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The Mystical Smoo Cave of Scotland

By Nomadic Matt | Published November 18th, 2013



I wish I could be everywhere but until they perfect cloning technology, there's only one of me traveling this big world. I now plan on having regular guest writers on the website to highlight places I haven't been yet... places we can together dream of visiting someday. This month my friend [Alex Berger](#) talks about northern Scotland and shares the story of Smoo Cave. It's beautifully written. Enjoy!

Perched atop the worn limestone cliffs at the mouth of the Geodha Smoo inlet, I casually brushed the toe of my walking boot across the soft, muted purple heather blossoms. I had arrived in the sleepy Scottish town of Durness a few minutes earlier and made the 10 minute walk along the edge of the inlet hoping to catch one of Scotland's mystical sunsets. The sound of crashing waves waging their perpetual war against the coastline echoed in my ears as I let the clean scent of heather, salt spray, and seaweed fill my lungs.

My arrival in Durness marked the culmination of a long day's drive up the northwestern coast of Scotland. The sleepy little village of 400 stands beside one of Scotland's most unique natural wonders. Situated at the end of Geodha Smoo, a mid-length inlet carved by

the ocean, wind, and a small stream, Smoo Cave resembles a dragon's open maw carved into the side of the surrounding stone cliff face.

What makes the cave unique within the UK is its geographic qualities. The sprawling outer chamber has been carved over the ages by the sea, while a series of internal caverns and tunnels have been etched out by the two fresh water streams that thread their way through the cave. The first of these two streams bubbles up through a submerged pool situated at the terminus of the deepest accessible part of the cave. The second comes from the waters of the Allt Smoo, a stream (or raging torrent, depending on the rains) that winds across the Scottish countryside before suddenly crashing 80 feet through a hole in the stone ceiling and down into Smoo Cave's second largest cavern.



There the waters join with those that have wandered their way out from beneath the bedrock to connect in a deep pool. Only partially lit by small wall lamps and the faint light streaming in through the hole in the roof, the dark waters are largely still except for the periodic swirl of a fish's fin, the gentle mist of the waterfall, and the soft ripple of an inflatable raft as it ferries visitors deeper into the heart of the cave.

On my previous visit to Smoo the rains had turned the small Allt Smoo into a raging river,

making it impossible to spend more than the briefest of moments on the wooden platform raised at the end of the small tunnel that connects the cave's grand mouth and the flooded depths of the second chamber. This time, as I slowly walked beneath the moss-covered ceiling of the grand chamber, I hoped I would have the chance to explore the cave's depths.

