

ARMCHAIR TRAVELLER

• **Border Security:** How we love to watch the naive, the shifty and the plain strange trying to talk their way out of the fireworks, salamis, small birds and wads of suspicious cash in their luggage. Monday, 2.30pm, LifeStyle • **Coast Watch:** Meanwhile, across the Tasman, where even a speck of dirt on a visitor's tramping boot causes concern to biosecurity inspectors, the New Zealand Ministry of Fisheries works with the coast guard, marine police, air force and navy to bring smugglers and dastardly paua shell poachers to book. Thursday, 7.30pm, LifeStyle. Susan Kurosawa

WHAT IN THE WORLD

• **Feeling flighty?** Strategic Airlines (flystrategic.com) has begun flights between Perth and Bali that will run three times a week; Bali's surfer hub of Kuta is already known as North Perth and this new full-service airline looks set to consolidate Australia as the holiday isle's premier visitor market • **Emirates** (emirates.com/au) has winter earlybird fares to Europe for passengers ex Sydney; tickets are from \$1852 return, inclusive of all taxes and charges, with a generous 30kg baggage allowance for economy class, and are valid for travel between October 1 and March 31 but ticketing must be completed by July 12 • **Philippine Airlines** and **Specialist Holidays** (131969) have launched deals that include four nights in Manila from \$999 a person twin-share from Sydney or Melbourne, including return flights on the airline's new 77s, four-star accommodation and daily breakfasts and return airport transfers; packages to Cebu and Boracay are also available, as are deals ex Brisbane on Philippine Airlines' A330 flights • **APT** (aptouring.com.au) has launched its 2011 Canada-Alaska tour-cruise program with three "fly free to Canada" offers for bookings made by October 15; the first includes free return airfares on a Majestic Rockies & Alaska cruise (valid for all departures), the second is free flights to Canada for April departures of packages of 21 days or more, the third covers complimentary flights for companions on May to September departures of packages of 21 days or more. Air taxes of \$400 are included in the free airfares. Susan Kurosawa

ACCESSORY OF THE WEEK

THE Kikoy can be worn as a versatile towel, sarong or wrap with a handy pocket. Made from 100 per cent cotton weave, the fabric is soft, colour-fast and comes in a range of vibrant shades, checks and stripes in three styles: Rockpool, Kikoy Beach Towel and Kikoy Robe. From \$45. More: sarong.net.au. Cassandra Murnieks



Michelle Rowe's Food Detective column is taking a break.

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{ JOURNEYS: THE SPIRIT OF DISCOVERY }

I'll take the Highlands

The untamed landscapes of northwest Scotland form Europe's last great wilderness

SELWYN PARKER

THE train appears out of the mist, skirting the green-grey loch on one side and the jagged ice-blasted crags on the other. It pulls up at the wooden station sitting in the middle of an otherwise desolate moor. Everybody piles aboard, clutching bacon bottles and take-away coffees. The driver lets off a warning blast and we head into the Scottish Highlands.

Of all the train journeys I've experienced, this one's my favourite. Starting at Rannoch Station, it's only two hours each way, the destination is nothing more glamorous than the fishing town of Mallaig and the carriages have seen better days. But the line takes you straight into the heart of Europe's last wilderness, with its rivers and lochs, vast swathes of brooding forests, treacherous moss-covered moors and scores of snow-covered mountains.

The 135km round-trip covers Britain's highest mountain, deepest loch, shortest river and most westerly station. And for good measure it traverses the 21-arch concrete viaduct across Loch Shiel made famous in the Harry Potter films. Yes, this is the Hogwarts Express.

If it's fresh air, bracing weather, open country, wild views and forest trails you're looking for, the Highlands region of northwest Scotland is hard to beat. It lays claim to easily be the most untamed landscape in Britain, and probably in western Europe.

My partner and I lived for nearly four years, until 18 months ago, in the village of Pitlochry at the foot of the Highlands and we used to marvel at the hordes of visitors pouring past our front door in all but the coldest months. Admittedly, some only came for a bit of a stroll up and down the street, but many arrived dressed for the hills. We'd be inundated with Scandinavians, eastern and western Europeans, busloads of English from the north, most of them wearing boots, forest-coloured clothing and backpacks. The weather be damned, they wanted the 100 freezing rivers, the 500 icy lochs and endless trails of Scotland.

