

Steve's Great Rail Journeys 2012-2016 - Scottish Tours

Several times each year I work as a Tour Manager for Great Rail Journeys, leading tours by rail in the UK and Europe. The programme is busy and there is no opportunity to take detailed notes, so the tours are not included in the Journeys section of this page. I do write a brief summary of each tour on my return. The official tour programmes are on the GRJ website, but often the highlights, for the group and personally, are the extras which can be organized during the tour. This file has been put together from these summaries and my personal recollection of the highlights of tours in Scotland, over the past five years.



Photo: Randy Clipson

A Highland Adventure

This is a short break, based on a four-night stay at the Palace Hotel in Inverness. Each of the three days include excursions that explore the Highlands featuring rail journeys on the Kyle Line, The Mallaig Line, the Strathspey Steam Railway and the Cairn Gorm funicular.



I've taken this tour twice, in 2013 and 2015. Prior to the first tour I was slightly concerned about travelling through some of the wettest parts of Scotland in late October, though in reality the weather, and more particularly the visibility, was good. The second time (in September) this was repeated. There were excellent views from the

Scotrail train from Inverness across to the west coast at Kyle of Lochalsh, followed by a guided tour of Eilean Donan Castle (above) and a brief visit across the bridge to Skye. The

journey from Fort William to Mallaig is by the Jacobite steam train via Glenfinnan and Morar. Fort William is reached by coach along Loch Ness, the Caledonian Canal and the Great Glen. In 2015 we returned to Inverness via the quiet, eastern side of Loch Ness, with great views down to the loch. The third day takes in the Strathspey Steam Railway from Aviemore to Broomhill (it became Glenbogle in the Monarch of the Glen TV series), followed by a trip on the Cairn Gorm funicular. On both occasions we had clear views of the



surrounding mountains from Ptarmigan station at the top of the funicular, 3599ft above sea level. In the spare time in the evening I managed a couple of visits to the fleshpots of Inverness - a few pints in the Castle Tavern and the reopened Phoenix Bar – both with a good selection of beer.

Some of the tour participants stay on in Inverness for a few days and visit nearby attractions such as the Culloden Battlefield, the Black Isle, dolphin watching on the Moray Firth, whisky distillery tours on Speyside, cruises on Loch Ness and the Far North railway line to Thurso and Wick.

The Highland Adventure tour will operate regularly from April to October 2017 (I am due to take one of the May departures)



The Western Highlands and Hebrides.

In September 2014 I led this tour, which takes in as much of Highland Scotland as possible in nine days. We were helped by glorious weather throughout. Edinburgh, the West Highland line from Glasgow to Fort William and the Jacobite steam train to Mallaig all lived up to the expectations of the passengers. New to me as a tour manager was the trip by coach through Skye and Glen Shiel and two days based on Mull. This included a boat trip to the amazing Fingal's Cave on Staffa (pictured) and the island of Iona, the first time I've visited either. The final few days were based in Pitlochry with a trip to Aviemore and the summit of Cairn Gorm. For some it was their first visit to Scotland, including four American couples who were impressed, despite Scottish Highland hotels

being as idiosyncratic as ever. Of course, we managed to include some whisky and plenty of good beer, including at the excellent Moulin Inn near Pitlochry.

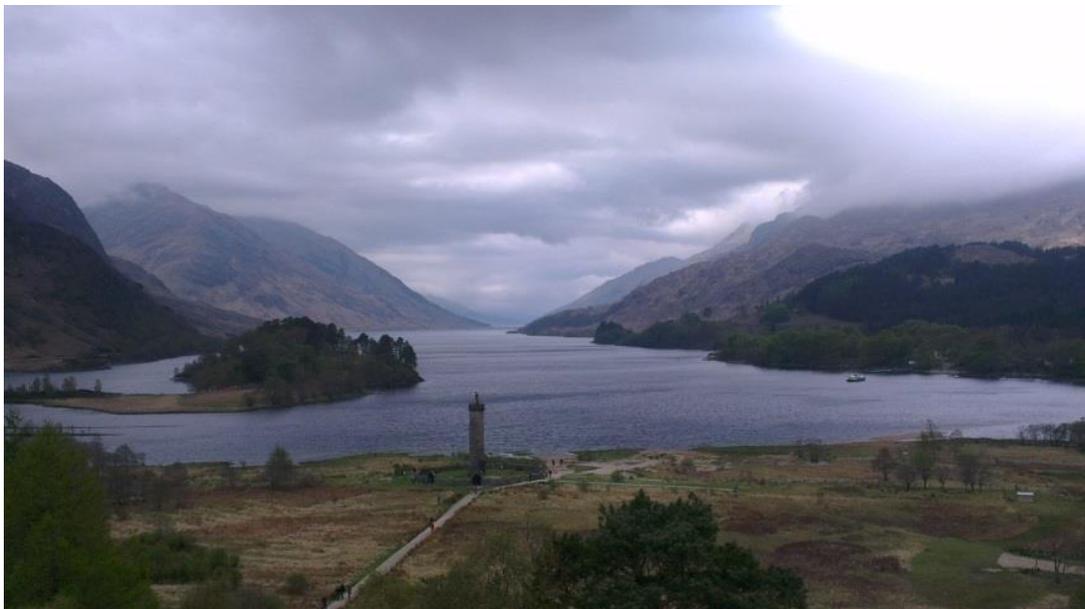
This tour is operating in 2017.

