked it to the headland. The question on everybody’s lips is “When will it fall over?”

The Kame of Hoy is a steep, angular headland where an exciting paddle through an archway and a tunnel further east leads to calmer waters. The receding cliff line and waterfall east of The Kame lead up to the remote buttresses beneath the Cuilags (433m), the second highest peak in Orkney. At Muckle Head a rock stack dominates the bay with a fresh water stream and rock slabs plunging into the sea.

After passing the remains of a rusting boiler washed up from one of the many shipwrecks along this coastline, the entry into Burra Sound requires careful tidal planning. Burra Sound has a number of low-lying skerries along the south-west side of the channel which are home to a number of curious seals. These may join you as you head east around the rocky reefs and shoreline towards the pier at Moness. The pier gives easy access to the Hoy Inn (pub), the post office and a
short walk up the hill to the Hoy Centre, which has recently been refurbished and equipped as a four-star hostel, outdoor and community centre.

Paddling east into Scapa Flow offers some excellent picturesque views southwards into the deep glaciated valleys and up to the lofty peak of Ward Hill (479m), the highest point in Orkney. The cliffs, rock formations and stacks between Sea Geo and the Candle of the Sale are a spectacular finale to the journey around Hoy.

Upon reaching Chalmers Hope, head north-east across Bring Deeps back to the Bay of Houton. Entry into the Bay of Houton may be possible over shallow reefs to the west of the Holm of Houton, at certain states of the tide.

**Tide and weather**

Departure from Houton at approximately 2-3 hours before HW Dover will enable you to use the south going tidal stream out past Fara and towards Cantick Head. It would be wise to be at Tor Ness at approximately HW Dover to avoid the large overfalls which build around the headland during the first hours after HW Dover.

Strong tidal movement through the Pentland Firth, especially when combined with an Atlantic swell and an opposing wind direction, can produce some extremely rough and difficult conditions along the exposed west coastline. In these conditions egress onto rocky shores and beaches is almost impossible.

Departure from Rackwick (if used as an overnight camp) should be at least 5-6 hours before HW Dover so as to give enough time to use the last of the east going tide to assist you through Burra Sound and back to Houton. This may require you to paddle against a weakening east going tide at Rora Head and past the Old Man of Hoy.

**Additional information**

Admiralty Charts 2162, 2249, 2568, and 35 give useful information in this area.
Burray & Hunda

Introduction

Burray (Brochs Island) is an excellent introduction to day or weekend coastal paddling. The island has an exciting mix of beaches, short sections of low-lying cliffs and rocky headlands. A number of archaeological remains and historic sites along the shoreline can be visited easily by kayak during the journey.

The circumnavigation of Burray requires a short portage across Churchill Barrier No 3. This portage enables the paddler to absorb the amazing panoramas and views to Copinsay on the east, and Flotta and Scapa Flow to the west.
Description

Access onto the golden sandy beach on the east side of Barrier No 4 can be made from the small car park and toilet facility at the north end of the barrier. The sands, which have built up along the east side of the barrier over the past sixty years, have formed a stunning crescent shaped bay. The remains of rusting blockships can still be seen poking out of the sand. The area marked by a wooden totem pole, north of the beach, is an excellent camping spot.

The first section of paddling, around the east side of the island, leads you away from the clear aquamarine waters of the bay and along a gentle shoreline of rocks and seaweed, passing the rocky inlets of Sea and Wife Geo. The low-lying finger of rock at Burray Ness can produce some surprisingly large and unpredictable waves if the wind is blowing on-shore. It is worth giving the headland a wide berth if conditions are rough. A small amount of tidal movement may be felt at Burray Ness as water either empties out of Holm Sound or is deflected around the rocky underwater promontory.

The tranquil and infrequently visited beach at South Links provides respite from the open ocean. Behind the dunes there is a small ruined church and cemetery at its south end. The area around the church and dune area is covered in a technicolor show of wild flowers and vivid natural colour during the warmer months of the year.

