

The Scottish Highlands

June 19 - July 3, 2018

We planned this 2-week trip in Scotland way back in the fall of 2017. I had visited Edinburgh a long time ago and took a 1-day bus tour around the Highlands. But I now realize you have to get well off the beaten path to see the best of the Highlands. I had no idea the scenery in Scotland was going to be so dramatic. We had exceptional weather. Which makes me think as great as this trip was, I'm not sure I'll be back to Scotland again anytime soon. I think I'd be setting myself up for disappointment as two weeks in a row of sun apparently has never happened before and will never happen again—this is what all the locals were telling us.

We rented the car through AutoEurope, and ended up paying a supplement for a larger car (which I definitely didn't want) as they did not have the Fiat 500 we requested in stock (and somehow that was on us). We did end up with an automatic transmission though, which was probably a good thing. It was my first time driving on the left and it was pretty scary at first. Not just because of the driving on the left thing but because the roads are so narrow in Scotland, often lined on both sides by stone walls, and often you are driving down single track lanes so if someone is coming the opposite way (inevitably at about 60 mph) you need to hope there's a turnoff near you or you need to back up until you find a turnoff (or hope they do). Terrifying... but by the end of the two weeks I was really enjoying the driving! One good thing about the driving in Scotland in late June is you don't have to worry about driving in the dark. It doesn't get dark until past 11pm and even then, it never seems to get fully dark. Commendably, we noticed that even the most fancy of restaurants do not at all push alcoholic beverages on the driver and seem to have a wide range of great non-alcoholic options that they happily pitch.

Scotland is a fantastic destination for hikers. If you spend any time with experienced hikers in Scotland, you will quickly become familiar with the concept of Munros, "separate mountains" over 3,000 ft.—and remember, most start at or very near sea level—of which there are 282. (Note, there are 538 summits in Scotland over 3,000 ft. but the dip between peaks must be significant enough to count them as separate mountains and not just multiple peaks of one mountain to be a Munro.) "Munro bagging" is the challenge of summiting all the Munros. I believe I bagged three on this trip, so I have a little ways still to go.

Again, we were really lucky with the weather. Come prepared for cold weather (it got chilly at night) and rain any time of year and you'll be ready! Many of the hiking trails are unmarked so if you're serious about hiking, it is worth joining an organized hiking holiday such as HF Holidays (<https://www.hfholidays.co.uk/>) or hiring local guides for day hikes.

I'm not sure there's anything I would have done differently in terms of the itinerary here except perhaps hoof it all the way to Tarbert on the first night to have more time hiking on the Kintyre Way. Of course we didn't visit any of the cities on this trip. We decided we preferred to take advantage of having the car and spend more time in places you can only see with a car. We can always get back to Edinburgh or Glasgow as short trips from elsewhere in Europe. But you may want to add a couple days in each if you have the time... Lastly, you'll notice we didn't visit any distilleries. But if you're a scotch whiskey aficionado, you should of course schedule in some visits!

Date	To	Flight/Hotel/Car Details	Cost	Comments
Tuesday, June 19	Overnight Flight	<i>Flight:</i> Norwegian Airlines flight Providence to Edinburgh direct, 9:25 pm	<i>Flight:</i> \$139 for one-way!	We got a great deal on flying out of Providence, which was probably worth it in the end though it made more sense when we bought the tickets, before both my mom and I had moved to Maine.
Wednesday, June 20	Strachur	Arrive airport 9:05 am <i>Car:</i> Europcar Drive to Strachur, about 2 hours Lodging: Creggans Inn, Strachur: http://www.creggans-inn.co.uk/	<i>Car</i> \$218.25 + supplement of around \$100. <i>Inn:</i> £150 (including breakfast, though we slept through it!)	The first day was the one rainy, dreary day of the trip. We got going late as Europcar made us wait nearly two hours for a car. We made a lunch stop in Luss, on the eastern side of Loch Lomond, then drove to Strachur. We had dinner at the hotel restaurant—excellent food and a cozy space. Very pleasant hotel—a good stop for the first night when we would be jetlagged and didn't want to drive too far. I did much prefer the other side of Loch Lomond—Balmaha where we stayed the last night. But I may have been influenced by the better weather then. This first day was really our only dreary weather day of the whole trip.

