



Scotland by coach

Bannockburn refought, an airborne narrowboat and the Queen's apartments were among the breathtaking diversity of attractions experienced by **Norman Wright** on a coach tour to Scotland

The Kelpies near Falkirk



TWO GIANT silver horse-heads rearing up against the Highland foothills, a chance to win the Battle of Bannockburn for the English after 700 years and a darting sheepdog rounding up a flock of ducks. A coach tour of Scotland certainly isn't dull.

And that wasn't all. Our group had a good look round the Queen's Scottish palace and her beloved Royal Yacht *Britannia*, investigated Edinburgh's ghosts, dined at a restaurant with more than 300 whiskies, were lifted 115ft in the air aboard a narrowboat, toured the amazingly restored Stirling Castle, visited the memorial to Braveheart, saw how malt whisky is made and matured,

cruised Loch Lomond and walked around Rennie Mackintosh's finest domestic creation.

An eclectic mix by anyone's standards, not counting the best bit – the glorious Scottish scenery enjoyed while relaxing between all the activities.

You could easily stay for a week in Edinburgh as there's so much to see but in 24 hours we visited three of the most popular attractions.

Edinburgh Castle high up on the rocky outcrop is worth the cobbled climb up from the Royal Mile just for the view over the city and out across the Firth of Forth. As well as the view, you get a glimpse into Scotland's proud military history. Website: (www.edinburghcastle.gov.uk).

At the end of the Royal Mile is one of the Queen's favourite official residences, the Palace of Holyroodhouse. Inside, you can see the ornate plasterwork and huge tapestries of the State Apartments as well as the historic apartments of Mary Queen of Scots and exhibitions usually on show at the Queen's Gallery.



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**Main picture: Part of the Queen's beautiful gardens at Holyrood House
Below right: Tapestry in Stirling Castle
Below left: Bannockburn's memorial
Above left: The Palace of Holyroodhouse and the Abbey**

Don't miss the gardens and the ruins of Holyrood Abbey; they are a particular delight to the Queen. With the ruins of the abbey and the palace framing them in one direction and the crags of Arthur's Seat in the other, the borders and trees are set off perfectly.

Unfortunately the modern design of the Scottish Parliament building does sometimes come into view. Please don't take me to task for saying that; I know many people like the building. It's only a personal

opinion that the design doesn't complement the palace, abbey and setting.

Full details of visiting Holyroodhouse are available from the Royal Collection, tel: 0131 556 5100, website: (www.royalcollection.org.uk).

Down from the heights of Castle Rock and the Royal Mile at the docks in Leith is one of the Queen's most treasured residences, the now-retired Royal Yacht *Britannia*.

Of all the books, articles, palaces and exhibitions, this gives the most intimate glimpse into the life of our Royal Family and the real personalities of particularly the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh.

Sixty-one years ago, on April 16, 1953, *Britannia* was launched from the John Brown & Company shipyard in





almost surreal images. At the Falkirk Wheel you can see the Forth and Clyde and the Union canals linked by the world's only rotating boat lift. The boats and barges enter the lift as they would a lock. With the gate shut behind them, the craft and the water they are floating in is lifted or lowered the 115ft between the two canals. It is a bizarre sight to watch the wheel in action and gives a great view of the beautiful countryside between Edinburgh and Stirling as the Lowlands meet the beginnings of the Highlands. Website: (www.thefalkirkwheel.co.uk).

Just a little way down the Forth and Clyde Canal is an even more striking sight in steel – the giant heads of two horses nearly 100ft high.

The heads are named the Kelpies after the mythical beasts with the strength of ten horses. They were modelled by artist Andy Scott on Duke and Baron, two Clydesdale heavy horses. Nine hundred



Clydebank, subsequently sailing more than a million miles on 968 official visits.

It was decommissioned on December 11, 1997 in Portsmouth, the last in a long line of Royal Yachts stretching back to 1660. *Britannia* opened its doors as a tourist attraction in 1998.

Britannia's Visitor Centre on the second floor of Ocean Terminal provides historical background, photographs of the Royal Family and yachtsmen, and houses the original Wheelhouse. Visitors then collect an audio handset tour, included in the admission price, and step on board to discover *Britannia's* five decks.

Highlights of the tour include the Sun Lounge, the State Dining Room and the Queen's Bedroom, which contrast beautifully with the working side of the

ship, including the Sick Bay, Laundry and Engine Room. Of the items on display, 95 per cent are the original artefacts on loan from the Royal Collection.

Britannia's whole visitor experience is fully accessible, with wheelchair access, lifts and ramps throughout. Tel: 0131 555 5566, website: (www.royalyachtbritannia.co.uk).

Edinburgh's Old Town has a long and sometimes macabre history. Mercat Tours' ghost walk, as the night begins to fall on the cobbles and the street lights cast dark shadows, reveals some of those stories told by a guide in a long black cloak with theatrical delivery.

This walk ends up in the company's own haunted Blair Street cellars. It's great fun and only slightly chilling. Tel: 0131 225 5445, website: (www.mercattours.com).

In the event of your nerves actually needing steadying, the Scotch Whisky Experience should do the trick; it has more than 300 whiskies and will explain its history and how the famous drink is made. The Amber Restaurant also offers excellent Scottish cuisine. Website: (www.scotchwhiskyexperience.co.uk).

Our tour also took in a real distillery, the Deanston Distillery, eight miles north of Stirling. Our tasting showed us the way you should drink their single malt whiskies, or any whisky, with literally just a few drops of water. They even give you a pipette to measure the drops. Website: (www.deanstonmalt.com).

On the way north to Stirling our coach pulled in at two unique sites both with

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stainless steel panels were shaped on site to make the incredible installations, weighing 300 tons each.

