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Scotland and Northern England (S26A-3)

Stirling, Inverness, Loch Ness and the Scottish Highlands

The Scottish Highlands occupy much of northern Scotland as well as the imaginations of many who think about traveling to Scotland, with images of mountains, lochs (lakes), castles and hairy Highland cows coming to mind. I had briefly visited the southernmost part of the Highlands on a 2003 group bus tour that stopped at a spot along the shore of Loch Lomond – on past trips my focus was on Glasgow, Edinburgh and sites related to our family history. Putting on my tourist hat for this trip, I wanted to some spend time exploring the Scottish Highlands.



The Highland Boundary Fault is a major fault zone that cuts diagonally across Scotland and separates two very different geological regions – the mountainous Highlands and the low rolling hills-covered Lowlands.

The fault lies just to the north of both Dumbarton and Stirling, technically putting them both in the Lowlands. That's fair for Dumbarton, as Dumbarton is closely tied to the River Clyde and the Kingdom of Strathclyde lands of southwest Scotland. But with only about 40 miles of land

separating the Firth of Clyde to the west and the Firth of Forth to the east, land routes between northern Scotland and southern Scotland and England passed through the Stirling area, making Stirling the gateway to the Highlands, and historically a strategically important city. As Scottish King Robert the Bruce once said, “He who holds Stirling holds Scotland”.

Stirling

Stirling was declared a royal burgh about 1125AD, and served as a co-capital and royal center for the Kingdom of Scotland until about the mid-1500s. Because of its strategic location, it has been the site of a number of battles over the centuries, including the Battle Stirling Bridge and the Battle of Bannockburn during the First Scottish War of Independence. It is home to Stirling Castle, a historic town center and other sites worth seeing, so I made it a destination for one of my train day trips out of Glasgow.

Stirling Castle appears in the records as early as 1110, although much of what visitors see today dates back to the 16th century. It was built on a crag with steep cliffs on three sides, giving it a strong defensive position and views in all directions. Until the union with England, the castle was one of the most used of the available Scottish royal residences. When I arrived in Stirling by train, I took a taxi to the castle to start my Stirling sightseeing there, as it was mostly downhill walking from there to see the rest of the sites I wanted to see.



Approaching Stirling Castle. The castle features hilltop fortifications that surround a number of buildings that include the palace, great hall, palace kitchens, chapels and other. Most of the buildings, grounds and related exhibitions in the castle can be explored on your own or as part of a tour group.



View of the royal palace from the Queen Anne garden



Inside the royal apartments in the palace



Stirling Castle's hilltop location served as part of its defenses. The pale building (upper right) is the Great Hall, where the public business of the castle often took place.



View of the castle grounds from outside the royal palace. The landscaped designs in the middle of the picture are the King's Knot (left of center) and Queen's Knot (right of center). These were once formal gardens, but only their earthworks survive. Before that, there was a medieval jousting arena here known as the Round Table, named for King Arthur's Court. The Battle of Bannockburn was fought a few miles out in the distant left.

After getting lunch at the castle, I began exploring the rest of Stirling.



The ruins of Mar's Wark. This was the residence of the Earl of Mar, whose job was the keeper of the castle. He kept things running smoothly whether or not the monarch was in residence.



Church of the Holy Rude (*rude* and *rood* mean *cross*). Founded in 1129AD, the oldest part of the current church dates back to the 15th century.



Inside the church. It was here on July 29th, 1567 that the 13-month-old son of recently abdicated Mary, Queen of Scots was crowned James VI, King of Scots. This was the first coronation after the Scottish Reformation, so the rites – led by John Knox – were Protestant rather than Catholic, and the ceremony was done in Scottish rather than Latin.



The Stirling tolbooth dates back to 1705. No longer used as a municipal office, it serves as a performing arts, exhibitions and events center.



Stirling's Mercat Cross. Although this was Stirling's commercial center as far back as the 16th century, the current marker was restored and erected in 1891.



You can pick up a set of bagpipes while you explore Stirling's historic center.

