Getting to Unst

Although Unst is as far north as southern Greenland, it’s a very accessible island. Frequent vehicle ferries link the Shetland mainland to Unst via the neighbouring island of Yell. The ferries are very busy in summer and if travelling by car you are strongly advised to book by phoning the ferry office. From Lerwick it’s a 45-minute drive north on the main A970 road to Toft ferry terminal. Follow the signs for the North Isles. The crossing to Yell takes 20 minutes. When you arrive at Ulsta in Yell, follow the main road to the Gutcher ferry terminal (about half an hour’s drive) for the 10-minute crossing to Unst. There’s a daily bus service (except Sundays) from Lerwick to Unst, all year round. It leaves the Viking Bus Terminal at 0700, 0900, 1030 and 1630. A697 road to Toft ferry terminal. Follow the signs for the North Isles. The crossing to Yell takes 20 minutes. When you arrive at Ulsta in Yell, follow the main road to the Gutcher ferry terminal – connecting with ferry arrivals from Aberdeen. It is advisable to check all ferry and bus timetables before travelling. If you bring your own boat, there’s a fine natural harbour at Uyeasound, where a new pier and marina welcome visiting craft.

Unst

Welcome to Unst — the special island at the end of Britain

Britain’s most northerly inhabited island is one of the most spectacular, varied and interesting in Europe. Unst has everything that attracts visitors to Shetland — and a little bit more. Packed into an area just 12 miles long by five miles wide are stupendous cliffs, jagged sea stacks, sheltered inlets, golden beaches, heathery hills, freshwater lochs, peat bogs, fertile farmland — and even a unique, sub-Arctic, stony desert.

Unst is an ideal place to enjoy bird-watching, botany, geology, archaeology, walking, sailing, angling or traditional music — or just to enjoy the peace and quiet. There is evidence of the early Norse settlers both in the place names and archaeology. Unst has the greatest density of rural Viking longhouses currently known. The Viking Unst project is excavating examples at Hamar and Belmont. They aim to try and answer key questions about when the Vikings arrived in Shetland, how they fitted with the existing population, and how they lived when they got here. Visitors are welcome and, when the excavations are in progress, the archaeologists will explain what they are doing. Unst is also a very sociable community that welcomes visitors to local events such as the farmers market, annual show, Up-Helly-Aas, fishing competitions, regattas, concerts, musical events and dances. As well as the great outdoor attractions of birdwatching at Hermaness National Nature Reserve, rare plants on the Keen of Hamar, clean sandy beaches, wonderful coastal walks and sea and loch angling, there’s plenty on offer if the weather keeps you indoors.

The Unst Boat Haven is Shetland’s only museum dedicated to the history of the islands’ distinctive wooden boats and the line-fishermen who used them until the early 20th century. Modern pleasure-boats can be seen at the Unst Marina in Baltasound along with the Far Haaf, a locally-built replica of a sixareen (six-oared boat).

Unst Heritage Centre tells the engrossing story of the islanders’ struggle for existence over the centuries. Most Unst families are still involved with the traditional crofting life depicted here, but there’s a variety of other work based on the island’s resources and position, such as quarrying, fish farming, brewing, craftwork (fine knitwear in particular), renewable energy, and wildlife tourism.

Other indoor attractions include the leisure centre, knitwear shop, brewery and chocolate manufacturers. We hope you enjoy your visit to this remarkable, accessible and welcoming island.

Some Useful Information

Accommodation: VisitShetland, Lerwick, Tel: 01595 693434
Ferry Booking Office: Ulsta, Yell, Tel: 01957 722259
Heritage Centre and Neighbourhood Information Point: Haroldswick, Tel: 01957 711528
Shops: Baltasound
Fuel: Baltasound
Public Toilets: Haroldswick, Baltasound
Places to Eat: Haroldswick, Baltasound
Post Office: Baltasound
Public Telephones: Uyeasound, Baltasound and Haroldswick
Leisure Centre: Baltasound, Tel: 01957 711577
Churches: Haroldswick, Baltasound and Uyeasound
Doctor: Baltasound, Tel: 01957 711318
Police: Baltasound, Tel: 01957 711424
South Unst

