

Highland Sting

OVERFLOWING WITH CHARM, SCOTLAND IS A
FAIRYTALE DESTINATION WHERE SCENIC LANDSCAPES
CAPTURE THE IMAGINATION

Words by KELLY ALLEN

Kilchurn Castle, Loch Lomond





View from Calton Hill, Edinburgh

At just over 80,000 square kilometres, Scotland isn't much bigger than Tasmania, yet the relatively small country packs a remarkable amount of personality. Crammed with mysterious lochs, dramatic coastline, rugged highlands and meandering glens, Scotland offers something for everyone. Whether you're a history buff, golf enthusiast, nature lover or connoisseur of whisky, you'll be charmed by this bonnie land.

This is my maiden trip to Scotland, home to my grandfather's family, and I've only got nine days to see it. That being the case, I have decided to let the experts at Abercrombie & Kent handle the details for me. Having travelled with A&K in the past, I am confident everything will be seamless and that my excursions and accommodations will be top notch. This feeling is validated when we are met at Edinburgh's airport by Margaret, our wonderful Abercrombie 'Guardian Angel' and Gordon, our knowledgeable driver and tour guide.

It's a short drive from the airport to the very impressive Balmoral Hotel, the hallmark of Princes Street, and certainly the most prestigious hotel in Edinburgh. Now owned by Rocco Forte Hotel Group, the grand castle-like hotel, complete with turrets, was built above the Waverley Railway Station in 1902. It has since hosted many celebrity visitors including Sophia Loren, Elizabeth Taylor, and Paul and Linda McCartney. The Queen Mother, meanwhile, regularly dines at the Balmoral when in town and is apparently a keen admirer of the lamb. We are in good company.

Our Castle View Suite has a generous lounge with working fireplace, cosy nooks created by the turrets and stunning views of the Old Town and, of course, Edinburgh Castle. Talented designer Olga Polizzi, sister to Sir Rocco Forte, has used soft wool tartans of blues, greens, greys and purples in the furnishings and the walls





"Rest and Be Thankful" mountain pass



Castle View Suite, Barmoral Hotel

are covered in the most beautiful wallpaper. The oversized marble bathroom has a deep tub and separate shower.

After helping us check in, Margaret gives us some tips on where to get a bite to eat and we spend the afternoon exploring the Old Town, which is less than a 10-minute walk from our hotel.

The next morning, after an amazing – and high protein! – Scottish breakfast of smoked kippers, local cured salmon, black pudding and a side of haggis, we are met in the lobby by Gordon for our full-day journey towards the Highlands and west coast. We revel in the next three days as Gordon delights us with Scottish history while we stare out the window, eyes fixed on beautiful wooded glens, braes and lochs. Gordon also makes time to stop off at picturesque villages such as Luss and Comrie when we feel like exploring further. When hunger strikes, Gordon always has several options for us from a fancy seafood lunch with white tablecloths to cosy local pubs for a pint and a pie – always homemade and always delicious. We enter the Highlands up the mountain pass known as 'Rest and Be Thankful', appropriately named as that is exactly what travellers would do in times past when they finally reached the top. From the summit, the views of Glen Croe valley with a bright blue sky are incredible. Yes, I said blue sky. This is not what I expected. Where is all the rain and wind everyone cautioned me about? It's a stunning 23 degrees and there is not a cloud to be seen.

A private tour of Inveraray Castle, home to the Duke of Argyll (chief of clan Campbell) is a great stopover, and the first of several that we explore. The castles in Scotland are a highlight of the trip and seem to pop up around every bend. I never tire of the history and hearing about the battles between clans. >>



Isle of Iona

We spend two nights on the west coast at the Isle of Eriska Hotel, a 121-hectare Relais & Chateaux property set on a private island estate accessible by a narrow bridge. The 19th-century mansion overlooks Loch Linnhe and the glorious west-highland scenery. Fittingly, there are several large fireplaces to cosy up next to with a glass of wine or a whisky – you can choose the deep comfy sofas with oak wood panelling in the hall or the sun-filled piano room surrounded by windows.

The hotel is a perfect jumping-off point for exploring the Hebridean Islands. A 45-minute ferry takes us to the Isle of Mull and from there the Isle of Iona. Sheep roam freely around both islands and Iona has a beautifully restored medieval abbey. In the sixth century, Saint Columba and his followers arrived from Ireland to spread the word of Christianity, and Iona was the first spot they landed. There are about 130 residents on the island as well as green pastures, sandy beaches and a handful of quaint shops selling locally produced crafts.

