

INSPIRATION South West Coastal 300

# Hidden gem

The southwest corner of Scotland is a region that is inexplicably overlooked by most holidaymakers. But a new touring route has been created in a bid to encourage more visitors to the area. **Iain Duff** explores the camping options on the South West Coastal 300

The beautiful Galloway coast



It has a coastline with sandy beaches, rocky coves and quaint fishing villages that Cornwall would be proud of. Inland, there are hills that provide a stiff challenge to walkers and climbers, not to mention hundreds of square miles of forestry and gently rolling countryside, where cycling and hiking enthusiasts can clock up the miles.

At night, the skies are so inky dark that the area has become one of only four officially designated Dark Sky Parks in the world, making it a brilliant place for amateur stargazers to view celestial displays. On top of that, the area has a rich, fascinating – and at times quite gruesome – history.

Add to the mix the fact that this part of the country enjoys a warmer climate than anywhere else in Scotland and that it is relatively untroubled by the menace of the midge, you do

wonder why Scotland's southwest – Dumfriesshire, Galloway and South Ayrshire – isn't a far more popular visitor destination.

When I was young, we had a caravan on the Galloway coast and spent many happy weekends and summer holidays here. I've been back a couple of times since with my own family, and never been disappointed. But this trip was a little different. The South West Coastal 300 is a new 300-mile circular touring route around the area, modelled on the hugely successful North Coast 500 in the Highlands.

You could easily spend a week or two following the route, exploring what the area has to offer. We only had a few days to cram it all in, but the beauty of tours like this, is that they allow you to sample all the highlights in one go, and if you like what you see, you can always come back to explore in more detail.

As the name would suggest, most of the route follows the coastline but there are also plenty of hills, glens, forests and lochs to marvel at. The upside of this area being off the tourist trail is that the roads are incredibly quiet, especially once you get into the heart of the Galloway countryside. They say there are more cows than people around here, and as you pootle along a hedge-lined country lane or meandering coastal road, it often feels like there are more tractors than cars!

Getting here we had to negotiate the horrors of the A1, the A66 and the M6 and the contrast couldn't be any more stark. I was accompanied by my nine-year-old son Thomas and after the long drive north, we spent our first night just outside Lockerbie. Because it's a circular route, you can start and finish wherever you like and the next day we would be going clockwise towards Dumfries, along the Solway coast, and on towards Newton Stewart.

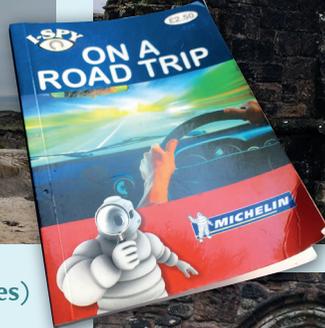


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Southernness Lighthouse



Sweetheart Abbey, New Abbey



## LOCKERBIE – CREETOWN (78 miles)

It's Day One proper of the road trip, and after an early rise and breakfast in the grand surroundings of the campsite at Hoddom Castle, near Lockerbie, we head west in the direction of Dumfries. Despite the drizzly weather, the drive is an absolute pleasure, along quiet roads, through lovely countryside, and yesterday's motorway misery is already a distant memory. Six miles beyond Dumfries, we make our first stop in the little village of New Abbey with its, er, old abbey. Sweetheart Abbey is a splendid red-sandstone ruin dating back to the 13th century, with a romantic backstory to warm the cockles. After the death in 1268 of Lord John Balliol, the founder of the oldest college in Oxford University, his grief-stricken widow, Lady Dervorgilla of Galloway, had his heart embalmed and placed in an ivory casket which she carried everywhere with her. On her death, she was laid



Thomas at Sweetheart Abbey

to rest with her husband's heart in the abbey, which the monks renamed Sweetheart Abbey in her memory. Unfortunately the abbey is closed for stonework repairs when we visit, but we have a mooch around the outside anyway then spend some time exploring the cemetery. Not as morbid as it sounds, honestly.

After a second breakfast at the Abbey Cottage tea room opposite the abbey, we hit the road again following the A710 along the coast for about five miles. Here we depart from the main road and pay a quick visit to the tiny cottage where John Paul Jones – known as the “Father of the American Navy” – grew up. Jones famously led a raid on Whitehaven during the Revolutionary War of the 18th century, and his story is told at the little museum here.

There's only so much history you can force upon a nine-year-old, so after a quick visit to the village of Southernness, home of Scotland's second oldest lighthouse (more history!), our next stop is the vast beach at Sandyhills Bay. Here we collect shells, chuck stones in the sea and generally run around like eejits, before driving along the coast for a bit and having a Mr Whippy from the ice cream van at nearby Rockcliffe Bay.

