The Wild West

A walk on Shetland’s Westside brings you face to face with nature in all its amazing variety. You’ll have good views of seals, seabirds, skuas, and moorland species such as Skylark, Curlew and Golden Plover. The long, winding tidaline teems with wildlife, with everything from rock pools full of hermit crabs and sea anemones to sheltered, sandy shores with razor shells and cockles. The geology of the west side is equally fascinating – displaying outcrops of granite and volcanic rocks in a heavily glaciated Old Red Sandstone. Wild flowers abound in a landscape where traditional crofting methods have preserved many plants and habitats fast disappearing on mainland Britain. In Shetland’s West Mainland you’ll find beauty and peace – and we can promise you a beach, a cliff-top or a loch in the hills all to yourself.

Welcome to the Sunny Side of Shetland

“West is best”. It’s true – many a day when the east coast of Shetland is smothered in sea fog, the Westside is gloriously sunny. It happens particularly in summer, when south-easterly winds pick up moisture from the North Sea: as the clammy air dries, clearing away the mist. “West is best”...

The West Mainland offers many miles of hill and coastal walks, excellent birding, seal-watching and otter-spotting, great angling and some fascinating historical and archaeological sites. There are hundreds of freshwater lochs, most of them in hollows carved by glaciers out of the granite and sandstone rocks. The lochs and the burns linking them to the sea are home to trout, ducks, wading birds and plants such as Bogbean and white Water Lily.

Some Useful Information

- **Accommodation:** Visit Shetland, Lerwick, Tel: 0870 119 99640
- **Ferry Booking Offices:** Papa Stour, Tel: 01959 810460, Papa, Tel: 01959 703254
- **Neighbourhood Information Point:** Baker’s Rest, Waas, Tel: 01959 809308
- **Shops:** Bixter, Aith, Waas
- **Fuel:** Bixter, Aith, Waas
- **Public Toilets:** Bixter, Skeld, West Burravoe, Waas, Sandness
- **Places to Eat:** Waas
- **Post Offices:** Bixter, Aith, Reavoe, Skeld, Sandness, Waas
- **Public Telephones:** Sandness, Treasa, Bixter, Aith, Chirnside, Sand, Garleoch G:not Shetland, Skeld, Reavoe, Culswick, Stanydale, West Burravoe, Brig o’ Waas, Sandness, Dale, Lara Vo, Voe, Vaila
- **Swimming Pool:** Waas, Tel: 01959 809324
- **Churches:** Treasa, Aith, Sand, Reavoe, Skeld, West Burravoe, Sandness, Waas
- **Health Centres:** Bixter, Tel: 01959 810202, Waas, Tel: 01959 809352
- **Police Station:** Scalloway, Tel: 01959 880222

This is a classic “drowned coastline”, flooded by the sea at the end of the Ice Age, some 12,000 years ago. The shorescape varies from the dramatic cliffs of the outer coast to long voes (sea inlets), which extend far into the heathery hills and green croftland. Whatever the wind direction, you can always find a sheltered beach.

A Crofting Tradition

The Westside is a largely unspoilt corner of Shetland, only indirectly affected by the oil developments of the past 20 years. Very much a traditional crofting community, this is also one of the main centres of the seafood industry, with many fish farms and mussel rafts, some small, inshore fishing boats and, at Skeld, a large fish processing plant. As well as sheltering salmon and sea trout cages, the voes of the Westside are ideal for yachting and canoeing. Natural harbours shelter modern marinas at Waas (Walls), Skeld and Aith – where berths are reserved for visiting sailors. The annual regattas at Waas, Aith and Skeld are major events in the social calendar. Like the Skeld Sheepdog Trials and the Waas Show (the longest-running agricultural show in Shetland), these community gatherings include concerts and dances where visitors are always welcome.

During the summer, several village halls offer Sunday teas – terrific value with home-baking and a chance to meet local people. Most villages have a shop, post office and fuel pumps. The Westside even boasts its own heated swimming pool, bakery, spinning mill, garages and a veterinary practice.

**Accommodation** comprises MT www.VisitShetland.co.uk. VisitShetland, Lerwick, Tel: 0870 119 99640.

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Touring the Westside

Traditionally, the Westside begins at the top of the hill dividing Westside from Althisting and Sandsting. Just below the summit, the road leading downhill to the leafy gardens of Tresta crosses a fault in the Earth’s crust. A short walk up the Burn of Tactigill reveals Shetland’s largest deposit of china clay. The fault runs south to emerge at the charming, secluded pebble beach of Sandsound, a favourite picnic place.