Thursday, June 21	Tarbert, Kintyre Peninsula	Morning in Inveraray Drive to Tarbert, Kintyre Peninsula 1 hour Lodging: The Moorings, Tarbert: http://www.themooringsbb.co.uk/	£183 total for two nights	Walk around Inverary in the morning. Walk along Crinan Canal starting at Cairnbaan in the early afternoon. Dinner at Starfish in Tarbert—so good, we booked again for the next evening!
Friday, June 22	Tarbert			Drove to and around Campbeltown via Skipness Castle. In the afternoon, hiked part of Kintyre Way starting in Tarbert. You can make a nice 2-hour or so loop that is well marked starting at Tarbert Castle. I wished I had time to do the whole Kintyre Way—it's gorgeous! Dinner at Starfish again
Saturday, June 23	Glen Coe	Drive to Glen Coe 2 hours 15 minutes Lodging: HF Holidays Guided Walking Alltshellach, North Ballachulish https://www.hfholidays.co.uk/holiday-s-and-tours/guided-walking-glen-coe/	£970 total for two people, 4 nights, upgraded to a premium twin en-suite room, full board & guided hiked included	Drove through the Glen Coe Valley alongside the West Highland Way to Alltshellach, a country home owned by HF Holidays. Everything at Alltshellach is included in the price except for alcohol, which is very reasonable to purchase (there's a full bar/pub in the house!) We found the price to be really quite reasonable; HF Holidays is after all a non-profit. HF Holidays offers hikes each day at 3 different levels. So if you're traveling with someone at a different level from you, no problem. You can each hike at your own level and meet back up for dinner. I was a bit worried the advanced-level hikes wouldn't be that advanced, but they definitely were. Very challenging! And incredible scenery. It was also really nice to meet and spend a few days with other hikers and get pampered a bit as everything is included. It's also very difficult to hike in Scotland on your own. Especially if you're a more advanced hiker, you will miss out on many outstanding hiking opportunities as there are very few marked trails. You really need a guide who can take you literally off the beaten path.
Sunday, June 24	Glen Coe			Hiked Sgurr na h-Eanchainne Distance: 7½ miles (12km) Total ascent: 2,750 feet (840m) <i>Provided by HF Holidays:</i> The walk in a nutshell: Cross the Corran ferry to walk in the mountains of the Ardgour Peninsula. Our route takes us past Maclean's Towel waterfall then around the ridge onto the summit of Sgurr na h-Eanchainne.
Monday, June 25	Glen Coe			Hiked Beinn a' Bheithir Distance: 8½ miles (13½km) Total ascent: 4,300 feet (1,300m) <i>Provided by HF Holidays:</i> The walk in a nutshell: Climb the two Munros of Sgorr Dhearg and Sgorr Dhonuill, the twin peaks clearly visible across the loch from Alltshellach. From Ballachulish we ascend a rocky spur onto the main ridge of the Beinn a' Bheithir mountain ridge and later descend through the wooded valley of Gleann a' Chaolais to Alltshellach.
Tuesday, June 26	Glen Coe			Hiked Ben Nevis, the tallest mountain in the British Isles. Distance: 10 miles (16½km) Total ascent: 4,500 feet (1,380m) <i>Provided by HF Holidays:</i> The walk in a nutshell: Our objective today is the summit of Ben Nevis, Britain's highest mountain. Starting from Glen Nevis we follow the Pony Track which zig-zags up to the summit plateau. We return by the same route.

