

RIDING INTO *The Shetlands*

THE RUGGEDLY BEAUTIFUL SHETLAND ISLANDS ARE A BEACON FOR WILDLIFE LOVERS AND PHOTOGRAPHERS, WHO CAPTURE ITS SPLENDOUR THROUGH THE LENS. BY EWEN BELL





The Shetland Islands are easy to fly into even if you're not a puffin. Flights land every day from Edinburgh and Aberdeen, mostly carrying travellers in search of sea birds. Fishing boats are modified in summertime to carry walkers and photographers, armed with long lenses in search of nesting gannets and guillemots.

They cling to the cliffs in their thousands, bickering and squawking like Twitter come to life. It's manic and wonderful. From the vantage of the boat you watch the birds return to shore with beaks full of fish. The cool waters of the Shetland Islands provide rich feeding for migratory birds, orcas and humpback whales.

Higher up the cliffs, where the soil is softer, the puffins nest in burrows and spend a furious few months raising chicks. Puffins have to flap their wings at 400 beats a minute to stay in the air, their stubby wings much better suited to flying underwater than above it. There are several hot spots for puffins around the islands, some an easy walk from a lighthouse and others a day walk across the wilderness.

Local bird expert Hugh Harrop takes travellers across the islands by road and sea in search of wildlife. He's a gentle guide who fits perfectly into the soft landscape of the Shetlands, hand in glove, and as calm as a Shetland pony. Hugh uses quaint little cottages for overnight stays, small lodgings that sit low against the prevailing winds. Cottages are usually in a fishing port or farming village, where the cuisine is tailored to hungry fishermen. Cod and potatoes is more likely to be on the menu than quinoa salad.

Knowledge of the ferry schedules is essential if you want to drive between islands and get off the 'mainland'. The northern tip of Unst offers spectacular views across the cliff tops and an unbroken horizon looking north to the Arctic.

Walking trails in the Shetlands are gently inclined with boardwalks on the marshy parts, and while the summer weather can be more oceanic than sunny there are always wildflowers lining the way. The big reward comes when you find yourself looking down upon a few thousand gannets as they circle in for a landing. The noise and smells are all-embracing, up close to such an abundance of wildlife where the very edge of our world meets the beginning of theirs. •

Ewen shot these images on the Canon 5DSR with the Sigma 150-600mm f/5-6.3 Sports, Canon 50mm f/1.2 and Zeiss 18mm f/3.5 lenses.

Opening image: The population of Sumburgh Head rises dramatically for a few months of the year when the puffins arrive. A short walk around the lighthouse brings visitors up close to puffins, guillemots and razorbills.

Left: Rugged coastline and an ample supply of seafood makes the Shetlands a happy home for puffins in summer.

Right, from top: Summer brings wildflowers and lush paddocks for the ponies; Gannets thrive in the Shetlands and are easily viewed on sea-going tours.



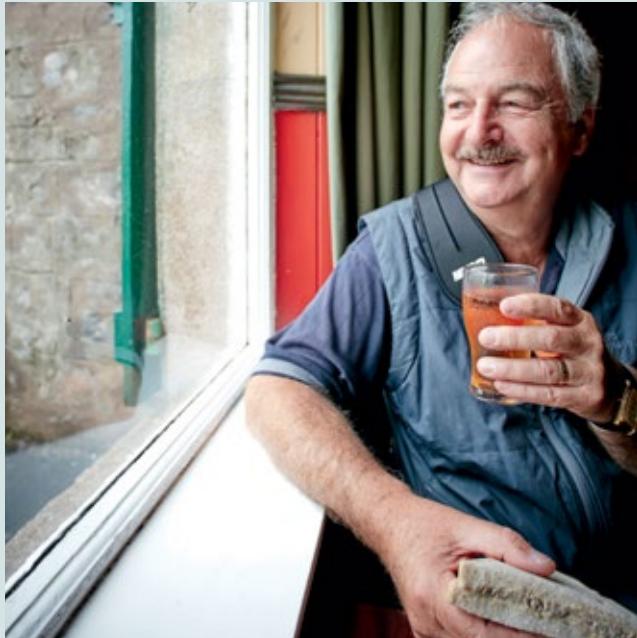


Clockwise from top: The landscape of the Shetlands is wild and beautiful and the locals love their seclusion; Crew of 'The Mousa Boat' get ready to push off, taking hikers across to Mousa Island for the day; The 'Ham House' was built in 1770 and is one of the few buildings on Mousa that has not become a ruin, erected from the abundance of stones that also serve for fencing material; Below Spiggie Loch there's a small beach of pure white sand that provides a sheltered harbour for pushing out a row boat; King tides and storms bring ashore an abundance of reef life including urchin shells.



Map Illustration: Irene Emily Graphic Design, www.ireneemily.com







Above: Shetland Ponies are valued members of the community, enjoying the quiet life with green pastures and plenty of attention from passersby.

Left, clockwise from top left: When the weather turns wild there are plenty of cosy escapes around the Shetlands; A puffin sightseeing from their cliffside retreat; Much of the fishing fleet around the Shetland Islands, like Voe, are tucked into very small ports with generous shelter and the promise of a hot meal at the bar.



TRAVEL FACTS

FURTHER INFORMATION

- Hugh Harrop's Tours: shetlandwildlife.co.uk
- Shetland Island Tourism: shetland.org