After finishing up in Stirling's historic city center, I took a bit of a walk to visit a couple more sites in the city. At Gowan Hill, I hiked up to the top of Mote Hill, site of the Beheading Stone. This was the block on which the heads of condemned prisoners were placed and then chopped off by the town executioner in the 15th century (before hangings became popular).



Stirling's Beheading Stone – proof that modern companies didn't invent the idea of using severance to reduce headcount



From the summit of Mote Hill, there is a nice view of the National Wallace Monument and the Scottish Highlands beyond. The 220-foot monument commemorates Sir William Wallace, a key leader in the First War of Scottish Independence before the English captured and executed him.

Among Wallace's successes was the 1297 Battle of Stirling Bridge, where the vastly outnumbered Scottish army routed the English army. I finished my Stirling visit at the Stirling Old Bridge. The current bridge was built around 1500 at the site of the wooden bridge where the battle was fought. This was the lowest crossing point of the River Forth before it widened into the Firth of Forth, making it strategically important for travel between northern Scotland and southern Scotland/England.



The Stirling Old Bridge crosses the River Forth at the site of the 1297 Battle of Stirling Bridge.

Perth and Cairngorms National Park

Perth was the biggest Highland city along my train routes to and from Inverness, and I had to change trains there on my way back to Glasgow. So, I scheduled extra time between trains hoping to be able to check out the city center a bit. Alas, the station was too far from the city center to get there and back with the suitcase.



The train also passed through Cairngorms National Park, the largest national park in the U.K. and one of two in Scotland. It covers the Cairngorms Mountains. No stops here, though. Just some beautiful scenery to enjoy through unfortunately dirty train windows.

Inverness

Inverness is regarded as the de facto capital of the Scottish Highlands and is home to the Highland Council offices. The name means “mouth of the Ness”. The River Ness connects Loch Ness to the sea here. The city itself struck me as rather ordinary with only a handful of significant sightseeing destinations in town. But for most visitors, it serves as a base for exploring the Scottish Highlands.



High Street, Inverness is a main shopping street



The Victorian Market



Inverness was one of the chief strongholds of the Picts. In 569AD, St. Columba came here and converted Pictish king Brude to Christianity. The Old High Church is believed to be located where that conversion happened.



Northern Meeting promotes Scottish culture, including music, dancing and bagpiping. The group organized the Inverness Highland Games in 1837, the oldest such event in the world. Northern Meeting Park became the home of the games in 1864.



Knocknagael Boar Stone, located in the lobby of the Highland Council offices, features a large Pictish carving of a boar dating to about 600AD.



The Ness Walk is a loop trail that follows the banks of the River Ness, connecting the city center to the wooded Ness Islands park area.



Jaunty Nessie sculpture along the Ness Walk. The River Ness is too shallow for the actual Nessie to swim downstream this far, trapping Nessie in Loch Ness.



Pictish cross slab

The top highlight of Inverness itself was the Inverness Museum and Art Gallery, although the art gallery portion was undergoing renovation, so I missed that.

For a small museum, its collection was surprisingly comprehensive in telling the natural and human history of the Highlands. The first floor focused on geology and archaeology, with numerous artifacts from the Picts and other early cultures in the Highlands. The second floor focused on more recent history, with exhibits on the Jacobite Uprising, Inverness silver, bagpipes, Highland weapons and so on.



A succession of castles has stood atop this outcropping near the city center over the last 1000 years, but the castle there today doesn't convey any of that history. Rather, it was built in the 1800s to serve as government offices and a prison. Today it is home to the overpriced Inverness Castle Experience, which focused more on multimedia razzle-dazzle than content and artifacts. I skipped out when I was only about halfway through.