<p>Wednesday, June 27</p>	<p>Isle of Skye</p>	<p>Drive to Edinbane, Isle of Skye c. 5 hours</p> <p>Lodging: Aber View self-catering apartment https://www.airbnb.com/rooms/5452624?eal_exp=1514384840&eal_sig=41dcacbf4c5a1822bd65579fce62e284f227b94e40e666fbd579880dd2fd4fa5&eal_uid=6179699&eluid=2&euid=efc62415-0ef7-2eb5-5add-7cc41d55cbd8</p>	<p>\$474.44 total for 3 nights</p>	<p>Headed towards Skye, we made a small detour to see the aqueduct and “Harry Potter” train at Glenfinnan, a beautiful spot even if you’re not into Harry Potter. This is also the site of the 1745 “Bonnie Prince Charlie” uprising and monument thereto.</p> <p>We drove through Fort William and picked up picnic supplies at the Marks & Spencer Food Hall, which should be a tourist attraction in itself.</p> <p>Our next stop was at the iconic Eilean Donan Castle, where we ate our picnic goods.</p> <p>Our AirBNB in Edinbane was a lovely place to stay—spacious and clean—and in a great location for exploring the best of Skye. There’s a great gastropub (the Edinbane Inn: http://www.edinbaneinn.co.uk/) across the street where we had a lovely dinner the first night.</p> <p>Portree is also a pleasant town and would be a good base of operations, especially if you’d like to be able to walk to more restaurants, etc. But unless you’re splurging for the Kinloch Lodge, I’d stay up north and not in the southern part of Skye as the Trotternish Peninsula has the most dramatic scenery. Don’t underestimate the distances in Skye. While everything is reachable as a day trip, the roads are small and if you get stuck behind someone slow, it can be hard to find a place to pass. Off the main routes, roads are narrow and very windy. So if you can group your activities in Skye by geographic proximity, you’ll be much happier!</p>
<p>Thursday, June 28</p>	<p>Isle of Skye</p>	<p>LUNCH AT KINLOCH LODGE https://kinloch-lodge.co.uk/ - ARRIVING AT 12:30, LUNCH AT 1pm.</p>		<p>In the morning, we headed down to Portree, Skye’s largest town and a lovely harbor. Skye was the start of our culinary splurging. As Kinloch Lodge and Three Chimneys are rated some of the best restaurants in the world, we could not pass up the experience. Both meals (and splurging for the tasting menus) were well worth it. The food is incredible but the settings were also magnificent and the hospitality impressive.</p> <p>After lunch at the Kinloch Lodge (a good hour’s drive from Portree), we visited the Old Man of Storr, a bizarre outcropping of rocks. It was a good time of day to go, in the early evening, as the sun was peaking out from behind the peaks and the crowds were dwindling. If you’re up for it, it’s definitely worth climbing up behind the rock outcroppings to the top of the ridge.</p> <p>After Old Man of Storr, we drove around the northernmost peninsula, the Trotternish, which, again, I think has the best scenery of Skye and possibly of all of Scotland. We stopped several times along the way to walk out along the coast, for example by Duntulm Castle. We also stopped off briefly at the Skye Museum of Island Life though it was closed when we arrived so we only saw the period homes from the outside.</p>

