

# Scotland

4/30/24 – 5/20/24

This was our third trip to Scotland, and was another “jam packed” Jim planned tour, with mostly one-night stays, lots of intermediate stops, and not a lot of time spent just poking around the various stopovers. Definitely not some folks cup of tea.

## Brief Summary

Day 1/2 Fly from west coast US to Glasgow (via Iceland). Got off the flight, took a bus to Queens Street and got on the train to Aberdeen. Spent the evening at the Blue Lamp with the Aberdeen Folk Club's weekly session.

Day 3 Walk/bus around Aberdeen, wife did a bunch of reading about her kin at Kings College Archives. Spent the evening at The Northern Bar with a splinter group of the Aberdeen Folk Club.

Day 4 Get rental car in town and headed north to visit my "estate" (my wife bought me a lairdship of 1 sq foot of land after last trip), Slains Castle, Bullers of Buchan, Pitslago Castle, then Rosehearty.

Day 5 Troup Head RSPB, Bow Fiddle Rock, Craigmin Bridge, Elgin Cathedral, to Nairn with surprise house concert at the B&B.

Day 6 Culloden, Cairn Laith, Whaligoe Steps, Sinclair Castle, to Wick.

Day 7 Duncansby Head/Stacks, John o'groats (for flat tire replacement on a bank holiday miracle), Dunnet Head, realized Puffin Cove was restricted, Smoo Cave, to Durness.

Day 8 Rock Stop Museum, Allt Chranaidh Falls, Wee Mad road, Knockan Crag NR, to Ullapool. Crazy accordion musician at pub.

Day 9 Rhue Lighthouse, Falls of Measach, to Shieldag and on to Locharron. Finally a little rain and too cloudy for the best chance for the Aurora.

Day 10 Attendale Gardens, Invergary Castle, Falls of Foyer to Fort Augustus.

Day 11 Crarae Gardens, Royal Castle of Tarbert (saw adder!), Kennecraig Ferry to Port Askaig to Bowmore.

Day 12 Loch Gruinart, Machir Beach, Port Mor Cafe, Finlaggan, Bridgend Woods

Day 13 Mull of Oa, Kildalton Cross, three Distillery walk - half by car, half walk - only drinking for wife :-)

Day 14 Early ferry from Port Ellen, The Red Lion (Outlander) in Culross for lunch, to Anstruther with harbor stroll.

Day 15 St. Andrews Castle & Cathedral, Montrose Wildlife Trust, Fowlsheugh RSPB, Dunnattar Castle, to Stonehaven.

Day 16 Cullerie Stones, Culsh Earth House, turn in car in Aberdeen, fly to Sumburgh, Sumburgh Head to Lerwick. Great session at The Lounge.

Day 17 Muckle Voe Lighthouse, Frankie's for lunch, Fort Charlotte, Town Hall (stained glass), great session at Marlex. (Second trip to Shetland, so don't list what we missed!)

Day 18 Ferry over to Bressay to visit wife's 19th century house ruin, and Heritage Museum, then lunch in Lerwick and ferries to Yell and Unst, Muness Castle, Clivocast, Keen of Hamar, to Baltasound.

Day 19 Bobby's Bus Stop, Hermaness Reserve for fabulous gannet and puffin viewing, Victoria's Tearoom, Boat Haven, Heritage Museum, Skinbladner.

Day 20 Ferries back to Shetland mainland, Sumburgh Lighthouse (again), flight to Edinburgh. Fabulous Edinburgh Shetland Fiddlers session at Digger's (just two of us in snug).

Day 21 Train/bus to Glasgow for LONG flight home to PNW.

## **Full Details**

We enjoyed great weather for all but one evening, when it rained lightly. Mostly sunny or partly cloudy with temperatures often in the 60Fs. It even hit 70F on a couple of days.

Once again, we chose IcelandAir as our long-haul carrier. Although their cabin service is sad and the entertainment is thinly disguised Iceland promotions, the flight times are the shortest, since every other carrier goes through Heathrow or San Francisco, both of which we prefer to avoid. They're competitive in price and you can purchase extra legroom seats when you make the reservation.



*Iceland*

### **Home to Aberdeen – Day 1,2**

Left home at 8am (Pacific) and after a short hop to Seattle, flew to Keflavik, then on to Glasgow, even getting a good photo from above the currently erupting volcano. Arriving at 11am GMT, we hopped on the 500 Bus to Queens Street, and boarded a train for Aberdeen, arriving mid-afternoon.

After a slightly confusing walk, we checked into the Premier Inn City Center.

After a 90 minute nap, we headed to The Blackfriar for a relaxing dinner, then headed to The Blue Lamp bar, which was loaning the upstairs bar to the Aberdeen Folk Club for their weekly session, which included poetry, song, and instrumentals, mostly solos after a short business meeting (about the crisis of inexpensive venues). Apparently, the current situation was too expensive to heat to a bearable temperature most of the year.

#### **Trains**

I hope UK residents realize their rail system is a gem, even with occasional strikes and other disruptions. You can get practically anywhere within a few hours, with frequent departures that are incredibly punctual. In the western US, you have one train a day to only a handful of places, and they're always running late, so you always miss any connections, forcing you to spend 24 hours till the next train.

Walked the few blocks back to the hotel and fell into a deep sleep till our 7:30am alarm for breakfast with our niece, who had arrived late the previous night.

