

## Glenfinnan, Fort William & Glencoe Adventure

We leave Edinburgh and start our tour driving westwards. Not long after leaving the city we get a quick glance of Linlithgow Palace through the trees on the left. It was used by the Kings and Queens of Scotland and dates back to 1425. Our most famous queen, Mary Queen of Scots, was born there in 1542. Although largely ruined, it is still very impressive, standing on a small hill above a loch (the Scottish word for a lake). It featured in the popular Outlander television series as Wentworth prison.

Soon afterwards Grangemouth can be seen off to the right – this is a large oil refinery and Scotland's largest container port. Further on to the left, is the town of Falkirk which was the site of two major battles in 1298 and 1746. It is also home to the Falkirk Wheel, a massive rotating boat lift that opened in 2002. It transfers boats between two canals that are 35 m apart in height - unfortunately it is not visible from the motorway. Also in this area are some remains of the Antonine Wall, built by the Romans in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century to try and keep back warrior tribes who fought against the Romans.

Now, look out for two giant horse-head sculptures on the left of the motorway beside a canal – they are the largest horse sculptures in the world, 30 m high, made of stainless steel and are called the Kelpies. They are a tribute to the huge, strong horses which pulled barges along the canals as well as working on the land. The name recalls mythological beasts that possessed the strength and endurance of 10 horses.

As we get near to Stirling we pass on the right the site of the Battle of Bannockburn where, in 1314, a Scottish army under King Robert the Bruce won a crucial victory against a much larger English army.

We now reach Stirling which was known in days gone by as the 'Key to the Kingdom' because of its geographical position close to the centre of Scotland. Dominating the town is Stirling Castle which sits high on a large volcanic rock. The site has been fortified since ancient times although today's castle dates back mainly to the 15 to 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. The kings & queens of Scotland lived here during that period and it was not just a military base but also their home and it therefore has a palace, chapel, large banqueting hall & gardens as well as other buildings.

In the distance, on a hill close to Stirling, is the Wallace Monument, which was built in the 1860's to commemorate our great freedom fighter, William Wallace, who led an army against the English and defeated them close to the monument at the Battle of Stirling Bridge in 1297. He was immortalised in the 1995 film 'Braveheart'.

At Stirling we leave the motorway and head west. A few kilometres further on we cross over the river Teith and as we do so, on the right, is the very imposing Doune Castle. Built in the 14<sup>th</sup> c. by the Duke of Albany, it is so strong that it was only ever captured once. It took on a new fame when it was used in a very popular film called 'Monty Python and the Holy Grail' in 1975 and even more fame when it appeared in the popular Outlander and Game of Thrones series.

We will probably make a coffee stop at Kilmahog where you may get the chance to see some Highland cattle – these are our famous 'hairy coos' with their long horns and thick, shaggy coats.

Next we drive through Callander, site of a Roman camp in the second century, and also a market town in the past but now mainly associated with tourism as there is a very popular area nearby called the Trossachs, full of lochs, rivers, small mountains & forests.

We are now into the narrow Pass of Leny and it is here that we enter the Highlands. Soon we come to our first loch, Loch Lubnaig. Lubnaig means 'curved' in Gaelic – it is the other language that has been spoken in Scotland for many centuries. Gaelic was brought to Scotland by Irish immigrants who settled on the west coast of Scotland and on the islands, although only about 60,000 people still speak it today.

We are now in the area where the Clan MacGregor reigned in the Middle Ages: the clans were extremely powerful at that time and the best known MacGregor was Rob Roy who was born in 1671. He was a great leader and has been romanticised in books & films as a Robin Hood character, always ready to steal from the rich but a friend to the poor.

After passing the end of another loch, Loch Earn, we climb up through pretty Glen Ogle (a glen is the Scottish word for a narrow valley) and then on through a wider glen, Glen Dochart before reaching the village of Crianlarich, which is an important road & rail junction. From now on, all the signposts will have town names in both English and Gaelic.

At the next village, Tyndrum, the road divides and we head north into more beautiful countryside. Soon pretty Loch Tulla comes into view before we drive up onto Rannoch Moor, a vast desolate area of moorland, small lochs & boulders that extends for a long way to the east (to the right of the road) while to the west is a range of mountains.

Now we are approaching Glencoe, the best known of all Scottish glens and full of atmosphere – beautiful, but also mysterious or menacing, depending on the weather and the light. We pass the road to one of Scotland's five ski centres then drive round the base of Buachaille Etive Mor ("the great shepherd of Etive" in Gaelic), the impressive mountain that guards the east end of the glen and is very popular with climbers. Soon we reach the narrow part of Glencoe where there are three mountains on the left, all similar to each other and called the Three Sisters of Glencoe while up on the right is Aonach Eagach ("the notched ridge").

