

Scotland – Summer 1994

Preceding this year's EPS conference in Glasgow, I took a trip with Karl.

Scotland was nice and I think that both Karl and I enjoyed it. We flew to Edinburgh on the afternoon of Wednesday, 13 July. We picked up our rental car from Alamo, and after declining their special offer of an upgrade for a very 'reasonable' price and declining all the extra types of insurance they tried to push on us (CDW was included in the plane-car package deal), they gave us a bigger car anyway, a Golf with sun-roof and radio! At times Karl is amazing. While I was still searching for the ignition he had already seen that there was a sun-roof and was pushing the button to open it. Needless to add, Karl was thrilled with the sun-roof, and although I was not at first, I later found it very nice when we ran into warm, sunny days so uncharacteristic for Scotland. However, the sun-roof does cost some headroom, and I did not like that at all as it was impossible for me to sit up straight.

From the airport we drove over the Firth of Forth auto bridge getting a good view of the famous railway bridge next to it. Then we went to Culross, a small village on the Forth, somewhat further inland (upstream?) from Edinburgh, which was important in the late 16th and early 17th centuries with extensive trade with the Low Countries. There are some nicely preserved buildings, but we were unfortunately too late in the day to visit them. We then proceeded to Dunfermline, which used to be the capital of Scotland and was the birthplace of Andrew Carnegie. After some difficulty we found the Bed & Breakfast where I had reserved a room. This was the only reservation and subsequently we just found a B&B when we felt like stopping.

The next morning we stopped shortly to see the Dunfermline Abbey, the interesting part being the church, 12th century, "one of Scotland's finest Norman naves" according to Michelin. Then we proceeded north. Our first stop was Dunkeld where the cathedral is in a nice park along the river and the street going to the cathedral is nicely restored. The cathedral itself is a ruined (since the mid-17th century) nave (being restored) and the choir, which survived as a parish church.

The next stop was Pitlochry, where the chief attraction was a salmon ladder around the local power dam—34 pools to rise 54 feet. Then we went to Blair castle whose white exterior with turrets, chimneys, parapets is most impressive. The Duke has the only private army left in Britain. It is set in a large beautiful estate and is supposed to be full of wonderful furniture and 'history'. We did not go in; I could not bring myself to force all that furniture (31 rooms full) on Karl, nor am I up enough on Scottish history to appreciate all of the historical connections.

As we proceeded further north the towns became smaller and the density of cars much less. We stopped in a small town, Kingussie, and visited the local Highland Folk Museum, of which the highlight was a 'black house', which actually wasn't local, but typical of the western islands. A black house had turf walls and a twig and sod roof. The entrance was to the first of three rooms, which was for the animals, typically a cow, a few chickens, and maybe a couple of sheep. The next room was the one used for almost everything. It had a peat fire burning practically constantly on the floor in the middle of the room, an enclosed bed along one wall for the parents, perhaps another bed on another wall (children would have slept on the floor if there was no bed), a small table, a couple of chairs. The chairs were very low to the ground. It appeared to me that their legs were only about half as long as they should be. The explanation was twofold: the people were shorter then, and they preferred to sit low to the ground

where there was less smoke. The peat fire gave off a fair amount of smoke and there was no chimney, not even a hole in the roof, to let the smoke out. That was not because they hadn't thought of it, but to save the smoke, which was slowly deposited on the ceiling, *i.e.*, on the twigs and grass which formed the underside of the roof. This is the reason for the name 'black house'. Every few years the soot was 'harvested' and used as fertilizer on the garden plot which the woman maintained. There was a third room containing a large bed and a couple of chairs. However, it was reserved for very special occasions like giving birth and laying out the dead. The man would probably have worked part of the year fishing. Life expectancy for the women was about 35 years; the men lived longer, presumably because they ate better when fishing, spent less time in the smokey room, and didn't have to bear countless numbers of children.

We then proceeded to Aviemore, which is a tourist center for outdoor activities. We bypassed the tourist-trap town and drove as far as we could up the mountain to a chair lift which was supposed to be able to take us even higher up on Cairn Gorm from where there is a Michelin ★★★ panorama. Unfortunately, just as we got out of the car the storm, which had been threatening us for several hours, let loose. So we skipped the cable car. The view from the parking lot was not bad and I could easily imagine that without all the close clouds and from a bit higher it would have been very ★★★. So we descended in the rain and drove a bit further to Boat of Garten (what a name), a small village where we found a B&B for the night.