### **Old Aberdeen – Day 3**

After a good full Scottish breakfast (for me, at least), we headed for the bus stop to take a short trip up to Old Aberdeen. Our first mission was to find my wife's (Kathy) 4xGreat grandfather's grave in Machir Cemetery, which was accomplished. After a brief tour of the cathedral, which included stained glass panels of each disciple accompanied by an image of their gruesome death, we headed to the King's College library, waylaid by a stroll around the associated arboretum, where Kathy had arranged access to bunch of family documents, learning a lot about her ancestor's life and times. Not only did she need a pass to get through security turnstiles, but she needed to wash her hands before touching any documents. Unfortunately, the juiciest documents were only references to the real documents, which are in Colorado. That's probably another trip in the future.



*Machir Cemetery - Aberdeen*

#### **Lodging choices**

The way I pick places is to first, look for bars that might have music, then look for lodging within walking distance that includes breakfast and parking, then sort by price with a bonus for waterfront. On this trip, that formula worked 19/20ths of the time. We rarely pick places in the country, which is probably a loss.

We then headed to Kilau Cafe for a lovely lunch in the back garden. University life is a little different than my experience in the States, but that is old information. After lunch, we toured the Zoological Museum, then we took the bus and walked a few blocks to the Maritime Museum, which was much more elaborate and informative than I expected. On the way back to the hotel, we ran into several raucous groups of men, wearing costumes, passing out lapel pins, and generally making a commotion, all due to a huge darts tournament.

After a short nap, we walked to The Northern Bar (based on a tip the previous night from folk club member Bob), for a nice dinner followed by a more

typical music session, with participants rotating the lead in Scottish ballads and instrumentals. Luckily, for us older folks, the session broke up about 10pm, allowing us to walk back for a reasonable night's sleep.

### **Aberdeen to Rosehearty – Day 4**

After another nice breakfast, I did the 11 minute walk over to Arnold Clark, and rented a Vauxhall Corsa, returning to the hotel to load luggage and wife and niece. Our first stop was my Lairdship, which is one square foot of land in a recently replanted forest tract. The route was nothing like that found with Google Maps, and it took a lot of U-turns and fails before finding something matching



*Impenetrable Lordship!*



*Slain's Castle*

the photos, except for a bit of vegetation. Expecting a typical replanted Scottish forest, which looks more like an orchard, we instead found a thick multi-species thicket. We made it a few dozen feet fighting off gorse, blackberries, and thick trees before giving up. Definitely not what I expected, and we'll have to do without setting foot on "our" land. It's actually just a cute way to pay for land re-wilding.

The Corsa is a very low clearance vehicle and

includes large diameter wheels, not leaving a lot of resilience for rough tracks and potholes. Definitely the wrong car for the application. I signed up for "VW Polo or similar", and the Corsa was a stretch of that description.

Climbing back into the car, we headed to Slain's Castle spending about an hour exploring the ruin, rebuilt many times, and destroyed an equal number of times. Saw, heard, and identified lots of birds.



*Bullers of Buchan*

Then it was on to Cruden Bay for lunch at the St. Olaf's hotel. Very nice lunch but the service was VERY slow. I had planned on the Kilmarnock Arms, but failed to discover they weren't open for lunch on weekdays until that morning.

After the 90 minute lunch, it was on to Bullers of Buchan, where we took a hike along the impressive cliffs and added a few more birds to our list. Then on to Rosehearty to check-in at the Davron Hotel. I had reserved a stay in Fraserburgh, but the hotel was sold and the rates doubled.

Waiting for the arrival of our nephew and his friend, we walked around the harbor a bit, stopping for a beer at the hotel patio. After getting all five of us together, we walked the short distance to Pitslago Castle, which was your typical ruined castle, although a local group was working to restore it but it might be Mission Impossible. The Davron was okay, but the beds were terrible. It was also the only food choice in the town (without driving), but the food was fine, as was the beer and whisky.



*Pitslago Castle*

**Rosehearty to Nairn – Day 5**



After a pleasant breakfast at the hotel, we jumped in our now two car caravan, and headed to Troup Head RSPB, which was too foggy to deserve a long walk, but it felt like we were in another time. So we carried on to Bow Fiddle Rock. The short hike saw the fog clear enough for good views of the Rock. Kathy learned from a fellow traveler that the razorbills were being decimated by the bird flu, which explained their absence.



*Bow Fiddle Rock*

Stopped at Bijou-by-the-Sea for a fabulous lunch including Cullen Skink for me and a beet-root burger for Kathy. Then on to finding parking spots in Buckie, for the short forest walk to Craigman Bridge. Gorgeous walk and interesting bridge.



*Craigman Bridge*

Drove on to Elgin, where we eventually found a marginally legal parking spot for a walk around the Cathedral ruin. There was a loud rock concert being held in the park, so we did a short walk around the Biblical Garden, then headed to Invernaine GH in Nairn. Made the short walk along the shore to The Bandstand for a long-held dinner reservation. There was some sort of beer fest going on, and the it felt more like a beach town in Florida than a quiet Scottish town. A real madhouse, making it tough to get drinks, but still able to have a lovely dinner.

When we got back to the Invernaine GH, they were completing the setup for a house concert by David Starr joined by Erik Stucky. They played for several hours,

mostly original tunes. Both were excellent musicians and the lyrics were all very moving. David apparently stays at the guesthouse every year, and the concert is an annual treat for the guests. Just luck that it was the night we were there.



