



Highland adventure

It's not often you get the chance to go on holiday to a town named after you. **Iain Duff** raises a glass to his namesake town as he follows Scotland's whisky trail as part of week-long Highland tour



Urquhart Castle in Drumadrochit, on the banks of Loch Ness



For obvious reasons, Dufftown has been on my bucket list of destinations for as long as I can remember. In fact, I don't know why it took this long to visit – but, as my 50th birthday approached, I felt it was time to meet my public. After all, if they had gone to all the trouble of naming their town after me, surely the very least I could do was grace them with my presence?

With the ongoing Covid situation I knew that a tickertape parade was probably out of the question, but, to be honest, I did expect a little bit of ceremony when we arrived. Maybe socially distanced schoolchildren lining the main street, throwing rose petals in front of us as we made our way to the Co-op. Something like that.

Sadly, we got nothing. Not even a measly party popper. It's almost as if no one cared that we were here. How rude.

A lesser person would have reacted badly to this apparent disrespect. Like some vengeful laird, I could have brought my wrath down upon on the people of Dufftown, but I am a bigger man than that – I am a bigger man, full stop, to be fair – and I refused to let it cloud my opinion of the place.

Because it turns out that Dufftown, as befits the name, is a very pleasant town indeed. Sitting on the banks of two rivers in the heart of the Speyside countryside, it boasts four wide main streets, which come together at the grand clock tower, formerly the town jail.

On the outskirts is the station where the Keith and Dufftown Railway begins its 11-mile journey through some of Scotland's most picturesque scenery. The heritage line was reopened by volunteers in the early 2000s



The heritage railway line runs between Dufftown and Keith

INSPIRATION THE HIGHLANDS

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The historic bridge at Craigellachie in Speyside

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Strathisla Distillery in Keith is the oldest operating distillery in the Scottish Highlands

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Strathisla is often described as the most beautiful distillery in the country

and trundling through the countryside is a lovely way to spend a couple of hours. On the platform at Dufftown, you can enjoy lunch in the Sidings Café restaurant car before boarding and you can pick up a souvenir tea towel if you are so inclined (and I am *always* so inclined).

STILL LIFE

Dufftown's big attraction, though, is whisky. The town is part of Scotland's Malt Whisky Trail, which winds through Speyside, taking in various distilleries and a cooperage. Like many of the communities around here, whisky-making is Dufftown's life blood and it has been home to the Glenfiddich Distillery since 1887.

We learned more about the story of the distillery, as well as the whole whisky-making process, on a tour of the visitors' centre. Since Covid, the tours have been a bit more limited than usual but still extremely interesting. And, of course, the highlight was a tasting session at the end, where we got to sample a 12, 15 and 18-year-old Glenfiddich as well as the Gran Reserva, a 21-year-old malt finished in rum casks. As the driver, I got to take my sample pack back to the campsite to try it later.

ON THE TRAIL

You don't need to be a big fan of the water of life to fully enjoy the distillery experience, but

it certainly helps. And if you're into whisky in a big way, you could base an entire camping holiday around the Malt Whisky Trail. For us, with two kids in tow, a visit to one distillery was plenty, but we used the route that links Speyside's distilleries as the basis of a day trip through this gorgeous part of the country.

Our route took us northeast from Aviemore, following the path of the mighty River Spey as it winds its way from the Cairngorms to the North Sea.

The dramatic forests and mountains were a stunning backdrop for the beginning of the drive and the scenery even managed to persuade the two grumpy teenagers to lift their eyes from their phones for some of the journey.

We managed to spot plenty of red squirrels and deer from the car, but sadly no golden eagles, who also make this area home. After a brief coffee stop in Elgin, and a visit to the cathedral ruins, we followed the coast, and started heading back towards Inverness. Now the wildlife spotting involved looking out for dolphins, otters and whales in the Moray Firth.

HIGHLAND FLING

Our Highland holiday actually started a few days earlier in Drumadrochit, on the banks of Loch Ness. A half-hour's drive from Inverness, this bustling village is filled with cafés and



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INSPIRATION THE HIGHLANDS



Urquhart Castle from the loch
 ● INSET One of the Loch Ness cruise vessels



Hold on tight... Loch Ness is deeper than the height of the BT Tower!

NEED TO KNOW

- **GLENFIDDICH DISTILLERY**
 Dufftown, Banffshire AB55 4DH
01340 820373
glenfiddich.com
- **MALT WHISKY TRAIL**
maltwhiskytrail.com
- **LOCH NESS CENTRE AND EXHIBITION**
 Drumnadrochit, Inverness-shire IV63 6TU
01456 450573
lochness.com
- **NESSIELAND**
 Loch Ness Lodge Hotel, Drumnadrochit,
 Inverness-shire IV63 6TU
01456 450342
nessieland.co.uk
- **JACOBITE CRUISES**
 Dochgarroch Lock, Inverness IV3 8JG
01463 233999
jacobite.co.uk
- **CASTLE CRUISES**
 Temple Pier West, Drumnadrochit IV63 6XR
01456 450695
lochnesscruises.com
- **URQUHART CASTLE**
 Drumnadrochit, Inverness-shire IV63 6XJ
01456 450551
historic-scotland.gov.uk
- **CAIRNGORM REINDEER CENTRE**
 Glenmore, Aviemore PH22 1QU
01479 861228
cairngormreindeer.co.uk
- **GLENMORE VISITOR CENTRE**
 Glenmore, Aviemore PH22 1QU
01479 861220
forestry.gov.scot

bistros, as well as providing a home for the thriving Loch Ness Monster industry.

