

# Sutherland: From beaches to peaks

*The remote, rugged terrain of the North West Highlands Geopark gives way to beautiful beaches along Sutherland's north coast, while the fairytale Dunrobin Castle is the standout attraction on the eastern fringe*

■ **Sandwood Bay** – Considered to be one of the most unspoilt and beautiful beaches in Britain, with nearly 1.5 miles of wide pink sand flanked by cliffs and the impressive sea stack of Am Buachaille. This remote bay has no road access but can be reached by a four-mile, fairly flat path leading from the gravel car park at the hamlet of Blairmore, near Kinlochbervie. Various legends and mysteries are associated with Sandwood. A local farmer claimed to have encountered a mermaid there, while the ghost of a sailor from a shipwrecked Spanish Armada galleon was said to appear on stormy nights. The beach is part of the Sandwood Estate, which is run by the John Muir Trust.

■ **Handa Island** – Just off the coast of north-west Sutherland the uninhabited Handa Island is one of Britain's most important breeding grounds for a range of seabirds including puffins, guillemots, fulmars, razorbills and skuas. Until the 1840s Handa had more than 60 residents, but the 1848 potato famine led to migration to Canada for many islanders and it has generally remained uninhabited ever since. The island is a Scottish Wildlife Trust nature reserve and it is manned throughout the summer by volunteer wardens. Visitors can reach Handa via a boat service from Tarbet, near Scourie – where there happens to be a wonderful seafood restaurant.

■ **North West Highlands Geopark** – The geopark takes in around 2,000 square kilometres of mountain, peatland, beach, forest and coastline from Wester Ross to the north coast of Sutherland. Its eastern boundary follows the Moine Thrust zone, an internationally significant geological structure that helped 19th-century geologists understand how the world's great mountain ranges were formed. Investigate the area's amazing geology at the Knockan Crag earth science site. A short walk up a limestone valley will lead you to the Bone Caves – an ancient series of caverns where the bones of polar bears, reindeer, wolves and arctic foxes have been discovered, relics of the Ice Age.

■ **Suilven** – Rising out of the ancient Assynt landscape, Suilven is a stunning sight with its distinctive two peaks. The climb to Caisteal Liath – the Grey Castle – is steep and unrelenting,

but you are rewarded with amazing view of the lochans and moors of Assynt far below. Either walk from Lochinver, following estate tracks past Glencanisp Lodge, or start at the parking area at Inverkirkaig. This option means you can also visit the Falls of Kirkaig, a fine walk in its own right. For the adventurous, it's also possible to reach the base of Suilven by kayak. North-west Sutherland's other mountains include Ben Loyal, Ben Hope, Foinaven and Arkle.

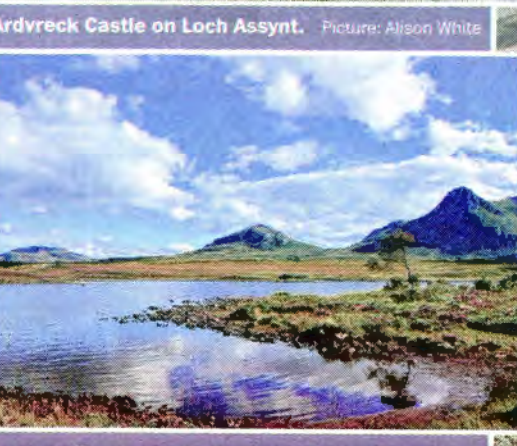
■ **Assynt Visitor Centre** – Live pictures of a golden eagle nest can be seen here, thanks to the only project of its kind in Scotland. A small CCTV camera is positioned on a steep crag in a remote Assynt glen and the images are beamed to the visitor centre in Lochinver. The centre is a base for VisitScotland tourist information and the Highland Council ranger service.

■ **Cape Wrath** – From Durness, the most north-westerly village in mainland Scotland, visitors can take a short ferry trip across to the peninsula of Cape Wrath, which is home to an operational lighthouse built in 1828 and an abundance of wildlife. It is also a Site of Special Scientific Interest and a protection area for breeding birds.

