
Scotland • 2026
Kate, Jeremy, Becca, & Iain
Scotland
In September 2026, Kate and Jeremy flew to Edinburgh to meet up with Becca and Iain. Between us, we hiked an extinct volcano, drank whisky in hidden underground rooms, and drove the single-track roads of the Isle of Mull to stay in a castle. We got lost and soaked on Ulva, saw dolphins and a rainbow at the same time, and explored Fingal's Cave on Staffa.
This book has the photos, the prices, and the honest reviews.


SCOTLAND
September 6th, 2026 - September 17th, 2026
Kate Baldwin
Jeremy Ott-Holland
Becca Lessem
Iain Collins

GETTING TO SCOTLAND

Overnight, direct flight - $2,171 for 2
Parking - $146
ETA application - $54 for 2
Wi-Fi on plane - $13





We drove down to O'Hare and used SpotHero to reserve a parking spot at "**Cumberland Blue Line - Covered Self Park**" for $11 per day plus a fee. It's covered, and located on the Blue Line, so you have to take the L two stops. O'Hare economy parking lot G is $16 a day, but it's often full. You can check its status online.

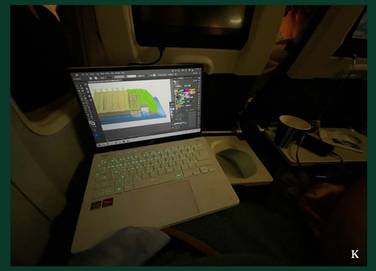


We had a direct flight from Chicago to Edinburgh on United, and it was on time.

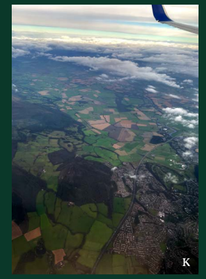
We had a regular economy middle and window seat, and we took Benadryl and slept some. I used my giant inflatable pillow that I lay forward onto.

The UK now requires an "**ETA application**" to be filled out on your cell phone at least 3 days before the trip. The phone scans your face and passport, and it's a little buggy, so leave time to get this done.





For the first time, I paid for internet and then got some work done on the plane. It worked OK and I would do it again if need be.







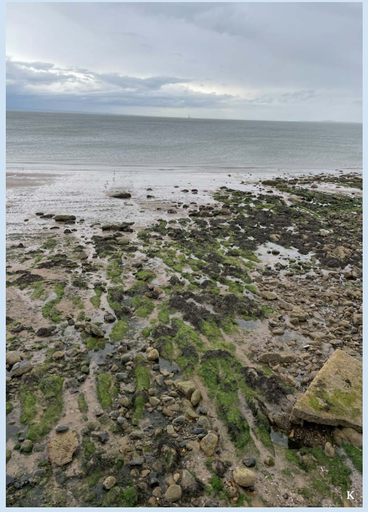


Source: Adobe Stock by Lily

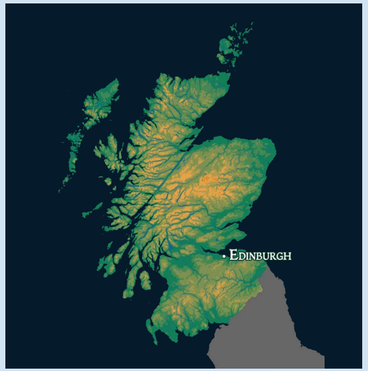
The Edinburgh airport was really crowded, and the wait for a taxi was 40 min (according to the taxi stand helper), and the surge pricing on Uber was making the cost to get to Portobello over $130 (when it's normally <$50).

So we took the light rail tram to downtown, which was really easy to do. Becca and Iain met us downtown and we had coffee at an outdoor stand in Princes Street Gardens near the Sir Walter Scott Monument. It was SO good to see Becca again, the coffee was great and the sun was bright!

Then we took a taxi to Becca and Iain's condo in the Portobello neighborhood of Edinburgh.



Source: Adobe Stock by bogdanserban









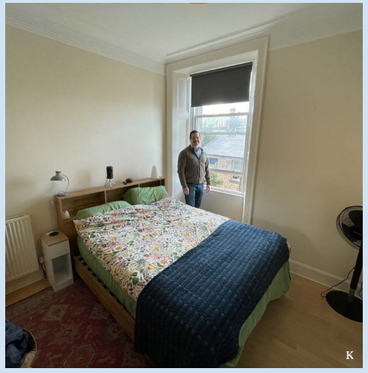
Source: Adobe Stock by tish11

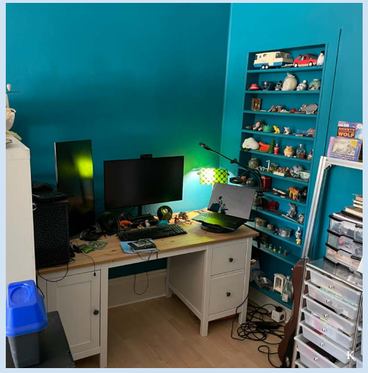












Becca and Iain's two-bedroom condo is lovely! The ceilings are about 12 feet tall, and it's very spacious. We had a wonderful stay here, including a lot of sleeping because we were pretty jet-lagged!



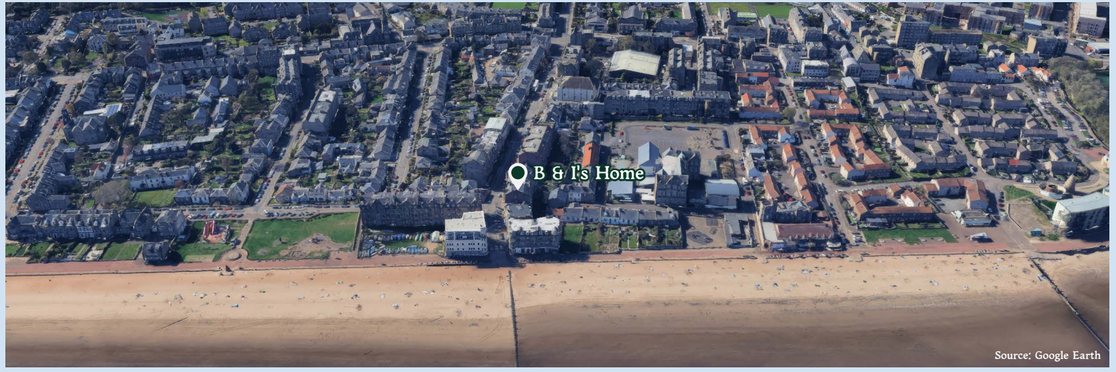


Becca and Iain's house is on Portobello beach, in Edinburgh. You can see the ocean from their windows! It's less than 30 min on a bus to get to the Royal Mile.

We walked around the beach, had drinks at the Espy (The Esplanade), and dinner at The Boathouse.

Neighborhood mansion Becca likes.





Ⓐ THE REAL MARY KING'S CLOSE

Prebooked: $33 per person

This is a guided underground tour of a long-closed-off alleyway. Our tour guide was a cheesy young man, dressed as an old-timey peasant. Our tour had projection-mapping videos and described the details of specific individuals living in this area in the 1600s. There were also detailed descriptions of the bubonic and pneumonic plague, and how the city leaders tried to curb the disease, despite no understanding of germ theory. Despite having nothing specifically to do with the site, I thought the info about the plagues was the most interesting. This hidden, underground space was re-discovered in 2003, and *it is* a neat space. However, all of Edinburgh has hidden underground spaces like this. The route to the bathroom at many restaurants goes through such tunnels. The rooms were really brightly lit with industrial lighting, which removed any feelings of intrigue or discovery. They also didn't allow photos, which was lame.



Source: facebook.com/Historyadd



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Source: instagram.com/marykingsclose

Offerings to a child ghost that a Japanese medium said lived in this room.



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Ⓑ MAKARS MASH BAR

$30 per entrée

Must be prebooked exactly 30 days in advance, to the minute, because they will sell out

Quality Scottish food, prepared simply but well. Pick from a list of 9 meats/veggie options and then also select your potato flavor, and then they very quickly bring out your dishes. The food was good, and it was quite a fast meal and we were on our way to the next fun thing. The space itself was totally fine, but nothing to write home about. But the food was great. All four of us got different things, and we were all really happy with our meals.



Source: edinburgh.org



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C MCGONAGALL'S GIN & WHISKY EMPORIUM

~$34 FOR A FLIGHT OF 3 WHISKIES 25 mL EACH

We stumbled upon this lovely whisky bar named after William McGonagall. Iain told us how he is Scotland's most famous terrible poet, and read us the poem below. J.K. Rowling named the character, Professor Minerva McGonagall, after this same poet. William McGonagall is buried in Greyfriars Kirkyard in the center of Edinburgh, where many other names from Harry Potter are derived.

This bar was nice! We appreciated the curated whisky flights. There are probably dozens of similar bars on the Royal Mile, but we enjoyed this one.


Source: facebook.com/McGonagallsEd



Source: edinburgh.org


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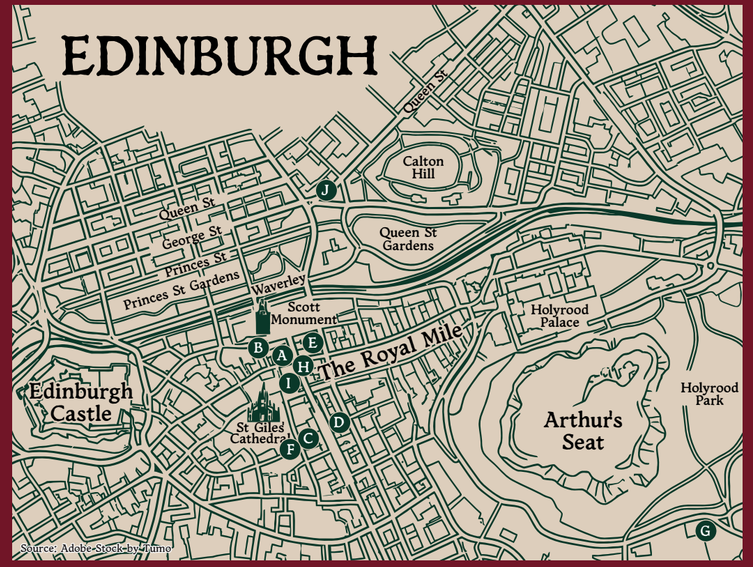
Beautiful Railway Bridge of the Silv'ry Tay!
Alas! I am very sorry to say
That ninety lives have been taken away
On the last sabbath day of 1879
Which will be remember'd for a very long time.

Oh! Ill-fated bridge of the silv'ry Tay,
I now must conclude my lay
By telling the world fearlessly without the least dismay,
That your central girders would not have given way,
At least many sensible men do say,
Had they been supported on each side with buttresses
At least many sensible men confesses,
For the stronger we our houses do build,
The less chance we have of being killed.
-William McGonagall, 1880

[Note that 75 people died, not 90.]


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Source: Adobe Stock by Tumo



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Source: instagram.com/outoftentravel



Source: thealternativeguide.com

(D) THE BANSHEE LABYRINTH

~$10 FOR A COCKTAIL ON DRAFT

This is the greatest bar I've ever been to. It's a maze of underground rooms, and you don't know what you will find around the next corner! There are additional hidden bars, pool rooms, karaoke bars, cinema rooms, and who knows what else! Exploring was the best part. Honestly, this space is nearly as cool as the Mary King's Close, but getting to explore it yourselves with your drink of choice in hand was so much more fun!

