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**There's far more
to the thriving city
of Inverness than
a famous monster,
tasty haggis and
acres of tartan...**

WORDS BY CAROLINE DEACON



**Inverness has more
history than you can
shake a stick at.**

The last battle on British soil was fought here at Culloden, and unlike other battlefields in the UK, this one was so recently vacated, you still expect to see a straggling soldier. In the aftermath of this battle, a series of forts were erected in the Highlands intended to crush any future rebellion. The best preserved of these, Fort George, is just outside the city. Still an active garrison, it's one of the best examples of artillery fortification in Europe, with one mile of ramparts from which you can spot bottlenose dolphins, one of only two resident populations in Britain. The city is also the most northerly in Britain, on the same latitude as Riga, Alaska, and Moscow, yet it enjoys a relatively mild climate thanks to the North Atlantic Drift. With a population of 65,000 and rising, it's the fastest growing city in the UK, but clings onto its small-town charm.



Beyond the High Street, with its 'anytown' chain stores, you can seek out the Victorian Market, a genuinely time-warped jewel with an eclectic mix of shops from fishmongers to bagpipe repairers. Morrison, the watchmaker and jeweller is worth a visit, for antique jewellery at reasonable prices, or if edible souvenirs appeal then pop to Nessies, the Belgian chocolatier. Having stocked up on sugar, wander out of the market and down Church Street past Abertaff House, the oldest building in Inverness, to Leahey's, an ancient church now housing a massive treasure trove of second-hand books. Poke around the dust of centuries while working on your appetite as the smells of home cooking drift down from the adjoining café.

Inverness is surrounded by serious mountains, and you can enjoy the best of these without any effort by taking the train from Inverness to Kyle of Lochalsh. One of the most scenic journeys in the world, it skirts along the rocky shore of Lochcarron, round the back of the ancient Torridon mountains, and ends inches from the sea, where you can gaze over to Skye. Dismount one stop early, at Plockton, and enjoy a delicious meal in the converted railway waiting room (www.off-the-rails.co.uk).

Feast on locally caught seafood and try Cullen Skink, a thick, creamy northern soup made with Finnan haddock (smoked over green wood, turf or peat). Once replete, you can hop back on the train, or wander through the National Trust conservation village where evidence of the North Atlantic drift can be seen in the numerous palm trees. The journey takes about three hours each way, and there are usually three trains per day.

Scotland would not be Scotland without whisky, and there are over a dozen distilleries a short stagger from the city—even in one day's round trip you can try every tippie. Start just west of Inverness at Moniac Castle (www.moniaccastle.co.uk), home to Highland wineries where you can sample everything from silver birch wine to Sloe liqueur, drive on to Ord distillery for a wee dram of pure malt and finish by sampling the fine range of unique organic beers at the Black Isle Brewery (www.blackislebrewery.com). The non-drinking driver will be compensated by the fantastic views en route.

For many, Scotland means golf, and there are three courses in the city where visitors can play a round from as little as £20 (Culcabock Road, Walter Scott Drive and Glenurquhart Road).



Highland views: from left to right, Inverness and Kessock bridge from Ord Hill; grazing moose at the Highland Wildlife Park; and the bank of the River Ness at the foot of Inverness Castle.

“SCOTLAND WOULD NOT BE SCOTLAND WITHOUT WHISKY, AND THERE ARE OVER A DOZEN DISTILLERIES A SHORT STAGGER FROM THE CITY”

There are dozens of other courses within spitting distance, Royal Dornoch being the most famous of these, a links course rated one of the best in the world, where golf has been played for nearly 500 years (from £50). Golf widows can enjoy a bracing walk along one of the north's finest beaches, or look in at the cathedral (Madonna's son Rocco Ritchie was christened there) and then take in the witch's stone, the site of the last burning of a witch in Scotland.

If even golf is too strenuous, go see the Inverness Caledonian Thistle FC who play in the Scottish Premier Division; there are often seats to spare at matches, www.caleythistleonline.com.

And don't miss any opportunities to watch shinty, the ancient Celtic game known in Ireland as hurling. See www.shinty.com for local fixtures.

Just a short distance from Culloden and Fort George, are the equally impressive and evocative yet completely off the tourist trail, Clava Cairns, prehistoric burial chambers, dating back to 2000 BC. On your way back, call in at Cawdor Castle. Forever linked by Shakespeare with Macbeth, Cawdor was not actually built until the late 14th Century (Macbeth murdered King Duncan in 1040, and it was actually in Inverness Castle). Cawdor is still worth a visit though, and the current resident Lady Macbeth is responsible for the wonderful gardens and tearooms.

If you are really intent on finding Nessie then join the hordes of buses and cars trailing down the treacherous A82 to the beautiful vantage point at Urquhart Castle. We suggest calling en route at the excellent Loch Ness Monster Exhibition, at Drumnadrochit, where the scientific evidence for a monster (or not) is presented. Here too you can detour away from the crowds into Glen Affric to see large remnants of ancient Caledonian pine forest. Or stop at Abriachan for empty forest walks with excellent views high above the Loch. To avoid the crowds completely, drive down the other side of Loch Ness, on the B862, over wonderful moorlands and traffic-free roads to Dores, where you can enjoy a drink and paddle at the loch side pub.

Inverness has so much else in the way of wildlife. Cross the Cromarty Bridge at low tide and you are almost guaranteed to see seals basking on the rocks. Just past the bridge, Storehouse of Foulis is a good place to observe them closely—then fortify yourself with their excellent home cooking. Cromarty, the Highland's best preserved historic town is worth a visit too, and from there you can hire a boat to go dolphin watching. From Cromarty, a short hop takes you to the Groam House Museum at Rosemarkie. Run by enthusiastic volunteers, it is dedicated to the Picts, the original Invernesians who were eventually ousted by the Celts.

To see all the Highland monsters at once, apart from the aquatic ones, head south to the highland wildlife park, home to all the creatures that used to roam this area and some that still do, including bison, wolf, wildcat, beaver and linx. The best time to go is around feeding time; not only will you be guaranteed sight of the animals, the guides give you an excellent running commentary. www.highlandwildlife.org. **easyJet**

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Letting off steam:

Drop the kids at the Aquadome (www.invernessleisure.com) with its myriad slides and river rides (over eight-year-olds can go unaccompanied) while you have a potter round the neighbouring Floral Hall (www.invernessfloralhall.com) or a stroll across the nearby Georgian footbridges that link islands over the River Ness. Then enjoy a skate at the Ice Centre or watch the locals hard at another ancient sport—curling.



Upcoming events:

2007 IS THE YEAR OF HIGHLAND CULTURE (WWW.HIGHLAND2007.COM) AND THERE WILL BE THOUSANDS OF EVENTS, LARGE AND SMALL, THROUGHOUT THE YEAR, SUCH AS:

Spirit of Speyside Whisky Festival
3rd–7th May

www.spiritofspeyside.com
Highland Whisky Festival
2nd & 3rd June
www.scotlandwhisky.com

The Outsider
22nd–24th June
A brand new festival, everything from music to wild food foraging and stargazing
World Highland Games Championships
(pictured above) 21st–22nd July
www.invernesshighlandgames.com