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Ten Best Stories of 2009

Summer Solstice on the Orkney Islands:

Pondering Ancient Feats of Architectural Genius

By Steven Bochenek

Suddenly, a massive arm drags me from behind, away from the bar.

"Honeymuining here? Whoot the hill fure?"

Who is this aggressively friendly giant? His accent sounds like a bad cartoon idea of Swedes. Though Scottish, Orkney Island is closer to Norway than Edinburgh, and the influence is apparent.

"How did you know we're honeymooning?" Clearly word travels fast. We'd only arrived the day before, to be near the Arctic Circle for today the summer solstice.



"Boab telt ush," he sings. Over his shoulder he indicates a man with a purple complexion. Bob had insisted on buying us drinks the night before in the Pomona Inn, another pub miles away in the village of Finstown.

"We came for the stone circles and pre-history."

Orkney is a group of more than 70 islands, actually, north of Scotland. It's easy to imagine life here 200 years ago. People speak in paragraphs, taking time to tell a story or set up a joke. It's almost as easy to imagine life five millennia ago. Really.

Within an hour's bike ride of this port town, Stromness, lies a UNESCO World Heritage Site whose structures rival even Stonehenge for their impressive antiquity. Best thing is, they're easily doable for families. Kids especially love them for their sheer caveman cool.



Stromness is a picturesque harbor town of 1,200. Note the rich green of the fields out of town. During midsummer the farmers take advantage of the days' length, fertilizing with good old-fashioned silage. The strong crosswinds plastered the scent into our clothes during our day of cycling into pre-history. Photo courtesy of visitorkney.com

On this very day, we'd crisscrossed this grimly beautiful rock on rented bikes, visiting these structures which make the Holy Land seem young and pimply. We were tired but pleased to explain to Peter and his ring of friends why we'd come all the way from Canada to Orkney on our honeymoon.

"And y' cam for the drink, I see!" Peter the giant pointed at Bob of the alcoholic hue. The crowd erupted in laughter. A typical Celtic trait: it's fun to poke fun. Once you've been made an object of ridicule, you're in. Peter bought us another round to toast these foolhardy newlyweds.

Our day started in Finstown, around the corner from the Pomona Inn. While we waited for the bus to carry us back into Stromness, a nasty wind shot painful needles of rain into us sideways. Our travel-dork Gore-Tex jackets were only somewhat useful. "It'll pass," the bus driver confidently smiled.

It did. The maritime winds in northern Scotland ensure a bounty of weather every hour. As one chap hilariously observed, "In Canada, you get weather every day. Here, we get climate!" By the time we arrived at Stromness – a 20-minute ride – the skies were a brilliant blue, punctuated by the occasional lonely cumulus. The day was magnificent and we followed through on our plan to rent bikes.



The Standing Stones of Stenness were erected 4,500 years ago. Just being there, your spirit soars. Few travel experiences were ever more inspiring. Though it was the longest day of the year, note the need for the travel-dork windbreaker. Click on photo to enlarge.

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ORKNEY INFO

Learn more at www.visitorkney.com, orkneyjar.com, and watch [live webcasts](http://live.webcasts) of the sun's movement into Maeshowe, created by Charles Tait Photographic.

How we got there: Orkney tourism's promotional website boast "Orkney is nearer than you think."

It's not.

Flying there from south Scotland isn't cheap. We got a ferry from Scrabst near the towns of John I Groats and Wick at the tip of mainland Scotland. We got there by train from Inverness. The ferry ride a couple of hours on the often rough North Sea.

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First, we booked into a local bed and breakfast, warning them that we wouldn't be back until late. They weren't the least bit surprised. On Orkney the summer solstice is a bit like Christmas. Celebration is everywhere. The locals golf at midnight because they can.

"No, the green fees aren't cheaper," Peter anticipated my question. Hippies and flakes flock here to groove out in the stone circles whose alleged magical properties are supposedly heightened.

To test this dippy theory, we rode back out of town and into the ancient past.

Nearly twice as old as Rome, Maeshowe is a 4,500-year old cairn whose masonry trumps the skill of builders for millennia to come. Outside, shaped like a massive grass-covered igloo, it's a symmetrical lump in an otherwise billiards-table-flat farmer's field. Inside, you could barely squeeze a dime between the massive sandstone blocks, carefully arranged into a soaring dome.