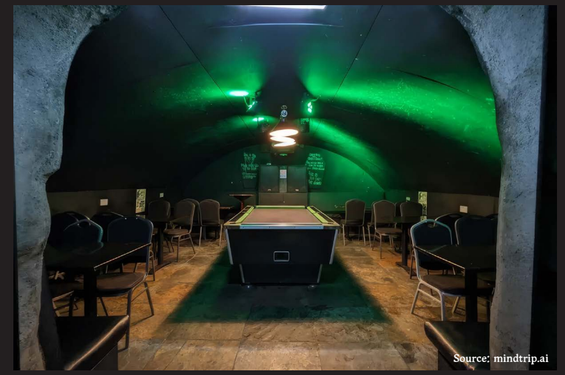


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We got sucked into watching Superman, the Movie (1978) with Christopher Reeve in the cinema alcove.



Source: mindtrip.ai

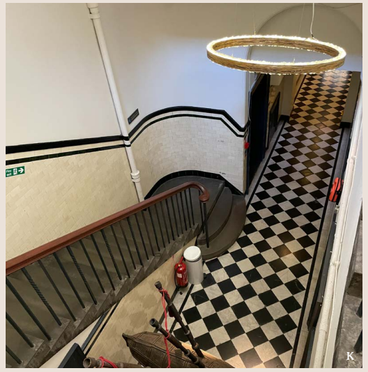


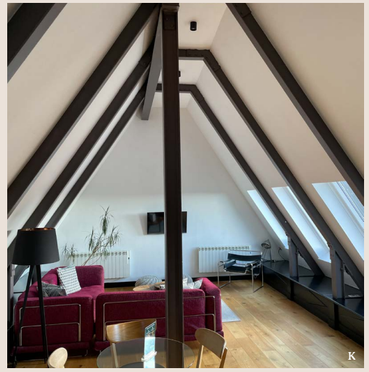
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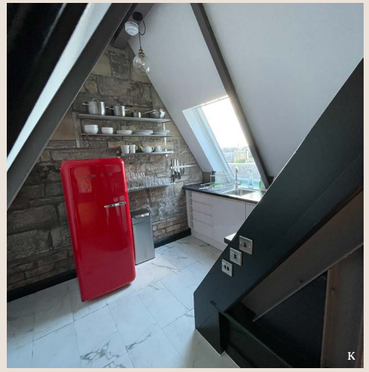
E THE LINTON COLLECTION, ATTIC FLAT

$1,177 FOR 3 NIGHTS

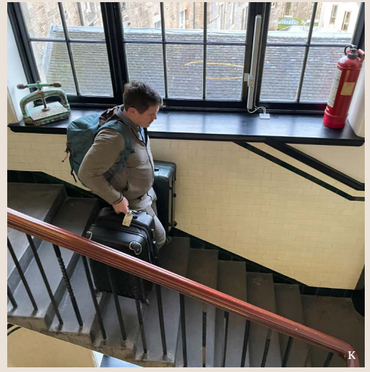
These vacation-rental suites are located right on the Royal Mile on North Bridge, connected to the same building as the famous Scotsman Hotel. For this location, our room was quite a good price. That is because it was up 95 steps, over 5 stories. The last flight was the narrowest spiral stairs possible. Maneuvering our hard-sided luggage up there was no joke. Thankfully, they had a locker and toilet on the lower floors, so if you just needed to drop off shopping, you didn't need to hike all the way up to the top.

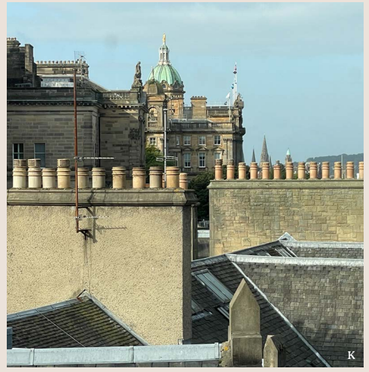




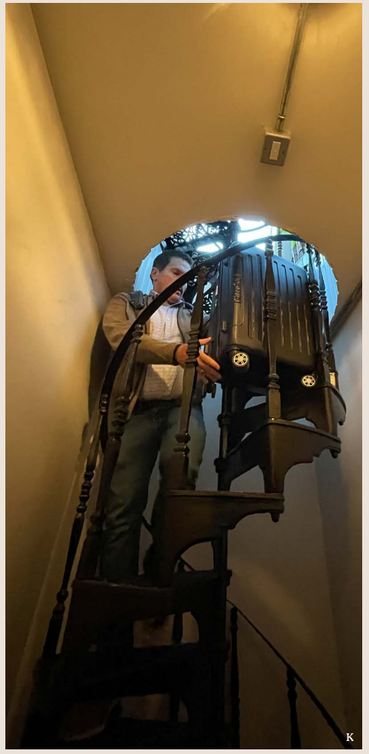


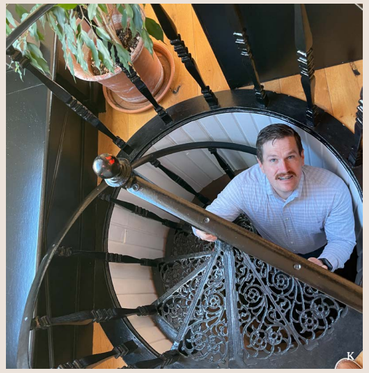


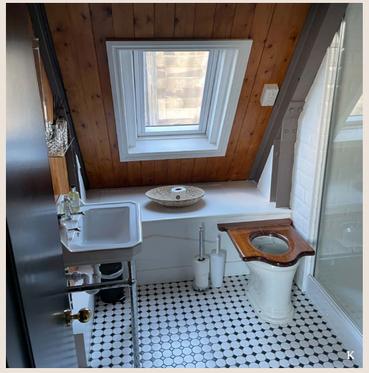












Check-in is completely on your phone, and you have to photograph ID and scan your face, and then wait for an email with your suite number.

I liked how when you enter your code in the door keypad, the French doors electronically open themselves.









Enjoying gin and tonics and salty snacks in our suite while basking in the view of Edinburgh.





The Attic Flat had a charming Twyfords 'The Deluge Adamant' water closet, with ceiling-mounted pull chain. Although this toilet was the top of the line in 1910 when it was produced, it did not actually flush well. And both Jeremy and I got a little bit of mild tummy upset, so that was too bad. It did work eventually, but it worked on a modest dilution principle instead of actually *flushing away* the waste. The amount of time we spent re-flushing the toilet is the main reason I gave the suite 4 stars instead of 5. Also, there were a bunch of pans stored in the microwave, so it was a bit tricky to use. And just four coffee pods for 3 nights.

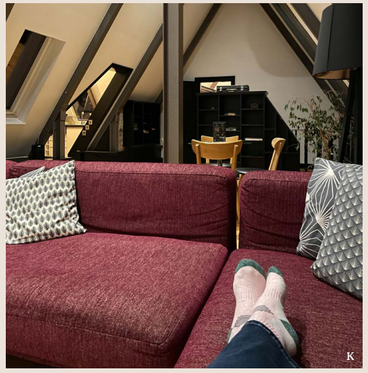


Source: thescottishsun.co.uk

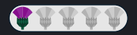
TUK TUK INDIAN STREET FOOD


$47 FOR A GENEROUS MEAL FOR 2

Due to my mild digestive upset, we ate in one night instead of going out, and Jeremy got us some takeout Indian food that was pretty good!



SCOTLAND CITY TOURS (SOMOS ESCOCIA): EDINBURGH GHOST TOUR


$106 FOR 4, BOOKED THAT MORNING

Our tour guide, Kristel, started off by telling us a lot about herself, and telling us all the irritating things that past guests had said to her over the years. We heard zero ghost stories on our tour, because Kristel said she focuses only on true, verifiable stories. However, she told us that the decorative skull on the tomb of Bloody Sir George Mackenzie was a real human skull, when we could see with our own eyes that it was a small concrete decoration. Some of the other stories didn't make total sense until I learned more later and was able to piece them together. This walking tour was 2 full hours, but we didn't walk very many places. It was mostly a standing-in-one-place tour. I would not recommend this tour, although we did get some good jokes out of it.




Source: findagrave.com

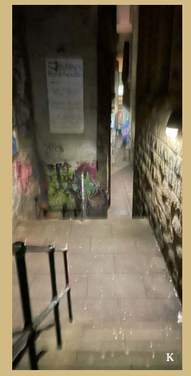
















F DIVINO ITALIAN

~$35 per entrée

We had a wonderful dinner at an Italian restaurant under the George IV Bridge. We wound up seated right next to a live music duet playing a clarinet and piano, which was really nice, but then you feel guilty talking with your friends over the music. This was another place with a very interesting journey to the bathrooms, which solidified my belief that all Edinburgh buildings connect to mysterious, ancient tunnels.







ARTHUR'S SEAT

Free

This was one of Jeremy's favorite activities. Arthur's Seat is an ancient extinct volcano that we walked to from our Attic Flat and then hiked up. It's about 800 ft of pretty steep elevation gain, so about 60 stories. It's a very popular climb for tourists in Edinburgh.












Start of Climb
E
Summit
G
Source: Google Earth





It wasn't a particularly windy day, but it was still very windy at the top of Arthur's Seat!



Scotland has the nicest grass I've ever seen. On the way down, we walked on a particularly soft section of long, dense grass that we lay down on for a while. We heard the calls of a ring-necked pheasant nearby.


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Passing Samaritan


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Ⓖ THE SHEEP HEID

$35 FOR 3-COURSE LUNCH, OR ~$27 FOR AN ENTRÉE

This public house is perhaps the oldest surviving licensed premises in Edinburgh, if not Scotland. There has supposedly been an inn on this site since 1360, with many building updates along the way, although it's hard to prove.

We were lucky to get a table in the bar area even though we had no reservation. Larger groups who came in later than us were having to eat at the picnic tables in the courtyard, and we heard the hostess having to turn away others. It was fun to sit in the bar and take in the activity and decor. Although there is also seated dining, a lot of the space is order-at-the-bar. The food was good and hit the spot after our hike!

This was my favorite part of the hike up Arthur's Seat!


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The Sheep Heid has what might be the last skittles-style bowling alley, built around 1880.

DUDDINGSTON KIRKYARD

While we were waiting for our Uber to take us back to our Attic Flat from the Sheep Heid, we wandered around the atmospheric cemetery at Duddingston Kirk.















MERCAT HISTORIC UNDERGROUND VAULTS TOUR

PREBOOKED: $36 PER PERSON

This is the underground Edinburgh tour that you do not want to miss. The tour starts out on the street, in order to give you the context of why these structures were built, and then quickly moves into the underground spaces.

Our guide was great. In contrast to the Somos Escocia Ghost Tour we took earlier, these stories were told efficiently and made sense. We got to see many vault rooms. In contrast to the Mary King's Close Tour, they were lit more appropriately. (Not like an office space!)

These particular vaults were discovered in the 1980s by a former rugby player doing renovations in the basement of a bar. But the entire area under the South Bridge is held up by man-made vault spaces. Some have been used for storage by the business above for decades, and some more vaults are probably still filled with debris and yet to be re-discovered!









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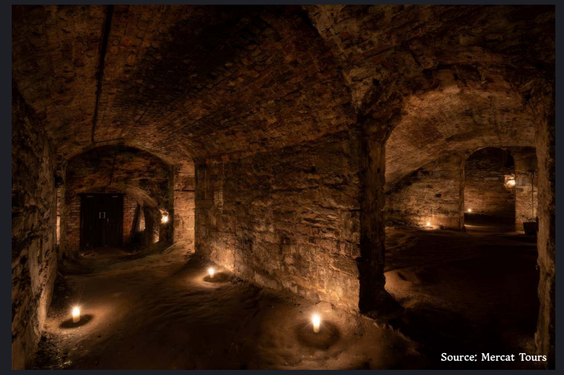
Source: Mercat Tours



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Source: Mercat Tours



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MÒR BAKE-HOUSE

There are a lot of these little grab-and-go chain bakeries around the city. The food was pretty good!







