

Europe - A student's playground: Scotland

By Brandon MacKenzie

My trip to Europe was my release from student life for a brief time. Three months of culture, life and learning. Sure as a young man I would be attracted at times to the night life of the cities and towns along the way; however, my goal was absolute - during my time here I want to experience something first hand, something to last a lifetime. My eyes turned to Scotland.

The Scottish Highlands are one of Europe's last great wilderness - one of the few places in this increasingly cluttered continent where you can really get away from it all. Some people come to Scotland for some peace and quiet, others come for the history and traditions - I arrived for a bit of both, or maybe to simply escape England.

Scotland is impossible to describe - you have to see it. And when you do, I assure you that its castles, glens, lochs, and magical history will leave you longing for more.

I arrived in Edinburgh (Ed-in-burr-a). The cost was 7.99 pounds to fly from London: Discount airlines truly are what they advertise, just don't expect any free cookies, or a life vest for that matter (Ryanair, EasyJet, BMI). Now Scotland still carries the Pound as their currency, being 2.4 times against the Canadian loonie; however, every pence spent will be worth it. Technically speaking, the country is still part of the UK - but say that to a Scot and risk a bloody nose. Christ, they even print their own version of the pound called the Sterling with heroic Scots featured prominently of the bills. Nevertheless, the North is cheaper, especially in the cost of hostels which can offer a comfortable stay for about 10 quid.

Now Edinburgh was wonderful, offering an incredible amount of relatively affordable activities. For those of you seeking the drink - it's the pub capital of the world. The people are wonderful, the city friendly...until of course the weekend rolls along, pitting neighbours against one another in a blood frenzied football rivalry. It



Isle of Skye

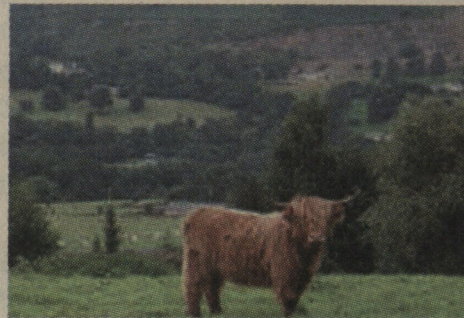


Glencoe pass (MacDonald Clan)

seems religion runs deep in the Scottish homeland, especially on the football pitch. Years ago, the Scots killed each other in brutally ruthless battles in support of either religion. Today, the Catholics' weapon of mass destruction is none other than the Celtics, while the Protestants depend on the Rangers. After hearing shocking tales from some locals and one very drunk Irishman, I can best describe the rivalry in this manner: Do not walk into the wrong bar on game day.

The city was great, but I grew up in one and wanted more. I wanted to see bagpipes, mountains, men in kilts killing the Redcoats - I wanted to see Loch Ness and William Wallace. So off to the mysterious Highlands I went, full of excitement, awe, and packing a good deal of local scotch. I happened to fall upon a band of travelers seeking the same adventure as I was - and oh God we found it. After hours on the bus awed by the tales our Scottish driver was delivering to his captive yet fearful audience (Scottish roads are more like mountain goat passes), we quickly learned two very important lessons: The Scots really hate two groups of people; the English and the Campbells.

Ah the English. They should have learned from the Romans.



A hairy-coo (highland cattle)



Eileen donnan (MacRea Castle)

Emperor Hadrian knew that the Scots (Picts) were maniacs and simply built a wall keeping them in Scotland. The English got greedy and decided to conquer - and to this day, are still hated in Scotland. But what about these Campbells? Well, the Scottish Campbell clan started a feud centuries ago by massacring a whole MacDonald clan in their sleep. Not a wise decision. The massacre of Glencoe Pass set in time a deep hatred between those loyal to the MacDonald clan (most of the Highlands) and the Campbells, a feud which continues to this day. In one stop in my travels, I actually learned of bar who refuses to serve anyone carrying the surname of Campbell, despite their origin.

Despite the hate, the Scottish folk, especially the Highlanders, are ridiculously friendly (given you aren't British or a Campbell). The Highlands are a mass of rolling green glens and

deep blue lochs nestled between what seems to be endless mountains. There are no trees, only the odd town, oddly placed phone booth, and sheep - millions of 'em. During the summer, the sunlight lasts over 20 hours, only to be followed by winter nights that run nearly as long covering the countryside in musted hues and darker tones. Despite the extreme which is Scotland, the land is filled with the warmest and most cheerful people in the world, so full of pride. Highlanders are so trusting that there isn't a need for trespassing laws. Any person is free to go anywhere - free to enjoy all the beauty which the lands secretly yields.

My travels took me through the Isle of Skye. The Island, draped in a continuous fine mist is home to MacDonald and MacLeod clans and is truly the most beautiful place on Earth. The Island has one lane highways, free roaming 'hairy coos', Gaelic street signs, drunk bagpipe playing locals and a crazy kilt bearing - knife yielding hostel owner, but all these surprisingly come together to make the Isle of Skye the pilgrimage it is today. Strangely, I will always remember watching the crowd in a local tavern as one Friday night they simply drank and passed a set of pipes around from one happy sole to another.

Despite the cost, Scotland is a must see for any student wandering across the old continent. Its rough charm, warm people, vibrant history, and ever flowing drams of scotch and pints of beer more than make up for frightening exchange rate. My advice - after England come to Scotland, you will appreciate every pound you spend. The hard part is leaving.

Top 5 reasons to visit Scotland

1. The Scotch
2. Friendly locals
3. To learn the 'real' story of William Wallace
4. Freedom
5. They hate England too

Top 5 reasons not to visit Scotland

1. Haggis
2. Blood Pudding
3. Highway driving is a constant game of chicken
4. Sheep
5. Deep fried hamburgers - bun and all