

## RHAPSODY IN TARTAN: WHIRLWIND TOUR HITS ONE BONNY SPOT AFTER ANOTHER



JOSH WILSON — SPECIAL TO THE MERCURY NEWS

A bagpiper strolls the grounds of Urquhart Castle, on the banks of Scotland's Loch Ness. The fortress was once key to controlling Scotland's Highlands.

# FOUR SHOTS of SCOTCH

From Glasgow and Arran, Inverness and Skye, images of a country that rolls over rocky crags and verdant pastures

By Josh Wilson

*Special to the Mercury News*

GLASGOW — So. Which Scotland shall I write about? The rolling, pastoral countryside dotted with sheep and stone walls? The cities, densely built up with ornate Gothic architecture? The wild and stark mountain country, haunted by stories?

What of the coast, more sheer and breathless than the best California can offer, but craggy like Maine's granite shore? And the islands, looming in humpbacked clusters, as geographically diverse as the whole of their mother country?

All this and more I saw, in the space of a week. I don't recommend such a hasty pace: Scotland is an ancient country packed with details, and you're advised to stay in one place and delve in.

But if time is an issue, you can take in plenty. My Caledonian voyage started at Glasgow, a destination chosen more or

less at random for its central location.

I was at first a bit put off by the city's 19th-century industrial aesthetic. There were no true skyscrapers, but the buildings and rowhouses were tall and crowded together, all wrought-iron, steeples and blackened stonework.

Schlepping my backpack from the train station to the bed-and-breakfast was a revelation. The narrow streets and a steady autumnal drizzle made me feel like I was in a Dickens novel, or the "Eleanor Rigby" sequence of the Beatles' "Yellow Submarine" movie. A big part of the UK's collective pop-cultural zeitgeist suddenly snapped into context. Aha!

The real beauty of Glaswegian architecture comes through in the buildings of famed architect Charles Rennie

## OFF THE COAST

North Atlantic cruise makes stops from the Orkneys to Iceland.

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## SCOTLAND BASICS

**Size:** About 275 miles long and 150 miles wide, and a little smaller than Maine.

**Population:** About 5 million people. Glasgow has about 700,000 people, Edinburgh about 450,000.

**Weather:** Average high/low in Edinburgh 43/35 January, 65/52 July. Two to three inches of rain most months; wettest July and August.

**Getting there:** Round-trip connecting flights from San Francisco to Glasgow start around \$360; fares to Edinburgh are usually higher. The train from London to Edinburgh takes about 4½ hours. Fares start as low as \$30 U.S., though those are not usually advertised outside the United Kingdom. Information: [www.railtrack.co.uk](http://www.railtrack.co.uk) and [www.gner.co.uk](http://www.gner.co.uk).

**Phone code:** The United Kingdom's country code is 44; Glasgow's city code is 141 and Edinburgh's 131.

**Currency:** The British pound is currently about \$1.50 U.S.

**Time change:** Eight hours ahead of Pacific standard time.

## Online resources:

Scottish Tourist Board, [www.visitscotland.com](http://www.visitscotland.com); Greater Glasgow Tourist Board, [www.seeglasgow.com](http://www.seeglasgow.com); Highlands of Scotland Tourist Board, [www.host.co.uk](http://www.host.co.uk)

# SCOTLAND | Isle of Arran promises country 'in m

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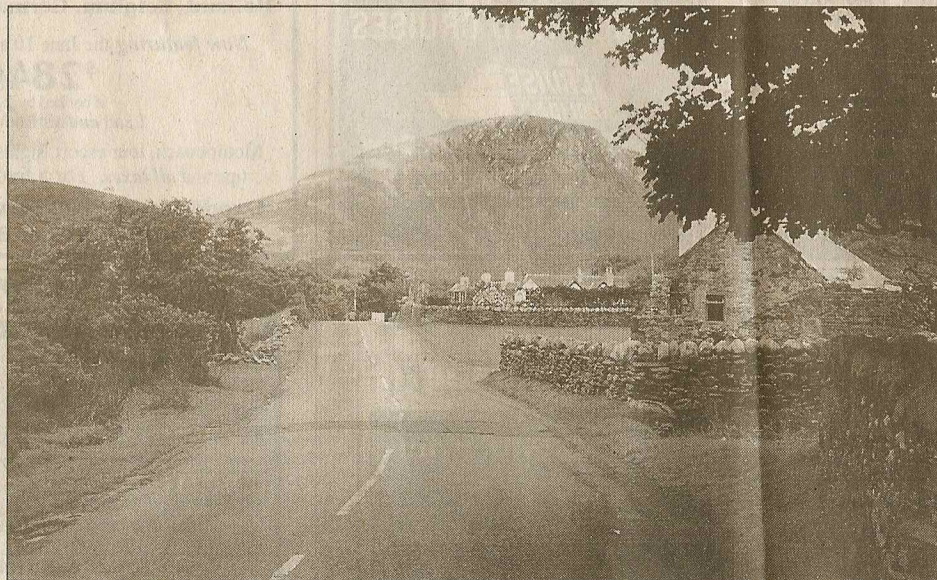
Mackintosh. The Glasgow School of Art (167 Renfrew St., 353 4526) is a good place to start.