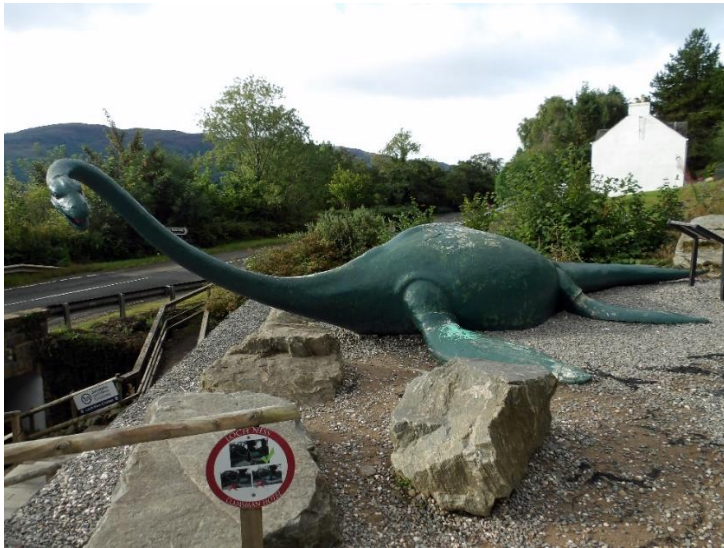
The only good part of the Experience were the views from the top of the castle. Here I'm looking at the River Ness, upstream through the Great Glen in the direction of Loch Ness. The Great Glen is a 62-mile straight valley that runs southwest from Inverness on the east coast to Fort William on the west coast along the Great Glen Fault. Along the way are numerous lochs and short rivers, including Loch Ness.

Inverness-area Bus Tour

To see more of the Highlands, I took a small group bus tour that stopped at a nice variety of sites in the Inverness area. These included visits to Loch Ness and Culloden Battlefield.

- **Loch Ness**

Loch Ness follows the Great Glen, and is about 23 miles long and 1 mile wide. It is also rather deep, at 754 feet. Given its size, and it holds more fresh water than all the lakes in England and Wales combined. It may also hold more monsters than all those other lakes combined, too, if the legend of the Loch Ness Monster is to be believed.



For our tour, we stopped for a boat ride on Loch Ness that would take us to our second stop, Urquhart Castle. Nessie greets passengers about to embark on the boat ride.



Cruising on Loch Ness

- **Urquhart Castle**

The ruins of Urquhart Castle on the shore of Loch Ness date back to the 13th to 16th century. The castle was granted to Clan Grant in 1509, but it was largely abandoned in the 1600s.



Our boat's approach to Urquhart Castle could have looked much more dramatic had the light been better, but the sun remained stubbornly behind the clouds until shortly after we landed. I had to lighten up the photo a lot just to make the castle reasonably visible.



But the sun did break through now and then while I was exploring the castle ruins.



Urquhart Castle's Grant Tower with Loch Ness behind it



View of Loch Ness from Urquhart Castle

I thought I saw something odd breaking the surface of the water towards the distant right. With my camera's 67x optical zoom, I tried to get a picture of it.



It looks to me like I captured a picture of the elusive Loch Ness Muenster breaching the surface. Or possibly the Loch Ness Havarti. From this distance Muenster and Havarti look a lot alike.

- **Beaully**

We headed for Beaully for some time on our own for lunch and exploring. But first, we checked out the Highland cows on a nearby farm.



Highland cattle are known for their long horns and long hair, and are a symbol of Scotland. Most Scottish tourist shops sell stuffed “harry coos”, as these hairy cows are called.



Beaulieu is home to the ruins of the Beaulieu Priory, a monastic community established here in the early 1200s.

- **Singleton Distillery, Muir of Ord**

Scotland is famous for its whisky, so we made a stop at the Singleton Distillery in Muir of Ord. The distillery had exhibits on whisky production, and it offered tours and options to bottle your own with custom labels. You could also belly up to the bar to sample it for yourself.



I don't think I'd ever had whisky before, so I decided to sample a dram of their "aged 15 years" whisky. When in Scotland... after all. I don't like the taste of alcohol, and that was about all I could taste ("hints of citrus and pear?" Not that I could tell.), so now I don't think I'll have whisky again. (BTW, *whisky* – not *whiskey* – is the preferred spelling in Scotland.)