As our first post-pandemic camping holiday, this was all about recharging and relaxing and enjoying the sort of scenery we'd missed out on for more than 12 months. If there's one positive thing to have come out of the various lockdowns and travel restrictions, it's the reminder that we should value what we have on our doorstep.

With family living in the area, we've visited Drumnadrochit many times over the years, but rarely took the time to appreciate the natural beauty that surrounded us. So, this time we decided to do the tourist thing and explore the area more fully, starting with a walk through the trees and hills that surround the village.

After a trek around the woods, brunch at Café Eighty2 on the outskirts of the village is

highly recommended. The café is welcoming, the staff friendly, and the food, including an excellent vegan option, is superb.

REMARKABLE RUINS

The ruins of Urquhart Castle sit proudly on the banks of Loch Ness and are just five minutes from the campsite at Borlum Farm. It's a half-hour walk or a five minute drive – predictably we chose the latter.

In its day, Urquhart was one of Scotland's biggest castles, and found itself at the heart of the power struggle between the Scots and English during the Wars of Independence in the 13th Century.

Although the current ruins date back to the 1200s, the history of the site as a fortress goes back much further and the panoramic

views over Loch Ness give an insight into why it was such a key location – the strategic setting provides an open outlook along the loch in both directions.

Thankfully, these days there are no rampaging southern invaders to look out for, but the castle's prominent position gives you a great viewpoint to enjoy the loch, not to mention keeping an eye out for Nessie!



MONSTER FUN

Of course, the mythical monster is the big business round here. For more than 70 years,



Walking through the Cairngorms countryside ● INSET One of the Cairngorms' wild reindeer



photo/stock-abbie.com



Phakay

The majestic River Spey in full flow on a sunny summer's day is a sight to behold
 ● INSET Elgin Cathedral's ruins

the tale of the creature that's said to call the loch his home has captivated the world, attracting visitors from every continent.

It's easy to be cynical about the Nessie industry but the truth is that it brings in tens of thousands of pounds to an area that doesn't have much else going for it, economically. And all those rich foreign tourists who come to Scotland desperate for a glimpse of the monster won't be disappointed by the stunning scenery they encounter, even if they don't see Nessie.

WATER WONDER

Loch Ness's stats are impressive. It's the biggest loch in Scotland by volume and is deeper than the height of London's BT Tower at 230m. It also contains more fresh water than all the lakes in England and Wales combined. When you consider all that, it's easy to see how some people could believe that a massive creature could live in its depths and rarely be seen.

For an even better view of the loch, we decided to take a cruise on the water. There are various options available but we chose the Jacobite cruise that sets off from the visitors' centre at Dochgarroch and sails up the loch as far as the castle before returning.

A well-informed guide provided an entertaining and helpful commentary, pointing out plenty of stuff about the history of the loch you probably wouldn't find out otherwise.

A couple of miles along the A82 is Inverness, if you fancy a bit of shopping or a night at the cinema. Follow the lochside road in the other direction, back through Drumnadrochit, and you'll eventually come to Fort Augustus, a pretty village on the Caledonian Canal, boasting amazing views down the loch.

WALKING WITH REINDEER

After a few days of relaxation by Loch Ness, we headed back down the A9 to Aviemore, right in the heart of the Cairngorm mountain range. This is Scotland's main ski resort, but it's a pleasant place to visit in the summer, too and the area has several good campsites to base yourself, including Dalraddy Holiday Park, just south of the town.

Aviemore is also home to Smiffy's, one of the best chip shops in the UK in my humble opinion, so try to fit a takeaway in during your stay. It would be rude not to.

The Cairngorm Reindeer Centre at Glenmore, just outside Aviemore, is the base for Britain's only wild reindeer herd and here you can see, stroke and feed these animals in their natural environment.

It really is a wonderful experience. Although at first they appear large and slightly intimidating, they'll happily take food and,

Covid rules permitting, will allow both adults and children to stroke their dense pelt.

Although a native species, the placid creature was hunted to extinction 1,200 years ago and only returned in the mid-20th Century. These are all descendants of the originals imported by Swedish herder, Mikel Utsi, in the 1950s.

A guided hill trip is a great way to get to know the reindeer, walk among them, and find out a bit about their history. It was a unique and memorable experience and a wonderful way to bring our Highland tour to an end.

STAY AT

LOCH NESS BAY CAMPING

Borlum Farm, Drumnadrochit, Inverness-shire IV63 6XN

01456 450544

borlum.co.uk

DALRADDY HOLIDAY PARK

Kincraig, Kingussie, Inverness-shire PH22 1QB

01479 810330

campinginaviemore.co.uk

SPEYSIDE BY CRAIGELLACHIE CAMPING AND CARAVANNING CLUB

Archiestown, Aberlour, Moray AB38 9SL

01340 810414

campingandcaravanningclub.co.uk