

IT TAKES A BRAVE HEART

Motoring through Scotland, May 26th-June 4th 2004

Tuesday, May 25th Jim drove us out to Seattle/Tacoma International airport, about 7:30 AM. Thank goodness for best friends. The security line moves slowly this morning as it passes by a glassed-in display of illegal items passengers have tried to take onboard. We're astounded by a gasoline powered chainsaw- which elicits a classic comment from Russ: "Now that's a knife!"

San Francisco Airport- Laveta, Sharon, Russ



3:00 PM Pacific Standard Time, we're waiting to leave San Francisco- United 989 was two hours late leaving Seattle because of fog here - so we missed our 12:45 PM flight to Heathrow. We'll now be six hours late to London on UA954.

About midnight now, Seattle time, the cabin is dark, quiet... and uncomfortable. The LCD screen on the back of the seat in front of me shows a moving map of our progress. Slowly our Boeing-777 has been creeping along the map in a great arc- tracing the shortest route between two points on our spherical surface, properly called (and I have to think hard for this one) a *geodesic*. Sacramento, Reno, Billings Montana and the Custer battlefield, Hudson's Bay, Goose Bay Labrador, then passing South of Greenland, we arc our way across the North Atlantic to London. At one time over Goose Bay, the outside air temperature

was -74°F. Coldest I've ever seen. Five hours to go.

Wednesday, May 26th 14:10 local time- our wheels touch down at Heathrow with a loud thump and shudder, which Russ attributes to "the sound of continents shifting". Seems we walked for miles (and took a bus) to the local flight terminal, endured more security, and got visas stamps in our passports. Our flight takes off for Edinburgh at 16:25.

Arriving at the Edinburgh Airport about 17:30, we pick up our bags and rental car. Sharon drives while I navigate. Meanwhile Laveta and Russ sit petrified in the back seat as Sharon maneuvers through downtown Edinburgh during rush hour, searching for the *Roxburgre Hotel* on Charlotte Square, all the while driving on the left for the first time, in a medieval/Victorian city with horrendous traffic. Oh yeah- and with no sleep since Tacoma.



Early morning Edinburgh- Sharon, Me, Laveta

After calling the hotel for directions, which include instructions to take what appears to be an alley, we arrive in one piece- then celebrate our survival with drinks before dinner, at a little place called *Garfunkles*. I have a double! But even in our terrified and exhausted state- Edinburgh appears to be a beautiful city.

Thursday, May 27th Waking up early (05:00 AM) I sneak out to see the town while it's still asleep. Sure a lot of history here. Hard to believe that these beautiful old buildings were built without power tools!



Sir Walter Scott Monument

Most impressive, is the monument to Sir Walter Scott (1771–1832) an ornate 200 foot spire towering above *Princes Street*. That the city's most impressive monument, completed in 1846, is a tribute to a novelist and poet rather than to a king or warrior, says a lot about the Scottish people.



Sterling Castle

Heading out about 09:30 (scary to be on the road again) we arrive at the *Bannockburn*

battlefield, site of the Robert Bruce memorial- then onward to Sterling, where we saw the town prison and justly famous castle. The castle, or rather castle complex, commands grand views all around. Proceeding north through *Aberfeldy*, then to *Pitlochry*, we stay in the *Autholl Palace* hotel, an old six story stone castle/hotel located on a hilltop.

Had a great but expensive dinner with dessert, accompanied by a kilted highlander stabbing the “Haggis” (with great ceremony) in the dining room. Haggis is cooked intestines with other inedible but well seasoned organs-stuffed into a grayish-pink sheep stomach about the size and shape of a small, squat melon, and in this case, served on a silver plate. Russ had some Haggis. The rest of us just couldn't work up the courage to try, though I did a few days later... to my regret.



Blair Castle

Friday, May 28th Laveta and I wake up at 9:00 AM. Laveta calls Sharon and Russ (and wakes them up too). We begin our day at the *Blair Atholl* distillery in *Pitlochry*. All very-interesting. I did get a taste of their 12 year single malt scotch- different but good. Hmm... so good that I also drink Laveta's sample. Proceeding north about 5 miles, we take a self guided tour of Blair Castle, which is simply marvelous! Besides the well maintained buildings, grounds and furnishings, the paintings, photographs and manuscripts are

historically informative and artistically superb- it's like we got an art museum at no extra charge. We could have stayed much longer here, but have to keep moving. We proceed up A9 to A95 to the little town of *Grantown on Spey*, we stop for the night.

Around 9:00 PM, Laveta and I make our way down to the lobby to see the live entertainment- which turns out to be this guy who sounds like a whole band unto himself. Playing an electrically amplified accordion, he makes it sound like just about any instrument you can name. He performed Scottish bagpipe tunes, Lawrence Welk type numbers and even Patsy Kline's "Crazy". So, Laveta and I sat by the fireplace drinking coffee with the rest of the over 60 "audience", listening to "country and western" in a Scottish hotel.