- **Culloden Battlefield**

With lines drawn between Catholics and Protestants, in 1688 Parliament deposed Catholic King James II and replaced him with his Protestant daughters and later George I. The Jacobites sought to return James II and his descendants including Bonnie Prince Charlie to the throne through a series of rebellions. The 1707 Act of Union united Scotland and England into the United Kingdom, but many Highlanders who felt marginalized by this joined the Jacobite Cause.

The 1745 Rising was the most famous of the uprisings. Bonnie Prince Charlie led the Jacobites as they captured Edinburgh and marched into England as far south as Derby, just 150 miles from London. But lacking expected English and French support, they retreated, eventually all the way to Inverness. The British army followed them, and on April 16, 1746 the two sides met in battle at Culloden Moor. Often cited as the last battle fought on British soil, it lasted less than an hour and ended with a decisive government victory. An estimated 50 government soldiers were killed compared to as many as 1500 Jacobites. Bonnie Prince Charlie fled to France and never returned.

Culloden Battlefield has a nice visitor center museum that tells the story from both sides, although no photos were allowed. Visitors can also walk the grounds where information signs and other markers tell the story of the battle that occurred there.



Most people did not carry IDs back then, so the dead were identified by clan through tartans and other items. Members of the same clan were buried together in mass graves now marked with the names of their clan. This is the burial site for members of Clan Fraser.



A local farmer built the Culloden Memorial Cairn at the battlefield site in 1881. Built to honor the fallen Jacobite soldiers, it is centered among the mass graves of the clans.

- **Clava Cairns**

Our final stop was at the Clava cairns at Balnuaran of Clava. The cairns were Bronze Age chamber tombs, basically a circular pile of rocks with a chamber in the middle, surrounded by a ring of standing stones.



A cairn with an opening leading to its chamber



Each of the three cairns here was ringed by a number of standing stones.

Southwest Highlands Bus Tour

After I was back in Glasgow, I took a second small group bus tour, this one through the southwest Highlands. It involved a much longer drive than the Inverness tour, so many of our stops were only short scenery/photo stops. But we covered a lot of ground and it was easy on my feet.

- **Loch Lomond**

Loch Lomond, in the heart of Loch Lomond and the Trossachs, Scotland's second national park, is a large scenic lake – the largest by surface area in the U.K. I actually saw it from the village of Balmaha on its eastern shore during my 2003 group bus tour. On this tour, we stopped at two places on its western shore. Unfortunately, both places were tour boat launches, so it was a bit of a challenge to get photos of the lake's natural beauty without the commercial boats in the picture. But I managed to get a few.



Loch Lomond at Tarbet, although clouds obscured views of Ben Lomond (mountain)



Loch Lomond at Inveruglas

- **Rest and Be Thankful**

Rest and Be Thankful is a viewpoint along Highway A83 at the mountain pass that separates Glen Croe and Glen Kinglas (*glens* are valleys). Soldiers along the original 1753 military road often paused here to rest and give thanks after a steep, difficult climb, thus the name.



View of Glen Croe from the Rest and Be Thankful viewpoint

- **Inveraray**

The small town of Inveraray is located on the western shore of Loch Fyne. It is the traditional county town of Argyllshire, and serves as the ancestral seat to the Duke of Argyll, who occupies a nearby castle (closed at the time of our visit). What we saw was the New Town, an early example of a planned community that replaced the original town. Inverness was used as the filming location for the Disney movie *The Three Lives of Thomasina*.



Inveraray's Mercat Cross dates from the 15th century, and was moved here from the Old Town.



Main Street, Inveraray



Loch Fyne and the Inveraray Pier

- **Kilchurn Castle**

Built for Clan Gregor in the 15th century at the northeastern end of Loch Awe, Kilchurn Castle soon was lost to a branch of Clan Campbell. It then served as their base until they moved to Taymouth Castle. Kilchurn fell out of use and was in ruins by 1770.



