

# SHETLAND: LAND OF THE 'SIMMER DIM'

The farthest-flung bit of the British Isles is finding fortune in an unlikely pair of exports: crime dramas and great food. It's also the place to visit for the UK's longest summer days. Susan Low heads north to find a community whose ship has come in



**hungry traveller.**



Shetland has a stark beauty. One moment the sheep-dotted, heathery hills glow purple in sunshine, blue skies are

reflected in an Aegean-hued sea and curving sandy beaches beckon. The next, it's Scandi Noir-grey and blowing a gale that threatens to blow the bloody doors off.

Place names have an old Norse ring – Beosetter, Skeld, Tresta. The Vikings settled here around 800AD, and their rule didn't end until 1468 (Shetland only became part of Scotland in 1471). Shetlanders are intensely proud of their Viking heritage – visit in January and you'll witness the incendiary madness of Up Helly Aa, the annual fire festival that marks the end of Yule. Or come for what Shetlanders call the 'simmer dim', from mid-May to mid-July when daylight seems to last forever – a full 19 hours at its peak.

Shetland can cast a bewitching spell. Crime writer Ann Cleeves is just one incomer who found the place hard to leave. She dropped out of university to take a job as a cook at a bird observatory on Fair Isle, where she met her husband. Her novels set on these islands inspired the BBC crime drama series *Shetland* and have lured many a visitor here, myself included.

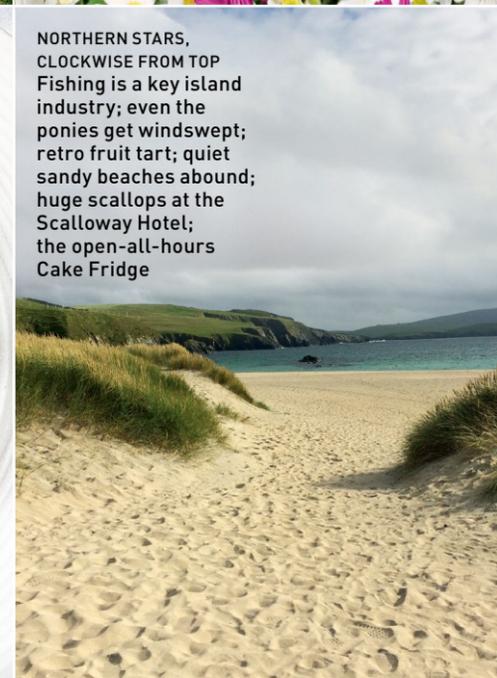
## THE LURE OF LERWICK

Keen to see what Shetland's capital had to offer I headed for the centre of Lerwick. Flagstoned Commercial Street, festooned with bunting and lined with shops selling hand-knit jumpers and Shetland crafts, has a hint of Harry Potter about it. But the rougher area around the docks could be a backdrop for a Shetland version of *On the Waterfront* – until the cruise ships come in, that is.

These seafaring behemoths, carrying up to 7,000 passengers each (about the population of Lerwick itself), dwarf the harbour, and they're becoming an ever more common sight. Local online newspaper *The Shetland News* →



NORTHERN STARS, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP Fishing is a key island industry; even the ponies get windswept; retro fruit tart; quiet sandy beaches abound; huge scallops at the Scalloway Hotel; the open-all-hours Cake Fridge



reports that in 2018 Lerwick welcomed 93 cruise ships and some 93,000 passengers; even more are expected this year.

Lerwick's ship, it seems, is coming in. Last year, local boy James Morton, the jumper-clad medic who so nearly won *Great British Bake Off* in 2012, collaborated with his dad James to write *Shetland: Cooking on the Edge of the World* (see the recipe on p124), a book about the archipelago's tight-knit (ahem) community and its food. And, of course, the tiny capital's newfound Shetland-noir fame means many a disembarking passenger is keen to follow in the footsteps of fictional Detective Jimmy Perez, star of the hit drama. They're also, it's fair to say, keen to get a taste of what Shetland has to offer.