The Portal



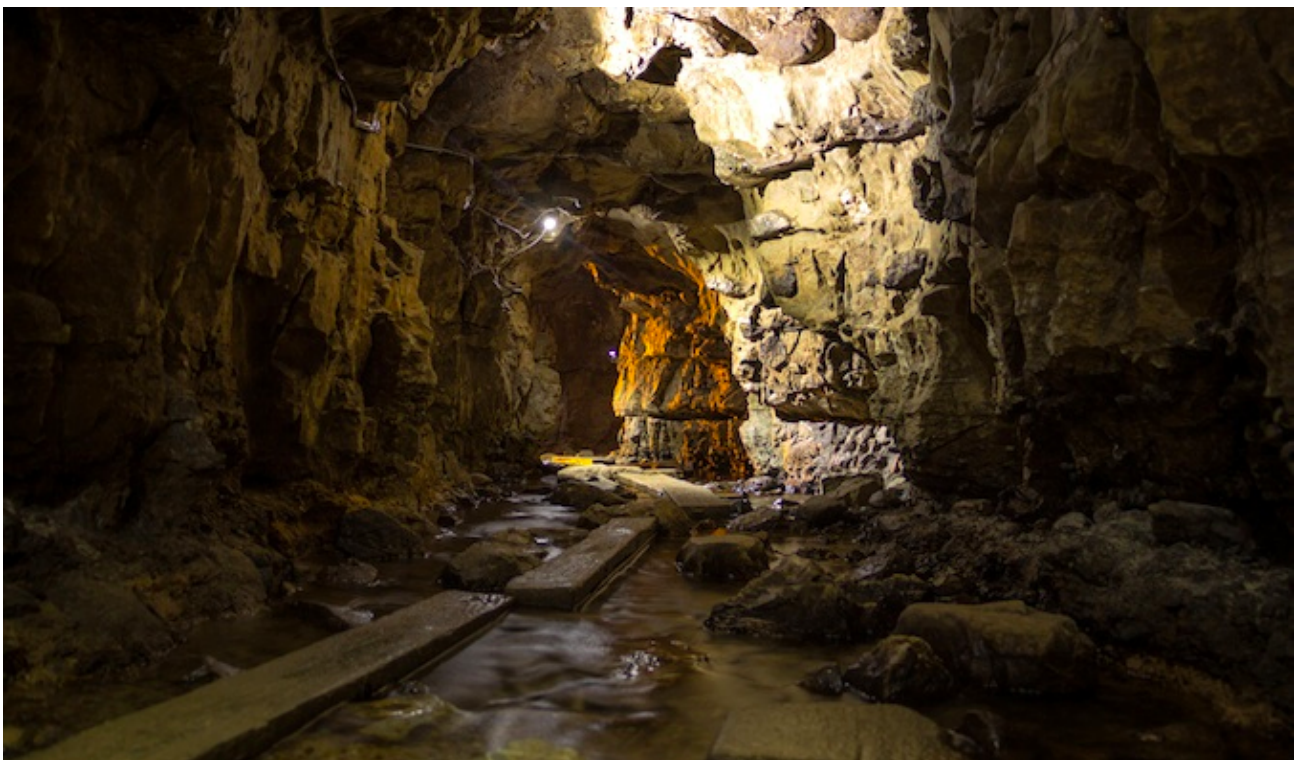
With most of the tourists having left for supper, I found myself standing alone in the center of the main chamber. With a skylight in the ceiling carved by the Allt Smoo before it found an easier route into the chamber, the cave ceiling arcs overhead with more than 40 feet of clearance. The back of the cave is covered in green moss and small plants, while a perfectly lit, otherworldly crevasse glows as though an emerald gateway to another world has opened.

For those familiar with the epic of Beowulf, it is easy to envision the early Norse explorers, who archaeologists say once made camp in the cave, huddled around a campfire telling stories of sea witches and cave trolls. For others who may have dreamed of similar sea-side caves, it is easy for the mind to wander with flights of fantasy and dreams straight

from Arthurian legend. It seems likely, given that the archaeological record for the cave shows signs of habitation stretching back more than 4,000 years to the Neolithic Era, that the cave was inspiring travelers even while the Pharaohs raised the great pyramids in ancient Egypt.

I relished the moment and paused inside the second chamber for several photographs before returning to the hostel. If the weather cooperated, the following morning promised adventure and the opportunity to delve into Smoo's deepest depths.

Exploring the Cave



To my delight morning arrived with only the lightest of Scottish showers. I quickly made my way down to the grand entrance in the main cavern, paid a couple of pounds for the tour, and was fitted for a hardhat. I joined the others and we were instructed to head into the second chamber where an inflatable river raft was set up just beneath the wooden viewing platform. After a brief wait, our guide arrived and ushered us carefully down a vertical ladder and into the boat. He was a crusty old Scotsman who obviously had a deep relationship with the cave and had been giving tours for years. After obeying a few barked orders, we ducked our heads and pressed ourselves against the bottom of the raft as he

pulled us out from beneath the low-hanging dock and along the edge of the second cavern.

