

ROAD TRIP THROUGH SCOTLAND

by Chase Binder

Some go to Scotland just for the distilleries. After all, the most iconic, sip-worthy and expensive scotches are distilled from ingredients culled from the peat bogs and soil found there. Some go for the castles. Scotland castles number over 2000, depending upon how you count the ruins, restored historical castles and current-day homes of the British royalty.

Some want to connect with history and seek their own ancestors. Some go to explore the Neolithic monuments, every bit as mysterious and striking as Stonehenge, but much more accessible and evocative. Some are drawn to filming locations of wildly popular series like *Outlander* and *Harry Potter*, or want to step on historic golf courses like St. Andrews Links.



Urquhart Castle: Urquhart Castle overlooks Loch Ness, purported home of the Loch Ness Monster. No...we didn't see Nessie, but we did visit the entertaining and informative Loch Ness Center and Exhibition which celebrated and also debunked the legend. Concord's own Robert Rines, noted for his 1972 "sighting" of Nessie, has prominent mention in the museum. Urquhart Castle is one of 77 historical places included in the Explore Scotland pass—a significant savings if you have the time.

Bud and I, and travel pals, Chuck and Debra Douglas, wanted to do it all. On our own, just the four of us, driving our own car. Building each day around a priority or two—a castle here, a museum there. A visit to Loch Ness one day, a ferry ride to the Outer Hebrides the next. And everywhere, everywhere, pub food galore. Fish and chips. Steak pie. Lamb. Salmon.

We designed a 14-day loop that began in Edinburgh (pronounced Edinburrh), bent south for a quick visit to the Douglas clan's original stomping grounds, then headed north to Pitlochry via St. Andrews Links. From there we visited Inverness and Loch Ness, then loaded our Citroen van onto the Cal-Mac ferry and made our way through the Isles of Lewis and Harris, two of the islands in the Outer Hebrides. Lastly—back on a ferry to the Isle of Skye, and over the bridge to Fort William and Glasgow.



Kilts: I came across these fine young lads in kilts at Edinburg Castle and thought they might be part of a period-costumed historical program at the castle...but no! It turns out the castle is a popular wedding venue and these fellows were part of a wedding party—traditional dress and all.



Highland Cattle: Highland cattle originated in in the Highlands and Outer Hebridean Isles, and that's just where we encountered this iconic fellow, grazing by the road-side on the Isle of Harris.



Calanais Stones: The Standing Stones of Callanish (Calanais in Gaelic) are found near Loch Roag on the Isle of Lewis, and are arranged in a cross formation roughly aligned with the movements of the solar system. The origins are a mystery, but scholars agree it was constructed around 3000 BC. Not only does it predate Stonehenge by 2000 years, but the remote location means that visitors are more often pilgrims interested in connecting with Neolithic monuments than tourists checking another box. The sun was still casting long shadows at 10:30 at night and we were charmed by an other-worldly ambiance and the ability to actually walk among the stones and lay hands on them.



St. Bride's Church: Church ruins dot the countryside and can be a boon to genealogists and folks seeking to connect with their ancestors. St. Bride's Church in the hamlet of Douglas was once the parish church of the Black Douglases', 13th century landowners who became prominent through their support of Robert the Bruce in the Scottish Wars of Independence, a particularly bloody time in Scottish history. The ruins are now a mausoleum with centuries of information and artifacts relating to the Douglas clan.



Jacobite Train: The Jacobite steam train runs from Fort William to Mallaig along the 21 arches of the Glenfinnan viaduct. You may know it as the Hogwarts Express train of Harry Potter fame—the one that carried Harry, Ron and Hermione to school each year. The “real” train was built in 1937 and is now owned by West Coast Railways. It makes two tourist trips a day and we were thrilled to have sun and bright skies for the trip. We booked five months ahead—not a moment too soon!



Crannog: Scots just love their history, including the 5000 years when crannogs were in use, artificial islands constructed in lakes through the country. Yurt-like dwellings house residents and some livestock in a communal setting designed for protection.

How did it go? We went prepared for all kinds of weather—and got it. A few days of rain, some wind and some cold, but many days of bright sun, blue skies and iconic green meadows.

Debra and Bud went prepared to drive a 7-passenger van, English drive and standard shift on the floor, along narrow lanes and crazy roundabouts. While we had some breathtaking moments, we didn't hit any sheep or Highland cattle, scrape any curbs or collide with any other vehicles—even when driving on and off the massive Cal-Mac ferries. We all went prepared to find great pub food at a reasonable cost—and had not a single disappointment.