A castle in the Highlands



In 2013 Glenborrodale Castle on Ardnamurchan (left) was managed by a former Great Rail tour manager and top chef. GRJ groups took over the castle for five days at a time - and it was a tremendous place to stay, with opportunities to explore the estate and the rest of the remote Ardnamurchan peninsula. Visits to Mull and the Jacobite steam train to Mallaig

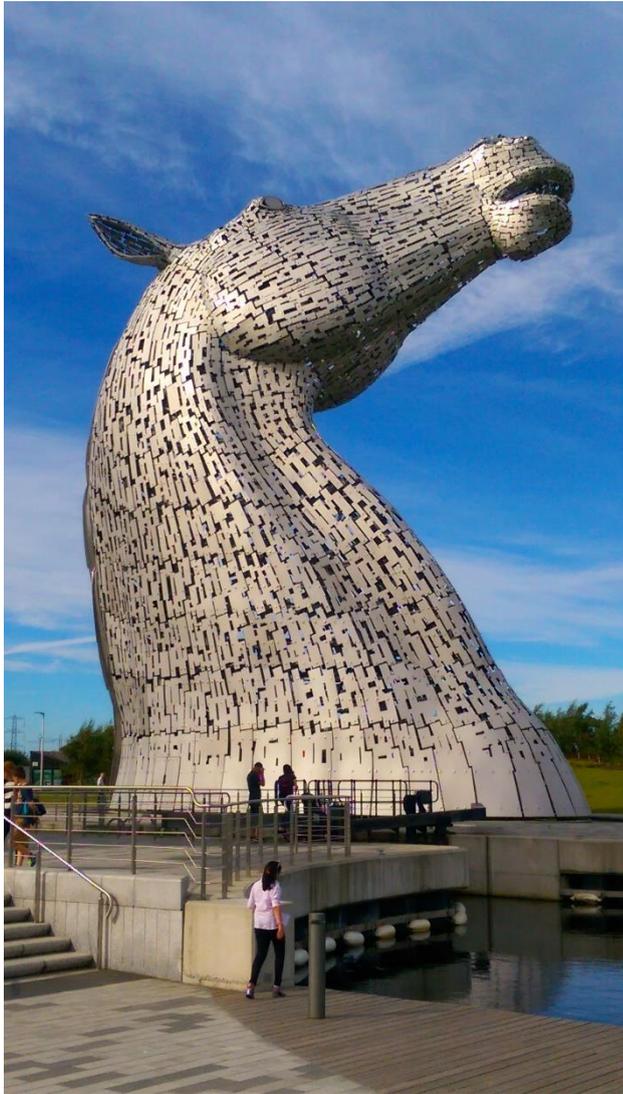
were included. On Mull I signed the special visitors book in Castle Duart as a member of the Clan Maclean and tried the whisky at Tobermory distillery. We had time in Glenfinnan to climb the hill for views of the monument and viaduct (below) The return train journey from Fort William to Glasgow was in the clearest weather I've ever had on the journey, with both Ben Nevis and Ben Lomond totally clear of cloud.



This tour no longer runs, though other GRJ tours feature Mull and the Jacobite train to Mallaig. Ardnamurchan is well worth a visit, though beware the midges.

During the **Edinburgh Tattoo** season each year GRJ run frequent short tours which take in a performance, together with a couple of days in Scotland. In 2016 I led one for the first time, which was also my first ever visit to the Military Tattoo. The Tattoo was not something high on my personal bucket list, but the performance was extremely professional and impressive,

making full use of the situation on the Castle Esplanade. And some of the performances were innovative, rather than the straight military music and marching I was expecting.



The tour was based in Glasgow, and on the day of the evening tattoo performance we had time to visit the steam Bo'ness and Kinneil Light Railway (also a first for me), the Falkirk Wheel and the Kelpies (left), and have a quick look at the new Forth Crossing nearing completion. A long day was followed by a free day in Glasgow which the passengers enjoyed – I took in a visit to the Riverside Transport Museum and a walk round the University. The Geography Department is still in the east quadrangle of the old building, where it was forty-odd years ago when I was a student.

The final day took us to Fort William along the West Highland Line. After a fine start it was pouring rain (as usual) in Fort William and we were soaked making our way to a cruise on Loch Linnhe. It dried up in time for the coach journey back to Glasgow via Glencoe and Loch Lomond.

This tour is operating during the Tattoo season in 2017. A similar tour visits the Tattoo from a base in Dunkeld, Perthshire.

Further information on these tours and other Scottish tours operated by Great Rail Journeys visit www.greatrail.com . Please contact me if you wish further information about these tours or the places they visit. GRJ also operate a variety of tours throughout England and Wales.

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