The Kelpies are at the heart of The Helix, an eco area that includes a new one-kilometre canal linking Falkirk with Grangemouth and providing recreational areas and attractions.

Website: (www.thehelix.co.uk). More conventional monuments are the William Wallace memorial near Stirling to mark the Braveheart Scottish leader who fought and defeated the English but was eventually captured and hung, drawn and quartered in London.

You can see the Wallace column from the ramparts of Stirling Castle, one of Scotland's most important historical sites. The renovation work going on at the castle is stunning. Its history, both noble and infamous, is brought to life by the tartan-clad guides.

Stirling Castle played an important role in Scotland's most celebrated victory over the English at Bannockburn in the valley below the castle walls. On June 23 and 24 exactly 700 years ago, masterly tactics by King Robert the Bruce meant his outnumbered army trounced the English troops of King Edward II.

The new visitor centre at the Bannockburn monument celebrates this achievement in the most modern of ways.

The battle and the opposing armies are explained via three giant video screens facing each other. Wearing 3D glasses visitors in the middle of the screens witness flying arrows. Charging men and horses appear to cross the room. You can

also join in a computer simulation of the battle on a giant table. Each participant, standing around the table, is given command of elements of the two opposing armies. Each person has to deploy those units. The operator obliges and you can see your miniature men tearing across the map (and frequently getting wiped out by their enemy).

After several rounds the computer analyses and decides who has won. It's perfectly possible for the historical result to be reversed – and the English army, bolstered by several members of our party, did just that, much to the dismay of our



Rainbow near Loch Katrine and, left, a ghost walk in Edinburgh
Above left: Loch Katrine, above right, Deanston Distillery
Right: A Stirling Castle guide entertains



◀ Scottish coach driver, Andy. Website: (www.battleofbannockburn.com).

From ferocious battles, the mood of our tour calmed to the wonderful scenery of Loch Katrine and Loch Lomond. The winding road up to Aberfoyle was spectacular, with a stop at the Scottish Wool Centre for a spot of shopping and a demonstration of sheepdog mastery by the resident shepherd and dog using a flock of ducks as the sheep. Website: (www.scottishwoolcentre.co.uk).

The Winnock Hotel at Drymen near Loch Lomond is much used by coach parties. The hotel provides a Scottish evening complete with the Haggis ceremony, bagpipes, Scottish music and dancing, and lots of explanations of traditions, including dressing one of the audience in the Highland kilt folded and fashioned from a single oblong of tartan wool cloth. Website: (www.winnockhotel.com).

From the hotel the next morning it was a short but spectacular drive to Tarbet on the loch shores for a 90-minute cruise.

Then there were more opportunities for



shopping at Loch Lomond Shores or to learn more about the National Park. Website: (www.lochlomondshores.com).

Our final stop was as we headed back down to Clydeside and the amazing Hill House at Helensburgh. Hill House, overlooking the river, was Charles Rennie Mackintosh's finest domestic work, now preserved and protected by the National Trust for Scotland. Website: (www.nts.org.uk/the-hill-house).

All the places we visited are on coach tour itineraries but not all of them on one tour.



Above: Ashlet Falls at the Inversnaid Hotel, Loch Lomond and, below, the Hill House garden at Helensburgh

Passport to Scotland by coach

Scotland continues to be one of the most popular destinations for coach tours to not only Edinburgh, the Trossachs and Loch Lomond but also the west coast and islands, the Borders, Highlands and beyond to the Shetlands and Orkneys.

Dozens of coach companies that are members of the Coach Tourism Council operate holidays to Scotland. See the website: (www.findacoachholiday.com).

Package prices for tours to Scotland are good with five-day/four-night trips on offer from around £350pp this year. All generally include half-board hotel accommodation, excursions and travel by coach from England. For tours to Scotland operators will pick up passengers from their homes or from a convenient starting point nearby.

Here are some examples of what is available with national and regional coach tour operators:

National operators:

■ Shearings Holidays has a variety of tours with nationwide departures featuring Loch Lomond and the Trossachs when staying in Oban on the west coast - seven nights' dinner B&B in Oban from £479pp. Tel: 0843 221 8877, website: (www.shearings.com)

■ Grand UK features tours to the Trossachs staying in Aberfoyle. Tel: 01603 619933, website: (www.grandukholidays.com).

Regional operators:

■ From South Wales, Edwards Coaches has a five-day/four-night tour staying at the Winnock Hotel and including excursions to Edinburgh, Aberfoyle, the Falkirk Wheel, a whisky distillery and a cruise on Loch Katrine (£399pp with departures in September and October). Tel: 01443 202048, website: (www.edwardscoaches.co.uk)

■ From South Yorkshire, Wilfreda Beehive has a five-day/four-night tour also staying at the Winnock Hotel and including excursions to Edinburgh, Aberfoyle, the Falkirk Wheel, a whisky distillery and a cruise on the *Sir Walter Scott*. Tel: 01302 330330, website: (www.wilfreda.co.uk)

■ Also from South Yorkshire, Grays Travel Group has a cruise of three Scottish lochs (Lochs Lomond and Katrine as well as sailing on the paddle steamer *SS Waverley* from Glasgow) and also visiting Stirling - £345 for five days staying in Dunoon. Tel: 01226 743109, website: (www.graystravelgroup.co.uk)

■ From Bristol and the South West, Bakers Dolphin features Loch Lomond, the Dochart Falls, the Trossachs and Edinburgh on a four-night dinner B&B tour staying in Aberfoyle with departures in September - from £349pp. Tel: 01934 415000, website: (www.bakersdolphin.com).