ROYAL BOTANIC GARDEN EDINBURGH

Free, donations encouraged

We walked from our Attic Flat to the botanical gardens, which was an interesting walk through the city.

Unfortunately, the famous greenhouses of the garden were closed for renovation during our visit. We walked around the outdoor gardens, which didn't have many flowers this time of year, but did have some really cool vegetation. I really liked the design of the rock garden, with lots of little hills.



Gunnera, or giant rhubarb, but it is not a rhubarb.



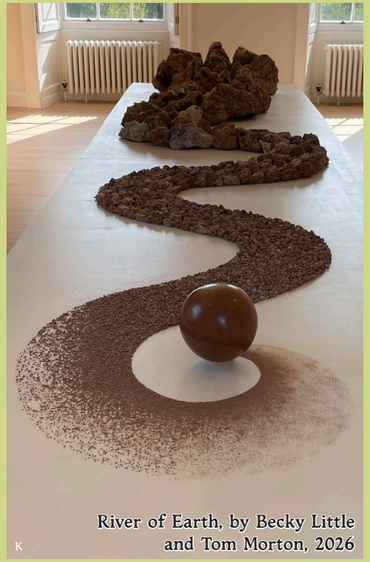
Female moorhen



Green vegetable sheep, *Raoulia haastii*



Source: atlasobscura.com



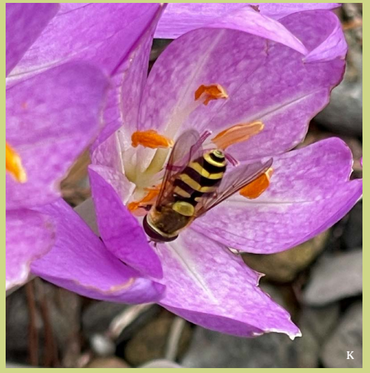
River of Earth, by Becky Little and Tom Morton, 2026

There is a 1770s estate home on the Botanical Garden's property that houses art shows with a natural theme. I was really impressed by the art we saw there.

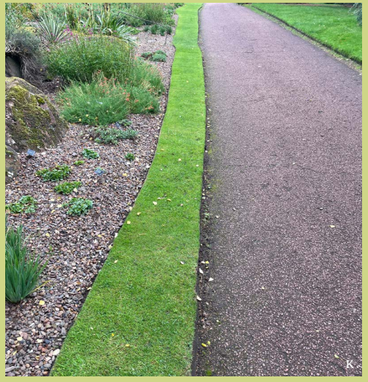




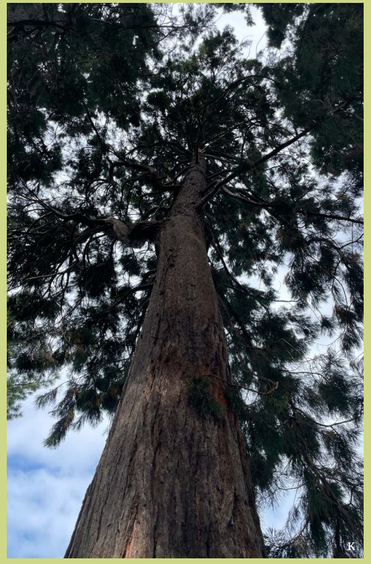


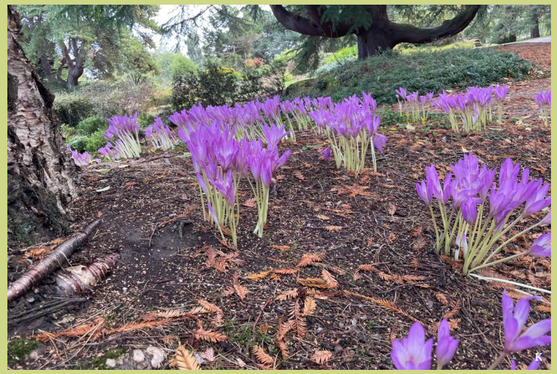


Syrphid fly, also called a hover fly.

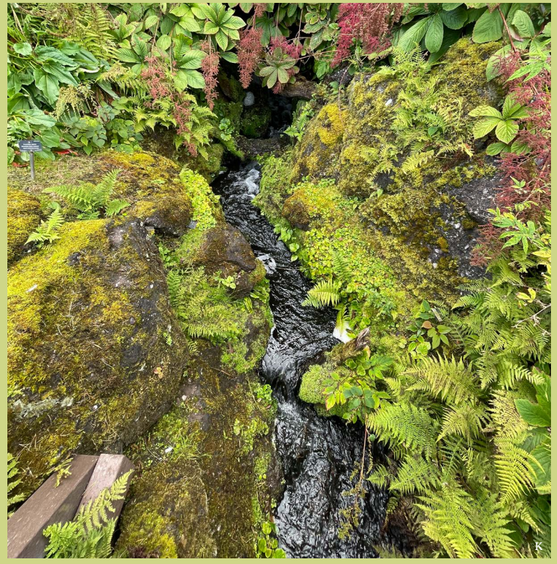


Grass grows so well in Scotland. Sometimes it is trimmed so precisely and carefully.





One of the few flowers we did see was Colchicum, or autumn crocus (but it is not a crocus), or “naked ladies” because the flowers come up bare in the fall. The green parts come up in the spring and feed the roots before dying back. The flowers come up later in the autumn.





THE ROYAL MILE

The heart of the touristy downtown of Edinburgh is the Royal Mile, a largely pedestrian area packed with shops, restaurants, bars, and hotels. Our Attic Flat was located in this general area, as were many of the sites we visited.

It connects the castle to the palace, and is roughly a mile long.



It's a very popular and crowded area, but you can see why. The buildings are beautiful, and there is lots to see and do. Even with the crowds of September, it wasn't too hard to find a place for a bite to eat or a drink because there were so many establishments ready to serve the crowds.



The whole area is very three-dimensional. The first story on one side of a building might be the 4th floor on the other side. There are outdoor stairs and little ramped alleyways everywhere.



There were a lot of street entertainers, and they all seemed to be American.



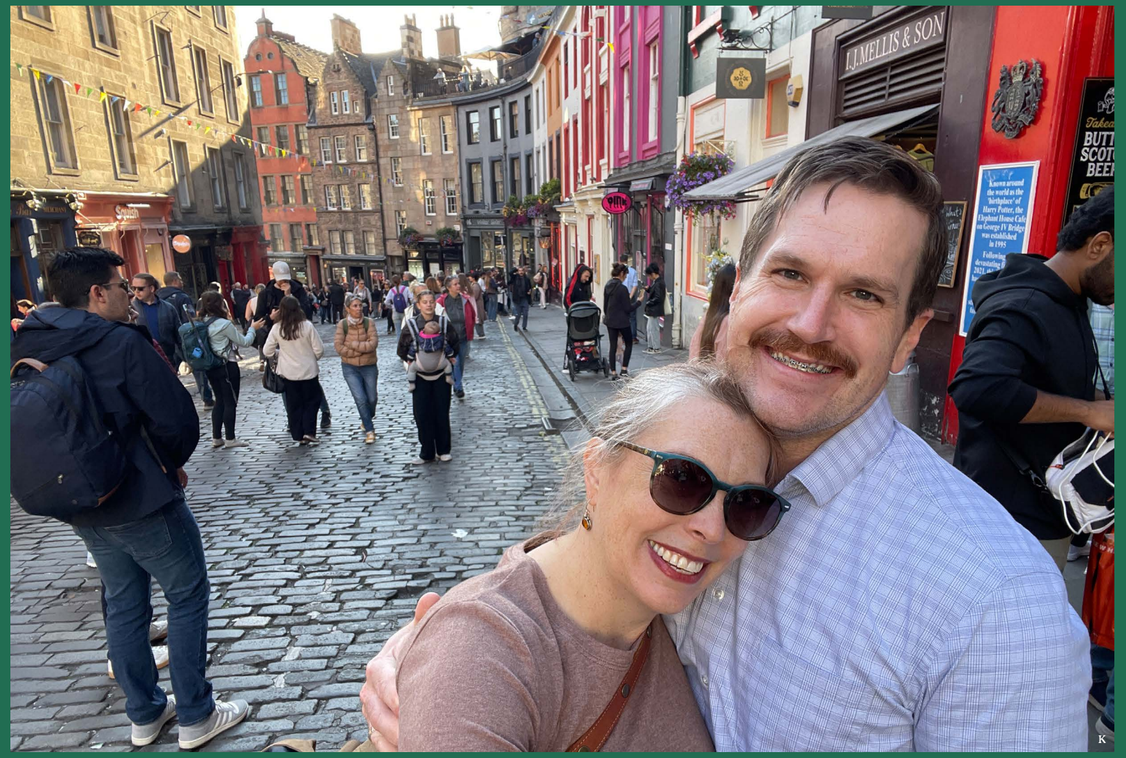
Cockburn Street



Source: Adobe Stock by MuzzyCo

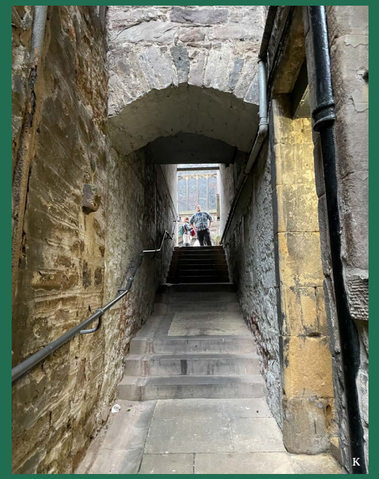


There are 250+ of these little alleyways in Edinburgh, many coming off the High Street. They are each called a 'Close' because historically they would have had gates at either end and they would 'close' them off at night to keep the homes with doors inside safe from prowlers. (Although most are kept open today.) Each close has a name, just like a street. Little alleyways that didn't have gates on them were called Wynds.



Victoria Street: This street is near the Royal Mile and is said to be the street that inspired Diagon Alley in Harry Potter.

A funny sentiment we heard multiple times from Edinburgh residents was that J.K. Rowling's creativity was really just the real-life beauty of Edinburgh and Scotland, and that she gets too much credit for 'inventing' the world of Harry Potter.





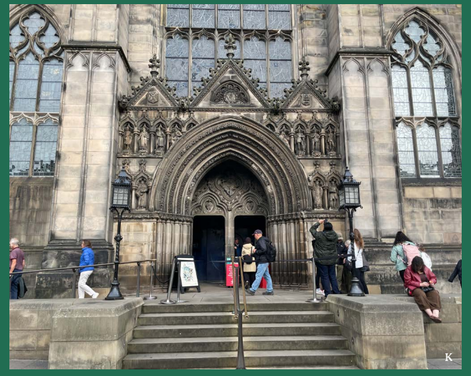


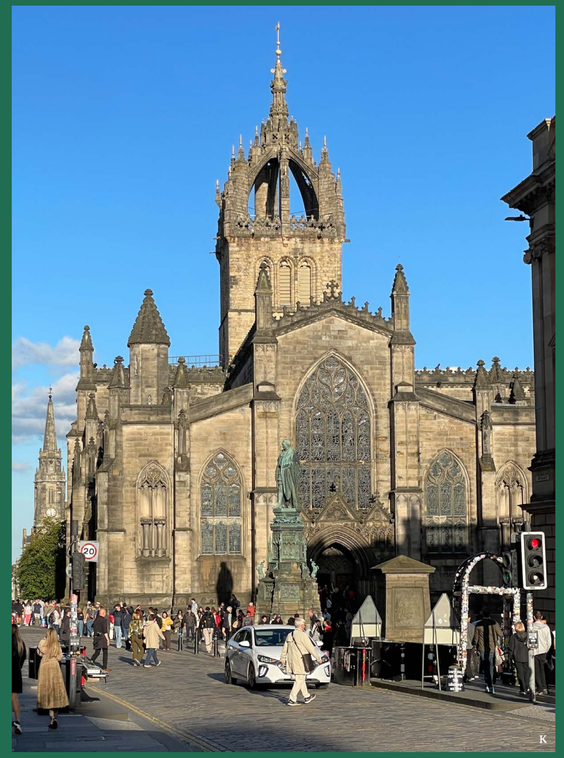


On the fenced-off hillside leading up to Edinburgh Castle, there were >30 European rabbits. This is the species that was domesticated to make the pet rabbit. To us, these wild rabbits looked so different from eastern cottontails. Their round bodies and thick fur looked just like pets! It was fun to be able to see them so close up. This warren was very used to tourists photographing them through the fence.