Sandyhills Bay





Quirky Dalbeattie Museum

From Rockcliffe, the road travels inland for a while, taking us into the small town of Dalbeattie, where we stop for lunch. After eating, we stumble across what might be the world's most random local history museum, where it appears they've asked everyone in town to donate old tat from their loft and put it on display. I like it a lot. Of course, there's plenty of interesting stuff about the town's past, including its links with the *Titanic*. But it's the social history exhibits that make it for me. The shelves heave with thousands of curiosities, ranging from matchboxes and milk bottles to old TV sets and telephones. It's a nostalgia-lover's dream and even Thomas is transfixed – especially when he gets to bang out a tune on the old barrel organ.

Continuing west from Dalbeattie takes us into the heart of rural Galloway, where life – and the traffic – noticeably slows down a pace or two. Despite being one of the least visited parts of the country, this is an area with lots of good campsites and we stay overnight at Castle Cary

Holiday Park in Creetown. There's nothing quite like a campsite with a good pub, and the Laird's Inn here is a cosy place to spend the evening.

### NEWTON STEWART – STRANRAER via Mull of Galloway (105 miles)

On the map, Newton Stewart to Stranraer is only about half an hour's drive along the busy A75, or maybe a little longer if you get stuck behind a convoy of HGVs heading to the Northern Ireland ferries at Cairnryan. However, we're following the far more interesting coastal road, which is about four times as long by distance and takes the best part of a day to complete. There's a lot to see, though.

From the market town of Newton Stewart, the route takes you to Scotland's Book Town, Wigtown, then around the beautiful, rugged coastline of the Machars (great cycling country if that's your thing), to the Mull of Galloway lighthouse, then Port Logan and finally the lovely harbour town of Portpatrick. In fact if we'd had a little more time, we would have split

## SCOTLAND'S SOUTH WEST CAMPSITES

### STAY AT HODDOM CASTLE

Hoddum, Lockerbie DG11 1AS  
01576 300251

[hoddumcastle.co.uk](http://hoddumcastle.co.uk)

Situated close to Lockerbie and the main M74, Hoddum Castle is located in the landscaped grounds of a 16th century tower house, part of the 10,000-acre Hoddum and Kinmount Estates. The facilities include a modern shower block, electric hook-ups, launderette, shop, and the Coach House bar/restaurant.

### CASTLE CARY HOLIDAY PARK

Castle Cary Holiday Park, Creetown DG8 7DQ  
01671 820264

[castlecary-caravans.com](http://castlecary-caravans.com)

A scenic family campsite, 10-minutes' drive from Newton Stewart and the Galloway Forest Park. Facilities include indoor and outdoor pools, crazy golf, café, a games room and playground and donkey, as well as its own pub.

### NORTH RHINNS

Glengyre Cottage, Leswalt, Stranraer DG9 0RG  
01776 853630

[northrhinnscamping.co.uk](http://northrhinnscamping.co.uk)

A peaceful, small rural site for tents and campervans, run by keen campers. The site features campfire hearths at most pitches and has a modern facilities block that features toilets, shower, washing-up sinks and a small fridge/freezer.

### MOFFAT CAMPING AND CARAVANNING CLUB SITE

Hammerlands, Moffat DG10 9QL  
01683 220436

[campingandcaravanningclub.co.uk](http://campingandcaravanningclub.co.uk)

A 180-pitch site surrounded by magnificent scenery but just a few minutes' walk from the town. The site is flat and well-kept, with typically good Club facilities.



Monument to the Wigtown Martyrs

this section over a couple of days to get even more out of it.

If you're an avid reader, a visit to Wigtown is essential. It's full of shops selling new and secondhand tomes and hosts an annual festival with a line-up of major figures from the literary world. We also wander down to the shoreline, where a memorial marks a gruesome period in Scotland's history. The Martyr's Stake commemorates the shocking execution of covenanters, Margaret Lachlan, and 18-year-old Margaret Wilson in 1685, for refusing to take an oath for Roman Catholic King James II. The pair were drowned after being tied up on the mudflats and forced to wait for the tide to rise.

South of Wigtown, we follow the coastal route around the Machars peninsula, which boasts some of Scotland's finest, and yet most under-appreciated, shoreline. We stop off at the tiny harbour village of Garlieston, where the bay was used to test the Mulberry floating harbours used in the D-Day landings in 1944. The village hall has an interesting little exhibition about the village's part in the war effort.

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The ruins of St Ninian's Chapel in Isle of Whithorn

After a grey start, the sun is now shining, and the sea sparkles in the sunlight as we head along the coast to the picturesque village of Isle of Whithorn. A good part of Galloway's appeal is its tranquillity. The winding roads that cling to the shoreline and criss-cross the countryside are a joy to drive on because they are so quiet.