*The Torr E - Nairn*

### **Nairn to Wick – Day 6**

Had a delicious breakfast in the garden dining room before our next adventure. Originally planning a first stop at Fairy Glen Falls, we realized our companions had never been to Culloden and our previous visit had been too short, so we changed plans and headed



*Cairn Laith*

to Culloden Battlefield for a walk around the visitor's center and a guided walking tour. The tragedy of the battle is its long term implications get stronger each time we read about it. The memorial site is very well done. Heading towards Wick, we searched for a good lunch stop and Kathy picked out the Cafe Tomich in Invergordon, which turned out great.

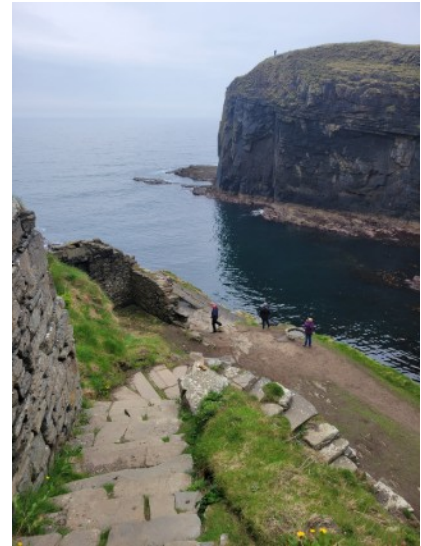
After the meal, we made a short stop at Cairn Laith, a burial cairn just a few miles north. We split up briefly for our nephew's friend Rani to look for better shoes, while we went on to Whaligoe Steps. Its a pretty climb down about 350 steps. It would be much more challenging in bad weather, but we had bright sun. Of course there's then the 350 steps back up, which did require a few brief stops to admire the views.

Went on to checkin at the Harbour House in Wick, then drove on to Sinclair Castle, which was unfortunately closed for the typical castle ruin "restoration in progress".



*Slaine's Castle*

Lots of scaffolding and not much sign of progress. We returned to the lodging, then walked over to The Norseman for an all-you-can eat buffet, which appears to draw every town resident, judging by the crowd. Nonetheless, it was a good, filling meal followed by a stroll back to the Harbour House. On the stroll back, our watching a grey heron attracted several local teenagers who were amazed that there were such things in their river. I also helped a poor teenage girl get the chain back on her bike without getting grease on anything but my hands.



*Whaligoe Steps*

### **Wick to Durness – Day 7**

Breakfast was delivered on a trolley to our rooms the next morning. Although the breakfast was good, the beds were the worst any of us had ever seen and although we've learned to ignore it, the rest of our compatriots were horrified by the cleanliness (shower mold, soap scum on glass, etc.). The 74 year old owner did warn us that his step daughter was in hospital.

We loaded our bags and set off to Duncansby Head, for a gorgeous walk in bright sunshine to the Stacks, with lots of birds and crashing waves. Half way back to John o'Groats, I managed to hit a serious pothole and the dash warning light for air pressure turned on. We pulled into a driveway, and found a flat left front tire. Of course this car only had a 12volt air pump that injects latex from a canister. The tire got up to 40psi, then immediately dropped to 20psi. Several more



*Duncansby Stacks*



attempts didn't improve the situation, so I called the Arnold Clark helpline. After several calls back and forth, I was told that help was on the way, and it would be 5-6 hours.



*Whoops*

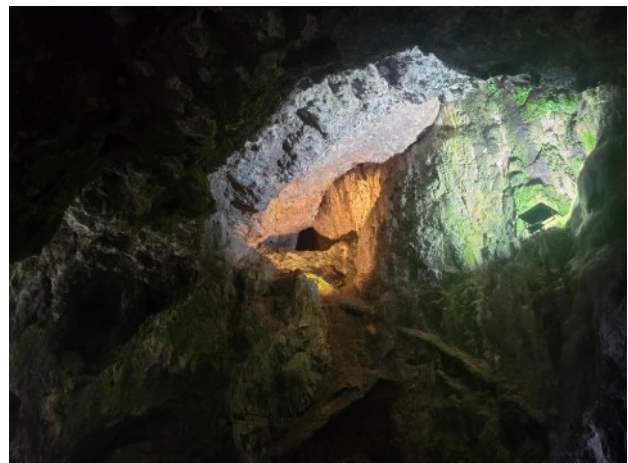
Rather than blow the entire day sitting by the side of the road, I called the only place anywhere near, and despite being a bank holiday, they had the needed tire and were open. I filled the tire once more, and we limped the 3 miles to JT Cormack. The service experience was unique, as voiceless workers in oily coveralls competently removed the old tire, showed me the sidewall tear, changed, balanced, and re-installed the new tire like a NASCAR pit crew.

This gave me an opportunity to remove some clods of turf I had been dragging around since my Lairdship. While I watched the progress, my wife walked around what was a huge junkyard, right on the beach, along with an old abandoned hotel. She saw lots of birds and wildflowers that seemed to have no problem with the mess. According to the more talkative manager (or owner?), they have been open every day for many years and stock a few common sizes of tires for situations like ours. Otherwise, they repair tractors, government vehicles, heavy equipment, you name it. Couldn't be more pleased with the service and final cost (\$95). The beach and hotel had been a terminus for a rowing route to/from Orkney.

Having only lost a few hours, we skipped lunch and headed for Dunnet Head. Although we could see it clearly from ten miles off, by the time we got there, the fog at completely enveloped the car park. Another visitor said it was even thicker up ahead, so we reversed, looking to stop at Puffin Cove. Between when I planned the trip and now, the car park had been removed and the walking route was signed ominously that it was closed to all visitors, which we honored. We later heard that a hiker had fallen and the helicopter rescue had terrified the puffins, so they pulled the plug on visitors. We still hadn't seen any puffins on the trip.