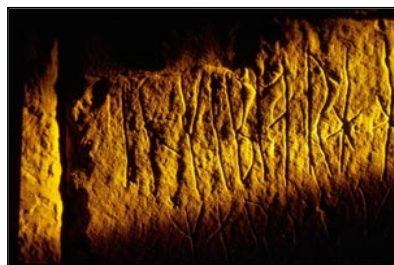
Entry requires an extended crouched duckwalk down a tunnel just 1.4m (4.6ft) high and 14.5m (47.6ft) long. So you don't expect the spacious magnificence inside this ancient stone bubble. The chamber's diameter measures a jaw-dropping 35m (115ft) and at its apex the ceiling is 7m (23ft).

Maeshowe was rediscovered in 1861. A farmer noticed the grassy hillock his sheep grazed on was too symmetrical to be natural. He dug and unearthed this Neolithic marvel.

People assume it was a burial chamber because the farmer found a shard of skull in one of the three 'graves.' But if there had been bodies in these shelves they'd long since been plundered. The farmer found proof he wasn't the first in.

Vikings left runes on the wall 800 years ago, some of the best preserved anywhere. Much of it was your typical smutty bathroom graffiti, according to translations at OrkneyJar.com. Consider "Ingigerth is the most beautiful of all women" (carved beside a rough drawing of a slaving dog). Or this Nordic riff on every teenage guy's favorite, "Thorni f***ed."

Filth aside, the runes also report that these Vikings had been seeking treasure. But they believed it had already been stolen by the crusaders who'd also graffitied walls earlier. Amazing.



800 years ago, but nearly 4,000 after Maeshowe was built, it was invaded by marauding Vikings. The graffiti they left – a sort of medieval tagging – is one of Europe's best collections of runes. There are stories of two explorers who went mad after a couple of days in this creepy tomb; disappointment about losing whatever treasure had already been plundered to crusaders who'd broken in first; and good old fashioned sexual smut, as you'd expect from graffiti.

When you can physically touch thousands of years of human activity, you ponder plenty. Like all this medieval tagging.

At what point does hooliganism become important historic documentation?

There's famous graffiti by Lord Byron in the dungeon of Chateau de Chillon on Switzerland's Lake Geneva. Roman soldiers carved toilet humor into what were already 2,000 Egyptian monuments – Napoleonic soldiers did the same 1,800 years later.

Will the spray-paintings of the Bloods and Crips be valued cultural insights 1,000 years from now?

Vikings, Crusaders, Bloods or Crips – who knows how many times this big creepy room's been explored and exploited? If it was a tomb it was an important one because – fasten your seatbelt, please...

This is also a massive prehistoric calendar.

The sun kisses the back shelf on the shortest day of the year. Provided you're between cloudy blasts, as it sets, the sun drenches the long low corridor with light and salutes this empty grave! During the weeks preceding and following December 21, the sun gradually inches to and from this spot. But on the solstice it's perfect. Every midwinter for thousands of years.

Amazing, yes, but why did they do it? A path to the next world for an important king? A religious display of gratitude for the precious sun that grows what meager crops the surrounding stony fields can yield? Aliens? We don't know.

The people who lived here thousands of years ago left no written language. But we must assume this calendar is no accident. Just imagine the builders' math skills to conceive of all this. (I get stumped just trying to convert the admission charges.) Then add to that the gargantuan task of executing their vision.

It gets more mind-blowing.

Right at sunset on the winter solstice, the shadow from the Barnhouse Stone, a single megalith in the middle of a field half a mile away, lines up with the entrance to Maeshowe. This stone, in turn, aligns at midwinter sunrise with another huge lonely marker the Watchstone and finally with the center the Ring of



Maeshowe is a 4,500 year old, massive stone tomb. You crouch-walk through a 48-ft tunnel before entering a stone dome reaching 23ft high and 115ft in diameter. But what's truly epic is that at midwinter, the sun sets directly down the tunnel to the grave-shelf at the back. This 'calendar' is still accurate five millennia later. Imagine these ancient builders' math skills. photos: Visit Orkney.

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Brodgar. Which is?