Cawdor Castle

Saturday, May 29th Pulling out about 9:00 AM, we drive north on A939, and finally, 12 miles of single lane road to *Cawdor Castle*.

The castle dates back to 1380, and while not nearly as large or extravagant as Blair Castle, it's still a home to the current Lady Cawdor who lives there part of the year. The castle and the 60,000 surrounding acres belong to her estate. Wonderful paintings and photographs line the walls, and castle is surrounded by beautifully manicured grounds and gardens- even a hedge maze.

Proceeding westward, we arrive at the *Culloden battlefield*, where the English army defeated "Bonnie Prince Charlie" in the last major military battle on English or Scottish soil. Another 10 miles or so and we arrive in *Inverness*, a small but beautiful city- its downtown overrun with people. We're staying at the *Milton Palace* hotel on the river Ness, one block from downtown. We have dinner and manage a little shopping before returning to the hotel.



Cathedral in Inverness

Sunday, May 30th Sunday morning dawns sunny and warm (t-shirt weather). Following breakfast in the hotel (Russ has haggis again) we go for a walk to the castle, which is closed today, but there are grand views.

We wander around to some of the many churches, though because of Sunday morning services we don't go in. Sharon noticed a churchyard cemetery, some of the graves dating back to 1717. One woman's grave is particularly poignant. Engraved on her headstone in weathered and hard to read letters was this fragment of a sentence:

"...and her loving memory, embalmed in the sorrowing hearts of her children".

After two centuries of sun, rain- and nights as quiet as her grave, these barely discernable words engraved in stone still possess the power to touch living hearts. How fragile life is- yet how marvelous!

Later that afternoon, Laveta finds a Laundromat (here called a “laundrette”) near the hotel so we... err, Laveta and Sharon can wash our dirty clothes.



Laundry day- Inverness

The laundrette also provides Internet access at one pound per 20 minutes; giving me a chance to catch up on my email (purged many pages of spam). We’ll eat downtown tonight, and pull out for the *Isle of Sky* early tomorrow morning



Laveta and Loch Ness

Monday, May 31st Leaving Inverness, we head West on A82, the two lane road (rather wide by UK standards) hugging the northern shore of Loch Ness.

After about an hour, we stop at the ruins of Urquhart castle, strategically located by its long ago builders to control the loch. The ru-

ins are displayed in a park like setting- with magnificent views in all directions. The sky changes from mostly cloudy to mostly clear and then back again, variations of sun and shadow adding texture and depth to water and hillside.

Except perhaps for the Golden Gate Bridge, I’ve never seen a human construction that so belongs to its environment as does *Urquhart Castle*. It’s difficult to imagine Loch Ness without the castle’s timeless presence.

After a couple of hours, we resume our westward journey- leaving Urquhart castle, to its endless brooding on past glories, on stone



and rain, loch and sky... time and destiny.

Urquhart Castle and Loch Ness

Leaving A82 at Invermoriston, and taking A887 towards the Isle of Sky, we see a castle on the northwest shore of *Loch Duich*. Castle *Eilean Donan*, is not large. Its rebuilt (1920’s) walls jut into a salt water inlet- connected to land by a stone bridge. Eilean Donan castle has been used as a prop in many movies, most famously, *The Highlander*, with Sean Connery. We have a nice tour of the rooms before resuming our journey. Motoring onward, we reach *Kyle of Lochalsh*, just before crossing the gracefully arching *Sky Bridge* that connects the Isle of Sky with the rest of Scotland. We’re staying two nights, in the *Kings Arms* hotel, in the town of *Kyleakin*.



Eilean Donan Castle

Tuesday, June 1st I'm up early at 6:30, and everything is quiet except for the sound of birds outside the opened window of the hotel. Gulls sound everywhere the same to me. Other birdsong is beautiful but strange- I can tell from their sounds I'm not at home.

Until the building of *Sky Bridge*, a ferry carried traffic to and from the Isle. Sadly for this little town, the ferry went in about a half mile to the northwest, leaving this village a sort of an appendix (as in vestigial organ) to the main route.

Clouds crown the *Cuillin hills* as we set off from Kyleakin, heading northwest on A87 to *Broadford*, then west on A863 to the *Talisker distillery*- located on the outskirts of *Carbost*, and seemingly at the end of the world. It's not as large as had I expected. Thankfully they serve samples *before* the tour. I drink mine, Laveta's, and part of Sharon's. The taste is strong- the burning peat used to dry the malted grain and the local water impart a lingering flavor, as distinctive as the people...and the land.

Driving mostly under clouds, with occasional Sun breaks from time to time that brighten the landscape, we continue on to *Dunvegan Castle* through the most wildly beautiful coastline I have ever seen, grass hill-sides intensely green, the houses white and scattered.