As the ferry from Yell crosses Bluemull Sound, you pass a modern salmon farm on the right hand side, on the left Hoganeas and the ruins of one of Unst’s several brochs – circular fortresses built about 2,000 years ago. You land below Belmont House, an 18th century landlord’s mansion, which is currently being restored by The Belmont Trust. Nearby, Shetland Ponies graze at the roadside. The walk from Belmont to Lund, takes you past the deserted crofting townships of Snarravoe and Snabrough. Another fine walk is from Belmont around the south-western corner of Unst to the picturesque village of Uyeasound, a busy centre for fish farming.

Uyeasound, a short drive from Belmont, has a youth hostel. Next to the pier is Greenwell’s Booth, a Uyeasound, a short drive from Belmont around the south-western corner of Unst to the picturesque village of Uyeasound, a busy centre for fish farming.

Further along the Westing road is one of the many disused watermills, once used to grind oats and barley. Vallafield, the ridge dividing the Westing from the trout Loch of Watelee, has one of Shetland’s finest panoramas.

On the eastern side of Baltasound, is a unique botanical site – The Keen of Hamar National Nature Reserve. This desert look-alike supports a number of rare plants including Edmondston’s Chickweed, which is found nowhere else in the world but Unst.

The RAF station at Saxa Vord closed in 2006 having kept watch over the northern approaches for over 50 years. The former buildings at Haroldswick are being developed to provide a range of facilities including accommodation, a bar and restaurant.

North Unst

The village of Haroldwick, a couple of miles north of Baltasound, is home to the Unst Boat Haven – a unique collection of traditional Shetland fishing craft – and the fascinating Unst Heritage Centre, where the permanent displays include geology, genealogy and the island’s famous fine lace knitting and spinning. Both centres are open daily, May to September.

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To the east, one of Unst’s two prehistoric standing stones is by the road to Muness Castle, a 16th century fortified house open to the public. Also at Muness is a knitwear shop serving teas.

A walk from Muness north to the Easting brings you to the perfect sandy beach of Sandwick, where a Viking longhouse has been excavated and again covered in sand.

Between Uyeasound and Baltasound, a detour down the Westing side road reveals some of Shetland’s prettiest scenery. The standing stone at Bordastubble is reputedly Shetland’s largest. At Underhoull there is the remains of another Viking house, below a broch overlooking the secluded beach at Lund. Beyond the ‘haunted house’ of Lund is the ruined 12th century kirk of St Olaf, with the tombs of two German merchants and of Thomas Mount who built Belmont.

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Central Unst and Baltasound

During the herring boom years, 1880-1925, Baltasound’s population of 500 rose to almost 10,000 during the season with the influx of the gutters and coopers. Today the village has three shops, Britain’s most northerly post office (where postcards can be specially franked), a brewery, hotel, marina and a leisure centre with a heated swimming pool for those cold, rainy days. Points of interest in the area include: prehistoric carns on the hill of Crossfiddle; the ruins of Baliasta Kirk, near the side road to the Loch of Cliff; the lonely valley of Hamars and boulder beach of Woodwick (where semi-precious stones are found); and the old horse-powered mill at Hagdala, a 19th century iron chrome mine.

Traces of old mines and quarries dot the hills north of Baltasound. At Guyas, near the salmon hatchery, is a disused talc quarry.

The RAF station at Saxa Vord closed in 2006 having kept watch over the northern approaches for over 50 years. The former buildings at Haroldswick are being developed to provide a range of facilities including accommodation, a bar and restaurant.

North-east of Haroldswick, a single-track road leads to the beach and dunes of Norwick and on to Britain’s northernmost inhabited house, at Skaw. On the nearby headland of Lambaness are the ruins of a wartime radar station.

The Scottish National Heritage Visitor Centre based in the former lighthouse shore station at Burray offers a great opportunity for those who are unable to make the walk to the cliffs to learn about the seabirds of Hermaness. The world-famous reserve covers the Muckle Flugga rocks and Out Stack as well as the seabird cliffs and moorland of Hermaness. It is home to over 100,000 seabirds in the breeding season.

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