Tolbooth Kirk, built in 1842. No longer an active church, but has a number of mixed uses, including a ticket office and café.





St Giles' Cathedral, exterior and entrance. Built in the 1300s.



FILLING STATION

We just stopped in here to kill a few minutes before a tour time one day. There was no wait at all and it was totally fine! I think maybe it was supposed to be American-themed.



THE ENSIGN EWART

Cozy old bar, dating back to 1680. The current name is in honor of a soldier of the Royal Scots Greys who captured a gold eagle statue carried into battle at Waterloo by Napoleon's troops.



Source: CMP & Scottish Historic Building Trust

TRON KIRK MARKET

We visited this handmade crafts market a couple of times, since it was right on the Royal Mile High Street and near our hotel. Once a church ('kirk'), it's now filled with individual craft sellers. It's a beautiful old building, and fun to mill around.



I got a pair of earrings for ~$40 made by Krzysztof Borkowski





Source: Adobe Stock by Neil

EDINBURGH CASTLE



Prepurchased: $50 per person for Flex Ticket

Tickets for the castle were indeed sold out on the day we went, so it's good to have advance tickets if you want to go. Regular tickets are $30 and have a specific entry time. We paid more for the flex tickets that are good for any day/time in a 7-day window.

Even though entry is limited to people with tickets, it was still very crowded at the castle. The outdoor areas were tolerable, but the line to go inside and see the Scottish crown jewels was over a 40 min wait, so we didn't do that.



J



K



K

Edinburgh Castle is on top of a high rock at the center of the city.

There were grandstands and a stadium set up for the annual Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo, a series of military music and precision display performances held each August. This unsightly temporary stadium is here such a high proportion of the year that Iain said there is a proposal to build permanent stone stands that would look nicer.



K





















~1570 needlework
by Mary, Queen
of Scots

We found a less-crowded gap in the line to see the prisoner-of-war holding areas as well as the military prisons.

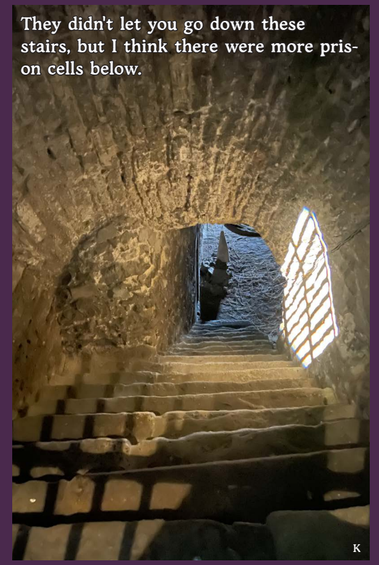
We also visited the Scottish National War Memorial on the castle site, which had cool stained glass, but doesn't allow photos.



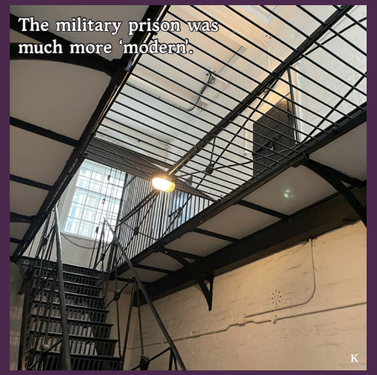


Some of the buildings on the castle site date back to the 1100s, and are built into the rock of the hill itself.





They didn't let you go down these stairs, but I think there were more prison cells below.



The military prison was much more 'modern'.



① WHISKY TASTING AT THE LOST CLOSE

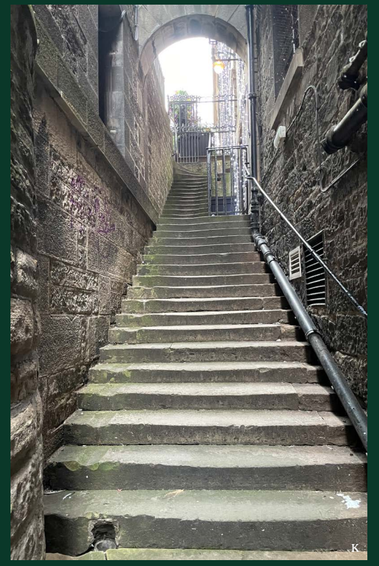
PREBOOKED: $53 PER PERSON

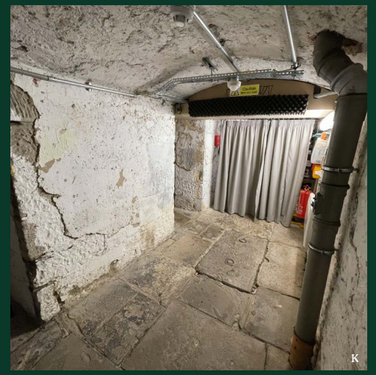
We had a whisky tasting and storytelling in the basement of a once-jail, now hostel. A smaller room next to the room we were in was discovered in 2019 when remodelers damaged a wall and found a hidden staircase. (A common story in Edinburgh!) There was another, smaller whisky tasting going on in that room.



Our guide, Ash, was a delightful young woman who walked us through 4 whisky tastings with interesting stories about the history of each distillery. It was fun to sit back, relax, and enjoy the show in a cool ambiance.

We also tasted some gin at a liquor store on the High St (of which there are many dozens), where they do impromptu personalized liquor tastings with the expectation that you will buy some at the end. That was also fun, but this was more storytelling and relaxing.

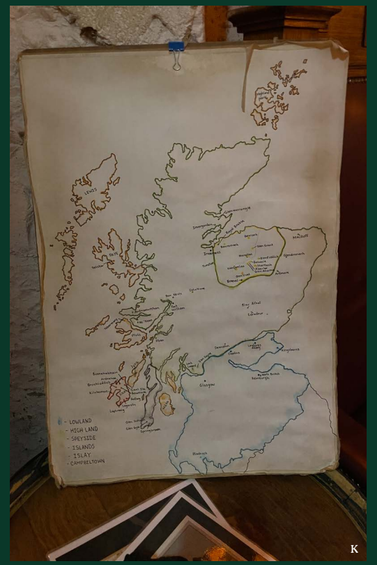









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WHISKY REGIONS OF SCOTLAND:

Lowland: Lindores Abbey (a newish distillery built on the site of the oldest recorded distillery in Scotland)

Speyside: The Glenlivet (our guide's home, and her favorite whisky)

Highland: Ardnamurchan

Islay: Kilchoman

Campbeltown: Not included in this tasting. Very hard hit by Prohibition in the US, with 17 distillery closures in the 1920s

They were all good, and hearing about the rich histories of the distilleries was even more fun. I think the second one was our favorite.



K


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J RAMEN RAMEN

$20 FOR A BIG BOWL

Jeremy found this place online and it was so good! We had to wait outside in line for less than 10 minutes for a table, but it was totally worth it. The **Black Garlic Tonkotsu** broth was to die for. So good. The service was meh.

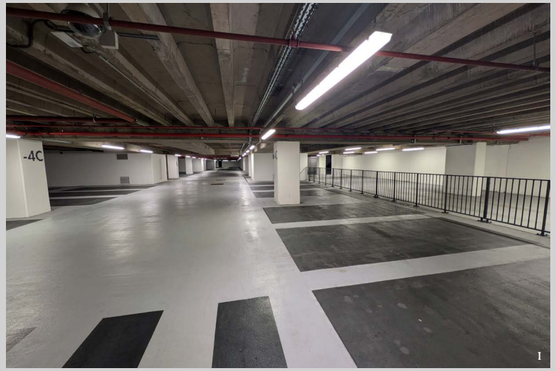
CUPP

We saw a poster for ice cream sandwiches at a counter-order place across the street. However, it was terrible! Instead of cookies, they used soft hamburger buns! 😝

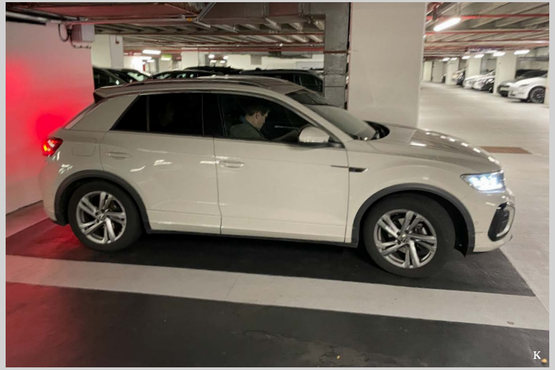

K

DRIVALIA





Liminal spaces of the parking garage.



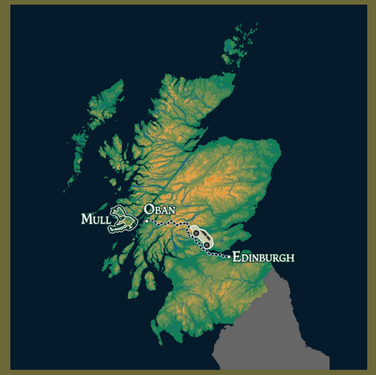
DRIVALIA RENTAL CAR

$480 INCLUDING EASY-CLAIM INSURANCE

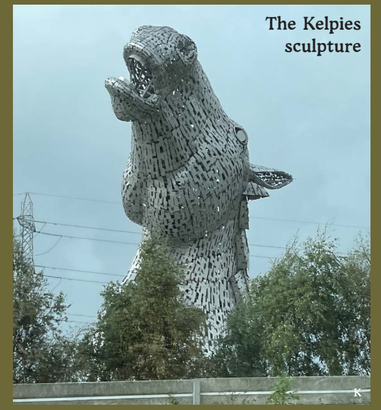
From our Attic Flat, we were able to walk over to the rental car location. However, finding the exact location where we were supposed to pick up the car was very difficult. The initial place we went was locked unless you had a code to scan. Part of the written instructions said, 'turn around, it's behind you,' but we didn't know which way we were supposed to face to have it behind us! We did eventually find it, as did Becca and Iain, who met us in the garage.

Unfortunately, we had to wait over an hour to pick up the car. There was only one customer in front of us, but the process was just that slow.

But the car itself was great! It was a VW T-Roc.



Source: Adobe Stock by bogdanserban



The Kelpies sculpture



First of many rainbows!

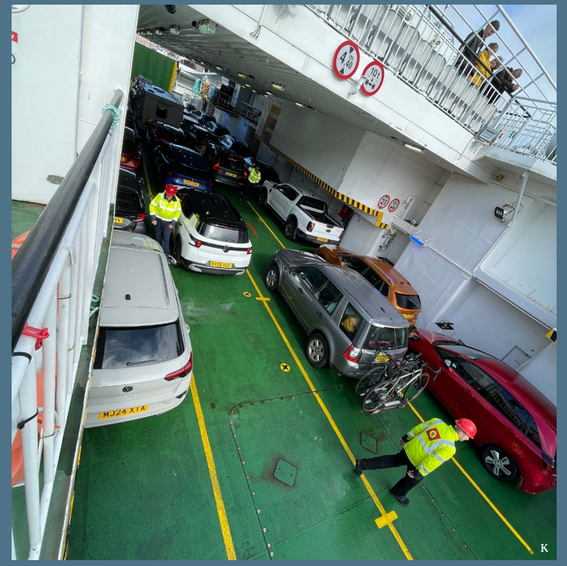
It was a ~3.5-hour drive from Edinburgh to Oban. You have to buy ferry tickets in advance, so we had a time when we had to arrive. The long wait at Drivalia cut into our leisure time, but we still had plenty of time for the drive.