Isle of Whithorn is right on the most southerly tip of the peninsula. From here it's only 15 miles to the Isle of Man coastline, which explains why my phone decided to connect to a Manx mobile company when it lost the local signal. Isle of Whithorn – technically it's not actually an island – has a graceful shoreline and charming seaside cottages and old fishing buildings making up the harbour. The Isle was pivotal in the spreading of Christianity as it was where Scotland's first saint, Ninian, came ashore and the ruins of a nearby chapel celebrate his works. Nearby there's a poignant cairn, where people leave stones in memory of relatives and friends who have died.

Mull of Galloway Lighthouse



Where to next?



Windswept Mull of Galloway

We have lunch at St Ninian's Tearoom then continue along the coastal road that twists along the eastern side of Luce Bay before sweeping round to the opposite shore and heading south to Drummore and the most southerly village in Scotland. We're actually further south than Newcastle, Sunderland and Carlisle here, which blew my mind briefly.

We then follow a long and winding road out to the Mull of Galloway lighthouse, perched on a 260ft cliff at the very end of the track. It's as remote as it gets, but the landscape here isn't quite the harsh wilderness you might expect. Instead we find sweeping sandy bays, rolling fields... and lots of cows. On the stretch of road leading to the lighthouse, cattle have the right of way and you have to take care as they wander across the road as they please.

At the lighthouse, there's an exhibition and you can climb the 115 steps to the top of the tower, where you are rewarded on a clear day with spectacular views across to Ireland, the

Isle of Man and Cumbria. Overlooking the cliff edge, where gannets swoop and soar, we enjoy a slice of cake at Scotland's most southerly coffee house before heading back north up the Rhinns of Galloway peninsula.

Our next stop is the little village of Port Logan, with its pretty harbour where you can stop for a picnic. A few miles further on, we come to the popular seaside village of Portpatrick, with its pastel coloured houses, pretty bay and dramatic cliffs. There are quite a few campsites around here, and we pitch up at North Rhinns Camping, a quiet site for tents and campervans, around six miles from Stranraer.

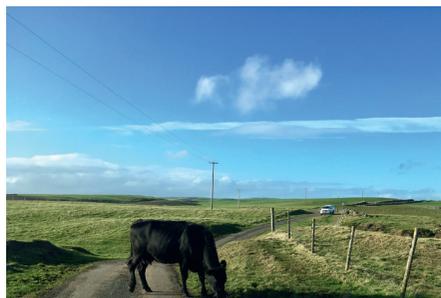
## STRANRAER – MOFFAT (110 miles)

No offence to the people of Stranraer, but spending three hours in their town is not how we expected to be starting Day Three of our road trip. However, a puncture shortly after leaving the campsite means that we're temporarily stranded here until help arrives.

Isle of Whithorn



Pretty seafront cottages in Garlieston



Moove please

And to be honest it's not much fun, especially as yesterday's glorious sunshine has been replaced with heavy rain. Thomas and I quickly exhaust what the town has to offer, and spend a miserable hour-and-a-half sitting in the car, watching rain streaming down the windows and waiting for the recovery truck to take us to the nearest tyre centre. But these things happen, and there's no point getting stressed about it.

Once we finally get back on the road, we head north towards Ayrshire. About half an hour up the coast, we reach the small village

of Ballantrae and, although we're way behind schedule, I can't resist a brief stop here. When I used come down here as a child, my parents would tell us about a hermit who lived in a cave overlooking the Irish Sea, just outside the village. To be honest, I always doubted the accuracy of this tale, assuming it was one of those stories that parents come up with to impress/scare their offspring (we've all done it), but much to my surprise it turned out to be true. Henry Ewing Torbet, known as "Snib Scott", lived there for 20 years until he died in



Fishing gear at Port Logan

## ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

### **i** NEED TO DO

#### **CREAM O' GALLOWAY VISITOR CENTRE**

Rainton, Gatehouse of Fleet, Castle Douglas, Kirkcudbrightshire DG7 2DR  
01557 814040

[creamogalloway.co.uk](http://creamogalloway.co.uk)

What could be better? An amusement park run by an ice cream company, with tours of a working dairy farm, an adventure playground, rides and nature trails. Plus tasting sessions!

#### **KIRKUDBRIGHT**

Kirkcudbright enjoys a sheltered position at the mouth of the River Dee, where it emerges onto the north Solway shore. An attractive settlement, surrounded by picturesque countryside, it has a strong artistic heritage which started when a colony of artists including the Glasgow Boys arrived in the 1880s. The 16th century Tolbooth has become an art centre and there are displays of paintings by Kirkcudbright painters past and present.