Heading north and around the headland, a newly built wind turbine dominates the horizon. The energy efficient blades overlook a number of historic sites including the remains of two brochs situated north-west of the headland. These well-placed, defensive sites would have been
an imposing sight to an invader, reaching up to 10m in height. A number of World War I gun emplacements and lookout posts are scattered along the north shoreline. These were positioned to protect the entrances into Scapa Flow before the Churchill Barriers were built. Interestingly, the prominent World War I lookout tower and gun emplacements were built on top of one of the brochs, proving that the view from here was strategically as important to those defending the island during the Iron Age as it was in the 20th century.

Weddell Sound, now blocked by Churchill Barrier No 3, has a number of excellent sandy areas which, like those at Barrier No 4, have built up over the past sixty years to form a sheltered sandy coastline. The broken remains of the *Reginald*, a three masted schooner, provide an excellent backdrop to a picturesque lunch spot on the beach.

The portage across the road and barrier involves heading up the over-sized steps behind the beach to a lay-by and safely across the road (access via the left hand metal gate). The flat grassy area leads to a rock and seaweed lined beach. On the west side of the barrier a number of blockships are easily visible at low tide. Two of the ships, the *Martis* and *Empire Seaman*, are well worth exploring. Shallow water and easy access to the sunken wreckage make it a prime location for new divers. It is wise to keep your distance from their air bubbles which may be seen from the surface.
Depending on the open water conditions it is possible to either paddle directly to Swannies Point, or follow the shoreline towards Echnaloch, where there is a freshwater loch with a number of resident wading and nesting birds. The west side of the island is higher and less cultivated than the east, with steep, broken cliffs and a rocky shoreline. Possible egress may be found via a small slipway with a steep track leading to a single-track road, just beyond, and south-west of Swannies Point.

Hunda (Dog Island) is a haven for a variety of wildlife including otters, seals and birds. It is joined to Burray by a natural rocky reef with a concrete causeway on top of it. The causeway, built as part of the boom defences, now gives access to pasture land and livestock on the island and has an excellent view of the easterly entrances to Scapa Flow. A ruined cairn at the south promontory on the island is clearly evident.

Paddling around Hunda can be an exciting experience, especially if there is a westerly onshore wind which can produce large areas of clapotis. In these conditions, a shorter and less exposed option is to portage over the easterly end of the causeway, avoiding the 3km paddle around Hunda.

The south facing bay at Wha Taing is home to a playful colony of common seals which are usually found lazing around the headland close to the causeway. The last 4km of paddling, along Water Sound, leads past a number of steep broken cliffs, wide open bays and picturesque cottages close to the water’s edge.
Burray and the herring industry

The village of Burray flourished and developed during the 19th century, predominantly as a herring fishing community. At the height of the industry over half of the island community were involved in fishing. Unfortunately, a change in people’s preference for fresh rather than cured fish, and the fact that larger boats based on the Scottish mainland were more economically viable, meant that by 1880 the herring industry was in decline. Close to the pier, the two storey building (the Sands Hotel), was the main building used for packing and curing the herring.

At the close of the Second World War, when the barriers were completed, any remaining fishing boats were forced to relocate due to the sea passageways between the islands being blocked.

Duncan’s Boatyard, next to the hotel, was once a prosperous family business, owned and managed by many successive generations until its recent closure. It was the last remaining boat building yard within Orkney.

Leave the water at the north end of Churchill Barrier No 4 via a small flight of steps leading steeply up towards the road. At low water a small sheltered sandy beach is exposed. The portage across the road requires a high degree of care, as traffic travelling south cannot be easily seen.
Tide and weather

Tidal movement around the headlands of the island is relatively weak and does not affect the journey. Wind from the north-west through to south-west can produce windblown swell within Scapa Flow and clapotis along the steeper shoreline cliffs. Ocean swell and wind from the east through to the south can funnel into Holm Sound causing rough water around Burray Ness and the beach start point on the east side of Barrier No 4; therefore, winds from the north to north-east are preferable for this journey.

Additional information

Possible camping areas around Burray include the beaches at Barrier No 4, South Links and the shoreline to the east of Barrier No 3. Permission to camp on the land close to Hunda should be requested from the landowner who lives at the farm at Littlequoy next to the causeway.

Admiralty Charts 2162, 2249, 2250 and 35 cover this area.
The Northern Isles
ORKNEY & SHETLAND SEA KAYAKING

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