

Eilean Donan Castle



The Getaway: International

A JOURNEY THROUGH THE SCOTTISH HIGHLANDS

THE name alone evokes images of weather-beaten mountains, dramatic seascapes, castles, bagpipes, romance and bloody battles. And indeed, the Scottish Highlands has it all, its people holding steadfast to the traditions of old in a land seemingly untouched by time.

My Glaswegian friend Finlay McLachlan tells me that the Scots refer to their homeland as “God’s own country.” Recently, he took me to this remote and strikingly beautiful northwestern region of Scotland to show me why.

INVERARAY CASTLE

We traveled first to Inveraray, an appealing town with whitewashed buildings attractively spread out along the head of Loch Fyne. The town is home to the 18th century Inveraray Castle, the Duke of Argyll’s grand estate, which houses a fascinating collection of furniture, paintings, porcelain and early Scottish weapons.

To reach the castle, we meandered along a path on the castle grounds past grazing sheep and a group of kilt-clad bagpipers practicing for the Inveraray Highland Games.

The gardens are as magnificent as the castle itself. Once, visiting dignitaries such as Queen

Victoria, Dr. David Livingstone and Prime Minister William Gladstone were asked to plant trees here, a practice common in the late 19th century.

THE VALLEY OF THE GHOSTS

At Kilmartin, which has more than 350 historic sites sprinkled within six miles, we explored the ancient burial cairns, rock carvings, stone circles and standing stones that surround the village.

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The area is known as the “Valley of the Ghosts” - not for its misty lochs or haunted castles, but for the many people who lived, loved, danced and died here over the past 10,000 years.

Visitors can learn more about the area at the

Kilmartin House Museum, which examines the fragments of history left here by the area’s pre-historic inhabitants.

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF HARRY POTTER

We spent the night in picturesque Fort William, known as the outdoor capital of the United Kingdom. The next morning we boarded the Jacobite Steam Train for the spectacular journey to Mallaig.

It’s no wonder that the train, called the Jacobite because it passes through countryside associated with Bonnie Prince Charlie and the Jacobite Rebellion, was chosen to portray the Hogwarts Express in the Harry Potter films. It travels a route lined with jaw-dropping vistas - waterfalls plunging from tall mountain peaks, heather-strewn moors hugging the edges of lochs, and hills swathed by trees in endless shades of green - an 84-mile journey that has been voted by Wanderlust magazine readers as the most scenic railway on the planet.

The highlight of the trip comes as the train thunders across the Glenfinnan Viaduct. At 1,248 feet long and 100 feet high, the viaduct’s 21 arches are a true engineering marvel. The



train stops in Mallaig, a fishing village in which we had an hour and forty minutes to explore before the return trip.

OVER THE SEA TO SKYE

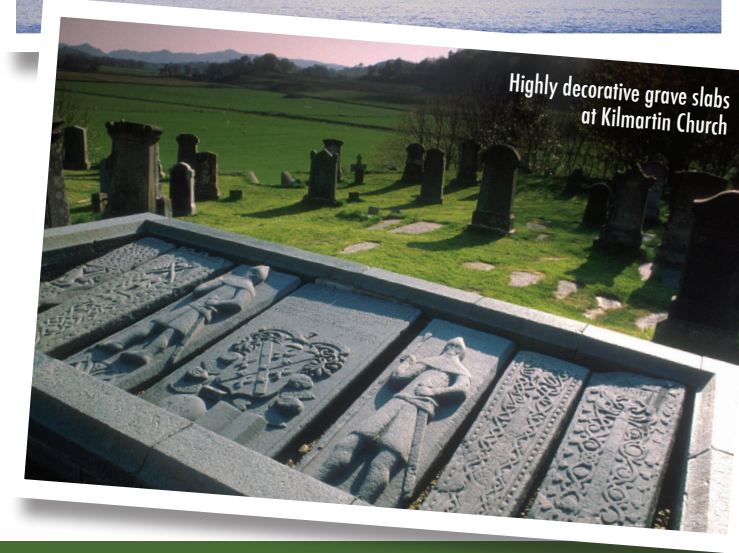
The next morning we visited the iconic Eilean Donan Castle, probably the most photographed castle in Scotland. Clinging to an islet that’s been a fortified site for 800 years, this romantic crenellated tower is situated at the confluence of three sea lochs and is connected to the shore by a stone causeway.

The Isle of Skye, our final destination, is easily reached by the Skye Bridge at the Kyle of Lochalsh. Dramatically scenic, Skye’s jagged Cuillin Ridge drops to the edges of soft, white sand beaches as sparkling inlets and bays lap its shores. Portree, the island’s only real town, has a cliff-edge harbor dotted with fishing boats and circled by multihued restaurants and guest houses.

We visited the 14th century Dunvegan Castle, home of the chiefs of Clan MacLeod. Famous for its “fairy flag,” said to have been given to a MacLeod chief by his fairy wife to protect the castle in times of trouble, the castle’s most striking feature is its lush, wooded gardens, ideal for a long walk.

In the Highlands, it’s easy to see why the Scots refer to their homeland as “God’s own country.” The area is so remote and astonishingly beautiful that it could have been intentionally designed to take your breath away. It’s the perfect escape from the modern world.

BY AGENT MELODY MOSER



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