Being now ahead of schedule, we stopped for the hike down to Smoo Cave (after hours) so were only able to see the main cavern and waterfall. During the day, there's a short boat ride to the back of the falls. Much more impressive than I expected, as we live very close to a cave nearly as large as Carlsbad, and are sort of bored with caves.

We went on to Durness, and after a little navigation failure, checked into the Wild Orchid, then eventually had a great dinner at the B&B, which



*Smoo Cave*

they offer due to the dearth of alternatives. The Smoo Cave Hotel apparently serves food, but I won't drive after having a beer with dinner.

### **Durness to Ullapool – Day 8**

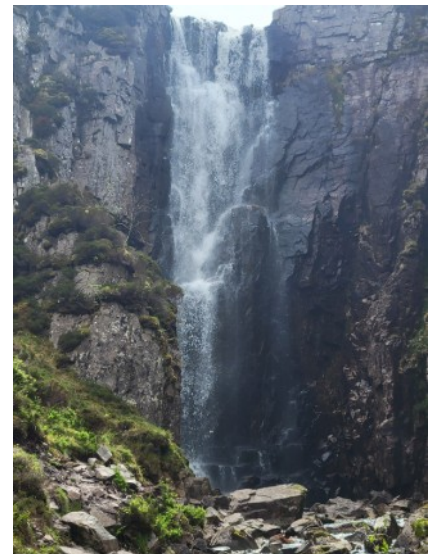


*Kylesku Bridge*

Originally planning the Smoo Cave visit, we got an early start on our other plans. The kids wanted to do the zip-line near Smoo cave, so we split up with us heading to Ullapool, which after pausing long enough to take a few pictures of the Kylesku Bridge, we stopped at the Rock Stop museum. It was too early for the planned lunch, so we toured the fabulous little museum. Besides a cool time-travel VR glasses exhibit that could be dizzying as you looked over a railing, they had something called The Sand Box that had a sandbox filled with fine sand with an overhead distance sensor and projector. You could pile up sand

and resulting holes would fill with projected water, or if you worked a bit, you could create a volcano that caused a projected eruption. I'd buy one for home use but they are \$13K ! The museum also had lots of rock samples from the collision zone between plates, which was in the area.

We continued on the Allt Chranaidh Falls, then took the Wee Mad Road through Lochiniver, where we stopped for lunch at Delilah's, which was delicious. Despite the warning signs that the road was unsuitable for campers, there were some, and they caused a complete knot in traffic whenever you happened upon one. Not sure what opposing campers would do, and we know it happened behind us.



*Allt Chranaidh Falls*

After lunch we made a stop at Knockan Crag NR, where we hiked to the top in the warm sun to many wildflowers, birds, and wonderful views. This is a major geological anomaly where two tectonic plates collided. Then it was on to checkin at the Royal Hotel in Ullapool.

Re-united with the kids at this point, we made reservations at the hotel for dinner, where we had very good food in fairly small portions. At this point, I received an email from CalMac that they had rescheduled our 9:45am ferry to 5pm, so while strolling along the newly re-designed harbor front, I spent 45 minutes on hold and/or negotiating for a better ferry solution, which failed. While walking, our niece noticed a "Live Music Tonight" sign at The Arch Inn, so we came back at the advertised time, got the last three seats,



*Knockan Crag*



and watched a riotous crazy man calling himself RuMac, playing a MIDI interfaced accordion, doing hilarious, foul mouthed versions of familiar songs. For example, Johnny Cash's Burning Ring of Fire became f'\*\*\*n Gaelic Choir, all at ear shattering volume. Good time despite the eardrum damage.

### Ullapool to Lochcharron – Day 9

We had a nice breakfast at the hotel, said goodbye to the kids, who were headed to Edinburgh, and jumped into the car to backtrack slightly to Rhue Lighthouse. The hike was easy, and we were surrounded by sheep and cuckoos. We also watched an old sailing ship wander around the bay, as if he was waiting for a higher tide?

Back on the road to the Falls of Measach. The Car park had been relocated since my trip planning so we fumbled around a bit finding the right spot, and found



*Falls of Measach*

ourselves at a recently created visitor's center and lots of highly refined hiking trails to the several falls in the canyon. There is a stylish suspension bridge built long ago, along with a similarly designed lookout, with a good view of the falls. The original landowner had apparently commissioned both for his own enjoyment, eventually donating the site to the government. Quite beautiful, and very well done. As we were walking back to the car, and ambulance went racing by (in our direction).

A few miles on, we found ourselves in a huge traffic stop, as the medics assisted a downed motorcyclist. By the time the road reopened, it appeared there were no major injuries, except to a badly scuffed motorcycle. Luckily, most cyclists wear full leathers, unlike the idiots in the States.

Stopped for lunch at Osgood Cafe, located next to the Inverewe Garden, just before Poolewe. We didn't visit the gardens, which may have been a mistake – we'll never know. We continued on to Lochcharron, with a short stop at another Geo Park parking area along Loch Maree, before checking in to the Lochcharron Inn. The Inn was pretty old and run down, but it was warm and welcoming. After short naps, we walked along the loch in a light rain to the Rockvilla for a memorable meal – panfried hake in surf clam broth with sapphire and rice wild mushroom risotto with crispy kale. When we mentioned where we were staying, they expressed sympathy. We are not 5 Star travelers, so we thought it was just fine, although the beds were less than terrific.



