

TRAVEL DIARY

HI TO THE HIGHLANDS

Scotland isn't a place where you want to spend your whole time in the cities, nice as they are. Escape to the moors and see what peaceful, easy living is all about.

BY DOUG WALLACE



With the Scottish, there always seems to be a silent standing invitation to join in — on the fun, the meal, even the joke. Perhaps due in part to the fact that its population is one-tenth that of England, Scotland feels a bit more small-town, even in the city. People tend to actually converse with you rather than just talk, and you get the straight goods without having to fish for it.

This may be the reason why Scotland will have millions of tourists visiting this year — and you could be one of them.

Edinburgh and Glasgow are terrific in every way, but motoring around the Highlands is achingly beautiful and you can easily do the trip in a week. Or longer. Or a lot longer. The scenery is the biggest draw here — endless hills and rock, trees and lakes. Driving actually becomes your main activity, as if you were on your own personal treasure hunt.

A good place to start the tour is in Speyside on the Malt Whisky Trail. This is a grouping of eight distilleries that bank the fast-flowing River Spey to take advantage of its crystal clear water. Legend has it that distillers settled here during a time when whisky-making was illegal, and chose the region because it was remote. Whatever the rationale, these days, Speyside produces more than half the whisky distilled in the country. In order to be classified as a single malt, whisky has to be made in Scotland, bottled in Scotland and aged at least three years. With regard to smokiness, a whisky characteristic that is often considered an acquired taste, most modern-day Speysides are sweeter and richer, with less smoky taste. Whichever traits you favour, there is bound to be a whisky that agrees with you if you take the time to test them out. The Scots, to their credit, credit the Irish for inventing whisky — they just don't talk about it much.

Next up is a swing west to Inverness, for a cruise down Loch Ness. Just to say you've been there, done that. This picturesque lake is long and skinny, cold and clear, and apparently, extremely deep. Certain

tours of it will drop you off at the ruins of Urquhart Castle, where you can wander around for an hour or so, wondering what life would have been like constantly on the look-out for marauders climbing over the stone walls.

From there, most visitors drive down the side of Loch Ness heading for Fort William, a thriving and busy tourist town, but you're stopping at Fort August instead, a quaint and beautiful village nestled at the base of the lake. Here you can spend hours here just watching the sky change colour or waving at barges and boats being guided through the Caledonian Canal and locks, on their way through the lake system to the sea. There's amazing golf nearby as well: the Scottish definitely invented that game (and don't have to share it with the Irish).

Because you've come this far, you may as well carry on west around Lochs Garry, Loyne and Cluanie to Loch Duich, then cross the bridge to the Isle of Skye. A region of farming and fishing, this is a place for tourists to get back to the land. It allegedly once had the reputation of being a hiding place for bandits, likely because it is so far away from the cities. It is said that there are no trees on Skye because authorities chopped them all down hunting for outlaws centuries ago. Bandits or just plain barren, Skye is beautiful beyond words — and also home to one of the best restaurants in the country: Three Chimneys at House-Over-By restaurant. It's booked for months in advance by foodies who also clamour for a night or two at the five-suite inn adjacent to the restaurant. The fabled Seven Courses of Skye uses ingredients sourced in Skye and Lochalsh, including the freshest seafood. Booking the table right inside the kitchen gets you in on all the behind-the-scenes activity.

Heading back to the middle belt of Scotland comes next, but not before making a few more pitstops. Quaint communities, historical sites and buildings (or what's left of them) and national parks dot the landscape. Map out in advance where you'll dawdle and where you'll drive on, keeping your itinerary flexible in case one of Scotland's many surprises along the way takes your fancy.





Of the castles you need to have on your list, Eilean Donan Castle near the town of Dornie is one of the best restored, the ancient home of the Clan Mackenzie and their allies the Clan Macrae. Built up and torn down for centuries, it was derelict for 200 years before being rebuilt by John MacRae-Gilstrap in the 1920s. The castle opened to the public in 1955, and has enjoyed its time in the limelight as a location for many films, including *The World Is Not Enough*, *Entrapment* and *Elizabeth: The Golden Age*.

Through the Loch Lomond and the Trossacks National Park you'll go, where you will lose count of the lakes you're driving around. Down, down, back to the reality of the city — but with a refreshed and revived spirit having hit all the Highland high notes.

Places to Stay

Book into The Craigellachie Hotel in Craigellachie on the Malt Whisky Trail, an upscale, old-style country inn. Its Quaich Bar features more than 900 different kinds of whisky.
www.craigellachiehotel.co.uk

At the very bottom of Loch Ness, relax into the loving arms of The Lovat, an award-winning eco-friendly boutique hotel in Fort Augustus. Comfortable, charming and run like a top.
www.thelovat.com

Just down the road from Rob Roy's gravesite sits the majestic but intimate 14-room Monachyt Mohr Hotel, on the banks of Loch Voil. This relaxing family-run destination has the best food for miles and miles.
www.monachytmohr.net

Nothing will pick you up faster than Champagne and cakes at Edinburgh's Scotsman Hotel, which used to be the Scotsman newspaper offices. Ask for one of the corner Editors rooms.
www.scotsmanhotel.co.uk