Trying to avoid a gaggle of fresh-off-the-boat sightseers, we headed for stylish café and restaurant **The Dowry** (98 Commercial Street). Opened in June 2018, it has queues at lunchtime when it serves Nordic-style flatbreads and huge charcuterie boards. There's a good beer list and fish-centric dishes on the menu Thu-Sat evenings.

Nearby, on The Esplanade, **The Peerie Shop Café** ([facebook.com/peeriishopcafe](https://www.facebook.com/peeriishopcafe)) is a favourite of Tom and James Morton. Tom describes chef James Martin – not *that* James Martin) as "A culinary hero of ours – and they serve good coffee." Open for breakfast and lunch, it's famed for its scones, muffins and cakes.

The newest restaurant-bar-music



venue **The String** (88 Commercial Street), which opened last summer, is headed up by Goa-born chef Akshay Borges, who made a name for himself at The Scalloway Hotel (see *Where to Stay*, p124). He won a national seafood competition this spring, and local produce figures

large on the menu, with a few flavours from the Subcontinent, too.

### LET THEM EAT CAKE

In Shetland, Sunday is cake day. Sunday teas – a laudable institution – are not to be missed. Local food writer Marian Armitage assured me these sweet-toothed fundraising events "really are the essence of Shetland's communities". She explained: "The community hall committees organise them to raise funds and each member will make batches of whatever they do best: Jeannie's bridal slices, Winnie's lemon sponge and so on."

Villages take it in turn to host, and each weekend's teas are advertised in the Friday edition of *The Shetland Times*. This weekend it was Aith's turn. We skipped breakfast and set the GPS for Aith, a coastal

village on West Mainland. And on the way to eat cake, we stopped for... yes, cake. Spotting the 'Fresh Home Baking' sign, we screeched to a halt outside **The Cake Fridge** (Roadside Cottage, East Burrafirth). It really is a fridge, filled with fairy cakes, cupcakes and various tiffins and open 24 hours, night and day, with an 'honesty box' inside. We found owner Lynn and her team making cakes in her croft. "Most people are honest," she says, "but I've had to install CCTV." They're also planning to expand the operation into a café or tea room.

Fortified, we headed on to Aith and squeezed into the busy car park. We paid £4 to enter the hall and instantly time-shifted decades into the past. My Scottish husband, clapping eyes on a glow-in-the-dark peach and jelly cake, declared he

hadn't seen anything like it since 1974. There were piles of bannocks (griddled flatbreads) and cheese scones, platters of pastel-coloured fancies, fruit slices and fairy cakes; bakes of all shapes and sizes laid out in an all-you-can-eat sugar-rush.

### PRESERVING TRADITIONS

Other Shetland food traditions are less globally popular than baking, but they're part of what's kept the islanders alive over the centuries. As Tom Morton writes, "Shetland's food stems from survival." I met two men doing their best to ensure these traditions don't die out.

Jay Joubert of Anderson Butchers is a South African who now lives in Lerwick and is an enthusiastic convert to reestit mutton, the salted, dried leg of local sheep that's a prime candidate for Shetland's

national dish. Jay explained how after salting, brining and drying, the meat loses almost half its weight, concentrating the flavours and preserving it. "You need to boil it for six hours before you eat it." Jay urged me to try something I'm unlikely to have elsewhere: reestit stew with carrots, which shows off the meat's salty, intense flavour.