*Rhue Lighthouse*

## Lochcarron to Fort Augustus – Day 10

We met a French couple during our nice breakfast in the dining room who had a van breakdown with their two border collies, and had been getting towed from one town to another looking for someone with time to work on their engine. He thought it was a head gasket or water pump. We wished them the best, scratched a few dog heads, and headed on to Attendale Gardens. We've never seen such ancient rhododendrons which are technically invasive in Scotland (and native at home). They really seem to like the climate.



*Attendale Gardens*

Stopped for lunch at Emily's Byre, which was far more formal (and expensive) than I had thought. We had delicious and huge curry lunches, immediately adjusting our dinner expectations. Very upscale for an old barn.



*Falls of Foyers*

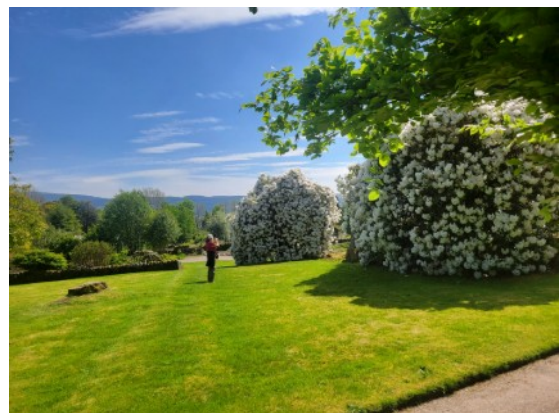
We continued on to Invergarry Castle, which was fenced off due to the usual hazards of ruined stone buildings. We then bypassed Fort Augustus to head to Falls of Foyers on Loch Ness. The falls were pretty small due to power plant diversions, but it was a nice hike down the cliff side with views of the Loch and lots of birds. Afterwards, we headed into Fort Augustus to the Abbey Cottage. Jacob was a very gracious host, making dinner suggestions and explaining life in the town. Fort Augustus is much smaller than I expected – no comparison to Fort William, just a few miles down the road.

We walked up along the staircase locks (which were closed for the day), then headed off to dinner, selecting the Loch Inn, where I had my umpteenth fish & chips and Kathy had a beet-something. We then moved over to The Legion for a couple of whiskys, then back to the B&B for sleep.

## Fort Augustus to Bowmore – Day 11

Jacob appeared at breakfast in his kilt, serving a delicious meal while explaining a little about his business and the daily headaches and pleasures. His favorite part was when he was fully booked with a Jacobite bus tour and the bus doesn't show up – he gets paid and does no work!

Starting our longest day of driving, we left Fort Augustus behind and drove the hours to Crarae Gardens, a beautiful garden originally created by Sir George Campbell



*Crarae Gardens*



(probably one of my wife's ancestors – still no free admission). Spent 90 minutes or so exploring the trail system, again seeing gigantic old growth rhododendrons, along with a few standing stones, and eventually a light lunch in the cafe. Just ordered scones, but later saw they had sandwiches as well.



*Royal Castle of Tarbert*

Drove on to the Royal Castle of Tarbert, where we found a parking place and hiked up the small hill to the Castle. There's not much of it left, but it does have dramatic panoramic views and good signage. On the way back down the trail, Kathy thought about picking up a little snake that slithered across our path – luckily she didn't try very hard, as a local identified it as an adder, the only poisonous snake in the UK.

We carried on to the Kennecraig/Port Askaig ferry for our twice rescheduled 5pm ferry. While waiting, I spent a few minutes with the desk agent and got a good solution



*Adder*

to our return ferry problem by moving ourselves to the 7am ferry from Port Ellen. Due to the port configurations, boarding involved backing the car onto the ferry. All the cars in front of me drove straight on (and apparently made U-turns on board). The loading person had a very thick accent, and it took me quite a while to figure out that he wanted me to back the whole way in. Not a problem except understanding the request. The substitute ferry didn't have the dinner menu of the MV Finlaggan, so we had a sausage roll for me and chips for Kathy. Even at 5pm, the trip was warm and shirt sleeves on the deck. Drove the 30 minutes to Bowmore and checked into An Cuan B&B. After chatting with Brigit a bit (she's also a knitter), we headed over to the LochSide Hotel for a couple of beers and/or whiskys. This was the biggest night for the aurora borealis, but it was just too cloudy, there was a street light right outside our room window, and we were too tired to stay up, so we missed it. We had multiple following chances, all sabotaged by late evening clouds.



*Loch Gruinart*

### **Islay – Day 12**

Had a extra nice breakfast with the other guests, and being the first opportunity, we delivered ten days of dirty laundry to Brigit for her much appreciated laundry machine. We headed out to Loch Gruinart RSPB where we did both the moor walk and the forest walk with its two bird blinds, seeing many wildflowers, birds, and running into the same friendly and talkative photographer on both trails.



We then tried half-heartedly to find Ballinby Stones, and not seeing any signs, we headed for Machir Bay beach, for a nice walk along the low tide exposed sand. Then on to Port Mor Cafe for a great lunch. Lots of children running around the playground, and it looked like a really progressive community center.

