

The Mack Walks: Short Walks in Scotland Under 10 km

St Ninian's Isle Circuit (Shetland)

Route Summary

This walk will provide unforgettable images, typical of the beaches, cliffs and coastal scenery found in the Shetland Isles. The two-sided “tombolo” beach connecting to the island is particularly breath-taking. Although not particularly long, there are lots of ups and downs.

Duration: 2.5 hours.



Route Overview

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Transport/Parking: It is possible to get to Bigton from Lerwick by bus. However the journey is not direct and takes almost 2.5 hours. Check timetables. Rough parking area at walk start/end point.

Length: 5.820 km / 3.64 mi

Height Gain: 160 meter. **Height Loss:** 160 meter.

Max Height: 46 meter. **Min Height:** 1 meter.

Surface: Moderate. Beach then mostly short grass, on sheep paths. Several stiles. We understand that it may be impossible to cross the beach at times during the Winter season, rendering the walk not viable. Please take care and obtain local advice if at all uncertain.

Difficulty: Medium.

Child Friendly: Yes, if children are used to walks of this distance and overall ascent. Keep clear of cliff edges at all times!

Dog Friendly: Yes. St Ninian's Isle is used to graze sheep. We suggest that dogs should always be on lead..

Refreshments: Nearest cafe at Hoswick Visitor Centre. Also, Mackenzie's Cafe, near Cunningsburgh on the main A970 road back to Lerwick. Options in Lerwick.



Description

This is an iconic coastal walk in the Shetland Isles. The route includes traversing a stunning double-sided beach known as a “tombolo” then walking around the connected “island”. We understand that it may be impossible to cross the beach at times during the winter season, meaning the walk cannot then be undertaken. Please take care and obtain local advice if at all uncertain. The tombolo beach, also known in Shetland as an “ayre”, is the longest beach of its kind in the UK. St Ninian's Isle stretches over 72 hectare and illustrates, in miniature, many of the features of coastal walking in the Shetland Isles, with towering cliffs populated by many seabirds, rugged offshore stacks and rocky islets, long distance views up and down the wild coast, and low heather hills as a mainland backdrop. Grazing sheep are also a feature of these walks, and St Ninian's Isle is no exception. The summer flock are from Bigton Farm, which recently featured in the BBC TV series, “[This Farming Life](#)”. Near the end of the walk, overlooking the beach and the mainland, we come across the ruins of St Ninian's Chapel, where there is an information board. This 12thC chapel was also a sacred place from much earlier times – a hoard of 8thC Pictish silver has been found here – and also burial cists from pre-Christian times. The 28 Pictish silver objects and the jaw bone of a porpoise were buried under a cross-marked slab close to the altar, possibly as safe-keeping from a Viking raid.

For a comprehensive selection of walks in Shetland, see: <https://www.walkhighlands.co.uk/shetland/>



Waypoints

(1) Start walk at information board

(59.97109; -1.33052) <https://w3w.co/removed.tripods.small>
Start the walk at the rough-surfaced car-park near the beach, below Bigton Farm. After reading the information board, head across towards St Ninian's Isle on the hugely impressive tombolo beach. We understand that it may be impossible to cross the beach at times during the Winter season, rendering the walk not viable. Please take care and obtain local advice if at all uncertain.



(2) Go left to leave the sandy path

(59.97003; -1.34288) <https://w3w.co/pave.minder.trump>
In 750 m, after crossing the beach and walking a little way uphill onto St Ninian's Isle on the sandy track, turn left to follow sheep paths around the 'island' but beware of going too close to the cliff edge in places. There are a number of stiles to cross as you make your way towards the trig point at the highest point on the 'island' on the northern tip. (747 m)



(3) Trig Point

(59.98016; -1.35455) <https://w3w.co/encloses.grain.restored>
After walking around the south and west coastline for approximately 3 km, you will arrive at the trig point on the exposed northern tip of the island. After taking in the views, carry on walking on sheep paths, as the route starts to return, now on the eastern side of the 'island'. (3.7 km)