Soon, we found ourselves by the outer edges of the falls as he explained how the waterfall came to be and the history of the cave. After a brief pause he tossed a few pieces of crumbled bread over the edge of the boat. As soon as it hit water, our eyes widened as a small army of invisible fish tore the bread asunder and then returned to the depths of the black waters.

With a gritty chuckle, a push, and a command to mind our heads, our guide used two ropes to pull us across the chamber and beneath a low-hanging arch with just enough clearance for the boat. A helmet scraped gently on the rocks overhead as we guided the boat beneath the arch and into a small chamber. There, our guide hopped out and led us carefully onto wooden boards haphazardly sitting in the midst of a small stream.

Deep in Smoo Cave



The tunnel that stretched out before us was roughly the height of a tall man. The walls looked every bit like a fossilized seabed, reflecting their ancient past.

Careful to mind our footing, we followed our guide along the raised boards deeper into

the cave. The journey wasn't long, but served to add to the feeling of other-worldliness. Each step took us further along what felt like a mixture of an underground river and the type of ancient mine our ancestors might have carved out 100 generations ago.

The tunnel dead-ends abruptly. The walls of the cave flair slightly and then converge, covered on one side by a thick layer of wide stalactites that protrude partially from the wall. Beneath them the stream threads its way across fallen rocks which in turn give way to fine sand and a small pool that slips beneath the stalactite covered wall.

With the light twang of disappointment in his voice our guide explained that attempts to further explore the tunnel through the use of dive equipment had come up empty handed. Indications suggested that the chamber likely continued on further into the cliffs, but silt and obstacles in the submerged part of the tunnel made it impossible to explore. It was clear he had the heart of an explorer and itched for the day when some shift or change made it possible to find and delve those depths.

He broke our thoughtful reverie and voiced his theory that at one point, the cave system likely opened into additional chambers further in the cliff side. As evidence, he gestured at small bits of sodden charcoal that had gathered, caught in the sand at the pool's lip. Bits of charcoal, like those we were seeing, had been tested and were roughly 4,000 years old. Even more interesting, they showed indications that they likely stemmed from man-made cooking fires.



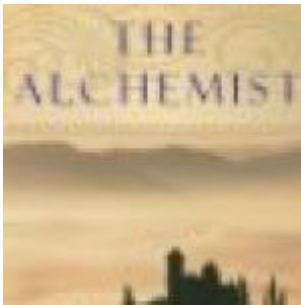
His passion to solve the question of where the charcoal was coming from and who had left it deep within the cave captured our imaginations as we slowly made our way back to the boat. Each of us dragged our feet slightly, eager to draw out the experience. But, then, as quickly as it had all begun we found ourselves back in the boat, our faces pressed against the thick rubber of the raft's sides as we squeezed beneath the small arch and re-emerged into the cavern with the waterfall.

Smoo Cave isn't the most grandiose cave you'll ever explore. It's also not the most beautiful. Yet, there's something special about it which teases the imagination. For my part, I look forward to the opportunity to return and harbor the hope that someday we'll solve the cave's mystery and learn more about what lies behind its flooded passageway.

Logistics: Durness is best reached by car or motorcycle. However, it can be reached by bus or a bus/train combination by way of Lairg. In addition to Smoo Cave, Durness is also a popular base for exploring Cape Wrath. There are several hostels and numerous hotels and B&Bs in the area; the most convenient for viewing Smoo Cave is the Durness Youth Hostel. Smoo Cave is free to visit but the boat tour costs roughly 4 GBP and typically lasts 20-30 minutes.

Alex Berger is the author of VirtualWayfarer.com and an American currently living in Copenhagen, Denmark. An avid traveler, his passions include travel photography and academic research into the evolving role technology plays in shaping backpacker culture.

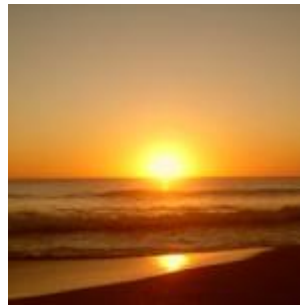
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Shaz Lake

November 18, 2013 at 12:20 pm

The colours of the cave are beautiful! Next time I visit the UK I'll have to make some time to explore Scotland a little more. Last time it was so wintry and cold and rainy...

