

Scotland: Where Old Traditions are Alive and Well Today!

by Fyllis Hockman, Travel Columnist, fyllish@aol.com

Ask anyone what they think of when they think of Scotland and you'll probably hear bagpipes, kilts, clan tartans. And if the year were 1746, you would have heard the same thing. It was in that year, after the Battle of Culloden when the British decimated the Scots, that the British set about to systematically rid the country and its people of their identity and traditions. It didn't work, which makes it all the more remarkable that everything that defines the Scottish people today is the same as it was centuries ago – and it was my mission to explore them all: kilts, bagpipes, also whisky. Even the Gaelic language.



Fyllis Hockman
Travel Columnist



Many of the signs throughout the Scottish Highlands are in both English and Gaelic! Photo by Victor Block

And it was on a trip to the Scottish Highlands with UNTOURS, a company with its own unique traditions, that I got to relish in all of it. UNTOURS puts you up in unusual accommodations -- perhaps a castle, a vineyard, or a delightful old farmhouse. It provides a car, inundates you with information, connects you with a local contact to answer questions, and sets you off to see what YOU want to see when YOU want to see it.

We were spending our "live like a local" week in our own apartment, part of an 1837 church in a former life, near our home base of Inverness, where all the neighborhood signs sported the Gaelic translation below the English ID. Dead language? Not close. Very hard to understand though. But then again so is the language they speak, which they claim is English...

And alas(sie) to the Highland Games. A throwback to ancient Scotland, it is a unifying rite of passage for any Scot. Amidst the vast ocean of tartan, bagpipes and clans sits a cultural event steeped in skill, tradition and community going back more than a thousand years.

The music, of course, the incredibly distinctive bagpipes emanating from competing bands, never leave your ears. And, of course, every pipe band sports its own tartan so the multitudes of plaids create a fashion visual that is hard to



Scotland's famous haggis should be tasted before actually identified – sheep's lungs, heart and liver! Photo by photocreations/Dreamstime.com



So many bands, so many colors, so many bagpipes highlight the summer Highland Games throughout the Scottish Highlands! Photo by Victor Block.

forge from your eyes. And I can't tell you how many times I heard the words bonny, aye and laddie. To say, the Highland games are an assault on all the senses is a wee understatement.

And although some of the games such as track and cycling may be recognizable, the chanter, caber tossing, hammer throw and tug 'o war are not. Men throwing heavy sticks, balls, hammers – and probably their arms out!

So kilts, bagpipes, Highland games all attesting to Scottish heritage. That still leaves whisky.

Scottish single malts – celebrated locally as whisky (no e) – are known all over the world for their richness and smoothness – and cost. With a history dating back as far as the 11th century, Scottish whisky is an important part of the country's identify, with most of the 140-plus distilleries in the Highlands. Being more of a pedestrian imbibor of alcohol, I was not the ideal candidate for a whisky distillery tour and tasting. But I soldiered on.

At the Glen Ord Distillery, serving up its single malts for almost two centuries, I sampled a flight of their 3 brands of whisky. Three very different flavors, or so I was told. They all tasted the same to me. I'm not proud. Then I added three drops of water to each dram to “separate the flavors.” And yes, I noticed they were more potent – but still tasted the same. I slinked out of the distillery.

A visit to The Highland House of Fraser reinforces the uniqueness that is Scotland because there, for a mere \$750, you can have your own personalized kilt made. And should you not have your own family tartan, you can choose from 750 different plaids from other clans. And you can even watch a kiltmaker weave your threads while, of course, listening to some bagpipe music.




The author did not do justice to appreciating the richness of Scotland's famed whisky at a tasting! Photo by Victor Block



Among the many unusual skills exhibited at Scotland's Highland Games is the hammer toss! Photo by Victor Block



The front of our UNTOURS apartment in an old 1837 church in Inverness, Scotland! Photo by Victor Block



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And lest you think the kilt is itself a throwback to history, not so. They are often worn at every celebratory gathering from birthday parties to weddings to funerals – and sometimes just because. And as our local UNTOURS rep told us, he takes his kilt and bagpipes with him wherever he goes – apparently both wrap up well for traveling -- which conveys how very much a part of everyday living the old traditions are today.

So despite Britain's efforts to destroy the language, the clothing, the traditions and the lifestyle of the Scottish people, it all remains alive and well today. And in UNTOURS own tradition, we picked up a roasted chicken and another bottle of wine in our home town and headed back to our cozy apartment to think about what other historic/modern Scottish traditions we would next explore.

For more information, visit www.untours.com/scottish-highlands.



Colorful tartans brighten up the entire country of Scotland! Photo by Victor Block



Kilts are often a part of everyday dress – only accompanied by a wee dram! Photo by Victor Block



The costumes and intricate steps of Scottish dancers are a big drawer to Scotland's Highland Games! Photo by Victor Block