Oban





CALEDONIAN MACBRAYNE FERRY

$50 FOR 1 CAR + 4 PEOPLE, OUTBOUND

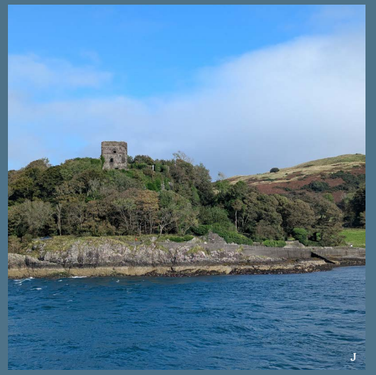
The ferry service was very professional and efficient. If you are bringing a car, be sure to buy your tickets 6 months in advance because the most popular times of day fill up quickly.







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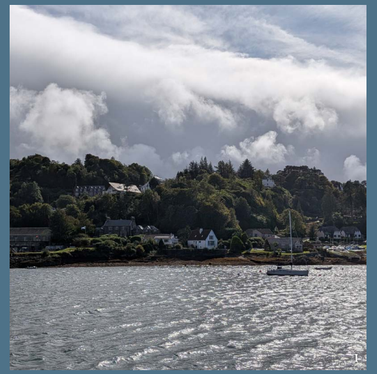
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SCOTTISH FOOD



Source: britishgram.com

IRN-BRU

A very sweet soda drink originally introduced in 1901. That level of sugar is now taxed, so the new recipe is lower in sugar. But they also sell a more expensive, 1901 edition with full sugar. It tastes similar to cream soda.



Source: Adobe Stock by sue

TUNNOCK'S TEACAKES

These are SO good! Tunnock's is an iconic Scottish brand, and the teacakes have been a favorite since the 1950s.



Source: gggiraffe.blogspot.com

HAGGIS

A ground meat containing sheep's organs, onion, oatmeal, suet, seasonings, cooked inside the animal's stomach. Tastes like ground lamb!



K

BLACK PUDDING

Blood sausage made from pork or beef blood, mixed with suet and a high proportion of cereal, like oatmeal. It's very good, like a finer grain meatloaf.



Source: coleandmason.com

CULLEN SKINK

Scottish soup made of smoked haddock, potatoes, and onions. Tastes like a slightly thinner chowder!



K

BUTTERY

Iain made sure that we tried these flaky, buttery rolls from his home city of Aberdeen, Scotland. They are like a flat croissant, so you can stick them in a toaster. They used to contain so much lard that they were essentially waterproof so sailors could carry a hearty meal.


I

GLENGORM CASTLE

$1,176 for 2-bedroom Tower Apartment for 2 nights

After our ferry landed in Craignure, we had over an hour drive to our accommodations. This was such an interesting and unexpected place to stay! We had a blast!


B

Glengorm Castle was built in 1860 by James Forsyth, who cruelly cleared the local crofting families off the ~5,000 acres of land. Legend says an old woman suggested the name Glengorm, which means "blue glen," and Forsyth didn't realize she meant the blue smoke from the burning crofts. James Forsyth died in an accident before the castle was finished.

It was briefly owned by a logging company that clear-cut the acreage of every tree and then immediately resold it.

The owner of the Carr water cracker company owned it in the 1960s. He's the one who added electricity.

The current family has owned it since 1970, but is trying to sell it for over $12 million.


K


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There was a shared entryway that I think was primarily used by one of the other rental apartments, or possibly the homeowners themselves.


I


K


K


K

The shared entryway had fragrant fresh lilies every day that we were there. Up the main staircase was our private Tower Apartment.



K



Our bedrooms were nice, and we had a laundry unit as well, which we used to refresh our clothes supply.



B

Our apartment included 3 sitting rooms!

We cycled through all of them, eating a charcuterie board of snacks for dinner, and playing Telestrations, which is like a game of telephone and Pictionary mixed together. It was a great night!



I

The best part of our Tower Apartment was this spiral staircase at the end of a hallway that spiraled up, up, up to more seating areas.



B



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The yellow room had custom-printed upholstery fabric.



K



B

The stairs kept going up, leading to a rooftop terrace with views in every direction!



K



I



K



I



B



K

We made some gin and tonics and walked down to the back lawn to watch the sun set over the grounds. It was magical.



K



K



K

We brought down carrots for the warren of rabbits we had seen from our room windows. It took the rabbits a couple of days to figure it out, but then all the carrots disappeared!



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GLENGORM COFFEE SHOP

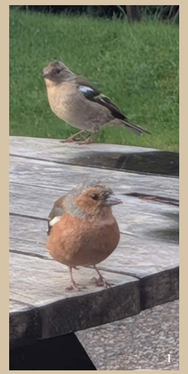
~$16 PER ENTRÉE

We strolled over to this delightful café on the castle grounds. We had some really delicious local food. Highly recommend!



K

Female and male common chaffinches



I



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B





GLENGORM CASTLE GROUNDS HIKE

After breakfast, the four of us wandered in the direction of the coast. It was so beautiful that it turned into more of a hike than we planned because we kept glimpsing more to see! But thankfully we could head back to the castle as soon as we got tired and thirsty.







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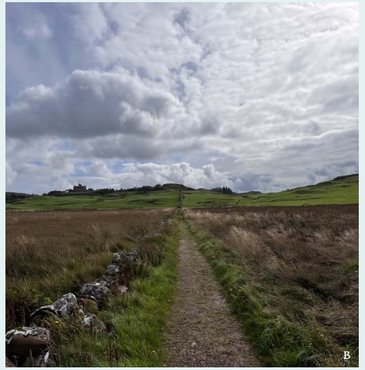


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Bell heather

K



B



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Giant cow patties everywhere!











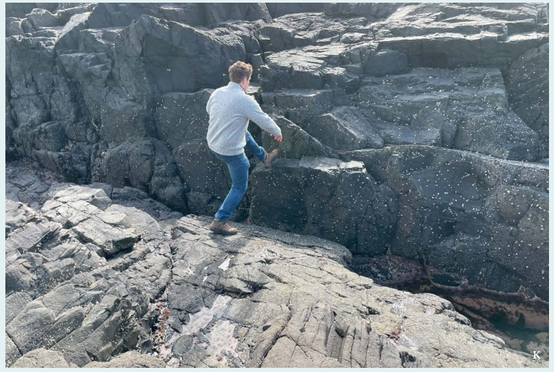


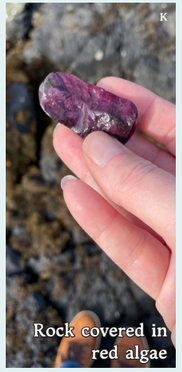




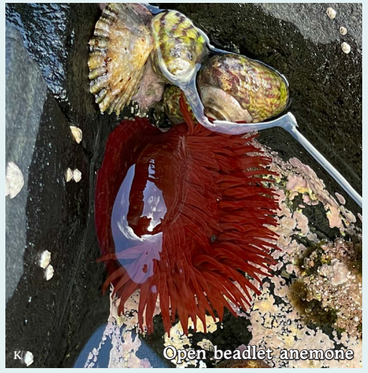
I hiked around the outer edge of the Glengorm Bathing Pool. The bathing pool is a man-made tidal rock pool made in the early 1900s to provide a sheltered place to swim. The public can hike out to swim there.

The pool is fed by a little waterfall.

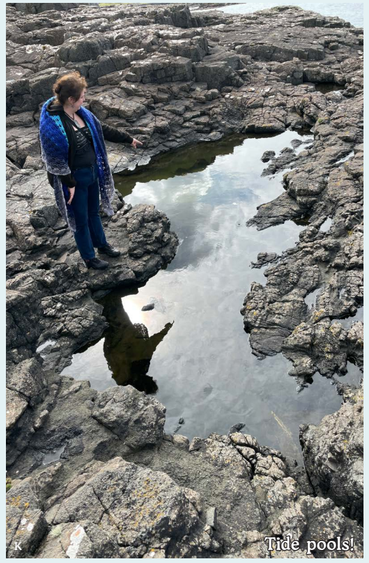








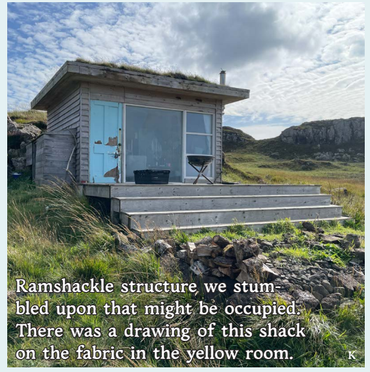












Ramshackle structure we stumbled upon that might be occupied. There was a drawing of this shack on the fabric in the yellow room. K





Common starfish K



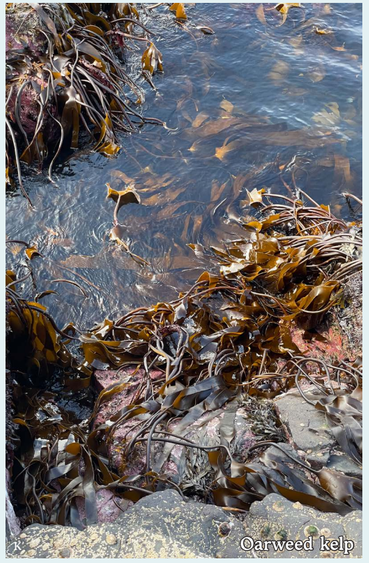
Dead seal



K Partly closed dahlia anemone



K Closed beadlet anemone



K Oarweed kelp



J Common limpets with seaweed hats because they can't graze on themselves



K Thongweed buttons



K

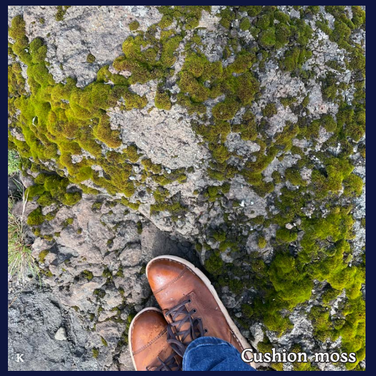


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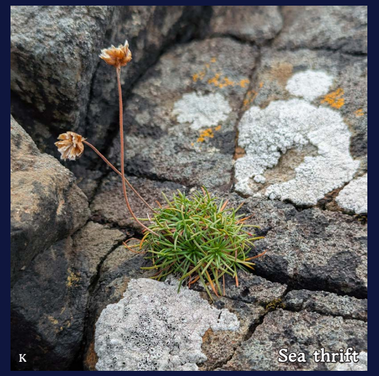
J

Common toad



K

Cushion moss



K

Sea thrift



J

MACGOCHANS

~$29 PER ENTRÉE

The food was perfectly good here, and it was decorated nicely, but it totally lacked heart or care. The upper floor had two servers who stood there twiddling their thumbs and seeming bored while you tried to get their attention. But I had langoustines for the second time, and they are really good. As far as I can tell, you mainly just eat the tail part, like a large shrimp. There is only a tiny amount of meat in the thin claws.



Source: saltverk.com







TOBERMORY

This is the largest town on Mull, but it's still quite small. The main street along the water has gift and art shops, with a few restaurants. There are 2 small grocery stores, the Co-op being the most useful of the two.