The Ring of Brodgar is a titanic stone circle nearly another half mile away, twenty-seven of whose 14-foot triptychs still stand today. There were once sixty but, at 114 yards wide, it's easy to picture them all still in place.

I marveled that they could ever create so perfect a circle without a computer or even a protractor. Then the guide told us that if you affix a piece of string to a post, stretch it straight, then walk in one direction, you have a perfect circle.

Umm. Yes, well. This deflating epiphany doesn't diminish the immense awe you feel walking the Ring of Brodgar. Access is free. And if you love henges and stone circles, ride your bike less than a mile back.

The Standing Stone of Stenness are even more impressive. Originally a circle of twelve stones, there are now four with what may have been an altar in the middle. Though they're fewer than Brodgar, the triptychs here tower to over six yards high but are less than a foot wide. Standing beside them, your spirit soars.

Why haven't they snapped and all fallen over in the five millennia since they were first erected? They weigh tons. How did the builders transport and erect them? At 58 degrees north, we're well past the tree line. So rolling these vast singular slabs of stone on logs wouldn't have been cheap or easy. Few experiences in many years of travel have come close to leaving me so utterly gobsmacked.

And that was our morning. We rode northwest for an hour. The destination was less than 8 miles but we were pushing hard into the wind to the edge of the island.



Ride your bike for hour from Stenness and you're at Skara Brae, a stone-age village made of (big surprise) stone. It was unearthed during a violent storm in 1850. It contains houses with drainage and furniture for 4-foot Fred Flintstones.

Skara Brae is a stone-age village composed of (big surprise) stone. Impossibly well preserved, it features actual stone homes, complete with drainage and stone furniture, between little alleys. It was unearthed during a violent storm in 1850.

Children love it here because, what's most striking, is the diminutive size of the structures. It was easy for the kids to imagine themselves living here because the houses Skara Brae contains were built for four-foot Fred Flintstones. Though a popular source of international insults, Scottish nutrition has clearly come along way in the past five thousand years.

For us adults, the aforementioned gobsmacked marveling continued: how could these hobbits possibly have built the huge structures we were puzzling at just an hour earlier?

And the harshness of the environment. Even on this longest day of the year, which remained sunny and dry

from 10am till midnight, we were often chilled by the strong winds. It's beautiful here but relentless. Life must have been tough and as short as the people themselves.

"What's that smell?" On our ride back to Stromness, local farmers were making the most of the long days, fertilizing their fields. This was the day I learned the meaning of 'silage.' Most of the island was redolent – even the café we were sitting in after we arrived back in town, around 4:00pm. Or was it?

I sniffed my travel-dork gore-tex jacket.

Yes, the layers we'd sported became sweaty with the exertion necessary to pedal into the wind. So the scent of sheepdip had been nailed into us. We skulked back to our b&b, at least ten hours earlier than planned, showered and changed. Later we strode to the pub where we where we met Peter and friends.

Unlike many UNESCO designated destinations, the locals here aren't resentful of travelers. Their economy is robust. They export a lot of goods, from dairy to oatcakes to whisky – that stone circle pictured on Highland Park, a single malt enjoyed worldwide, is the Ring of Brodgar – and they don't depend desperately on tourism. They were as curious about us as we them.

"Fühnnny accint you got," Peter teased. I bought the final round.

How we got there:

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27 of the Ring of Brodgar's 14-foot triptychs still stand today. There were once 60 but it's easy to imagine them all still in place. I marveled that they could ever create so perfect a circle without a computer or even a protractor. Then the guide told us that if you affix a piece of string to a post, stretch it straight, then walk in one direction, by default you have a perfect circle.

Pin it

0

Stumble

Digg it!

The islands have unlikely names like Papa Westray, Hoy and Shapinsay. But if you're keen on ancient history – or just get a buzz from seeing a massive stone circle for free – you don't need to leave the Orkney mainland to feel like you've left the real world behind.

Learn more at www.visitorkney.com, orkneyjar.com, and watch [live webcasts](#) of the sun's movement into Maeshowe, created by Charles Tait Photographic.



Steven Bochenek is a veteran marketing writer who has dabbled in editorial the past couple of years, and recently added travel to his portfolio.

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