While deciding whether to drive down to Portnahaven to walk or going to the Mull of Oa, we instead went to Finlaggen. The visitor center was very thorough and the



*Machir Beach*

docent was



*Finlaggen*

immensely informative. We walked out to the island, poked around all the ruins, then returned to the visitor center for more information and a few trinkets. We met a local sheep and cow farmer on the path who was also very friendly and talkative about his living on Islay. He owned several farms and

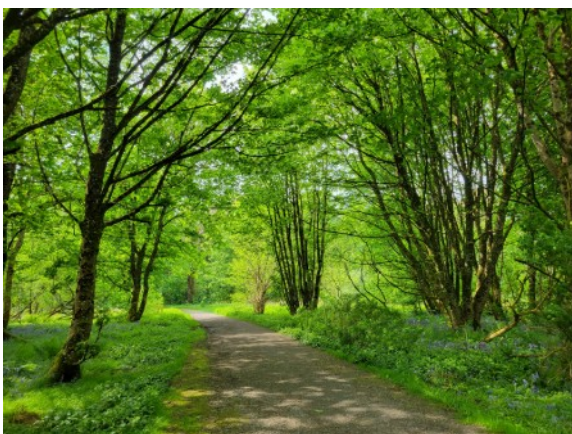
drove a Land Rover, so I think he might have been titled. Educated us about Tups (versus Rams), breeding Coos, and Border Collies.



*Finlaggen Tups*

Headed back to Bowmore, stopping at the Bridgend

Community



*Bridgend Community Forest*

Forest for a nice walk through the trees among the birds. After returning to the B&B, we walked across the street for our 7pm dinner reservation at the Bowmore Hotel. Kathy ordered a crab salad/shrimp rose marie while I ordered scallops. I guess I've been under a rock, but in Scotland (and maybe everywhere but in the States), scallops come with their gonads attached, which are about the same size as the rest of the scallop, and frankly, taste about the same. I ate all of it, but I did feel a little queasy that evening, although it was no doubt psychological. Kathy's crab was not nearly good as our local Dungeness Crab.

We headed back to the B&B, napped, then walked around the pier until about 11:15pm, hoping to score the aurora. A little too cloudy or maybe just too subtle.

### Islay – Day 13

After another delicious breakfast, we headed down to the Mull of Oa. The car park had one other car, and we set out on the 2.2 mile circular walk to the American Monument. It was too foggy to see more than a shadow of Northern Ireland, and too windy to do more than stand on the lee side of the Monument. Did get to see some wild goats, mingled with lots of coo, including calves. On the drive back, we found ourselves stymied by another car, so we backed up about ¼ mile to a turn out, only to have our photographer from Loch Gruinart thank us as she drove past.



*American Monument - Mull of Oa*



*Kildalton*

After

getting back to Port Ellen, we drove out to Kildalton Cross and church ruin. There was a distinct buzzing sound that between us and a fellow traveler decided it must be a swarm of bees in the top of a large sycamore tree, although we never spotted more than a few bees. It was the same sound as Outlander's standing stones.

Stopped at Ardbeg Distillery, thinking we could have lunch, but the lunch truck was closed, so we went for a taste in the lounge (I got a to-go bottle and a wee nip of Kathy's whisky). We then drove down to Port Ellen and proceeded to do the first 2/3rds of the Three Distillery Walk, stopping for tastes at Laphroaig and Lagavulin distilleries (and, yes, to-go bottles for me).

Eventually making it back to the car, we drove back to Bowmore, walked over to the Lochside Hotel for dinner after a beer/whisky. One of Kathy's favorite pastimes is to eavesdrop

on fellow diners, and it was very frustrating for her as everyone seemed to be speaking German. We had 2x fish & chips rather than risk something more exotic. Stopped at the Spar Market for a sweet dessert, then after looking at the clouding sky, retired and didn't even try to see the aurora.

Kathy forgave me for having slightly sore feet after 7.5 miles of walking today.



## Bowmore to Anstruther – Day 14

We originally had a 9:45 ferry from Port Ellen, but the delay in the MV Finlaggen refit caused Cal Mac to re-schedule us to 5pm. Since that didn't work, I finally found an opening on the 7am ferry, after checking several times a day since leaving Ullapool.

Due to our early departure, Brigit left us multiple cheese sandwiches, water, apples, and chocolate for breakfast. On the way out, Kathy left a skein of wool as a gift to her fellow knitter.

We pulled into the Port Ellen ferry terminal, got confused again about whether to back on, and eventually headed off into the fog. We ate Brigit's offering along with ferry coffee, which was surprisingly good.

With the extra two hours due to the change in ferry, we decided to head to Culross to have lunch in the community owned and run Red Lion Inn (used in the Outlander series). They were very busy but everyone seemed very happy and things ran efficiently, testifying to the benefit of being community owned and operated. After lunch, we walked



*Red Lion Inn*

around

town a bit, investigating all the sound stage equipment, drones, large vans, and people sitting in tents. There was apparently some filming being done, but nobody knew or was willing to fess up. Very secretive. Walked out the strange pier, that was apparently the entrance to a coal mine dug below the firth shore. The whole town was a little too touristy for our taste. We wouldn't want to live there.

Rather than try to squeeze in yet more "things", we headed to Anstruther, checked into the Waterfront, and strolled the waterfront, with Kathy finding several carboniferous fossils on the beach as the tide came



*Anstruther*

rushing in.

We had a few beers at the Ship Tavern, then went to the Ox & Anchor for a nice dinner with a few more beers. Walked the short distance to the Waterfront and slept ten hours.

## Anstruther to Stonehaven - Day 15

After a good breakfast at the Waterfront, we headed to St. Andrews, finding a parking place not far from the Castle. Explored the castle, including looking over the cliffs to the eider filled rocks and several



*St. Andrews Castle*



people swimming in a sort of swimming pool, perhaps carved in the rocks. Then moved on to the Cathedral, really mostly a graveyard with some remaining cathedral walls. Met an interesting young docent that bonded with Kathy in several areas, which stimulated a little science proselytizing on Kathy's part.



