

FROM ART TO ASTROTOURISM: 48 HOURS IN KIRKCUDBRIGHT, DUMFRIES AND GALLOWAY

*With a distinctive artistic heritage, a new planetarium and stargazing prowess, Kirkcudbright is a visitor's delight, and the ideal location to spend a long weekend. **Vicky Smith** shares the town's highlights.*

Kirkcudbright (pronounced 'kir-coo-bree') packs a picturesque punch, with its pastel houses and busy fishing harbour, evocatively overlooked by the 16th-century ruins of MacLellan's Castle. Mix in a wealth of attractions, superb community-run information services and festivities galore, and it's clear to see why this is one of Scotland's most alluring towns.

Artistic heritage is perhaps Kirkcudbright's greatest draw. The self-titled 'artists' town' inspired one of Britain's first artist colonies (circa 1880 to 1980), owing to its unique light and close-knit community, and attracted leading figures from the Glasgow Girls and Boys and Scottish Colourists, among many other creative icons. This special legacy is now preserved through major venues, such as the £3.1 million Kirkcudbright Galleries, which launched in 2018. Meanwhile, a plethora of studios and galleries, alongside events like the annual [art and crafts trail](#) and [year-round art tours](#), showcase a thriving present-day artist population.

More recently, Kirkcudbright has become something of an astrotourism hotspot, thanks to the July 2021 launch of a state-of-the-art planetarium, which builds on the renown of nearby Galloway Forest Park – first in the UK to be awarded Dark Sky Park status. You can even enjoy stargazing breaks at the Selkirk Arms Hotel.

Can't-miss Kirkcudbright Broughton House and Garden

Owned by the National Trust for Scotland, this striking pink [Georgian town house](#) was where artist E A Hornel lived from 1901 until his death in 1933. Hornel was a leading member of the influential Glasgow Boys, who represented the



The gardens are a true highlight of Broughton House

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beginnings of Modernism in Scottish painting, and settled in Kirkcudbright at the height of his fame – helping establish the town’s reputation as an artists’ colony.

Combining both original Edwardian interiors and exhibition space, the house features a large display of Hornel’s own work alongside that of his Scottish contemporaries; visitors can also discover his vast library, which includes one of the world’s largest collections of works by national bard Robert Burns. Another highlight is the garden, which blends eastern and western horticulture to enchanting effect.

Kirkcudbright Tolbooth

This [characterful building](#), which you might recognise from 1973 cult horror *The Wicker Man*, was completed around 1629 and is renowned for its use as a prison until the early 19th century: inmates included American naval hero John Paul Jones, Covenanters (17th-century supporters of a Presbyterian Church of Scotland, who were in conflict with government forces), and those accused of witchcraft. Many original features remain, including a set of joughs – a metal collar used to publicly shame offenders. The venue is

“The garden blends eastern and western horticulture to enchanting effect.”

now a gallery-museum, and includes a shop selling gifts and art supplies, display space showcasing local artists, and an exhibition on the building and surrounds.

Several prominent artists depicted the Tolbooth, including Glasgow Girl Jessie M King, who is best known for her Art Nouveau illustrations, but was one of a group of women active in Glasgow during

its artistic golden age at the turn of the 20th century. King and her husband E A Taylor, a fellow teacher and artist, later moved to Kirkcudbright. With many associates visiting and working at their studio home, the couple are credited with

bolstering the town’s creative reputation further. Don’t miss a peek at their house, The Greengate, just a few doors down from the Tolbooth, marked with a tiled plaque. The house is thought to have inspired *Blue Gate Close* in Dorothy L Sayers’ detective novel *The Five Red Herrings*, which she based on Kirkcudbright’s artist community.

Kirkcudbright Galleries

Described as a ‘regional gallery of national significance’, [Kirkcudbright Galleries](#) is situated in a handsome sandstone building that was formerly the town hall.

With more than 600 objects ranging from paintings to silver, the permanent Kirkcudbright collection recounts the town’s fascinating artistic story – from its beginnings with the Faed family in nearby Gatehouse of Fleet to the many esteemed artists that have lived and worked in Kirkcudbright over the last two centuries. Notable names span E A Hornel and Jessie M King to Samuel John Peploe – one of four painters known as the Scottish Colourists, who were inspired by French artists’ free brushwork and bold colours – and English painter Charles Oppenheimer, whose palette is exhibited in the charming Stewartry Museum across the road.

The building’s upper floors feature changing exhibitions, and there’s also an airy café which overlooks Kirkcudbright Parish Church and the beautiful Soaperie Gardens.

Dark Space Planetarium

Kirkcudbright welcomed its own [planetarium](#) in July 2021, thanks to a multimillion-pound renovation of the Johnston School. Accompanying a gin distillery and pottery in the renamed Johnston Centre, this builds on the region’s impressive stargazing credentials, as nearby Galloway Forest Park was the first in the UK to be awarded Dark Sky Park status. Further afield, but also in Dumfries and Galloway,



The Dark Space Planetarium opened in July 2021

Moffat was Europe's first Dark Sky Town; Neil Armstrong's forebears hailed from Langholm.