I'll have to aim for the summer months.

[Reply](#)



Alex Berger

November 19, 2013 at 5:17 am

I've yet to make it to Scotland during winter. During June, July and August it is absolutely amazing though! Unfortunately, usually a bit rainy no matter when you go...but, hey, I guess that's the price you pay for it being so green. That, and the low hanging clouds usually add to the ambiance!

[Reply](#)



Euan

November 19, 2013 at 5:47 am

May is often a good time of year to visit Scotland. The past few years May has been a relatively dry month.

This summer was one of the best for years and hopefully it's repeated next year!

[Reply](#)



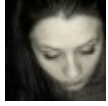
Andy Watt

November 21, 2013 at 11:50 pm

Best time to visit my homeland is probably July/August. Though in recent years there have been unseasonably warm Mays and Septembers.

Best thing about August is whilst exploring the country you've got the chance to take in the biggest fringe/comedy festival in the world in Edinburgh. Be prepared for crowds though.

and it will still rain, no matter when you go. If anything mid winter is the least likely to rain as it's too cold.

[Reply](#)**Celia**

November 18, 2013 at 1:24 pm

Wow, the photos are absolutely stunning. Smoo Cave goes on the bucket list, that's for sure! Love that it's free, too. When you travel a lot it's crazy how much you can end up spending on tourist attractions.

I love natural wonders like these, and caves are always an amazing experience.

Thanks for the share! I'm going to Alex' blog now – so funny that he now lives in my old home town. 😊

[Reply](#)**Alex Berger**

November 19, 2013 at 5:24 am

Yup, it is fantastic that the level of development is so low for the location.

Given it is so far north, there's not a ton of traffic that makes it up to the area.

As I understand it, they just shut it down for 2 weeks for slight improvements in September, but I don't believe they've changed the ambiance any. Mostly just rock scaling to keep it safe.

...and yeah, Copenhagen is a fantastic spot!

[Reply](#)**Michelle at Tripboss**

November 18, 2013 at 1:46 pm

These pictures are amazing! I definitely want to travel there one day 😊

[Reply](#)



Joe A.

November 18, 2013 at 3:28 pm

Fantastic photos and great article. Scotland is such a hauntingly beautiful place. And the old place names and myths just ooze history.

[Reply](#)

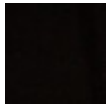


Cheryl Cholley

November 18, 2013 at 11:12 pm

Just fantastic! I love caves and the mystery of this cave is very compelling. Thanks for the beautiful photos and the wonderful story.

[Reply](#)



Hannah

November 19, 2013 at 3:06 am

Awesome pictures matt! The cave looks really wonderful. Definitely must try to check this out when we get to Scotland!

[Reply](#)



Lena

November 19, 2013 at 6:58 am

Thank you for posting this! I lived in Scotland for four years but it seems I have totally missed this place. Northern Scotland is very pretty indeed.

[Reply](#)



Raymond Waruhari

November 19, 2013 at 8:01 am

Awesome pictures matt! It seems that I have to explore Scotland a little more.

[Reply](#)



The Epic Duo

November 19, 2013 at 9:03 am

wow! the colors are ridiculously cool! Recently saw a tiny cave (well... compared to this lol) here in Costa Rica and i thought it was wonderful! but this... omg this gorgeous..

Awesome pics!

Will venture there quite soon!

[Reply](#)



Shaun

November 19, 2013 at 9:55 am

Killer photos man.

It seems the further north and off the mainland Scotland's natural beauty just keeps

better and better. The Isle of Skye gets a lot of attention, and rightly so, but it's worth making time for nature's other gems!