It was in here in the winter of 1692 that the Glencoe Massacre took place. Under orders from the government, a troop of the Campbell clan massacred 38 of the Macdonalds of Glencoe although they had been given hospitality by Macdonald families for 12 days beforehand. Even today the Campbell name is associated with their treachery and the terrible abuse of the hospitality they had received. Near the west end of the glen there's a hotel where there is a notice saying that Campbells are not welcome!

After Glencoe we pass two sea-lochs, Loch Leven & Loch Linnhe and at the north end of Loch Linnhe the town of Fort William is located. A fort was built here by the government in 1690 to house soldiers to control this part of the Highlands from the threat of Jacobite Uprisings. The fort was demolished in 1855 but the town is a very popular base for visitors with so much to do in the area. Top of the list for many is a walk up Ben Nevis, the highest mountain in Britain at 1345 m, sprawling behind the town.

We will stop in Fort William for lunch. Afterwards, as we are driving out of Fort William you may see huge pipes on the mountain-side: these bring water from Loch Treig, 24 km away, to an aluminium smelter in the town. At a roundabout we take a road to the west called the "Road to the Isles" that leads to a fishing and ferry port called Mallaig. This road goes through some beautiful countryside and the railway line that also runs between Fort William and Mallaig and that rail journey has been voted the most beautiful in the world by an independent travel magazine!

Very soon we cross over a canal with a series of locks on the right called Neptune's Staircase. It is part of the Caledonian Canal, which along with four lochs, allows boats and ships to make a 96 km journey from the west to east side of Scotland.

After a lovely drive we reach Glenfinnan, a beautiful location situated beside the lovely Loch Shiel with mountains surrounding it and with a magnificent curved railway viaduct that opened in 1901. It has 21 arches, was made entirely out of concrete and featured in some of the Harry Potter films. The most famous scene shot here was in the flying car scene in *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* when Ron and Harry find themselves being chased across the bridge by the train. We should arrive in time to see the Jacobite Steam Train crossing the viaduct (the train runs from 1<sup>st</sup> May to 29<sup>th</sup> September 2023).

It was at Glenfinnan in 1745 that Bonnie Prince Charlie met those clans who agreed to support him in a Jacobite Uprising against the government in an attempt to regain the throne for his father. There is a monument commemorating the Jacobites which you can climb\* but the best viewpoint for both the loch and the viaduct is on the small hill behind the visitor centre and which is easily reached by a path.

When we leave Glenfinnan we retrace our outward route until we reach the roundabout near Fort William. This time we turn to the left where we pass the Ben Nevis whisky distillery. A little further on is a road going up to the Aonach Mor ski resort as well as a mountain bike centre used for world championships.

At Spean Bridge we turn off to the right and start a long drive eastwards through more lovely scenery passing and potentially stopping at the Laggan Dam, and continuing along Loch Laggan to eventually reach Dalwhinnie, a small village with a large whisky distillery. Here we join the A9, the major road that links the Lowlands & Highlands. Further on we can see Blair Castle over to the left and then we drive above a deep gorge, the Pass of Killiecrankie, where a battle took place in 1689, before driving into Pitlochry, a very pleasant town where we may make a short stop.

We are now back in the Lowlands and we pass by Dunkeld, an attractive little town that sits beside the river Tay, Scotland's longest river, and beside it is a village, Birnam, which featured in 'Macbeth', one of William Shakespeare's most famous plays. Soon we come to the city of Perth and close by is Scone Palace (but not in sight). Beside the Palace is Moot Hill where, in ancient times, Scottish kings were crowned while sitting on a large flat stone called the 'Stone of Destiny'. The Stone is now on display in Edinburgh Castle alongside the 'Honours of Scotland' – a crown, sword & sceptre, all dating back to the 15<sup>th</sup> & 16<sup>th</sup>c.

As we drive back towards Edinburgh, Loch Leven comes into view. One of the islands has a castle on it where our most famous queen, Mary Queen of Scots, was imprisoned for 11 months in 1567 after many of the nobles had risen up against her. She eventually escaped and sought refuge in England where her cousin, Elizabeth, was queen. Mary expected that Elizabeth would raise an army on her behalf but instead she was kept a prisoner in England for 19 years before being executed in 1587, aged 45.

On our return to Edinburgh we cross over the Firth of Forth, an inlet of the North Sea and you will see our famous Forth Bridges. The magnificent Forth Rail Bridge, opened in 1890, is a cantilever construction and made entirely from steel girders (enough steel to build 3 Eiffel towers!) and carries 200 trains a day. The Forth Road Bridge opened in 1964 and replaced ferries while beyond it is a second road bridge, the Queensferry Crossing, which opened in 2017 and is the longest three-tower, cable-stayed bridge in the world.

Once we have crossed the Firth of Forth we will soon arrive back in the centre of Edinburgh.

\* This is an optional extra – the cost for this attraction is not included in the price you have paid for the tour.