Though it's only a day's drive from Inverness or Glasgow, there seems (to me) a loneliness here- due perhaps, to the treeless hills and rugged coastline- and to the mostly depressing weather. Sheep graze everywhere. The people of his land survive on them, on tourists like us... and on whisky.



Isle of Skye

Dunvegan Castle on the northwestern shore is a commanding presence above the seashore, but this is our 5th Scottish castle and we have become rather discriminating. Dunvegan is worth the drive, but It's not as interesting as the others. Driving back through the town of *Portree*, we stop and have lunch. It's a neat little town with a main square, busy shops and restaurants.

Wednesday, June 2nd After breakfast in the hotel, we head back over the bridge, leaving the rugged beauty of the *Isle of Skye* disappearing in our mirrors. More sun than clouds today as we drive Southeast on A87- water surrounded by mountains the whole way; *Loch Cluanie*, *Loch Loyne*, *Loch Garry* and *Loch Lochy*- aquamarine jewels in emerald settings. Leaving the lochs behind, *Stob Claurigh* appears, followed by *Ben Nevis*, the highest mountain in the UK at 4406 feet. Speeding clouds alternately shroud and reveal snow patches remaining still on their higher slopes. *Fort William* is our destination for to-

night, and our hotel, the *Alexander Milton*, is right on the edge of downtown.

Ft. William is another really fun place, with lots of locals mixing with tourists. It seems every store sells whiskey! We have fish and chips for lunch.



Fort William

Later, all that food finally caught up with Laveta and I, so stopping by a grocery store, we buy a sandwich and a candy bar to share, some apples and a bottle of cheap wine. We'll eat in our hotel room and relax, while Sharon and Russ go into town.

Thursday, June 3rd We leave Ft. William in the rain- the only real rain we've experienced on the trip, a shame since we're traveling through *Glen Coe*, which translates as "valley of weeping", an extraordinarily beautiful valley- confining mountains on each side adorned with waterfalls. The thin soil, perhaps only a foot or two thick, can't hold the water, and the underlying rock is impermeable- hence the dozens (and dozens) of waterfalls. Meanwhile the summits play hide and seek with clouds that from time to time reveal bare rock and snow filled gullies- and more waterfalls. Glen Coe was sure weeping today.



Glen Coe

The other highlight of the drive is Loch Lomond (the one with the "true love" and "bonny bonny banks").



Loch Lomond

The north end is misty and rainy, but the south end dries out and the weather improves as we enter Glasgow.

Glasgow is a big city, much larger than Edinburgh, a somewhat dirtier, working city. Taking the motorway (freeway) Sharon takes exit 19, and I manage to find our hotel on the first try. The *Jurrys Inn* hotel is the most modern of the trip and the room comes with an Ethernet plug for a broadband internet connection. Our window offers a great, if somewhat industrial view of Glasgow's main rail station.

After resting up for a couple of hours we go out for a walk, eat lunch in a humongous glass roofed, multilevel shopping center, and then head uptown. The streets are *very* crowded, even more than Edinburgh's- I've never seen a city so full of people- and they're all walking! Glasgow as a whole seems rather unloved, or perhaps I should say neglected- nevertheless, there are a great number of beautiful old buildings, and though we don't have time to check them out- museums, galleries and universities.



Downtown Glasgow

Cigarettes are 10 dollars a pack, and liquor prices about double what they are in the US, yet there seems to be far more smoking and drinking going on here than in the states. The only behavior attenuated by expense is driving- but at 85p/liter (about seven dollars a gallon) I can see why!

Friday, June 4th We're up early, have breakfast in the hotel, then navigate to the motorway, heading west on M8 to Glasgow airport. Good thing that our flight wasn't yesterday! On Thursday morning, UK air traffic control lost one of their main computers for an hour or so. For hours afterward, nearly all UK aircraft were grounded and schedules fouled up worldwide. Today things appear to be normal.

As I type this, my computer's sucking power from *Glasgow International*. With experience, I've become adept at scanning airport waiting rooms for electrical power plugs with which to power my laptop- saving my batteries for the flight. They're few outlets in waiting rooms- most likely used for powering vacuum cleaners and such. It seems that I've become an electrical parasite- traveling the world, discreetly draining electrical power from public places.

Our British Midlands flight 4889 leaves for Heathrow in two hours, then we're on to Chicago on United 659, and finally United 959 to Seattle- and home.

A little over half-way across the Atlantic, at 35000 feet and a few hundred miles or so south of "Godthab, Greenland" - it's 6:51 PM Chicago time, 4:51 Seattle time. What time is it in London I wonder, or Godthab? Einstein said that It's all relative. But then, what time is it to my laptop battery- another hour closer to discharge I guess- but hey, that's not relative... any more than life is.



At the Talisker Distillery- Isle of Sky

The return flights are long, uncomfortable... and mercifully uneventful. Tonight we'll sleep in our own beds.

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