The city itself is bustling and ambitious. At night main drags like Sauchiehall Street are full of spirited young folks on the prowl, shifting from one pub to another, and deep in their cups by the time last call arrives.

Nightlife is big over there. Ostentatious yuppies, besuited middle-aged financiers, scruffy rockers, clean-cut college kids and gruff working stiffs all pour back pints in pubs, sports bars, wine clubs and basement dives. Frustratingly, most of the pubs seemed to stop serving food as dinnertime arrives, and they close up shop entirely before midnight (though maybe that's a good thing).

Nightlife, however, wasn't the reason I went to Scotland. I wanted history and landscapes, and the country is generously endowed on both respects.

From Glasgow Central Station it was an hour's train ride to the coast, and another hour on the ferry at Ardrossan to the Isle of Arran, which the brochures call "Scotland in miniature." Right! A cheap round-trip bus ticket will get you all over the place. I caught a coach straight through the steep-sloped mountains that occupy the center of the island, enjoyed a leisurely



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From the bayside town of Lochranza on Scotland's Isle of Arran, a visitor can head out to hiking trails or a tour-on-your-own castle. (Get the key at the post office.)

lunch (toasted sandwich, chips and a half-pint) in Blackwaterfoot's warm and well-appointed Kinloch Hotel, then took a connecting bus around the coast to Lochranza, a classic picture-postcard town set on a small ocean inlet and surrounded on

three sides by tall, rocky hills.

A small, crumbling castle stands on a spit of land jutting into the waters, the names of its first builders lost to the ages. Get the castle's gate key (hanging off a "Braveheart" keychain deocrated with

Mel Gibson's mug) at the town's general store/post office and enjoy the solitary walk out. You can clamber up the stairs and around the ruined tower, and look down at the jumble of rocks that was once a high seaward wall before heavy weather brought it down.

Walk along the waterside and Lochranza is all cottages and winding little roads. A shady trail up the slope opposite the castle will take you through what I'm told is sublime day-hiking country, past enticingly named spots like Fairy Dell and Ossian's Cave.

I wouldn't know. I had a bus to catch, and then a ferry, and then a train back to Glasgow, before leaving for my next stop: Inverness, heart of the Highlands.

I didn't know what to expect of the Highlands. Bare rocks jutting from thin soil and a cold north wind? In fact, Inverness and its surroundings are surpassingly beautiful, wooded and green.

"Inver" means "at the mouth of" and the river Ness does indeed pass right through town before emptying into Moray Firth and the North Sea. Architecturally far less oppressive than Glasgow, Inverness is still a very old city of narrow streets, odd three-way intersections and beautiful buildings, nestled together and maintained with all the attention to detail a tourist town can muster. (The famed castle is a modern contrivance, and proba-

# country 'in miniature'

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bly one of the most kitschy spots you can visit.)

The food is good, the pubs are always full and shops line the byways, everything from speciality Scottish music and clothing to modern electronics and jewelry. I wound up staying at Wychway (3 Haugh Road; 1463 239399), a small but lovely B&B with a fabulous medievalist proprietress who will fill your ears with stories and who serves the kind of delicious, multi-course breakfasts you can get away with eating only when on vacation.

There are plenty of tours around and from Inverness. The territory is full of hikes, ghosts, castles and standing stones — a perfect home base for a longer stay in Scotland, with access to all the Highlands and plenty of its own charm if you want to stay put and relax.

Loch Ness is a must-see, a natural beauty of a lake, deep blue-black and bordered by steep hills covered in evergreens and rich farmland. Though narrow enough to swim across — about a mile — the loch is 24 miles long and at least 700 feet deep, with extensive submarine caverns that have ever been charted. Urquhart Castle, right on the loch, is a magnificent and extensive ruin complete with a bagpiper patrolling the ramparts. It was once the strategic key to controlling the Highlands, vir-

# SCOTLAND | Embrace the cheesy on Nessie tour

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ually unassailable by land or water. There is a fee for entry, but it's worthy.

You can rent a car and drive, take a bike down the B582 roadway, or try a tour, if only for the Nessie mythology. There as many Loch Ness Monster tours and museums as there are Original Famous Ray's pizzerias in New York City, and they are equally cheesy. I opted for Tony Harmsworth's Loch Ness & Natural History Tour ([www.loch-ness.org](http://www.loch-ness.org); 1456 450831), run by a respectable academic who deflated most of

the tall tales, left in enough mystery to keep the rubes guessing, and rounded things out with a few standing stones and country-life details. The tour ended at Urquhart, where I took a cruise back up the loch to Inverness, the blue sky and brilliant sun of my September afternoon periodically occluded by drifting curtains of mist.

Rent a car and head west from Inverness along highways 832 and 890 towards Kyle of Lochalsh and the Isle of Skye. The landscape transforms from quaintly rural to barren, striking

hills and plains, then turns sharply up into churning coastal mountains that surpass the Mendocino Coast in raw majesty. At the intersection of highway 87 turn back east about five miles, away from the water, for a brief stop at Eilean Donan Castle, a fairytale beauty jutting up out a small inlet. Easily the most beautiful castle I saw, with the late afternoon sun reflecting off rippling crosscurrents, Eilean Donan is fully intact, still inhabited, and provisioned with guides and remarkable historical artifacts and slice-of-life reproductions in each room.