We had hoped to find some cheery, outgoing Scots to chat up and ended up being thrilled with our encounters. Folks were very friendly, welcoming and happy to give tips on everything from menu selections to local attractions and the “best” pub bars.

We were also pleased with our timing. Late May and early June just skirts the very high season. Yes, there were buses of tourists here and there. But we started with Edinburgh Castle on May 27th and it wasn't uncomfortably crowded. We heard horror stories from a couple of weeks later.

As for the pace over 14 days and our selection of sights and attractions, it worked very well. We were lucky to have mildly-castle-obsessed Chuck setting up an array of castles—ancient ruins to modern day homes—that gave us an excellent feel for the depth and breadth of Scottish history. We didn't get “castled out” until day 12 or so! We only pre-booked a couple of “must-haves”—a ride on the Jacobite train of Harry Potter fame and both ferry trips. Other days were loosely defined as “have lunch at St. Andrews Links Clubhouse”, “visit the site of the Battle of Culloden”, “shop for Harris Tweed on the Isle of Harris”, or “visit the Royal Yacht Britannia.”

Our collective mood on arrival was upbeat and excited. By the time we departed we all felt like we had connected with the people, the history (and even prehistory) and the stunning landscape of Scotland. Somehow the green is greener, the mountains craggier, the sheep more abundant and the castles more striking than I had expected. I do love when a trip goes well!



Fisherman's Bar: Cozy is a word that applies to much of Scotland. This outdoor bar at Port na Craig, a riverside restaurant in Pitlochry, had just a few tables. Still, plenty of room for the locals to bring their dogs!



Britannia: This working cabin may look modest, but it's actually Queen Elizabeth II's office aboard the Royal Yacht Britannia, which is docked in Edinburgh and functions as a museum. In service from 1954 to 1997, it's full of history and fun photos of the royal family and is a must-do for Anglophiles. We loved having scones and tea on the upper deck!



Park Bar: Pubs are an integral part of life in Scotland. We happened into The Park Bar on Argyle Street in Glasgow during a Scotland-Cyprus “football” match and met Will, Alasdair and Calun, three young men who absolutely made our last night with tales of extreme hiking on Skye and advice on pub drinking. Best of all, Scotland pulled off a surprise win—and the pub went wild!

If You Go to Scotland/England

Details are critical in planning a successful trip, especially when traveling with another couple and self-driving in the UK. Here are some tips:

DRIVING: UK vehicles are notorious small—and for good reason. The roads are skippy and often rimmed with sharp granite curbing. Ask for a vehicle that seats 4 adults comfortably and can accommodate 4 large suitcases and a few smaller bags. A Citroen Berlingo 7-passenger van worked beautifully for us with the 3rd row seat removed for luggage storage. An in-dash GPS navigation system was a huge help, as was having two drivers to share the load. Luckily, Bud and Debra are both comfy with UK driving with a standard shift.

WALKING: Folks in the UK walk a lot and city streets are often rumbled cobblestone! Good comfy shoes are a must (I found some great air-cooled Skechers with memory foam soles at Marshalls). And when someone says “it’s just down the street a bit and around the corner—an easy walk”, they might well mean a mile or so, uphill at times.

LODGING: Aside from \$500/night high end London hotel rooms, UK rooms are also notoriously small. Accommodations with lots of ambiance in the country and in smaller cities are often in older homes—think 100-200+ years old. This can mean no elevators and rooms that are rarely uniform. One twin or double room might be larger than the other, with more windows, etc. This is also often true of VRBO or Airbnb apartments. This was problematic a few times, which we tried to resolve by alternating who got the better room. Important note: our queen bed (60” x 80”) is their king. Our king bed (76”x 80”) is their super king and not terribly common. For folks who book a twin room when a king isn’t available, note that twin rooms can be tiny.

HOW MUCH TIME? We extended our 14-day trip an additional 4 days in Iceland through Icelandair’s Stopover program. More on that program in another column, but I think the four of us would agree that that two weeks is an ideal time for this type of trip. Any less and you’re rushed, any more and you can get edgy with your own spouse, let alone someone else’s!



Sheep In Road: Driving was a challenge! Our trusty drivers, Bud and Debra, had to drive on left side of the road, steer from the right side of the car and navigate breathtakingly narrow roads—all while managing a stick shift with their left hands. And then there was the occasional sheep in the road!



Inn: The Old Mill Inn in Pitlochry caught my eye. Have a pint out on the patio or in by the fire, where’s sure to be a dog curled up on the hearth. Quintessential Scotland!

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