■ **Scourie** – The village of Scourie, in the parish of Eddrachilles, is an ideal base for exploring the far north-west. It is said that palm trees, Highland cattle and red-throated and black-throated divers can all be seen from the foreshore here, depending on the season. Take a trip with Scourie Wildlife Cruises to explore the spectacular coast and its abundant wildlife.

■ **Smoo Cave** – Venture deep into an eerie underground world at Durness. Smoo Cave has an entrance 100ft wide and a wooden walkway allows you to view an inner chamber where the Allt Smoo burn falls from a gap in the roof. There are boat tours of the cave throughout the summer. Durness itself boasts a beautiful stretch of golden sands and its chocolaterie Cocoa Mountain is famed far and wide.

■ **Beaches** – There are superb, unspoilt beaches along the west, north and east coasts including Clachtoll, Achmelvich, Balnakeil Bay, Sango Bay, Bettyhill, Coldbackie, Melvich, Strathy and Dornoch.



■ **Dunrobin Castle** - Resembling a French chateau with its conical spires, Dunrobin stands above a magnificent garden that took its inspiration from the Palace of Versailles. The castle has 189 rooms and was home to the earls and, later, the dukes of Sutherland. Away from the grandeur of Dunrobin's interior, there is a museum within the grounds containing an intriguing mix of safari souvenirs, archaeological relics and other artefacts. Visitors to Dunrobin can also watch falconry displays.

■ **Dornoch Cathedral** - This impressive building, with its magnificent stained-glass windows and stunning woodwork, has been attracting worshippers and visitors since it was built in 1239.

■ **Historylinks** - Dornoch's five-star museum features displays on a wide range of subjects related to the area's rich history.

■ **Golf** - The Royal Burgh of Dornoch is famed for its championship golf course, ranked No. 6 in the world by *Golf Digest* in 2014, ahead of the Old Course at St Andrews. James Braid helped design so many courses in the Highlands that a trail has been dedicated specifically to him, enabling golfers to follow in his footsteps. Brora, Golspie and Fortrose and Rosemarkie are among those featured.

■ **Big Burn** - Not far from Dunrobin, signposted from the other side of the A9, is the Big Burn - a short walking route through scenic woodland and up a gorge ending in an impressive waterfall.

■ **Timespan Museum and Arts Centre** in Helmsdale has historical exhibits, a storytelling room, a gallery, a riverside café and a garden of herbs and flowers. Discover the story of the 1868 gold rush in the

Strath of Kildonan and find out more about the 19th-century Clearances. Nearby, overlooking the village harbour, is *The Emigrants* - a statue commemorating those who left the Highlands to travel to the far corners of the world.

■ **RSPB Forsinard** - Venture into the Flow Country on the Dubh Lochan Trail at the RSPB's Forsinard visitor centre. It provides information on the peatlands and bog pools of Caithness and Sutherland and the rare species found in this internationally important habitat.

■ **John Lennon memorial garden** - A small garden commemorating the former Beatle's connection with Durness. Lennon spent many childhood holidays there and it is thought to have been the inspiration for his song *In My Life*, lyrics from which are featured in a set of three standing stones.

■ **Strathnaver Museum** - Learn about the infamous Sutherland Clearances of the early 19th century when families were forced from the land to make way for sheep-farming. The museum is also the starting point for the Strathnaver Trail, linking 29 archaeological sites ranging from Neolithic cairns to pre-Clearance townships.

■ **Ben Bhraggie** - Dominating the skyline around Golspie is a large statue of the 1st Duke of Sutherland - known locally as "the mannie" - on the summit of the 1,300ft Ben Bhraggie. Highland Wildcat mountain-bike trails have been developed in the surrounding landscape, giving a big boost to activity-based tourism in the process.

■ **Brora** - The village heritage centre has exhibits on the local whisky, coal and wool industries as well as a display by Clyne Heritage Society.



The lovely Loch Erliboll.

Pictures: Alan Hendry



On the Dubh Lochan Trail at RSPB Forsinard.



Dornoch Cathedral.



Deep mysteries lie within Smoo Cave at Durness.



View from one of the Bone Caves in the geopark.



The unspoilt Strathy beach.