The 3rd church converted into a craft market or café we saw in Scotland


Iain got a lovely blanket here at The Gallery Bar and Restaurant









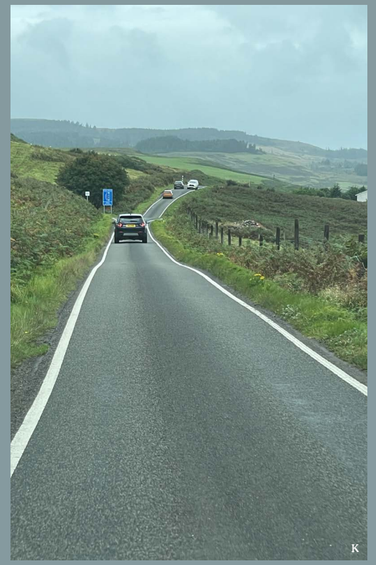
DRIVING ON MULL

Jeremy did an amazing job of driving around Mull. Nearly all the roads were ~7 ft wide, and yet 2-way! And there are hills and twists and turns everywhere, so you can't see oncoming traffic until it's right in front of you.

So, it was a bit stressful. We didn't turn on the radio, and all tried to look ahead to help warn Jeremy of oncoming cars.

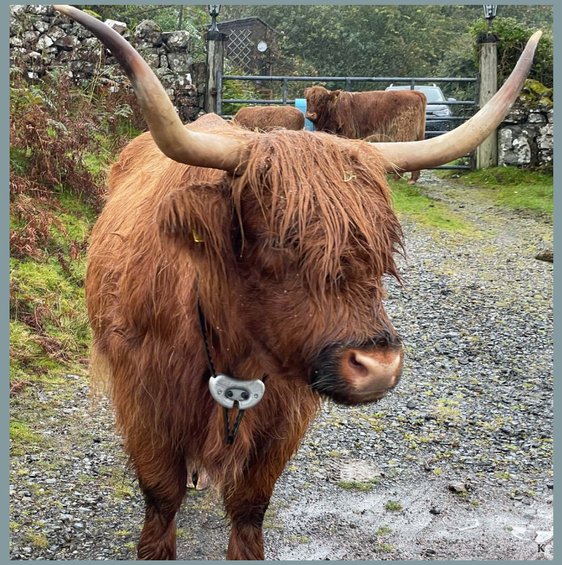


Periodically, there would be a widening of the road called a passing place. We would have to reverse (without a backup camera) and go off to the side of the passing place, and flash the brights to say that we are ready for the oncoming car to come. From this, you might be thinking that oncoming traffic is rare. No, we had to stop and do this constantly.









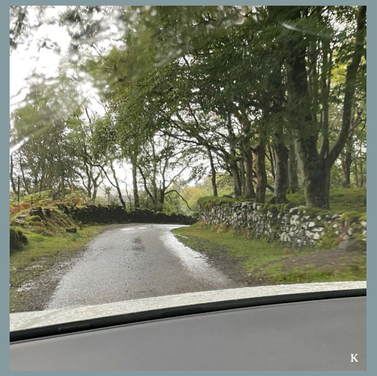


And, of course, there are animals wandering around the roads as well.



Of course, it was also really beautiful, and we were having fun.











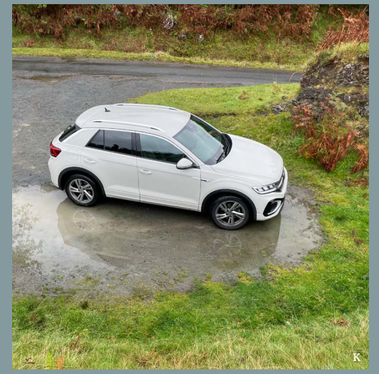




Driving on Mull is so crazy that it's an international thrill sport. The Mull Rally is a legendary car race held annually in October. Unlike Jeremy's challenge, the roads close for the official race so there isn't any oncoming traffic.

We stumbled upon this memorial marker for a racer who died here, and she is not the only rally car racer to die attempting the narrow, twisty, hilly roads of Mull.













EAS FORS WATERFALL

If you find yourself driving around this side of Mull, you have to stop by and enjoy this waterfall. It's right next to a little parking lot, and a lovely quick stop.











Iain and I insisted on climbing over the tree we were probably supposed to stay behind in order to climb on the slippery rocks.













ULVA FERRY

To get to the Isle of Ulva, you take a 2-minute ferry ride on a tiny boat. It's $10 per person for a round trip, and the ferryman takes credit cards.

You call the ferry by sliding a piece of wood to reveal the red square, and the ferryman sees it and comes over to get you.



THE BOATHOUSE

~$24 PER ENTRÉE

This place was great! I got the smoked fish platter with langoustines, and it was fantastic. The whole place was charming and genuine, with high-quality local foods. You order at the counter, and then they bring you your food upstairs, or outside. Highly recommend!









WALKING AROUND ULVA

We thought we would walk around Ulva for less than an hour. There was a cave that Google Maps said was a 24 min walk away. However, Google didn't really know where the paths were, and there were no signs. Sometimes there would be a random arrow with no lettering, which is worse than nothing.

So we got pretty lost, and right around then, the rain *really* picked up. What's worse, the ferry stops running, and after that you're stuck on the desolate island all night. So there is a threat of doom. The ground got so wet and muddy. We all had waterproof shoes, but the conditions were too much and most of us had wet feet. Our jeans were wet flaps we had to fight through with each step.

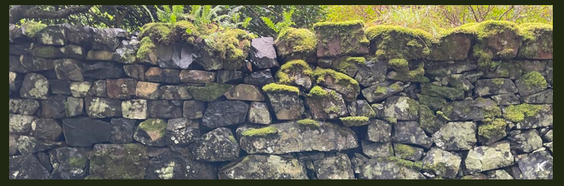
Ulva was privately owned until 2018, when the community banded together and bought it, which is pretty cool.











There is a garden that visitors are invited into where they are using old slate roof shingles as weed control cover.











This was a pretty low spot in the hike. At this point we were figuring out that we had gone a very long way out of our way, when we had thought we were headed back to the ferry.

We sent Jeremy over the hillside to check what was ahead, and he did find a connection back to the main path. We were OK, and we made it back together!









Near the ferry port on Ulva is 'Sheila's Cottage.' This was a little museum, but the roof has become unsafe so it's closed until they can raise enough money to repair the thatch roof.





The ferry ride back through the rain was a lot less joyful than our outbound trip, but at least we were headed back to the dry, heated car!



Our shoes and jackets were *very wet*! Becca and Iain found that there are hidden hair dryers in the Island Pods, so we used those. We also used the heated towel rack to try to dry our coats.



B

ISLAND PODS

$554 PER POD FOR 2 NIGHTS

We enjoyed these cute miniature homes! It was fun to each have our own cabins next to each other. And they were still large enough for the four of us to have dinner together. This location is within a 30-min drive of Turus Mara port, but not much else. It's only 20 min away from Salen, where there is a Spar convenience store and one *(just one)* restaurant that serves dinner. But you could say that about most of the island. Tobermory might be the only town on Mull with 2+ restaurants. These pods had excellent water pressure and toilets, etc. And the kitchenette had everything we needed to make frozen pizzas, etc.


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TURUS MARA'S TRESHNISH ISLES WILDLIFE CRUISE & STAFFA TRIP



PREBOOKED: $93 PER PERSON,

5-HOUR TRIP

This boat trip was amazing! We had a lot of fun. It's a good idea to take a Bonine for motion sickness before this trip, even if you aren't sure you need one (thankfully, we did take Bonine). There is an enclosed indoor section of the boat, as well as outdoor sections, so you can pick where to be. You bring your own snacks and water. There is an airplane-style toilet. The Staffa part was definitely the best, so if you need to do a shorter tour, Staffa-only is an option they offer. But we were happy to cruise by the Treshnish Isles (no landing) to see the gray seals and the interesting rock formations.

It was a great boat trip, highly recommend!





Apparently Jeremy, Becca, and Iain didn't get wet enough the day before! Standing here was 100% their choice.



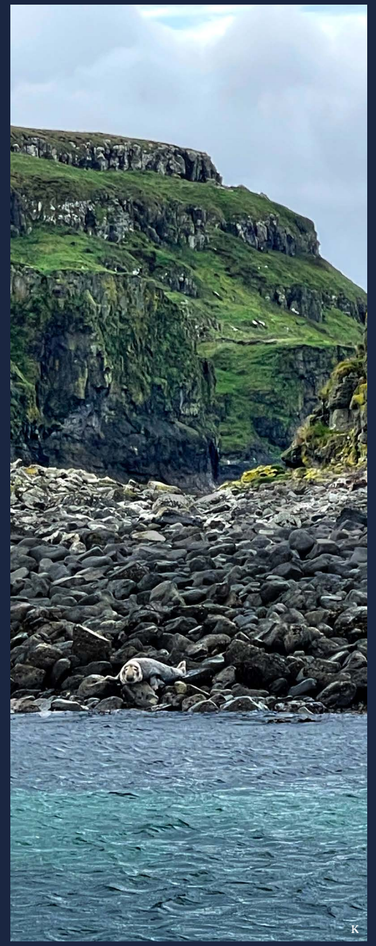














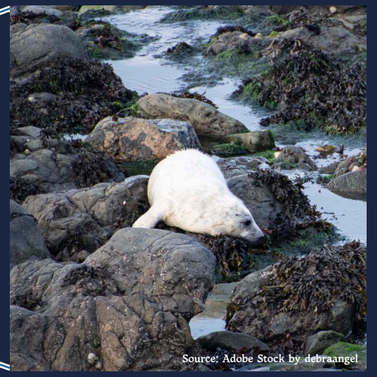
Gray
seal

Gray seals have their young in late September through December, so we got to see a few of the earliest pups!

Gray seals



K



Source: Adobe Stock by debraangel



K



K



K

Harbor seals



K



K

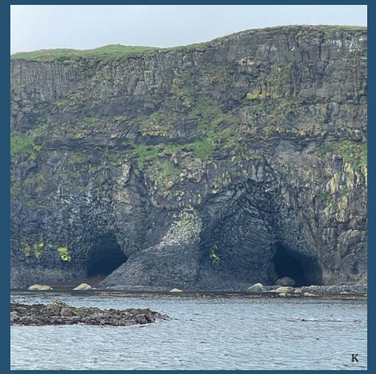
European shag, a type of cormorant. Other times of year the islands have many puffins.



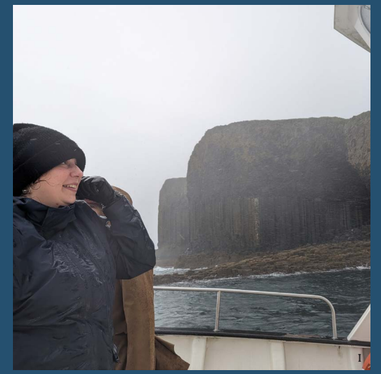
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K



K



I



J



B



I











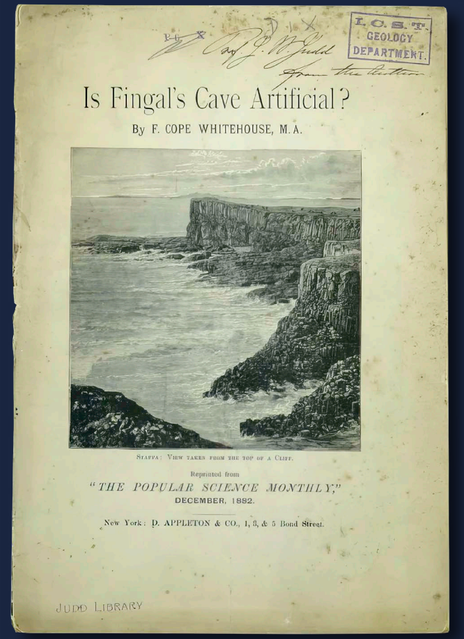






When a thick layer of lava cools slowly, it shrinks as it hardens, and cracks form to relieve the tension, just like mud cracks as mud dries out (see photo). The cracks tend to meet at roughly 120° angles, which makes a pattern of mostly six-sided shapes. As the lava keeps cooling from the top and bottom inward, the cracks grow deeper and deeper, until the whole flow is split into tall, tightly packed columns!

