

INTO THE WILD

Galloway is an untamed region of dramatic coastline and unspoiled landscapes. Go for treasure hunting, history and Scotland's official book town

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Sweetheart Abbey was founded in 1273 by the grieving Lady Devorgilla of Galloway, in memory of her husband



Handwritten letters at The Antique Shop in Kirkcudbright offer a glimpse into the past

When the on-the-run hero of John Buchan's 1915 thriller *The Thirty-Nine Steps* decided to flee to 'the nearest wild part of Scotland', he chose Galloway. And Buchan garlands the action in his grand yarn – made into a classic 1935 film thriller by Alfred Hitchcock – with admiring descriptions of 'a land of little wooded glens... a great wide moorland place, gleaming with lochs'.

Tucked into Scotland's southwest corner, Galloway remains a great place to run to. The majestic Galloway Forest Park (see Must-see) provides a vast arboreal heart, while ruined abbeys and castles vie for historic bragging rights with ancient stone circles. A sinuous coastline curls around wide bays from the Irish Sea to the Solway Firth, punctuated by sandy beaches and an array of distinctive little ports – from yachting havens like Kippford to winsome end-of-the-world spots like Isle of Whithorn.

I start in Kirkcudbright at the mouth of the River Dee,

which combines a working harbour for Solway scallop boats with a townscape so picturesque it became a beacon for artists and designers from the 19th century on, earning its present-day tag of Scotland's 'artists' town'. Set up an easel, and you can paint the stirring 15th-century ruins of MacLellan's Castle one way, then turn around and capture fishing boats against glistening water and wooded hills in the other direction.

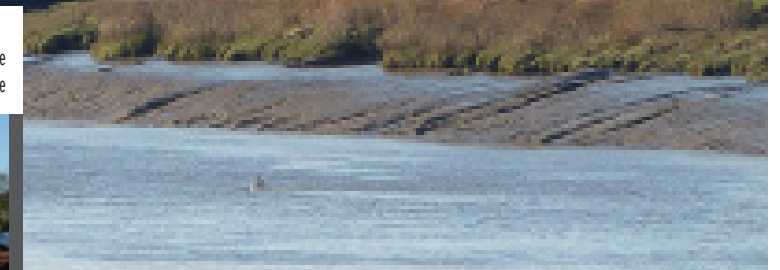
The 17th-century Tolbooth Arts Centre and recently opened Kirkcudbright Galleries dip into the town's two centuries of artiness – though its most ravishing embodiment is Broughton House (see Must-see). The Stewartry Museum adds a quirky panoply of local objects, from 5,000-year-old tools to 19th-century decorative snuff boxes. There are pleasing little shops too – unusual contemporary plus vintage fashion at Pleat, and contemporary local craft at the PA Pop-up across the road.

By the fishing quay, The Antique Shop offers small vintage items mainly from 1900 to 1950. Owner Paul Mairs sees a trend among both tourists and local buyers for objects with a purpose beyond mere decoration. 'If it's useful as well as interesting that's good.' He points me towards a lady selling vintage French textiles and ephemera under the banner Starched & Crumpled from her nearby B&B, but sadly I miss her. Hopefully you won't. Just north of the town, Threave Castle sits beguilingly on an island in the River Dee, where it was built for the gloriously named Archibald the Grim in the 14th century. Arrive via a stroll through fields to a waterside quay, where – from April to October – ringing a bell summons the castle custodian to ferry you across.

A few miles south of Kirkcudbright, Dundrennan Abbey is just one of Galloway's evocative holy ruins. Others include the 12th-century Glenluce Abbey and – my favourite – Sweetheart Abbey just south of Dumfries. This lovely 13th-century red-stoned Cistercian monastery takes its name from the story of its grief-stricken founder, Devorgilla, who carried a casket containing the embalmed heart of her husband (founder of Oxford's Balliol College) for 20 years after his death. The casket is still with her, buried beside her beloved John in the presbytery. The ruined Whithorn Priory, in the eponymous village, has much older pedigree. Though today's ruins date from medieval times, they stand on the site of a priory built for St Ninian, who brought Christianity to



