



Break for the Border

Sometimes the best adventures are closest to home. No matter how many times **Caroline Phillips** visits, Scotland is the gift that keeps on giving



I can't keep away from Scotland. Yes, yes, I know it rains a lot. And if you go to the wrong place in summer there may be battalions of midges. And, OK, it's true that far outside the cities a few still think that a vegetarian is someone who's happy to eat oatmeal picked from the sheep's liver and lungs of a haggis. But ah dinnae ken of many places I love more than Scotland.

There are wild beaches beside bonnie, rugged shores for bracing swims, thousands of miles of dramatic coastline – breathe deep the spectacular scenery of its jagged west coast – and forested braes for blustery walks. The right to roam offers relatively free access.

Scotland boasts majestic highland glens for picnicking and tranquil lochs for trout fishing. Plus brooding castles and fortified tower houses for walking into the 13th-century world of Scottish lairds, chieftains and ghosts. Who can ignore the inspiration for Sir Walter Scott?

I don't mind the weather – yes, honestly – with its four proper seasons, from snow-capped mountains through to summer's purple heather. And I love the Scots with

their irrepressible spirit, humour and hardiness; after all, this is a people that has emerged from centuries of conflict between Picts, Scots, Angles and Norsemen and invasions by the Romans and William the Conqueror.

As for the sights and activities, there are the undulating farmlands of Angus, Ayrshire and Aberdeenshire. Those green and lush Borders vistas. And the wildernesses of the Cairngorms, Rannoch Moor and the Trossachs, with red deer, peregrine falcons and golden eagles. Highland paradises for hillwalking, rock climbing and white-water kayaking. Who can ignore the lure of Loch Lomond or Ben Nevis, Britain's highest peak? Or the Hogwart's Highland Express Tour across multi-arched Glenfinnan Viaduct?

There are more distilleries than you can shake an ancient malt at (Speyside is world class) and bars and spirits aplenty. There's a flourishing foodie scene with innovative chefs working their magic with locally sourced ingredients: best-in-the-world shellfish, flavoursome Angus beef, premier game and artisan cheeses.

Add to this mix Glasgow and Edinburgh,

boasting between them a mighty medieval castle, gracious Georgian and grand Victorian architecture, with an industrial heritage, edgy art scene and nightlife. And let's not forget Kengo Kuma's V&A Dundee, with its stunning curved concrete walls.

I've driven up to Scotland more often than I've had Hogmanay dinners, taken overnight sleepers and flown there too. Once I cross the border, a calm and sense of the awe of its delightful otherness permeates my soul. Even the names of hotels have an alluring peat-fire-meets-Highland-fling of a ring to them – just try saying Perle Oban, Kinloch Lodge or Killiecrankie Hotel – even more beguiling if said by someone wearing a kilt, as in, 'Och, the hotel, it's just about a mile up the wee road there...'.

I've slept on a (Georgian) floor for the Edinburgh Festival (it was too late to book a room), bobbed around the Hebrides slumbering in regal comfort in the Queen's favourite boat – a converted ferry – and napped in a luxurious train-turned-hotel-on-wheels. I've stayed in castles aplenty, including a five-star fortification on the so-called Highland Riviera. But the majority

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Luskentyre beach looks more like the Caribbean than the Outer Hebrides; even the name Kinloch Lodge summons the idea of peat fires; the ultra-modern V&A Dundee has put the city on the cultural map; red deer are Scotland's largest surviving native wild land mammal; Killiecrankie Hotel has spectacular views of the Cairngorms; all aboard the Hogwarts Express – or at least the Glenfinnan Viaduct



FROM ABOVE: Knockinaam Lodge has an outstanding restaurant; Castle Stalker off the west coast; Ben Nevis, Britain's highest peak



of accommodation is in Georgian and Victorian country house hotels, the kind with squishy sofas, roaring open fires and books beckoning to be read.

What about you, then? You may wish to start in Edinburgh, in which case you can stay in Fingal, a converted former lighthouse boat docked in industrial Leith. If you're off to the north-west Highlands, The Torridon is the hotel to pick: set in 58 acres of parkland at the end of a sea loch, with views that make you rub your eyes and a silence that makes mindfulness meditation feel noisy. Whether you're after mountain biking, stargazing or whisky tasting, this is the place to be.

You don't have to meet as furtively at Knockinaam Lodge as Churchill and Eisenhower did to plan the D-Day landings. You will, in fact, want to tell everyone you've been to this 19th-century country house hotel, fashioned from a historic hunting lodge, in a private cove with gobsmackingly gorgeous views over the Irish Sea.

For those who'd like to follow in the footsteps of Queen Victoria and Queen Elizabeth II (to their fave holiday spot), you won't want to miss the newly-opened Fife Arms in Braemar, Aberdeenshire –

where else will you find a Lucian Freud and Picasso alongside a self-playing grand piano and drop-dead gorgeous walks and lonely landscapes on the moors?

Please don't write to me in the unlikely event you come back not loving Scotland, because I'll think you're fibbing. After all, I've seen seals, whales, dolphins, puffins, red deer and wildcats on my visits there. I've tapped my feet to a Scottish jig at a ceilidh and discovered my four feet while Scottish reeling. Tried golf on world-class links (did you know the Scots invented the game?) and foraged for wild mushrooms with a ghillie and his dog.

I've snooped through the rooms of private baronial mansions and ogled at Charles Rennie Mackintosh- and Adam-designed buildings. I've gazed in wonder at ancient standing stones and monoliths, the wind clapping my face and the sound of waves crashing on the shore. And I've spent happy afternoons reading second-hand tomes and eating scones in Wigtown, with its 20 bookshops and literary cafés.

I'll be back. Och aye. And lang may yer lum reek (may you live long and stay well)... so that you too can visit 'bonnie Scotland'. Again and again.

48 HOURS IN EDINBURGH

SKIP THE TOURIST HOTSPOTS
AND LIVE LIKE A LOCAL



Portobello beach

SEE

Catch the Chilly Dippers, university students who de-stress by plunging into the water at Portobello beach; visit Stockbridge market for sourdough and handmade soap; explore Water of Leith's 12-mile riverside walk through the city's heart; chill in Marchmont's hip cafés and yoga studios.



Fingal

STAY

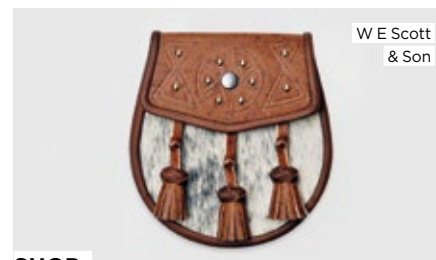
You can't sleep over on Britannia, so slumber the other side of Leith Docks aboard Fingal, a luxurious converted lighthouse boat. A stay at The Scotsman will bring out your inner journalist; a night at The Balmoral will feed your passion for Harry Potter (JK finished the seventh book here).



The Lookout
by Gardener's
Cottage

EAT

Head straight to Fhior, with its excellent modern Scottish menu and Nordic inspiration. Don't miss the new Lookout by Gardener's Cottage (it's partially suspended over Calton Hill) for unbeatable views and even better food. No visit is complete without a flippin' fresh fish at Fishers.



W E Scott
& Son

SHOP

For sporrans and Highland belts, it's W E Scott & Son; Dick's offers men's linen suits and hankies; Araminta Campbell sells weavings inspired by the Scottish landscape and alpaca pieces; visit Georgian Antiques' warehouse for interiors. ■