[Reply](#)**Alex Berger**

November 19, 2013 at 3:29 pm

Definitely! As much as I love Skye, the North Western coast is still my favorite. So many incredible things to see along it. Truly astonishing territory.

[Reply](#)**Euan**

November 21, 2013 at 5:21 am

The Outer Hebrides (Lewis, Harris, etc) are worth a visit. They have some incredible beaches!

[Reply](#)**Alex Berger**

November 29, 2013 at 6:22 am

That they do! Fantastic to explore. Also the converted black house hostel there is a must-stay.

[Reply](#)**Annie Craven**

November 19, 2013 at 6:07 pm

Thanks for sharing such a cool place! The tour sounds like a great adventure and you get to know the history of the cave.

Really awesome photos!

[Reply](#)



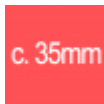
Bastiaan

November 19, 2013 at 10:26 pm

Hello Alex, Thanks for this really nice post. It makes reminds me of the fact that there are so many beautiful places that you can visit close to your home country (I'm from the Netherlands). It is not always necessary to travel to the other side of the world to see beautiful places.

Thanks for reminding me and I will be following your blog!

[Reply](#)



Euan

November 21, 2013 at 5:21 am

Bastiaan, I couldn't agree more. I live in Scotland and there are still so many parts of the country I've yet to visit!

[Reply](#)



Alex Berger

November 29, 2013 at 6:23 am

Thanks! It's very true. As an Arizonan, I realized a few years back that it had been more than 10 years since I'd make the 3.5 hour drive to the Grand Canyon. Took a weekend later that month and did it as a tourist. Made an amazing difference and I saw the state in a whole different way!

[Reply](#)

**Basha**

The descriptions of the tunnels and cave have been so pleasant to read. "The back of the cave is covered in green moss and small plants, while a perfectly lit, otherworldly crevasse glows as though an emerald gateway to another world has opened." This is my favourite line by far!

[Reply](#)**Alex Berger**

November 29, 2013 at 6:23 am

Thanks Basha!

[Reply](#)**chris**

November 23, 2013 at 11:30 am

The best time to visit Scotland is Spring, interestingly it has always been the warmest month when we have been. Summer in Scotland can be marred by midges, Scotlands best kept secret, the little critters can get through regular fly screens and give a mean bite that itch like hell, they are known to swarm also. The midges are not about in the Spring, another good reason to visit then.

[Reply](#)

**Alex Berger**

November 29, 2013 at 6:25 am

Ugh. So true. While they didn't bother me most of the time, when I was going up the road at Applecross I looked like a crazy person running around flailing my arms trying to escape them while waiting for my photos to take. Brutal.

[Reply](#)**Sam @ Trilogy Yachts**

November 24, 2013 at 6:50 am

first look at the images give me an impression the it is photoshopped, but on a serious note, these caves are the real nature's beauty.. Superb!

[Reply](#)**Alex Berger**

November 29, 2013 at 6:26 am

Thanks! Nope, just slight enhancements to contrast, clarity, sharpness, blacks, and saturation. I try and keep my photos as true to nature as possible!

[Reply](#)**Kevin Scullion**

November 25, 2013 at 3:21 am

Hi great article on Smoo caves.

I'm a regular visitor to Durness as I travel almost full time around Scotland. A useful piece of information if you are a hardy camper or have a motorhome or campervan....

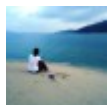
Whilst the Sango Sands campsite in Durness is officially closed they are happy to

allow free camping throughout the winter. They leave the toilet blocks open with cold running water only. If you contact them beforehand they will provide electrical hook up for your van at a daily rate.

Thanks again for the lovely post.

Kevin

[Reply](#)



November 26, 2013 at 7:36 am

Jorja Alcorn

Scotland is such a magnificent country. Summertime is the usually the best time to visit. I lived their for 2 years and I really can say that it has amazing natural beauty.

[Reply](#)

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