The title page drawing I used in this photo album (page 1) comes from an 1882 article, showing that the amazing shapes on this island have been inspiring wonder in people for a long time.



Is Fingal's Cave Artificial?

By F. COPE WHITEHOUSE, M.A.

I.C.S.T. GEOLOGY DEPARTMENT.

STAFFA: VIEW TAKEN FROM THE TOP OF A CLIFF.

Reprinted from

"THE POPULAR SCIENCE MONTHLY,"

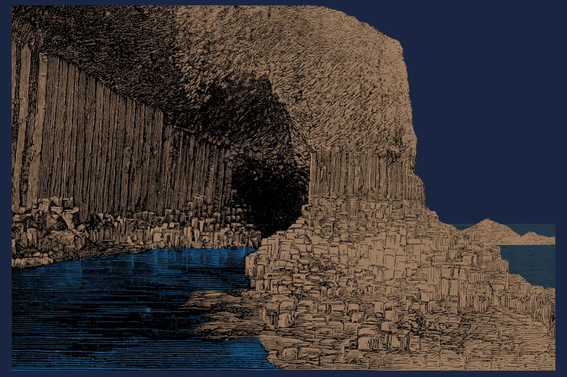
DECEMBER, 1882.

New York: D. APPLETON & CO., 1, 3, & 5 Bond Street.

JUDD LIBRARY

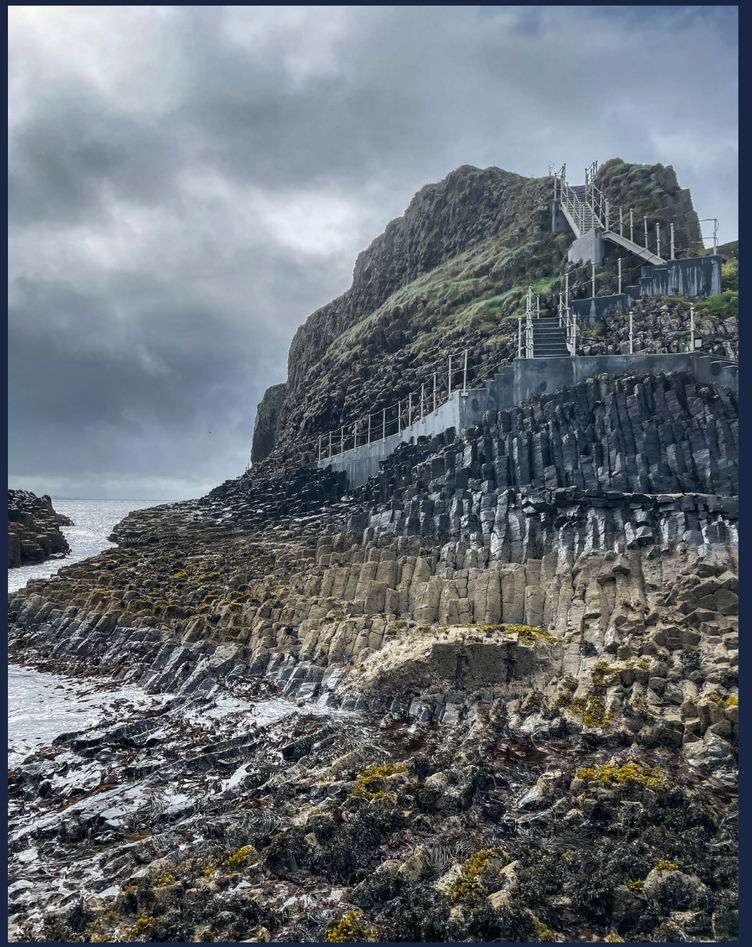


Source: "Dried Mud" by B Smith, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0



Source: F. Cope Whitehouse, "Is Fingal's Cave Artificial?", The Popular Science Monthly, 1882

