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SCOTLAND

Our correspondent saw bagpipers, castles, and gorgeous landscapes but, alas, no Loch Ness monster.

by Margie Goldsmith







MARGIE GOLDSMITH/OPENING SPREAD; FOTOLIA

When I'm in a new place, I like to rise early and explore while the city is still yawning itself awake, but it was late morning when my driver pulled into the entrance of the Sheraton Grand in Edinburgh, Scotland. I was jetlagged, and breakfast seemed like a better idea.

It was hard to choose between smoked salmon, eggs, cereals, pastries, bacon, and what I thought were two kinds of traditional breakfast sausages—until I read the descriptions. One turned out to be haggis pudding, which is made from a sheep's heart, liver, and lungs and is boiled in a sheep's stomach. It sounds disgusting, but it was delicious—similar to a spicy sausage. The other was black pudding, which is blood sausage made from pork fat and minced with oat groats. It was even worse than it sounds.

Americans typically visit Scotland to play golf, fish, or explore their ancestry. I came simply to tour Edinburgh as well as the unspoiled countryside up to the Outer Hebrides. After breakfast, I began by wandering over to the city's famous Royal Mile, which runs from Edinburgh Castle to Holyrood Palace.

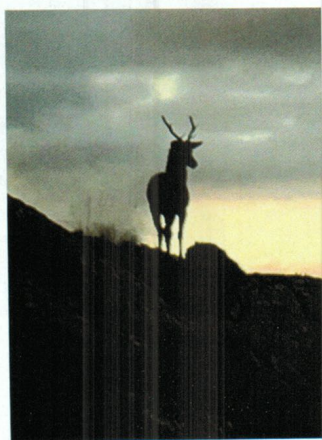
On the Royal Mile, a bagpiper in traditional dress and a black bearskin cap entertained tourists who jockeyed for position to take selfies with him. A young man with a long sword dressed in a *Braveheart* horse's costume handed me a Norse helmet and demanded money for a photo. I donned the helmet, grabbed his sword before he realized what was happening, and pretended to fight him, cracking up as I handed him a coin.



ELLIOT GILLES

When I visited Edinburgh years ago, the *Britannia* had not yet been decommissioned, so that was my next stop. Behind glass were the adjoining bedrooms of Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip.

The Queen's Sitting Room was nearby, and I imagined her trying to sign documents with the ship rolling in a storm. Upstairs was her Rolls-Royce Phantom V, which could be squeezed into the ship's garage only by removing its bumpers and hoisting it onto a special track fitted on the deck. My first thought was that I'd never be able to park that car without scratching it.



MARGIE GOLDSMITH



ELLIOT GILLES

After viewing the *Britannia*, I left Edinburgh, heading up through the Highlands to the Tomatin Distillery, near Inverness, which is surrounded by velvety rolling hills and cascading streams. There, I looked up at an advertising poster that showed a long-horned Highland cow wearing a shaggy coat and red rubber Wellington boots. The ad read, “Tomatin Highland Single Malt Whiskey: The Softer Side of the Highlands.”

I joined a guided distillery tour that ended with a tasting of five whiskeys. The Tomatin guide poured the first into my glass and told me to smell it the way I would wine. Next, he said, take a sip and savor it for 10 seconds before swallowing. Normally, I don’t drink whiskey, but it felt smooth and velvety in my mouth. The guide then added an eyedropper of water, which he said would open up the flavor.

Maybe it opened a little too much flavor because back on the road, I was lightheaded enough to ask my driver if he wore anything under his kilt. He admitted that one night at a wedding he’d had a little too much to drink and fell over a table. “I wasn’t hurt,” he said, “but when I was upside down, everything was revealed, so ever since, I’ve worn dark underwear.”

Inverness is probably best known for Nessie, the monster that has supposedly been inhabiting the waters of nearby Loch Ness since at least 1933. Though no one has seen her, that doesn’t stop tourists from looking. My driver said that a boat captain had told two London teenagers that Nessie loves the English accent, so the boys spent the entire ride leaning way over the bow and talking in loud voices. They were really disappointed they didn’t find Nessie.

The morning after my distillery tour, I left my hotel shortly after dawn and ran through Inverness to a footpath along the River Ness where there were just a few other joggers. In front of me was a footbridge with a “Please Dismount Your Bicycle” sign. A cyclist arrived on the other side, dismounted, walked her bike across the short bridge, then remounted. If there were a dismount sign in New York City, no one would pay attention unless a cop was around. It was



ELLIOT GILLES

refreshing to visit a country where people actually obeyed rules.

A few times as we drove northwest in the Highlands towards the Outer Hebrides, we had to stop as herds of sheep crossed the road. We went down country lanes lined with fir and larch trees and passed fields dotted with gigantic rolls of hay. Always in the distance were the mountains. Each time we passed another ruin of a medieval church, I’d yell “stop!” and jump out to shoot a photo. The air smelled fresh, like earth and misty rain, even though it wasn’t raining.

In Lochinver, I gazed out of my hotel window at the boats in the harbor and watched the sky turn bright orange as the lights across the bay twinkled like Christmas bulbs. A little past dawn the next morning, I walked to the top of a steep hill and saw a similar mesmerizing harbor view. Coming back down, I stopped in my tracks. Less than 25 feet away was a large stag staring at me. I expected him to run away, but he didn’t. Slowly, I raised my camera and snapped. He turned, seemed to tiptoe across the road, and then broke into a short trot before climbing a nearby rock. There he stood, antlers pointed at the sky, as majestic as a *National Geographic* photo.