#### **JOHN PAUL JONES COTTAGE**

Arbigland, Dumfries DG2 8BQ  
01387 880613

[jpp.demon.co.uk](http://jpp.demon.co.uk)

John Paul Jones grew up in this cottage but later became known as the "Father of the American Navy" – famously leading a raid on Whitehaven during the Revolutionary War of the 18th century.

#### **CREETOWN GEM ROCK MUSEUM**

Creetown, Newton Stewart DG8 7HJ  
01671 820357

[gemrock.net](http://gemrock.net)

A world-renowned family museum, regarded as one of the finest private collections of gemstones, crystals, minerals, rocks and fossils in Britain.

#### **MULL OF GALLOWAY LIGHTHOUSE EXPERIENCE**

Drummore, Dumfries and Galloway DG9 9HP  
01776 840554

[mull-of-galloway.co.uk](http://mull-of-galloway.co.uk)

Climb the lighthouse, visit the exhibition, explore the vintage engines and foghorn, investigate the RSPB Scotland nature reserve and enjoy snacks and drinks at Scotland's most southerly coffee house.

#### **GALLOWAY FOREST**

Galloway's varied wildlife attracts many holiday-makers eager to see red squirrels, otter, pine marten, black grouse, golden eagles and deer and there's nowhere better to see it than in the 300 square miles of its forest. There are three visitor centres, at Clatteringshaws, Kirroughtree and Glentroll and around 30 marked pathways, so there's a route to suit all abilities.

#### **CULZEAN CASTLE**

Maybole, Ayrshire KA19 8LE  
[nts.org.uk/visit/places/culzean](http://nts.org.uk/visit/places/culzean)  
01655 884455

Nestling on the south Ayrshire coast, Culzean is one of Scotland's best-loved castles. There's plenty to enjoy both inside the castle, within the walled garden and in the surrounding estate, which boasts an adventure playground, deer park and a series of caves beneath the property.

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1983 and the locals put up a cairn in his memory, opposite the cave. His old bolthole is still there, although the road no longer passes in front of it, and as far as I can tell no one is using it as a home. I hope we'd be as tolerant today of someone who chose to live such an alternative lifestyle, but I do have my doubts.

You can't come to the southwest of Scotland without learning more about Robert Burns, the National Bard and writer of countless famous poems and songs, including *Auld Lang Syne*. The most northerly point of the SWC300 is Alloway, where you can visit the cottage where he was born in 1759. From here, the route leaves the coast for the last time and takes us inland, deep into the heart of the south Ayrshire countryside. We pass through towns and villages like Straiton, Dalmellington and Sanquhar, the latter home to what is reputedly the oldest working post office in the world and another haunt of the aforementioned Burns.

Former hermit's cave near Ballantrae



Wanlockhead – Scotland's highest village



The wide high street in Moffat

Shortly after Sanquhar, we come off the main A76 road and take the Mennock Pass through the Lowther Hills, part of the Southern Uplands. From the lush green countryside we've been driving through for the last few days, our surroundings suddenly change. The countryside here is wild and largely uninhabited, surprisingly more reminiscent of the remote far north of Scotland than what we consider to be typical of the south. The road winds through the slopes and mountains of the Lowther Hills, part of the Southern Uplands, before arriving at Wanlockhead, the highest village in Scotland and home of the country's highest pub. I should stress at this point, that by "highest" I'm referring to the height above sea level (1,532ft)... what the residents of this former lead mining village do for recreation I couldn't say. And sadly, our schedule means we've no time to hang around to find out.

We carry on east towards the main M74 motorway, and finally arrive at our last overnight stop, the Camping and Caravanning Club site at Moffat. We're late, and the reception is closed,

but a special mention must go to the wardens who break off from their night off to check us in and help us get pitched. The tent goes up in record time and after a long day of driving, we treat ourselves to a well-deserved curry in town.

Moffat is another of those places I've passed countless times on the motorway on my way to somewhere else, and never paid a visit. But as we discover next morning, it's definitely worth stopping. It has a charming main street, with a good selection of interesting independent shops, cafés and restaurants – and even a record shop selling secondhand vinyl. We mooch around for an enjoyable few hours, Thomas stocking up on Irn Bru flavoured sweets from the Moffat Toffee Shop and me splashing the cash on a couple of Adam And The Ants albums.

After an enjoyable morning in Moffat, we get back in the car for the final leg of the trip down the motorway to Lockerbie, where we started three days and 300 miles ago. A quick lunch and we set off home, leaving the peace and quiet behind us, until next time

The remote road through the Lowther Hills