*St. Andrews Cathedral*

The next stop was the Montrose Wildlife Trust, which was an expansive estuary in which we found few birds in season or they were just avoiding us. We walked a few miles through mustard fields, seeing (or hearing) a few skylarks and spent a few minutes in a blind, not seeing much. Sort of underwhelming, although it's probably fabulous at other times.

Headed into Montrose for lunch, discovering the Market Arms doesn't serve food, so we had a quick bite at a small bakery, and drove on to Fowlsheugh RSPB, where we did nice cliff walk seeing thousands of kittiwakes, razorbills, and guillemots. Talked with another hiker with some serious camera gear and she shared her view of our first puffins of the trip, though only through a spotting scope. Very

dramatic cliff walk. despite the lack of nearby puffins.

After a few mile walk, we headed on to Dunnattar Castle, a semi intact structure perched on a fabulous cliff overlooking the North



*Dunnattar Castle*

Sea. A substantial number of steps down and back up to access the site, but well worth the visit.

Then moved on to Stonehaven where

we checked in to The Ship Inn on the waterfront. After walking around the harbor, we had a nice dinner at the Ship Inn, then headed to bed after another long 8.5 mile day for Jim's poor feet.

### **Stonehaven to Lerwick – Day 16**

After yet another nice full breakfast, we headed for Aberdeen. First stop was Culsh Earth House, a tiny pullout leading to an entirely camouflaged site within 50' of the road. After crawling through a low entrance, it opened up



*Culsh Earth House*

into a large space, which signboards claimed were not for burials, rather some sort of shelter or storage. Not sure how they know.

Next stop was Cullerie Stone Circle, which was one of many stone circles in the vicinity. While strolling around the site, one of those vacation-making events occurred. As we were about to leave, and elderly border collie approached, not sure if we were friendly. Of course we were, and she trotted over and submitted to belly rubs and ear scratches. If only our dog knew! We eventually pulled ourselves away from the encounter, stopped to refill the gas tank, then brought the car back to the same place we rented it 15 days earlier. Arnold Clarke waved off any charges for the unmatched tire or latex kit replacement. After a short shuttle ride to Aberdeen Airport, we boarded the one hour flight to Sumburgh Airport without incident. Cloud cover made gawking at windmills, sailboats, and whales impossible.



*Cullerie Stone Circle*



*Upstairs at The Lounge*

Lounge for a genuine session in the upstairs bar. It included a father/son combo on accordion/piano, several fiddles and a few guitars. We had never experienced a piano in a session, so it was interesting. Very upbeat evening and we stumbled home and slept well.

### **Lerwick – Day 17**

Having been to Lerwick just two years earlier, we had already seen the “usual” sights, so we had planned to go to Isle of Noss, but discovered at the last minute that the ferry from Bressay to Noss didn’t run on

Arriving in Shetland, we picked up a Bolt rental car, and immediately drove over to Sumburgh Lighthouse, where we had seen many puffins two years earlier. No luck, but someone did inform us that it’s all a matter of time-of-day as they are all at sea in the afternoon. We drove on to Lerwick and checked in at Varis House. The host described the 300 year old history of the house and its original owner, an Earl of Whalsay, who built the house as a place where he could see his island lands. We were in what was previously the attic.

We then headed out to our dinner reservation at The Dowry (made weeks earlier) and then over to The



*Muckle Voe*





*Lerwick Town Hall*

Thursdays (fire the trip planner!), we opted for a hike to the Muckle Voe Lighthouse, followed by lunch at Frankie's, then returned to town to walk to Fort Charlotte and the Town Hall. We had hoped to see the amazing stained glass in the Town Hall, but it was closed for a private wedding, but we managed to cajole someone setting up for the wedding into giving us a quick tour of the glass along with reciting the history of many of them. Not quite the full meal deal, but an adequate substitute.

After a brief siesta, we had a nice (if slightly spendy) dinner at C'est La Vie. The owner and staff were talking about the decrease in cruise ship port calls affecting their business. Afterwards, we headed to the Marlex (the other bar at the Douglas Arms) where another session was starting. Although already thoroughly entertaining, three young lads came in, had a beer, and then left briefly to return with a fiddle, banjo, and guitar. They ended up dominating the session. It's so cool to see the young advancing the

art that we enjoy so much.

Returned to Varis House and slept well.

### **Lerwick to Unst – Day 18**

Having moved some of our plans into yesterday, we had the morning free, so we moved the car and walked down to the Bressay ferry terminal, where we walked on for the short crossing. The staff was kidding us about our private yacht since we were the only people of the ferry. Our first task on Bressay was to walk north to eventually get to the old Bolt house and grounds, Kathy's distant ancestors. Two years earlier, the archivist from the museum pointed out the ruins across the bay and identified them as the Bolt's ancestral home. Crossing the fields, we explored the ruins of the house, several barns, and Kathy found some interesting rocks on the beach.



*Bolt ancestral home and Lerwick*

The Bressay Heritage Center opens at 10am on Fridays, so we returned to the ferry terminal and walked into the adjacent Center. Kathy struck up a conversation with the volunteer docent Hazel, who immediately launched into providing pages of family info from her genealogy database. I had time to walk around the exhibits while Kathy and Hazel poured over the computer screen. As the 11:30am ferry arrived, we wrapped up the task, although Hazel has continued to provide more information via email.