Ruins of Kilchurn Castle

- **Oban**

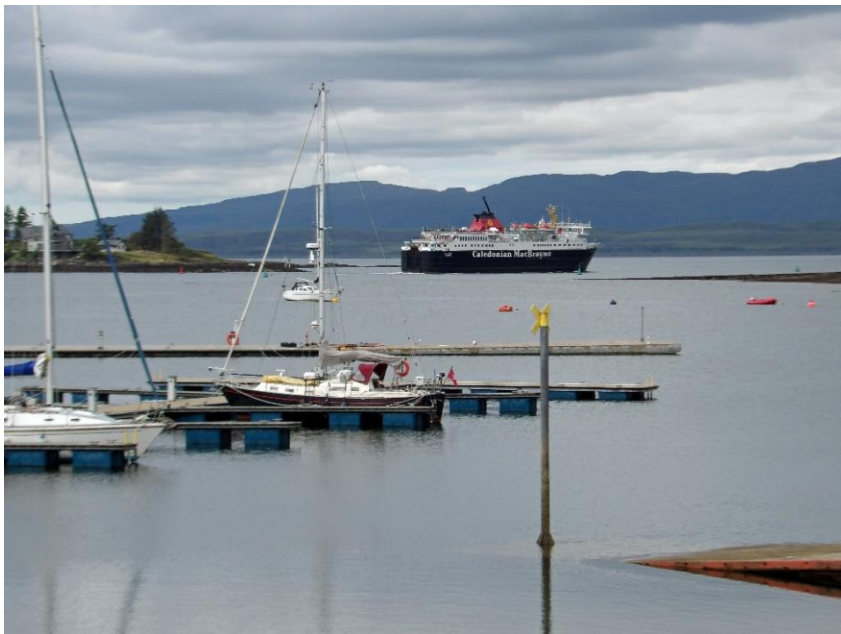
Oban is a small coastal town with only about 8,000 people, but it is the biggest town in the region. The tour group was turned loose here for our own sightseeing and to get lunch, with seafood recommended as Oban is known as the seafood capital of Scotland. It sits on a bay of the Firth of Lorn, and the town center lines the waterfront.



The Oban waterfront



Oban city center and McCraig's Tower atop Battery Hill



A ferry departs Oban for one of the occupied islands in western Scotland

- **Castle Stalker**

Built in about the 1440s, Castle Stalker, which sits on a small tidal islet on Loch Laich near Appin, is famous as the filming location for the climactic finale of *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (other castle scenes in the movie were filmed at Doune Castle in the Stirling area). It was scheduled to be a tour drive-by, but after I mentioned that it was my favorite comedy movie to our guide who was also a fan, he added it as a short photo stop. (He took the hint. 😊)



Castle Stalker

For those who've seen the film, this was where the French once again outwitted some "tiny-brained wipers of other people's bottoms". Monty Python's Terry Jones studied medieval history at Oxford. Much of the movie's humor, including the Frenchman's taunts, were inspired by actual medieval history, writings and artwork, but certainly with a Python spin to it.



On display at Newcastle Castle was a "close stool" of the type that kings once used, providing the king with a comfortable place to sit over a chamber pot inside the box. Some monarchs employed servants called the Groom of the Close Stool, whose job was to help the king with personal hygiene. Duties sometimes included wiping the royal bottom. The taunting Frenchman in *Holy Grail* was apparently aware of this.

- **Ben Nevis and Glen Coe National Scenic Area**

Ben Nevis and Glen Coe National Scenic Area is home to Ben Nevis, the highest point in the U.K., and Glen Coe is a quite scenic glacier-carved valley. The area makes numerous lists of the most scenic places in Scotland. Although our route didn't include Ben Nevis, we made a couple stops in Glen Coe before returning to Loch Lomond and then Glasgow.



The Three Sisters



The Glen Etive area

I wish we had a bit more sunshine on the tour – well, for much of the trip actually – but I still enjoyed my time spent exploring the Highlands.