(4) Ruins of St Ninian's Chapel

(59.97151; -1.34181) <https://w3w.co/webcams.encoding.erase>
In another 1.3 km, walking back towards the tombolo beach, you will arrive at the remains of St Ninian's Chapel* in a fenced off area. After checking out the ruins and the information board, carry on, descending to the tombolo beach that you crossed earlier as you make your return to the start-point car-park. (5.0 km)

**Note: This 12th C chapel was also a sacred place from much earlier times – a hoard of 8th C Pictish silver has been found here – and also burial cists from pre-Christian times.*



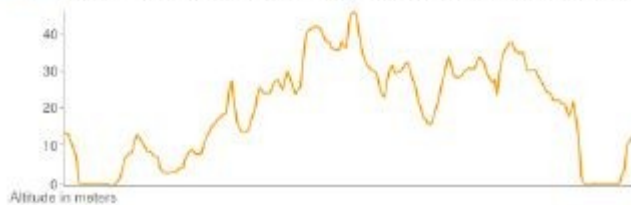
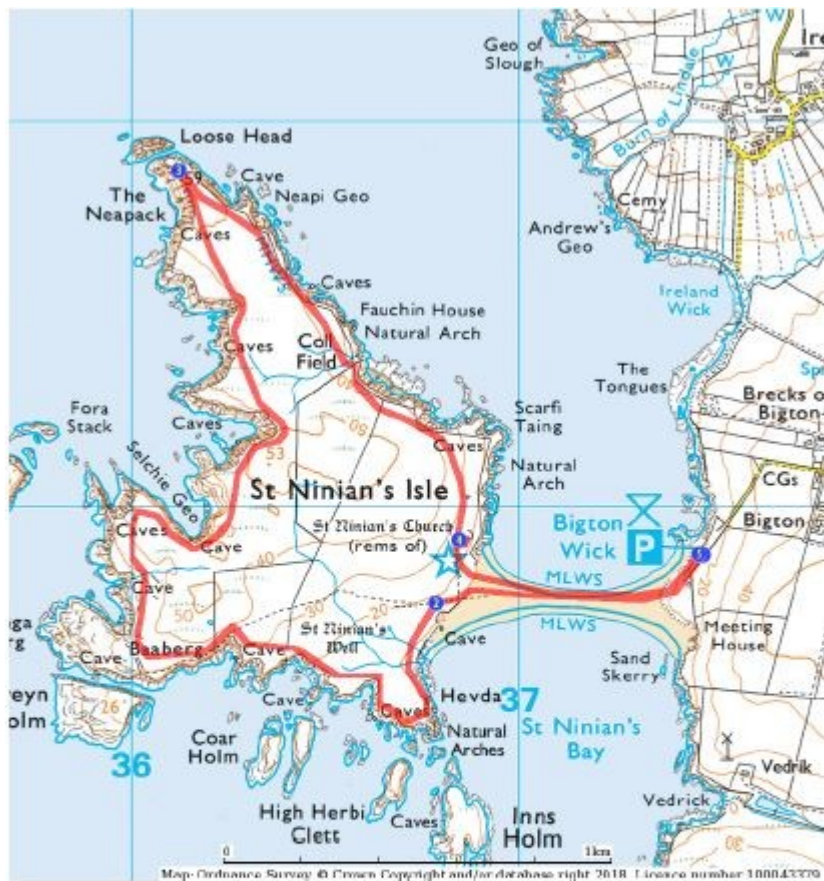
(5) Return to your start-point

(59.97112; -1.33072) <https://w3w.co/alive.nicer.clasps>

In 800 m, or so, you will have arrived back at your walk start-point. (5.8 km)



Route Map



Links:

[Photos from walk](#)

[Download Route Guide](#) (PDF with illustrated Waypoints)

[Download GPX file](#) (GPS Exchange Format)

[Access Walk on OutdoorActive](#)

[Access Walk on OSMaps](#)

[Access Walk on AllTrails](#)

[Access Walk on Wikiloc](#)