The most beautiful castle? Eilean Donan on the west coast, still inhabited but open to visitors.

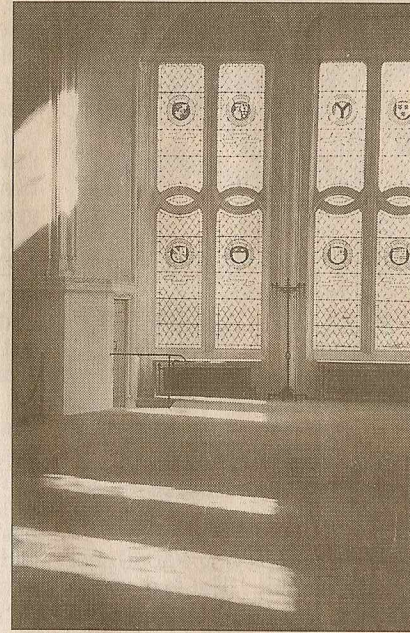
Skye is now accessible via a new bridge, and worthy of much more than a paragraph. Mostly treeless, but peppered with lush nooks and rumors of ancient standing stones, the island has all the pleasures an outdoors fan and history buff could want. The panoramas are without peer, full of weird geological formations and wild sunsets. Just watch out for the sheep, who charge absurdly down the road towards your oncoming car. In the off-season I was able to get a B&B easily, but book ahead during the peak. Make a stop at Dunvegan Castle, no-

where near as lovely as Eilean Donan, but gifted with wonderful surrounding gardens.

Of Scotland's numerous castles, as many are in stately decay as lovingly kept up. The star of my trip was Stirling Castle, just north of Glasgow. I spent six hours exploring every nook and cranny of that fantastic structure. Atop an ancient cliff of volcanic rock with high, sheer walls, Stirling was of inestimable strategic and symbolic value in the wild old days. It looms over the River Forth, site of William Wallace's decisive victory over the British. Mary Queen of Scots was coronated there as an infant; you can also find a museum dedicated to the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders, describing that regiment's decisive roles in Britain's lost imperial ambition, from Balaklava to the Battle of New Orleans.

Amid the fearsome military fortifications you can recline in luscious gardens of bright roses and hoary old trees with spreading branches. The meticulous greens were favored by resident nobles for lawn bowling and the occasional royal murder. On the surrounding plains below you can see earthen embankments and forests on the hillsides, once the gardens and game preserves of long-dead aristocrats.

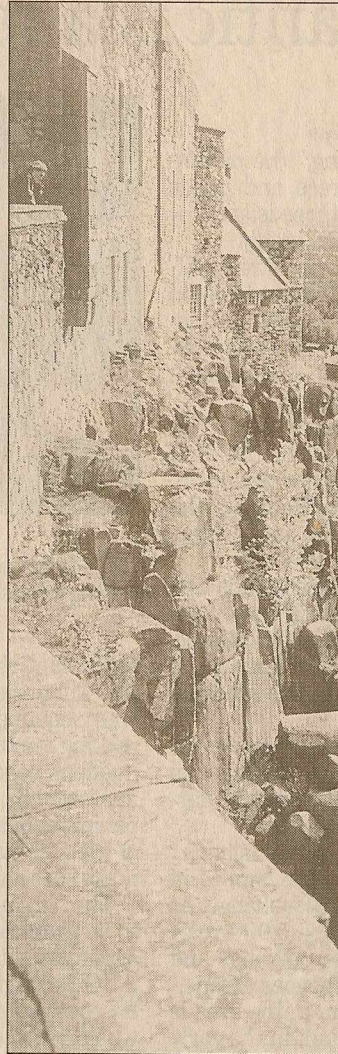
A brief visit to Scotland is like



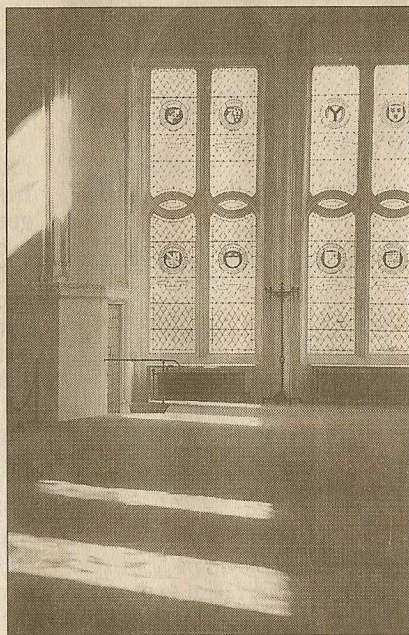
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The well-kept interior of Stirling Castle stands in counterpoint to its craggy outer walls.

skimming through a story book a thousand pages long, full of dazzling landscapes and characters both contemporary and quite antique. I will turn those pages again, and perhaps next time stay a while.



# Nessie tour



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