The daily catch from the fishing boats at Kirkcudbright's quayside include scallops, lobster and sole



Picturesque Kirkcudbright has attracted artists and designers since the 19th century

Tips for the first-time visitor

- Galloway hosts a diverse range of festivals throughout the year. May alone offers the Dumfries & Galloway Arts Festival, the World Ceilidh global music festival and Spring Fling, when around 80 top artists and makers open their studios (dgculture.co.uk/the-festivals-events-of-dumfries-galloway).
- For edible mementoes, visit Castle Douglas. Its 50-or-so food-related businesses have earned

- it the tag of Scotland's 'food town'.
- Rather than rely on GPS, a good printed map lets you see at a glance all the smaller roads that let you experience Galloway's off-radar by-ways.
- Galloway is home to Britain's only venomous snake, the adder. So take care on nature trails, and walking on moorland or grassy clifftops. Look out for their distinctive diamond-back pattern.

Must-see

Galloway Forest

By day, explore 300 square miles of forests and lakes, rugged hills and waterfalls, lonely memorials and woodland sculpture trails. Then, by night, enjoy some of the world's best star-gazing via guided observations at the park's observatory or from your own tranquil place – Clatteringshaws Loch is a renowned spot.

- forestryandland.gov.scot/visit/forest-parks/galloway-forest-park/dark-skies

Broughton House

This gorgeous orange-pink Georgian building was long-time home of celebrated painter Edward Hornel. One of Scotland's leading painters for decades, his frequent travels to Japan are reflected in his art plus the ravishing period interiors. A delightful garden reaches down to the Dee.

- [12 High Street, Kirkcudbright; nts.org.uk/visit/places/broughton-house](http://12HighStreet,Kirkcudbright;nts.org.uk/visit/places/broughton-house)



The ruin of 14th-century Threave Castle stands remote on an island in the River Dee



'Wigtown is Galloway's mecca for lovers of old print, with an array of second-hand bibliophile beacons'



A statue of Robert Burns in Dumfries, where the Scottish poet spent the last years of his life



Boats flank the whitewashed harbourside church at Isle of Whithorn

One of Emily MacKenzie's humorous prints in a Wigtown shop



The courtyard at Priory Antiques, an established family-run business at the heart of Whithorn



Scotland at the end of the 4th century, and was buried here around AD 430. An adjacent full-size reconstruction of an Iron Age roundhouse provides insights into even more ancient human presence here.

Back on Whithorn's main street, lined with Georgian houses, I admire a gorgeous 1680s carved wooden cabinet at Priory Antiques, where Mary Arnott has spent three decades offering Scottish domestic items, with a side helping of vintage silverware and jewellery. Four miles away, meanwhile, Isle of Whithorn presents a scattering of prettily painted houses and boats bobbing in the tiny harbour, from whose breakwater you can see the whale back hump of the Isle of Man in the distance.

An air of sweet solitude infuses the Rhins of Galloway too – a hammerhead peninsula so far west its BBC TV local news comes from Northern Ireland, just over 12 miles away. Here you find one of the region's best beaches at Sandhead, the Kirkmadrine early Christian carved stones displayed in a lonely moorland church, plus the dramatic southwesterly tip of Scotland at the Mull of Galloway, where a lonely lighthouse tops towering cliffs smashed by surging sea.

The mood is very different at nearby Logan Botanic Gardens, a walled idyll of subtropical greenery where exotic plants from New Zealand, Chile and Japan flourish in the lee of a ruined 14th-century castle keep. Lovers of the unusual, meanwhile, should drop by the Logan Fish Pond at the end of a little arc of sand in nearby Port Logan. This restored early 19th-century fish larder lets you feed and touch fish as they swim around a sea pool fashioned for a local laird from an ice age blowhole.

While Kirkcubright bags the prize as Galloway's best-looking town, Wigtown is its mecca for lovers of old print. Scotland's official 'book town' since the late 1990s boasts a dazzling array of second-hand bibliophile beacons around Scotland's widest high street, from the country's largest bookshop to tiny places dedicated to specialist interests like folklore. Every October, the gentle bookish hum rises to a crescendo with an inspiring annual book festival.