The next day, Friday, we headed on north as far as Inverness. In the vicinity of Inverness we visited Culloden, site of a decisive battle in 1745 where the Duke of Cumberland defeated Prince Charles Edward Stuart thus putting an end to the Jacobite Rising. We also saw the Clava Cairns, late Neolithic burial or ceremonial stone circles and mounds. We did not stop in Inverness itself, but just drove through it to turn back south, driving down the west side of Loch Ness, which is pretty enough. At the southern end of the loch is Fort Augustus where there is a picturesque set of locks to connect Loch Ness with a short river to the next loch, Loch Lochy.

We then turned west and drove through rugged valleys and hills and along lochs—Loch Cluanie, Glen Shiel, Loch Duich. Eilean Donan Castle, which occupies a small island in Loch Duich just off the shore, looked to me to be typically Scottish, particularly if you could imagine away the bridge which now links it to the shore.

Then came Kyle of Lochalsh. Ferries connect from there to the near-by (15 min.?) Isle of Skye. It would have been nice to have gone to Skye, but we didn't have enough time. Kyle of Lochalsh looked like a very touristy place catering to the wilder, young set (maybe I am wrong, but that was my quick first impression). So we decided to continue on to Plockton.

This was our first encounter with the roads in remote Scotland: one-lane, but asphalted, with "passing places" every so often, actually quite frequently—every 100 yards or so in the hills where the many curves make it impossible to see even that far.

Plockton is a small, picturesque fishing village on a small bay which attracts lots of visitors in the summer. It was perhaps 5:30 when we arrived, a bit late to find a B&B, as it turned out. All of them along the water were already full. However, along a back street there were still vacancies. We found one run by an ordinary family which moved into a trailer beside the house for the summer and rented out their bedrooms, whereas most of the others we stayed at were run by older women whose kids were grown and gone. Besides being picturesque, Plockton had something else to recommend it, one of the best pubs according to some national pub guide. So we hurried there to eat, and

a good thing we did, for it was quickly full. It was nice, and the food was as good or better than most of the places we ate. The ale was great, although to my uneducated palate not so much different from other places. Actually I became quite addicted to the ale. Delicious, and with one exception served slightly cool, not like the warm stuff you get in many English pubs.

The next day was devoted to travel northwards to Gairloch, mostly along the coast and mostly on one-lane roads. The scenery was spectacular: moorlands and mountains, some more than 3000 feet. It is not as spectacular as parts of Norway, but in some places it gets close. The highlights were the Bealach-na Bo, pass of the cattle, and the Beinn Eighe mountain range. You note that the names are in Gaelic, a language almost dead a few years ago but now making a revival.

Bealach-na Bo is at a height of 2053 feet. To get there you climb, essentially from sea level, a one-lane road with lots of hairpin curves and in some places 1:4 gradients. As Michelin says, “not recommended for learner drivers, caravans or heavy vehicles.” Strangely enough, Michelin does not mention that it is a one-lane road, where it may be necessary to back up to the nearest passing place in order to let an oncoming driver through. The views, however, make it very worthwhile.

The Beinn Eighe range has 7 peaks, a few of which are capped by white quartz, which makes a rather special sight. It is in the Beinn Eighe National Nature Reserve, which is Britain’s first, and which was created with large grants from the European Union. Loch Maree, along one side of the range, completes the magnificent setting. We took a short walk up the hills and along the loch. Karl can walk quite well along trails and loose stones do not bother him much any more, but you almost have to force him to get started. He never volunteers for a walk and almost always answers “no” when asked if he would like to go for one.

At Gairloch, our first try for a B&B was full, but the next one had a room. It was more a hotel than a simple B&B, run by two solicitous ladies in, I would guess, their fifties. We finally had a choice of something other than the usual Scottish breakfast of juice, toast, fried egg, sausage, bacon (Canadian), and a tomato (with sometimes as extra fried mushrooms and/or fried bread). I opted for eggs Benedict. Karl stayed with Scottish breakfast, which came with haggis as well as all the usual stuff.