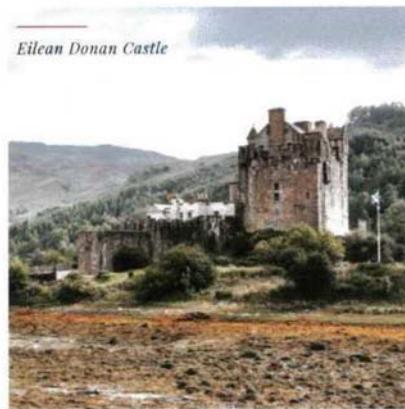
Our journey back to Edinburgh is just as delightful as we drive through the Great Trossachs Forest with the sun shining on the quiet lochs. We spot pheasants, wild turkeys, black grouse and red deer, and we get a roadside view of Stirling Castle before we are back in the Old Town of Edinburgh for a half-day private tour of the area including the Edinburgh Castle and the Palace of Holyroodhouse.

Met by our enthusiastic tour guide, Sandra, we are given an abbreviated history lesson of all of the Georges and Jameses that ruled Scotland as we walk the Royal Mile from the palace to the castle. We explore both fortresses with Sandra and I take in more history in a few hours than I think I did right throughout high school.





Ben Nevis mountain



Eilean Donan Castle



Royal Mile, Edinburgh

So far, our trip has been sensational in every way, and the locals can't stop talking about how spectacular the weather is – they keep thanking us for bringing the Australian sun with us. But I have to say I'm truly excited about the next part as we will be boarding the Belmond Royal Scotsman train for four days of beautiful countryside, delicious meals, local entertainment and more than a few 'wee drams' both at the whisky distilleries and on board.

We meet downstairs in a private lounge at the Balmoral Hotel to drop off our luggage and I happily tuck into some of the best shortbread I have ever tasted. Meanwhile, we 'meet and greet' our fellow passengers and our train host, Jerry. We are 32 guests in all, from all corners of the world. >>



After the formalities, we make our way to the train platform, where I hear the faint sound of pipes. Being a huge fan of bagpipes – I get choked up whenever I hear them – I quickly make my way to the front of the group so I can follow right behind the piper. He leads us all the way down the platform and onto the train where we are handed a glass of champagne from a silver tray. With tears rolling down my cheeks and a grin from ear to ear, I know this moment will always be one of my best travel memories.

The four days that follow truly surpass my expectations. The handsome burgundy and gold exterior of the train and the lovingly restored vintage carriages with polished brass and decorative woodwork create a nostalgic feeling. It's easy to remain riveted by the scenery as it's a bit of an undulating meditation watching the countryside hurtle along. The bright yellow fields of canola alongside the green pastures and purple heather are mesmerising and I come to realise that to truly appreciate the variety of the terrain you need to experience it on the ground.

A luxury train journey is an intimate hotel on wheels where you get to know your fellow travellers as time passes with good wines and thought-provoking conversation.

The food is unanimously excellent and the service outstanding. The crew knew our names from day one and by day two, also knew our preferred beverage whether it was a flat white at breakfast or an 18-year-old single malt whisky at cocktail hour. You would have to look very hard to find fault with this train. I did hear a few comments about the size of the cabins, but this is a train after all; there is only so much width to play with. My advice is to



pack light, though they did store our suitcases for us, and there is also storage space under the beds. My husband and I found the cabins very comfortable, and he is two meters tall. The ensuite was thoughtfully laid out with high-quality organic toiletries and the shower's water pressure was excellent.

The daytime excursions run the gamut from private castle tours, often times chatting with the duke or duchess of the castle, to whisky tasting and clay pigeon shooting (so much fun and easier than I expected). In the evenings after dinner we gathered in the observation car for entertainment, which ranged from lively folk music to a highlander regaling us with dramatic tales of the past. On our final night, we celebrated with live music and Scottish dancing on the train platform, a perfect ending to a perfect trip.

While in days gone by it may have been the budget traveller who rode the train while the well-heeled chose to fly, the golden age of rail travel is back. This is a wonderful way to slow down and enjoy the journey. A true luxury. 🇬🇧



SELECT IMAGES SHOT WITH A CANON EOS M50 AND AN EF 70-200MM F/4L IS II USM LENS

The Details

For a private journey through Scotland with Abercrombie & Kent, consider *A Scottish Sojourn*, priced from \$10,355 per pers^{on}. The nine-day tour includes hotel accommodation, services of A&K Guardian Angel, breakfast daily, private transfers and transport by luxury vehicle, daily sightseeing with expert private guides, and entrance fees. A&K's nine-day small-group journey *Scotland: Edinburgh & the Highlands* is priced from \$10,285 per person, twin share, with a maximum group size of 18. Rates for the Belmond Royal Scotsman five-day *Classic Splendours* journey start at \$9630 per person. For more information, contact Abercrombie & Kent on 1300 590 317 or visit abercrombiekent.com.au.

Bagpipes in Sydney

If you love bagpipes, enjoy a genuine Scottish experience at the Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo, coming to Sydney's ANZ Stadium on October 17-19. Witness the largest show of its kind, featuring more than 1500 performers, including pipers, drummers and dancers, that will leave you mesmerised. Set against a full-size replica backdrop of Edinburgh Castle, this is a show not to be missed. edinburghtattoosydney.com.au