But Wigtown is also home to places like The Wigtown Emporium that drew the BBC's *Antiques Road Trip* in 2019. Carved from a 19th-century pharmacy (the amazing old chemist drawers remain) by John and Sara Black, their previous years spent running a *brocante* shop in rural France explain some of the lovely Gallic objects. 'We moved here because we thought people who loved old books would also like vintage,' says Sara. I also love the vintage lamps, music memorabilia and old school technology – a particular passion for John. Just along the main street, Faodail's main draw is its upstairs Retro Room, artfully curated by Roddy Cooksley. 'I travel all over the country to source things,' he tells me. Facebook also brings in both buyers and sellers, while his brother finds the old vinyl.

A mile away in the neighbouring village of Bladnoch, Beyond the Bridge enjoys a riverside location a few hundred yards from Scotland's most southerly whisky distillery. Behind its old worn sliding door, I find an engaging mix of Victorian and Edwardian items – plus ravishing artists' boxes by Louise Martin, whose resonant vintage components echo the peerless Joseph Cornell. Still musing on their beauty, I head back to Wigtown and walk down to where saltmarshes rim Wigtown Bay. Overhead, curlews and oystercatchers arc and dip against a vast sky. Welcome to the nearest wild – and wonderful – part of Scotland. 📍

The essentials

VISIT

The Antique Shop Harbour Square, Kirkcubright; tel 01557 332400

Beyond the Bridge Unit 3, Bladnoch Bridge Estate, Wigtown; see Facebook

Faodail 7 North Main Street, Wigtown; see Facebook

Kirkcubright Galleries St Mary Street, Kirkcubright; kirkcubrightgalleries.org.uk

PA Pop-up 67 St Mary Street, Kirkcubright; papop-up.co.uk

Pleat 30 St Mary Street, Kirkcubright; see Facebook

Priory Antiques 29 George Street, Whithorn; see Facebook

Starched & Crumpled Glenholme, Tongland Road, Kirkcubright; see Facebook

Stewartry Museum St Mary Street, Kirkcubright; see Facebook

Tolbooth Arts Centre High Street, Kirkcubright; dgculture.co.uk

The Wigtown Emporium 1 High Street, Wigtown; wigtownemporium.com

EAT

Steampacket Inn

On the Isle of Whithorn quay, the Steampacket Inn majors on fresh seafood from the local fleet – lobster, crab, sole and monkfish feature regularly – with a harbour view. Choose between the formal restaurant, or atmospheric low-ceiling pub area of a CAMRA award-winner that brews its own excellent beer.

○ Harbour Row, Isle of Whithorn; thesteampacketinn.biz

Castle Bistro

Sitting opposite MacLellan's Castle, this simply decorated

award-winning bistro showcases excellent Galloway produce, from scallops off the nearby boats to venison from the hills. Chef-proprietor Paul Tomlinson is great for local gossip too!

○ 5 Castle Street, Kirkcubright; see Facebook

STAY

Knockinaam Lodge

On the western shore of the Rhins, this former 19th-century hunting lodge offers cosy luxury plus a superb restaurant, private woods and its own beach. Winston Churchill was a regular guest – and secretly met US President Eisenhower here in 1944 to plan D-Day.

○ 3 miles from Portpatrick; knockinaamlodge.com

Fludha

Galloway's first five-star B&B, this Victorian hideaway sits in two acres of landscaped gardens on the edge of Kirkcubright, with views to the town over the River Dee.

○ Tongland Road, Kirkcubright; fludha.com

TRAVEL

Dumfries is Galloway's rail gateway, with frequent trains to Glasgow and Carlisle. Car hire is available from Enterprise beside Dumfries station. The area's main road is the A75, which links to the M6 and M74 motorways. Ferries from Ireland sail into Cairnryan. Prestwick airport is around 70 miles from Dumfries, while Glasgow, Edinburgh and Newcastle airports are around 85 miles.