We started the next day with a visit to the Inverewe Gardens. The Gulf Stream ensures a reasonably mild climate, which allowed Osgood Mackenzie to create his magnificent gardens on a barren peninsula. They were continued by his daughter after his death in 1922 and later given by her to the National Trust for Scotland. About half of the 64 acres are woods, the rest a wide variety of plants, more than 2500 species. It was very pleasant to wander around. Besides the plants there were many nice views of the adjacent loch. The previous day had been overcast and a bit cool, but it had now turned sunny and warm, which was to continue for the rest of the trip.

Continuing on, we passed more lochs and hills, somewhat less spectacular than the day before, and a waterfall before ending the day at Ullapool, another nice fishing village on the edge of a loch given over these summer days to hordes of tourists, where we spent the night.

We were now at the northern-most point of our trip and had to turn south again to reach Glasgow in time for my conference (and Karl’s plane home). We drove directly to Inverness and then again along Loch Ness, but this time along the eastern side. There the road is not so close to the loch, but the lack of views of the loch is compensated by other hilly scenery, and by much less traffic.

We spent the night at Fort William, using the afternoon to take a cable car up to a shoulder of the Nevis range where we walked around and enjoyed the views. Ben Nevis itself could not be seen from there, but from the valley below we had good views of it too. There was still a bit of snow on Ben Nevis, so all was still well—the story is that if the snow ever leaves Ben Nevis, the ownership of Ben Nevis will revert to the Crown. (I have no idea who owns it now.)

Our next to last day we drove through Glen Coe, which has spectacular mountains. I could not convince Karl to take a walk though. We visited the Bonawe Furnace, an iron smelter in operation from 1753 until around 1870. It used iron ore shipped from Cumbria and locally made charcoal. Instead of cutting down whole trees to get the wood for the charcoal, they would only cut part of the tree every 16 years or so, thus preserving the forests (and the source of the charcoal).

We made our way south to Loch Lomond and then to Callander, a tourist center in The Trossachs, a stylish vacation area, where we found a B&B for the night. The rest of the afternoon was used for a trip to Stirling to see the magnificent castle, which rivals that of Edinburgh for its site and history.

The following day, our last, we took a walk to a waterfall and drove a bit around The Trossachs visiting Loch Katrine (very pretty), which serves as Glasgow's water supply since 1859. Then it was time to head for the Glasgow airport. Karl then flew back alone and was met by Patsy at Schiphol. It was pretty adventuresome for Karl to fly alone, but I had arranged with KLM to have him met at the gate at Schiphol and helped through customs. And someone in Glasgow escorted him through passport control and to the gate. I guess it went without a hitch. As usual, I couldn't get much out of Karl about it beyond that there were no problems and that he was met.

And I proceeded to my conference in Glasgow. There wasn't anything particularly exciting at the conference, but a lot of the talks were interesting. As usual, my carefully prepared talk required a lot of last-minute modifications as I got new information from several people at the conference. But it went OK.

On Sunday, the only free day of the conference, I had wanted to walk around Glasgow as well as to visit some museums. That, of course, was the only day of bad weather of the whole trip. It rained on and off most of the day, and frequently quite hard. But I managed to dodge the rain most of the time. Unfortunately, the university's museum was closed on Sunday, although I was able to find some time on another day when there were a couple of talks I felt I could skip—the highlight there is a large Whistler collection, two rooms devoted almost entirely to him. And I did manage to see the Burrel Collection, which is in a very functional new building in a park. It is essentially the collection of one (rich) man (Burrel), whose interest was very broad. So the collection includes not only Western art (paintings, tapestries, Greek and Roman pottery and statues, etc.), but also Egyptian and Chinese. And this is all done without its being a hodge-podge. Quite remarkable!

The conference ended too late on Wednesday to catch a plane, so I had to stay until Thursday. Instead of the morning plane I took the afternoon one and used the morning to walk around Glasgow and see what the rain had prevented me from seeing on Sunday. Frankly, there is not so much to see. The cathedral was interesting, but the interior was mostly torn up to install a new heating system. The rest of the city is either massive stone buildings of about 100 years ago or recent urban renewal, not particularly interesting. And there is a lot more urban renewal necessary.