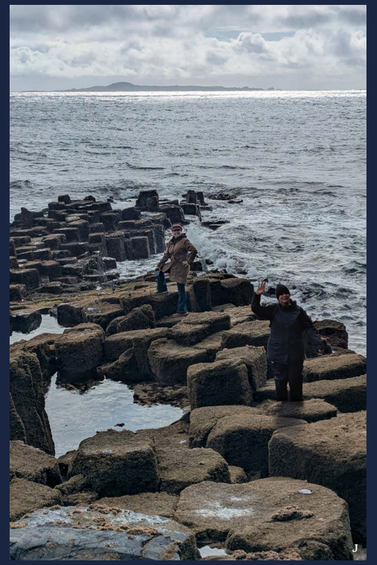


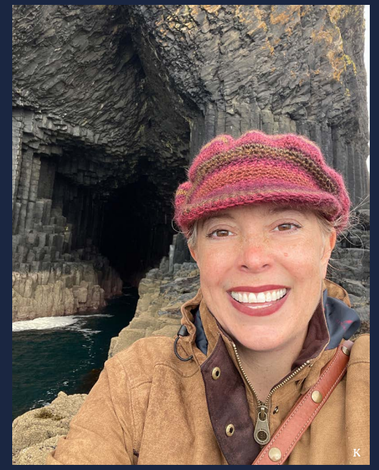


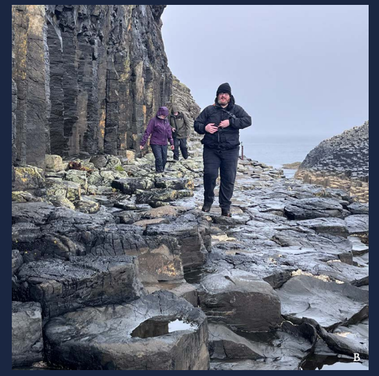


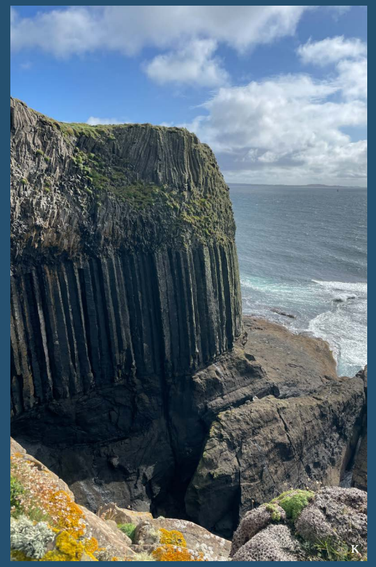






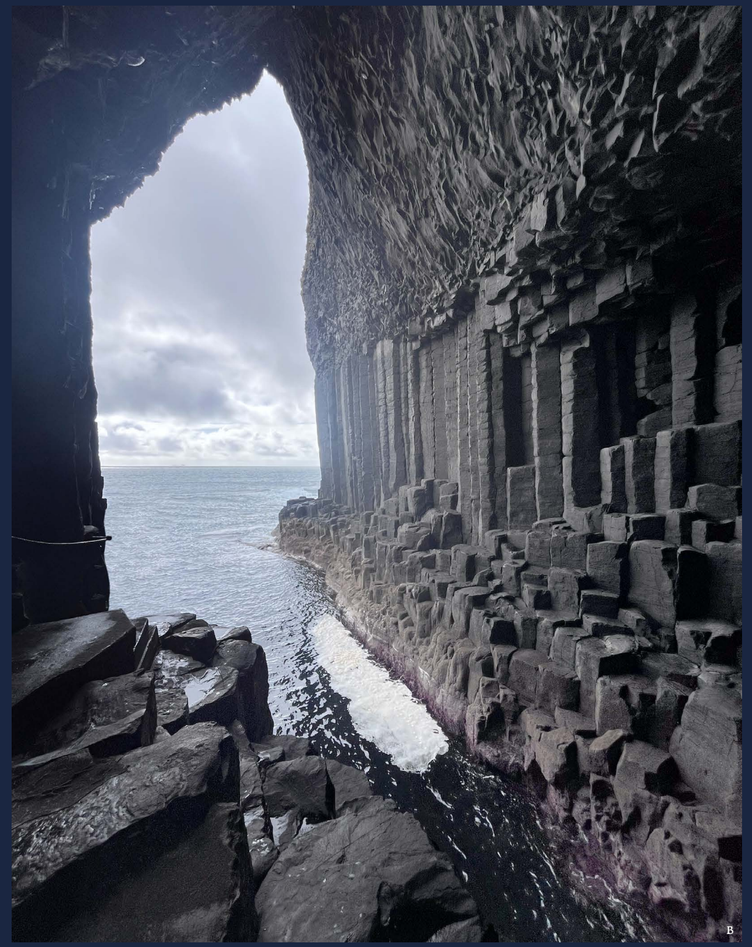








Fingal's Cave on the island of Staffa





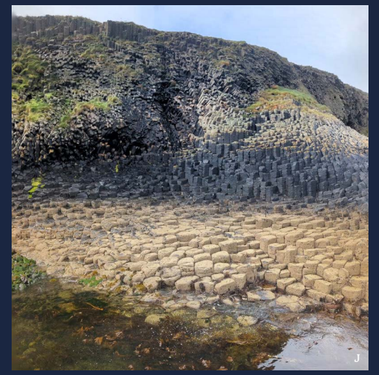


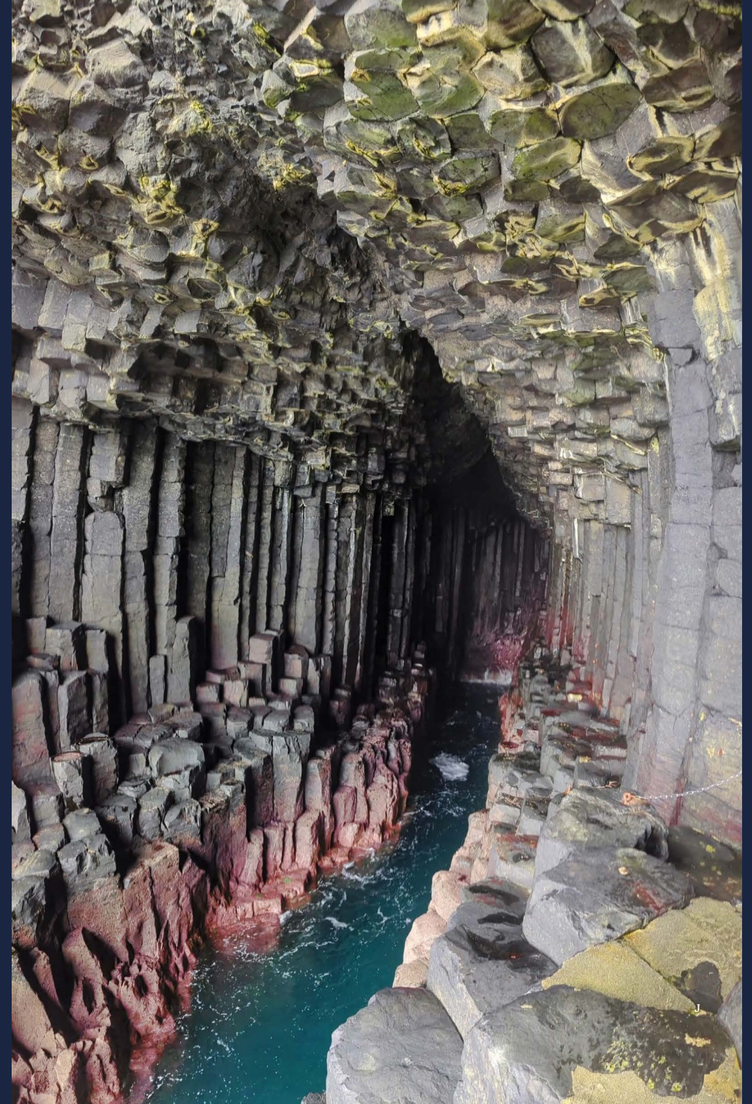


Passing Samaritan














J


J

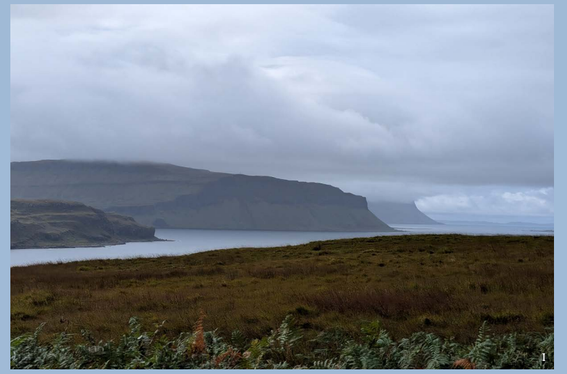

K

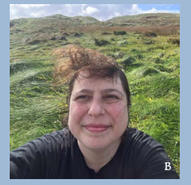

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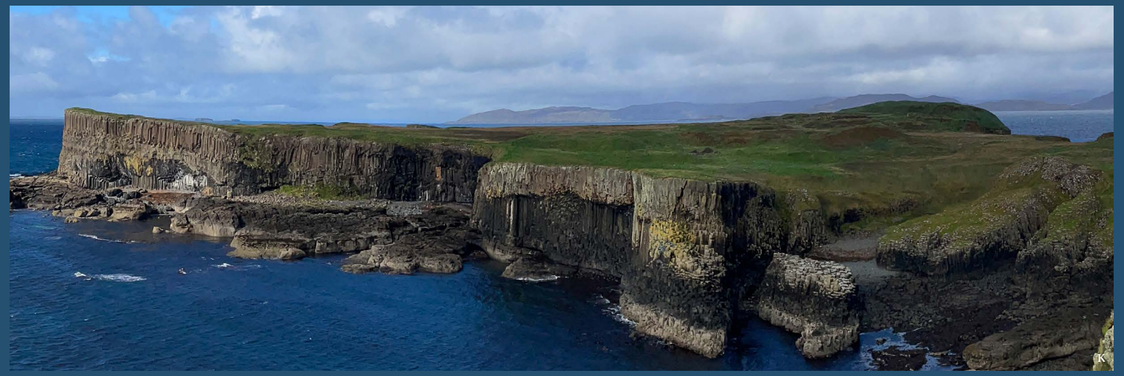

K


I


K


I


B









All your ducks in a row?
(These are actually
probably auks.)







On our way back to port, we came across a pod of short-beaked common dolphins, and then there was a rainbow at the same time! The dolphins were playing in the wake of the boat; it was fantastic.


K

GLENFORSA HOTEL BAR

~$21 PER ENTRÉE

This was the only place that serves dinner within a 30-min drive of the Island Pods, and driving farther wouldn't have turned up more options. It was totally fine and filled our needs. They seemed a bit harried and overwhelmed at our arrival, since apparently they were expecting a busload of people soon, but they were still able to prepare food for us. We ordered at the bar and found a sofa in the loft of the entryway. I had scallops and black pudding salad on special, which I think was actually the best entrée of the four of us.


K


K



K

Our other meals while at the Island Pods were foods that we got at this convenience store in Salen, and then brought back to our pod kitchenettes to prepare.



I


B


K


K


B


K


K

CALEDONIAN MACBRAYNE FERRY

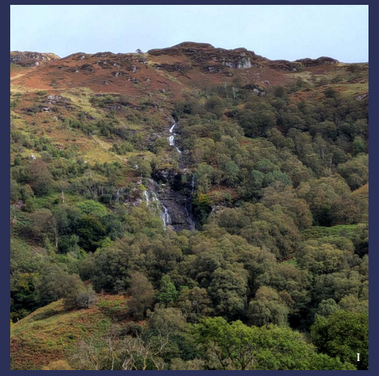
$50 FOR 1 CAR + 4 PEOPLE, RETURNING

Our ferry back to Oban was much larger than the outbound one, with multiple cafés on board. And the entire front nose of the whole ship lifted up for the cars to drive out.











DROVERS INN

~$22 PER ENTRÉE

On our drive back across Scotland, we took a 10-min detour to have lunch at the Drovers Inn.

The Drovers Inn was built in 1705 at the north end of Loch Lomond, as a stop for Highland drovers herding their cattle south to market. It's over 300 years old, and it feels like it, with dark wood and dusty taxidermy everywhere.

We each chose different traditional Scottish entrées from the menu and each one of them was really good. Highly recommend.







Jeremy successfully 'Drove on the Left,' which was an ad campaign from the Scottish government for tourist drivers.



We took the tram to our hotel for our last night in Edinburgh.



The final drive into Edinburgh was a bit stressful just from dealing with the traffic, but we successfully returned the car on time! Not that the staff at Drivalia noticed, because they once again had a huge line of frustrated customers trying to pick up cars. We dropped off the keys in a box and said goodbye to Becca and Iain, who took the bus the rest of the way home.





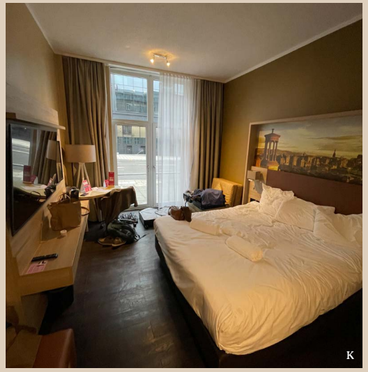
LEONARDO HOTEL EDINBURGH HAYMARKET

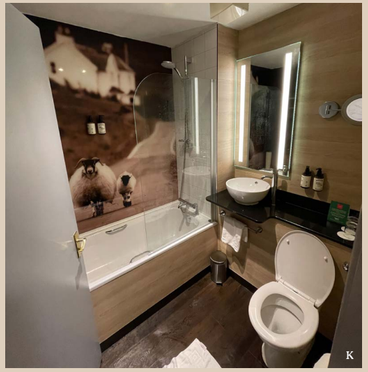


$295 FOR 1 NIGHT

We only stayed at this hotel for our last night. It was in the Haymarket neighborhood, which made it very easy to jump on the tram in the morning and get to the airport on time for our flight home.

This hotel was fine. I was happy with the location. Our room was right on the ground floor with windows to the busy sidewalk. So we kind of had to leave the curtains closed, which made the room feel like a cave.

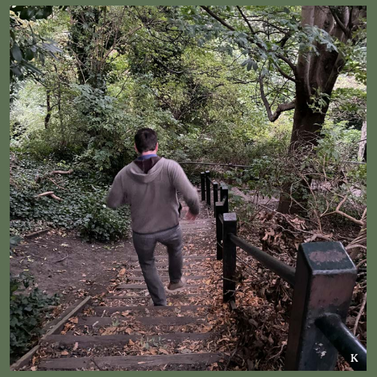












WATER OF LEITH WALKWAY NEAR DEAN BRIDGE



This was a very fun area to wander around! This river walking path extends for miles, but we just walked around this area for a while before our dinner reservations. There was a cool and dark wooded area, and then there was a very photographic area with medieval-style buildings that looked Shakespearean. Great place to wander around!



















K



K

THE PALMERSTON

PREBOOKED: ~$34 PER ENTRÉE

We made reservations at this bakery and restaurant weeks in advance, and even then we had to choose a slightly later time slot. But it was excellent. High-quality, delicious Scottish food, served in a nice ambiance with professional service. Highly recommend!



J



K



K



Source: finedininglovers.co.uk

We selected a bottle of this Scottish cider, from Naughton Cider Company, which is the most expensive beverage bottle we have ever ordered in a restaurant ($66). But it was our last meal, it's a highly regarded cider, and we knew we were in for a great meal after we tasted the sourdough table bread! Indeed, it was excellent cider and an excellent meal!

The orchard where this was made was started in the 1700s, but fell into disrepair in the 1960s and was reawoken in 2018. The cider makers come from a history of champenoise and it shows. Very clean, not too sweet, excellent cider.

It's not available in the USA, so it's a good thing we took our chance when we had it!


K


K

The tram to the airport picked up right near our hotel.

The tram in Edinburgh is easy to use. You tap your regular credit card at a pink kiosk at the stop before your tram comes. And then you tap it again at whatever station you get off at. If you fail to do this, you will get caught because a ticket checker guy comes by often and he scans your credit card and can tell if you tapped. But Becca told us, even if he does catch you, he just sells you a ticket and gives you a stern look with his eyebrows.

We had time to shop around duty free and got some whisky and some more of those Tunnock's teacakes!


K


K

I swear our seats were extra small on this flight home. Jeremy's shoulders could not fit in his seat.

It took nearly an hour for any luggage from our flight to show up at O'Hare baggage claim, but it gave us a chance to watch the beagles work. They are really only interested in fresh fruit and meats.

Upon arrival, we took the L two stops, got our car, and drove the 2.5 hours home! Since Jeremy did 100% of the driving in Scotland, driving home was the least I could do!

Fantastic trip! A lot of fun!


K


K



DAILY TRIP PLAN, 2026:

SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
Sept 6 p3 3:30pm: SP+ parking at Cumberland L stop, covered parking, booked through SpotHero 6:40pm: Flight UA118 departs Chicago Try to sleep on airplane	Sept 7 p4-p7 8:25am: Flight UA118 arrives Edinburgh Stay at B&I's home at Portobello beach	Sept 8 p8-p13 5:30-6:30pm: The Real Mary King's Close (4) 7:00pm: Makars Mash Bar (4) Stay at B&I's home at Portobello beach	Sept 9 p14-p20 6:30-8:30pm: Edinburgh Ghost Tour (4) Stay at Attic Flat, 'Linton Collection' (2)	Sept 10 p21-p31 Hike up Arthur's Seat (2) 3:00-4:15pm: Mercat Historic Vaults Tour (2) Stay at Attic Flat, 'Linton Collection' (2)	Sept 11 p32-p53 Royal Botanic Garden (2) Edinburgh Castle (2) 5:30-7:00pm: The Lost Close Whisky Tasting (2) Stay at Attic Flat, 'Linton Collection' (2)	Sept 12 p54-p72 8:30am: Pick up rental car (4) 2:15pm: Oban to Craignure Ferry (must line up at least 30 min earlier) (4) Stay at Glengorm Castle (4)
Sept 13 p73-p86 Hike around Glengorm estate (4) Stay at Glengorm Castle (4)	Sept 14 p87-p105 Ferry to Ulva (4) Stay at Island Pods (4)	Sept 15 p106-p128 11:45am-5:00pm: Turus Mara's Treshnish Isles Wildlife Cruise & Staffa Trip (4) Stay at Island Pods (4)	Sept 16 p129-p137 11:05am: Craignure to Oban Ferry (must line up at least 30 min earlier) (4) 5:30pm: Return rental car in Edinburgh (4) 8:00pm: Dinner at The Palmerston (2) Stay at Leonardo Hotel Edinburgh Haymarket (2)	Sept 17 p138 11:30am: Flight UA119 departs Edinburgh 2:05pm: Flight UA119 arrives Chicago Arrive home!	Sept 18	Sept 19

K = Photo by Kate Baldwin
J = Photo by Jeremy Ott-Holland
B = Photo by Becca Lessem
I = Photo by Iain Collins

Plaid tartan source: Adobe Stock by puttikom