After the short ferry, this time with a full house of cars and passengers, we had a quick (and delicious) lunch at the Peerie Shop Cafe, then drove to Toft, where we snuck onto an earlier ferry, as the crew saw us driving down the hill. After the 20 minute voyage, we were off from Ulsta to Gutcher, hoping to catch the early ferry there as well. After a little confusion about which line to get in, we were not loaded on the much smaller ferry, and we patiently waited for our booked ferry 40 minutes later. We were first car onto the booked ferry for the ten minute trip.



*Muness Castle*

From Belmont, we drove to Muness Castle with a short stop at Clivocast Stone on the way. Muness Castle is actually in quite good shape. We later learned that an American had bought it, planning on re-building it (or something) but he is stymied by the local council's disapproval, so it's just a free visit for tourists. We loved the way the heavy wooden door creaked on opening and closing. We enjoyed watching a farmer and his border collie working sheep.

We checked in at the Baltasound Hotel, where we were shown to one of the duplex bungalows, and were warned that the boxies (Skuas) might attack during hikes and we should borrow a cane from the lobby. We then walked over to the Keen of Hamar, stopping at Bobby's Bus



*Keen of Hamar*

Stop on the way, walking the few miles of vague trail, eventually cutting off the last part of the loop to return in time for dinner. It's a serpentine outcrop with oodles of unusual flowers. We have a similar soil and plant population on our property at home. There was a bench at the top of the keen(?) that included a button to push to hear two Scottish fiddle tunes celebrating the dawn and the sunset. Very nice touch! I think Kathy will require such a device at home.

Had an excellent dinner, and we took after-dinner whiskys back to our room and called it a night, although we attempted yet again to see the aurora borealis by getting up at midnight and walking around the hotel grounds.

### **Unst – Day 19**

After a good breakfast in the hotel dining room, we headed off to Hermaness Reserve, for a 6.5 mile easy walk along the cliffs and over the hill. Although the first hour was a bit foggy, we were alone on the cliffs. We've never seen so many fulmers, and there plenty of puffins in addition to the usually present gannets, razorbills, guillemots, black



*Hermaness Nature Reserve*

backed gulls, skuas, etc. Fantastic birding, and no weapon required. We spent 4 ½ hours hiking and watching and there was another push button audio of fiddle tunes.

We then headed for Victoria's Tearoom, where without a booking, we were relegated to the patio (such a shame on a beautiful sunny day) to have our toasty and sandwich. Strolled over to the Boat Haven, where there was an excellent museum of the Unst fishing industry, including lots of descriptive signs, and many old and restored boats.

Hopped in the car and headed to the Heritage Center which was equally interesting, but they were closing shortly, so we did a pretty rushed exploration. Headed back to Baltasound, making stops at Skinbladner and Viking Unst to examine the restored longboat and structure similar to the main island's black houses. We returned to the hotel and after a brief lie down, headed for the dining room for another nice dinner. The chef was a talkative character that provided a bit of entertainment. A mother/daughter pair that we had met at the Marlex session walked in and we chatted throughout dinner with them. We ordered a couple of Muckle Voe nightcaps, and headed back to the room.



*Skinbladner*

### **Unst to Edinburgh – Day 20**



*Catpund*

Got up at a leisurely 8am, had yet another good breakfast, and headed to Belmont for the ferry to Gutcher, then drove to Ulsta for the ferry to Toft. As we drove from Toft to the airport, we stopped at Catpund – a bit of a hidden gem of a Viking soapstone quarry. When we checked the hours for Mackenzie's Farm Cafe, we discovered it was permanently closed as a restaurant, so we drove past, stopped for fuel at the Bolt fuel station, then headed over to the Sumburgh Hotel for lunch. The parking lot is shared with Jarlshof, so it was difficult to find a parking spot, but the restaurant wasn't busy.

From there we headed to Sumburgh Lighthouse (again), this time having the patience to see lots of puffins for one last fix of cute. We

loitered until it was time for our flight to Edinburgh, again not seeing much through the cloud layer. After retrieving our bags (Loganair has very small carry-on allowance), we took a taxi to the Brooks Hotel. It



*Sumburgh Head*



was in a very ethnic neighborhood (immigrants from all over Europe) but the hotel was very nice and friendly.

My original plan was to head to Sandy Bells for music, but seeing how late it was, and we needed some dinner, I googled the area around the hotel and found Digger's Bar which served small food and was featuring a pub quiz and a music gathering in the snug of the Edinburgh Shetland Fiddle club. The name of the bar comes from the fact it was located between two cemeteries. The snug eventually filled up with players, five fiddles and a guitar, and just us as an appreciative audience. The players were



*No Mow May*

quite good and they were very talkative among themselves and included us in the conversations. A completely private session for us! Apparently the club once had scores of members but most had died off with little recruitment from younger players, although Tim was barely thirty(?), so there was some hope. The session lasted until about 10pm, so we walked home past the graveyards and slipped into the hotel. The month of May has become "No Mow May" in much of Europe, so the graveyards were a sea of bird filled tall grass and wildflowers rather than neatly trimmed lawn. Great tradition!

### **Edinburgh to Selma, OR – Day 21**

After a leisurely breakfast in the hotel, it was off to walk to Haymarket for the train to Queens St. in Glasgow, then the 500 bus to the airport, and finally the Icelandair flight to Seattle via Reykjavik. We then had a long layover in Seattle for our flight to Medford, our home airport, then got the car out of hock and drove home, arriving 24 hours after leaving the hotel. Not a very painless ending to an otherwise great trip. Alaska keeps changing their flight schedules in the wrong direction.

Our border collie Samantha was very happy to see us.



*IcelandAir*