Bixter to Alth

Gatalfirth is one of Shetland’s most sheltered voes and a winter favourite with birdwatchers – particularly for sea ducks, divers, grebes and waders. Seals often haul out along the shoreline of Bixter and Effirth Voes. The village of Bixter has a shop and a children’s play park nearby. Here the road branches north to Alth – a large township in a scenic setting. Alth has a shop, leisure centre, the Westside’s secondary school, a charity shop and a fine marina.

One of Britain’s most modern RNLI lifeboats, a 17-metre, long-range, ‘Severn’ class boat, is stationed at the Alth Pier. Take time to stop at Michaelwood, a small woodland with a picnic area, wildlife pond and bird hide. Just north of Alth is the hamlet of East Burrafirth, where a path leads up the Burn of Lunket to the waterfall and on to some exhilarating hill-walking with wonderful views of the Westside’s lochs, hills, islands and voes.

Driving north along the west side of Alth Voe you come to Vementry House and a view of the uninhabited island of Vementry. The isle has ruins of ancient homesteads and burial cairns and, on the west side, derelict Royal Navy gun emplacements from the First World War.

An interesting walk leads from Vementry House to Clousta and Noonsbrough. This was once a quiet backwater but now the sound and voes are busy with workboats and fish farms – a major source of jobs for local people. The road leads from Clousta back to Bixter through the crofting township of Twatt. The place name is Old Norse and means the clearing in the trees – a reminder that, more than 1,000 years ago, scrub woodland covered most lower-lying parts of the islands.

Sand to West Burrafirth

The road junction at Park Hall, just west of Bixter, leads to another delightful corner of the Westside. Legend says sailors from the Spanish Armada built part of St. Mary’s, the pre-Reformation chapel, just above the beach, at Sand, in thanks for deliverance from shipwreck on the offlying Kirk Holm. Only the horizon, while a maze of spectacular coves and sea stacks skirts the beautiful Bay of Deepdale. There is more good walking south to Watsness, Footabrough and Littlure.

A couple of miles beyond Skeld are two of the most exquisite bays in Shetland – Westerwick and Culswick, each a narrow green valley ending in a pebble beach fringed by sea stacks, cliffs and caves. A track beside the Culswick chapel leads to the remains of the Culswick Broch high on a hill overlooking the entrance to Gruting Voe and Vaila Sound. From Skeld the road to Brig o Waas (Bridge of Walls) passes the tranquil inlets of Gruting Voe, Selivoe, Sculta Voe and the Voe of Browland. Remains of prehistoric settlements are scattered among modernised croft houses. In early summer the roadside verges display an amazing variety of wild flowers.

Just north of Scutta Voe lies the extraordinary Stanydale ‘temple’, reached by the side road from the A971 at Hulma Water. The heel-shaped ruins are thought to be almost 4,000 years old. Surrounded by the remains of field walls and several oval-shaped houses, this is the largest Stone Age structure in the islands. The ferry to the island of Papa Stour leaves from the snug fishing harbour of West Burrafirth, set in a landscape of tiny lochs and hummocky hills. A side road to the hamlet of Brindister is the start of a grand walk around the rocky headland of the Neans. Folklore says a cave here was the hide-out of Da Tief o da Nean – a notorious sheep-theif who ended his days in a Scalloway prison cell.

Waas (Walls) and Sandness

From Brig o Waas the road passes the prehistoric site of Brouster, and winds through the hills to Sandness, a crofting township in a spectacular setting overlooking St. Magnus Bay and Papa Stour. Sandness has Shetland’s only wool spinning mill where visitors are welcome. The district’s many archaeological remains include watermills at Haxter and several burial cairns and brochs.

Sandness Hill and the coastal walk beyond Haxter have breathtaking views of the westernmost point of the Shetland mainland. The dramatic silhouette of the island of Foula sits out on the Atlantic horizon, while a maze of spectacular coves and sea stacks skirts the beautiful Bay of Deepdale. There is more good walking south to Watsness, Footabrough and Littlure.

The village of Waas [Walls] makes a good base for exploring the Westside, with its camping and bed-and-breakfast houses. Sheltered by its islands, Vaila Sound offers safe summer anchorages and a ferry service to the island of Foula. There is also a bakery, shop [with Neighbourhood Information Point], post office and a cheerful boating club which welcomes visitors. Just above the shop you will find the Baker’s Rest tearooms where you can enjoy goods direct from the Waas Bakery.