The planetarium's main room includes over 25 interactive exhibits, designed for all ages but especially popular with youngsters. An adjoining cinema offers an immersive virtual-reality-like experience, with its 360°-domed screen – currently this shows a rotating slate of films spanning rocket launches to aliens, but there are plans to host presentations soon. As the venue is still in its

nascent stages, other developing schemes include stargazing sessions in Barhill Woods behind the building (also a popular place for spotting red squirrels, for which a hide is provided), and adult-only experiences that additionally feature the Dark Art Distillery.

Dark Art Distillery

Alongside Dark Space Planetarium (and paint-it-yourself studio, The Wee Pottery), [Dark Art](#)

[Distillery](#) completes the trio of new Johnston Centre attractions. Inspired by the area's stargazing acclaim ('the Dark') and artistic heritage ('the Art'), this was founded by Andrew Clark Hutchison and features a magnificent copper still named after his grandma Peggy, who hailed from Kirkcudbright. The site – which still sports wooden panelling and chalk boards from the Johnston's days as a primary school – includes a shop and visitor centre, with gin tours offering a glimpse into the creation process and, of course, a sneaky tasting.

Beyond the suburbs Galloway Forest Park

Although it's over 25 miles away from Kirkcudbright, this is a must for astrotourists. The Milky Way and more than 7,000 planets and stars are visible from the [park](#), which has been given a Gold Tier rating by the International Dark-Sky Association. There's plenty to entertain by day, too, in this melange of forested hills and glimmering lochs: from biking and walking, to wildlife spotting (red deer and wild goats are but two local residents). Owing to its distinct offerings, a campaign is currently underway to help Galloway become Scotland's third national park.

Sadly, its observatory was recently destroyed in a suspicious fire; however, three visitor centres

provide optimal stargazing conditions as well as facilities and information for daytime visitors.

Kirkcudbright Bay

Kirkcudbright Bay is where the 'Dee meets the sea': from here, the river (which begins in the Galloway Hills) flows into the Solway Firth, famed for its sweeping beaches. This location has long been fortuitous for the town – leading to centuries of international trade, Royal Burgh status in 1455, and the fact Kirkcudbright boasts the region's busiest commercial fishing harbour

today. But it also makes for some engaging walks, as highlighted by the [Kirkcudbright Bay Views](#) project. Spanning four to nine miles, starting either at the town's harbour or nearby Doon Beach, these descriptive routes highlight the best of this varied landscape and the area's many compelling tales.

Castle Douglas

Nestled between the Galloway hills and Solway Firth, the self-proclaimed food town of [Castle Douglas](#) is packed with independent businesses,

from specialist shops to enticing delis. The surrounding area bristles with attractions; most notably [Threave Garden and Estate](#), which has been training horticulturists since 1960 and is home to the Scottish Baronial Threave House. The wider grounds also feature Scotland's only bat reserve and a nature reserve that's part of the [Galloway Red Kite Trail](#) – other birdlife here includes osprey, for which there is a viewing platform, and wildfowl. Yet another Threave landmark is an atmospheric [island castle](#), built in 1369 for the delightfully named Archibald the Grim, Lord of Galloway.

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Walks highlighted by the Kirkcudbright Bay Views project begin at the harbour

PRACTICALITIES

Shopping

Kirkcudbright's lively farmers' and producers' market (every fourth Sunday of the month) provides an excellent opportunity to buy local wares, from arts and crafts to food and drink. There's plenty of indie shopping to be had in town; from award-winning food purveyors like J Hall & Sons Butchers to, naturally, an abundance of studios and galleries.

Eating and sleeping

Selkirk Arms Hotel

Dating to 1777, the [Selkirk Arms Hotel](#) was once frequented by Robert Burns, and many believe it was here the poet penned his famous *Selkirk Grace*. Situated on Kirkcudbright's pretty High Street, its tasteful lodgings can also be booked as

part of activity packages (including stargazing). The hotel's acclaimed restaurant primarily serves modern British cuisine, featuring regional produce such as Galloway venison loin and Kirkcudbright's prized scallops.

Masterpiece

A little off the main drag, this [local favourite](#) sells great-value sandwiches loaded with all manner of fresh fillings (including haggis) along with homemade soup, salads and a tempting array of tray bakes and cakes.

Thai Kitchen

This [unassuming restaurant](#) at Kirkcudbright Golf Club sells top-notch Thai fare at a steal (main courses are just over a fiver), but remains something of a hidden treasure when it comes

to tourists. Locals have cottoned on, however; due to unprecedented demand it's take-away-only this year, and pre-ordering is strongly recommended.

Travel

Buses are the only public transport to serve Kirkcudbright, but services are fairly frequent. [Traveline Scotland](#) offers an easy UK journey planner, taking in all forms of public transport.

More information

[Vicky Smith](#) is a freelance writer and photographer, specialising in travel and arts. For more on astrotourism in the UK, check out [Dark Skies](#), which is out this month, or for more on the region see our Slow Travel guide to [Dumfries & Galloway](#). The Travel Club members can get 50% off all books with the code **TRAVELCLUB50**.