The salty tale continued when I met salt cod producer David Polson, who runs Thule Ventus. He describes his small company as "a hobby that got out of hand". "My dad ate most of my early attempts," he jokes. David has worked in Shetland's fishing industry for decades and is a walking fact-book on the subject of salt cod. He describes the period of the late 1700s and early 1800s as "the heyday of Shetland's salt cod", →

ISLAND LIFE, CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE The capital Lerwick; hardy Shetland sheep; the islands are a key habitat for otters; the traditional way of preserving lamb



### MEET THE PRODUCER

I visited Ronnie Eunson at his windswept 2,000-acre organic Uradale Farm overlooking the *voe* [a deep inlet] separating it from Scalloway. "We focus entirely on native breeds of sheep and cattle," Ronnie says. Native Shetland sheep pre-date the Vikings and are small and tough – but the meat has a superb flavour. "When we started out 14 years ago there was no market for them," he says, but Ronnie sent some meat to C Lidgate butchers in London – who put it on sale and asked for more (you can buy it online at [lidgates.com](https://www.lidgates.com)).

It's a similar story with Shetland Kye cattle; by the 1980s, the breed was endangered. Uradale now farms about 30 of this hearty breed and sells the meat locally. Farming in these northern climes is as much about maintaining the land and local food traditions – although it helps that the meat tastes brilliant too. As Ronnie puts it, "What you see, you taste."

PHOTOGRAPHS: ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES, VISITSCOTLAND.COM, SUSAN LOW, GUY DIMOND

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## hungry traveller.

when the islanders wrested control of the production from the Basques and cornered the market.

Though its heyday has passed, David assured me the tradition of people salting their own fish – cod, or the local piltock (pollack), is still alive. “You can sometimes still see it drying on people’s clothes lines.” When, weeks later, I cooked up a batch of David’s salt cod, the saline flavours took me straight back to Shetland... Surely I could still feel the stiff breeze in my hair.



### WHERE TO STAY

#### • Scalloway Hotel

Overlooking the harbour, this family-run hotel serves the best food in Shetland – seared scallops with pea foam, followed by lamb from Uradale Farm (see box, p122). *Doubles from £140 B&B; scallowayhotel.com*

#### • Busta House Hotel

Friendly country house hotel in beautiful grounds on the shore of Busta Voe in the west of Main Island. The restaurant serves local produce without fuss. *Doubles from £115 B&B; bustahouse.com*

### HOW TO GET THERE

If you’re not a fan of sea travel (northlinkferries.co.uk), Loganair is the only other way. Flights from Aberdeen to Sumburgh start at around £190 return in June.

*Thanks to A Taste of Shetland for organising the trip; for more info see tasteofshetland.com.*

### James Morton’s oatcakes v

SERVES 12. HANDS-ON TIME 15 MINUTES,  
OVEN TIME 35-45 MIN

“Shetland oatcakes are meant to be crumbly. When you try to move them from one place to another, they should crumble between your fingers. (The only place you need move them to is your mouth.) This is achieved through the liberal use of pinhead oats, which give a texture almost like rough sandpaper on your tongue. There’s nothing quite like it.”



For more snap in the oatcakes add an extra splash of water and knob of butter in step 1.

- 100g salted butter
- 225g oatmeal (preferably ‘medium’)
- 100g pinhead (steel-cut) oats

- 1 Heat the oven to 170°C/150°C fan/gas 3½. Put the butter in a saucepan with 100ml water and melt over a low heat (see tip).
- 2 Put the oats in a large mixing bowl. When the butter has melted, add it to the oats. Mix together to form a moist paste.
- 3 Take a tablespoon of the paste and put it on a baking sheet lined with non-stick baking paper. Repeat with the rest of the mixture to make 12 even mounds (you might need 2 baking sheets), then pat the mixture down into 1cm thick rounds.
- 4 Bake for 25 minutes, then carefully turn the oatcakes over, if you can, using a palette knife or fish slice. If you can’t turn them, bake for a further 5-10 minutes and then turn. Once turned, they’ll need 10-15 minutes more. Remove from the oven and cool the oatcakes completely.

**PER OATCAKE** 175kcal, 9.1g fat (4.7g saturated), 3.3g protein, 18.8g carbs (0.1g sugars), 0.2g salt, 2.2g fibre d

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THIS AT  
HOME