A ferryboat ride away to the Outer Hebrides was the Isle of Lewis. It was misty and the landscape was haunting



ELLIOT GILLES



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Traveler Fast Facts

WHAT IT IS:

Scotland, part of the United Kingdom, occupies the northern third of Great Britain, shares a border with England to the south, and is home to almost 800 small islands, including Shetland, Orkney, and the Hebrides. With a little less than 5.2 million people, Scotland has 550 golf courses, fishing in thousands of lakes, unspoiled countryside, secluded sandy beaches, castles, excellent fresh food, and some luxurious accommodations.

CLIMATE:

While you can visit Scotland anytime, late March to early October is best. June, July, and August might be less rainy than other months. (It rains all year, but not all day long and only in spurts.) Throughout much of the year, it’s a good idea to pack layers of clothing, a raincoat, gloves, and a cap, as the weather can change by the minute.

GETTING THERE:

Flights from European and American cities land in Scotland’s five international airports—Aberdeen, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Glasgow Prestwick, and Inverness—all of which can accommodate private jets. Air Canada Rouge, American, Delta, and United are among the airlines that fly direct to the country from North America.

WHAT TO KNOW BEFORE YOU GO:

Credit cards are widely accepted and there are numerous ATMs to exchange dollars for pounds.



Traveler Report Card

ACCOMMODATIONS:

The **Torridon** (A+) in northwest Scotland is set on 58 acres of parkland with 19 plush accommodations, an excellent restaurant, gin tastings and guided outdoor activities. **Lews Castle** (A) in Outer Hebrides has 23 luxurious guest rooms, which can be configured into full apartments with multiple bedrooms. Edinburgh's **Sheraton Grand Hotel and Spa** (A-), in the heart of the city, has 269 accommodations, a 62-foot rooftop pool, and a spa with endless water features, including an indoor-to-outdoor swim-in Jacuzzi. **Rocpool Reserve** (B) in Inverness has 11 rooms, but only one with a balcony and hot tub. You're there for the location and the **Chez Roux** restaurant (see below). **Inver Lodge** (B-) in Lochinver has 22 slightly shabby rooms saved by the location, harbor views, and **Chez Roux** restaurant.

CUISINE:

The food is especially delicious at Scotland's two **Chez Roux** restaurants: Rocpool Reserve (A+) and Inver Lodge (B+) as well as in the Outer Hebrides at **Talla na Mara** (A) which overlooks the beach on the Isle of Harris, **Lews Castle** (A+), and the **Torridon** (A+). Stornoway's outstanding local favorite, **Digby Chick** (A+), chooses its delicious fish from whatever has been caught that day.

ACTIVITIES (A+):

August brings the famous month-long Edinburgh Festival. Other options include golf, fishing, deer stalking, archery, falconry, gorge scrambling, kite surfing, biking, hiking, kayaking, dolphin and whale watching, whiskey and gin tastings, and visiting castles. Alladale Wilderness Reserve in the Highlands is beautiful and has three caged wildcats. For shopping, the House of Bruar, less than two hours from Edinburgh, has everything, including the U.K.'s largest collection of cashmere.



ELLIOT GILLES



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FOTOLIA

The Isle of Lewis was misty, and the landscape was haunting and remote, with not a house or town in sight.

and remote, with not a house or town in sight. We drove past mountains of shale, green moorlands, and lakes with small, nearly treeless islands. My new lodging was a palatial suite at the recently restored **Lews Castle** in Stornoway.

I love listening to choirs in foreign countries, and as the next morning was Sunday, I walked down the castle grounds and crossed the bridge into town. After wandering into and out of a church service where there was no choir, I suddenly heard music. I peeked through an open door and saw a drummer, guitarist, and tambourine player. Was it a rock band rehearsal? No, at least 12 people were singing a Christian rock hymn. A man signaled me to come in, and soon I was joyously clapping along with the parishioners, singing the words that appeared on a screen.

It could be said that the 5,000-year-old Standing Stones of Callanish, more ancient than the Pyramids and Stonehenge, also offer a spiritual experience. But were they placed there for religious reasons or do they have something to do with the sun and stars? No one knows.

The next day, we took the ferryboat back to the Highlands and drove up the driveway of the **Torridon** hotel, a former hunting lodge. In front of it was a pasture with three Highland cows and two calves, just like in the poster I'd seen, but with no Wellington boots. After lunch, I donned a pair of Wellies myself and joined a **Torridon** guide for a walk through the property's wooded trails, purposely sloshing through every bog I found. The mud barely covered my boot, but it made me feel like a kid.

And now it was time to go home. I thought about my wonderful week in which I'd traveled through miles and miles of pristine countryside, stayed in a castle, hiked through forests and bogs, observed Highland cows, seen a stag, visited the famous Standing Stones, and even managed to steal a sword from a *Braveheart* character. Maybe it was, as the Scots would say, a "wee" visit, but it was one I won't forget.

BJT

Margie Goldsmith (mgoldsmith@bjtonline.com), a longtime **BJT** contributor, wrote about Colombia for our October/November 2017 issue. For this article, **Luxury Scotland**, an organization of five-star hotels, provided air transportation, accommodations, activities, and meals. **Little's Chauffeurs** provided a car and driver.