Friday, June 29	Isle of Skye	DINNER AT THREE CHIMNEYS https://www.threechimneys.co.uk/		<p>We headed back to the Trotternish Peninsula to explore the Quiraing in the morning. The Quiraing is another area of odd rock formations—impossible to describe in words. You have to look at the photos! We were lucky to arrive when the valley was fogged in and still be there while the fog was lifting. It’s a magical place—definitely one of the most beautiful places I’ve ever been in terms of natural scenery.</p> <p>After the Quiraing, we walked around the Fairy Glen just outside Uig. It’s a lovely spot with a surprising landscape. We expected everything after the Quiraing to be a disappointment but this was definitely worth exploring!</p> <p>On our way to Three Chimneys, we visited Dunvegan Castle. We are usually content to just visit castles from the outside, but we decided this one we should go in as some of our ancestors are of the MacLeod Clan. So we wanted to see the castle that really should belong to us but through some mishap in history doesn’t. While perhaps not the most interesting interior, the setting of the castle is beautiful and the gardens are worth a walk through. We drove past the castle, towards Claigan Corral Beach for a brief walk along the coast before this exceptional dinner.</p>
Saturday, June 30	Torricon	Drive to Torricon via Plockton 2 hours Lodging: The Torricon: https://www.thetorricon.com/	£770 total for 2 nights for 2 people, including breakfasts, dinners and activities	<p>Our last morning in Skye, we drove to Elgol. It’s a bit of a harrowing drive but beautiful. From Elgol, you can take a boat trip to Loch Coruisk. We went with the Bella Jane: http://www.bellajane.co.uk/. Unfortunately, we didn’t have time for the full trip that lets you get out and hike around Loch Coruisk, but the boat trip and the drive down to Elgol were definitely worth it anyways. The water is turquoise, the mountains impressive (this area is supposed to have great hiking too), the guide was very informative, and we saw a bunch of seals, including seal pups!</p> <p>On the drive back to the main road, we stopped for a bit at the picturesque Church of Kilchrist (Cill Chriosd).</p> <p>Just after crossing the bridge back to the mainland from Skye, we took a short detour to have lunch in the lovely town of Plockton, probably the prettiest town we visited on this trip.</p> <p>The drive to the Torricon was beautiful. If you have more time than we had (and you’re a fearless driver), you may consider a detour to Applecross, not far from Torricon.</p> <p>The Torricon piece of our trip was our splurge for my mom’s birthday. The accommodations are truly luxury and worth the splurge! But if you are looking for a cheaper option, the hotel also owns an inn just a few hundred meters away.</p> <p>The scenery in the Torricon is dramatic and we were lucky to have good weather most of the time there but it would also be a wonderful place to spend a couple of days even if the weather weren’t cooperating. Just spending time in the hotel lounges and impressive whiskey bar would be time well spent! Dinners at the Torricon, starting with aperitifs in the lounge, were fantastic—we continued our culinary splurging...</p>
Sunday, July 1	Torricon			<p>It turns out a 2-hour guided kayaking adventure was included in our rate as guests of the hotel. Visiting Upper Loch Torricon at water level was wonderful. I then climbed up above the lake in the afternoon, following one of the marked trails that crosses the A896 then leads south and uphill from the hotel. The adventure center in the inn can help you plan out the best excursions for your level.</p>

Monday, July 2		Drive to Loch Lomond 4.5-5 hours (if use highway) Lodging: Oak Tree Inn, Balmaha: http://www.theoaktreeinn.co.uk/	£110	<p>We had a long drive on this last full day, but made a nice stop for a walk (an hour or so) around Loch An Eilein in the Cairngorms National Park.</p> <p>We had drinks and dinner at the Oak Tree Inn's pub. They have a lovely terrace. We then followed the route of the West Highland Way past the Balmaha Pier and along Loch Lomond for a little while. I found this side of the Lake much prettier than the west side.</p>
Tuesday, July 3		Balmaha through lunch Drive to Edinburgh Airport - 1 hour 15 minutes Flight (mom) to Providence 5:15 pm / Arrive Providence 7:55 pm Abby on to Brittany 4:55pm – Brussels Airlines Edinburgh Airport, GB - Brussels Airport, BE - Nantes Atlantique Airport, FR, arrive 22:45	<i>Abby's flight: £78.46</i>	<p>The last morning, I woke up early and hiked up Conic Hill before breakfast—about an hour and a half round trip. Conic Hill is along the West Highland Way and offers a spectacular view down at Loch Lomond.</p> <p>On the way back to the airport, we found another Marks & Spencer (mini) food hall in Linlithgow and picnicked just outside the lovely Linlithgow Palace. It made for a nice last stop as it's only 20 minutes from the Edinburgh airport. With a bit more time though, you could also visit Stirling Castle, also on the way.</p>