For most of these visitors — and we would often meet and talk with them when out running the trails or cycling the byways — the main attraction was that much of the Highlands remains as it was. Although Scotland contains less



TOM JELLETT

than 9 per cent of Britain's 60 million people (and the Highlands disproportionately less again), the country claims a third of the land area. It also has much more than its fair share of water and most of the mountains, or Munros as they are known after Sir Hugh of the same name who logged them all a century ago.

Pitlochry is a real Highlands village, all stone, forests and green hills. Its glory days were in the 1930s when titled people of leisure would come up for the shooting season, blazing away from the "glorious 12th" of August, as indeed people still do. Or they might wait a racquet in the Highlands tennis tournament, now in its 115th straight year, although, sadly, not the glamorous event it was. These days people come for the open spaces and the history, which is as wild as the landscape.

For time-travellers the Highlands runs the gamut. Just to remind ourselves that today was a long time in the making, we used to visit a mock-up of a prehistoric crannog, a timber-built round-house standing on piles way out in the middle of Loch Tay, one of "our" lochs and among the 10 biggest in Scotland. Surviving on a diet of fish, fruit and nuts some 5000 years ago, the crannog people are said to have had a remark-

We often pedalled in the tracks of William Wallace down... a magically dark lane running for about 20km alongside the loch



able average life expectancy of about 80.

And, racing ahead, a mere 2000 years ago the main route north went straight past the ancient village of Moulin, lying at the foot of Ben Vrackie mountain barely 10 minutes' walk from our cottage. We often had a pint of Tennent's in the 315-year-old Moulin pub and imagine the ferocious, wood-painted Picts hurrying by. Massive standing stones still mark the way.

And back down the hill is a flat sports area, the venue of the annual Highland Games, where an army of empire-

building Roman centurions set up camp circa AD100. Terrified of the Picts, they retreated and never returned.

And jumping a further 1300 years, we often pedalled in the tracks of William Wallace down what's known today as the Foss Road. It's a magically dark lane running for about 20km alongside Loch Tummel where the scourge of Edward Longshanks, the "Hammer of the Scots" (Edward I), hid out in the late 14th century. (At Wallace's old base in Stirling, locals joke that his statue bears a remarkable resemblance to Mel Gibson.)

Practically every place has a terrible story to tell, like the village of Dunkeld. Hardly 20 minutes down the road from Pitlochry, it looks as though it's never been anything but a quiet and picturesque backwater with arguably the best cafe in Scotland (Palmerston's, with its irresistible muffins, fruit scones and rock cakes), art shops and old pubs such as the Taybank, once owned by folk singer Dougie MacLean and wife Jennifer.

Yet in 903 the local abbey, founded about AD600 by no less a personage than St Columba, was attacked by

Vikings who paddled up the river, bent on rape and pillage. In 1560, Dunkeld Cathedral, which still has Sunday services despite being half-ruined, was sacked by one of John Knox's Reformation mobs.

And (we've hardly started) about 130 years later, most of the village was flattened in a siege by the Jacobites and had to be rebuilt. If you're into Shakespeare, it was from Birnam Woods on the other side of the Tay River from Dunkeld that Malcolm launched an attack on Macbeth.

A visit to the modest grave of Rob Roy, Scotland's Robin Hood, in the quiet hamlet of Braes of Balquhider feels like you're hurtling into modern times. In 1734, he was buried in the churchyard with wife May and two sons. And that's still 54 years before the First Fleet landed at Botany Bay.

With all this around them, it's hardly surprising the Scots have a highly developed sense of the past. It runs from the bard Robbie Burns all the way to food and drink. Scots love their malt whisky, stovies (an artery-hardening combination of dripping, potatoes and onion), thick soups, mince and tatties, and other delicacies that seem to go with the cold climate.

But contrary to myth, 99 per cent of Scots wear kilts only on special occasions such as weddings and Hogmanay, when we dance in the streets to the tune of a lively jigs-and-reels band accompanied by a fearlessly flat baritone who is known locally as The Voice.

The kilt is also a la mode for national football (soccer) and rugby matches, especially, funnily enough, out of Scotland. I've shared a train filled to the gunwales with thousands of kilt-wearing, half-drunk, foul-mouthed football supporters and, believe me, when they get out on to the platform and launch into song, they're a formidable and thrilling mob.

Never get between a half-pissed Scot and his patriotism.

Reverence for history certainly extends to golf. Scotland is, after all, the home of the sport and even Pitlochry's precipitous 100-year-old course at the foot of Ben Vrackie has long been something of a magnet for the rich and famous, including Henry Ford II and the great professionals of yesteryear. As the last players leave the course, it's not uncommon for red deer to emerge from the bush and trot over the greens in full view of members in the splendidly restored clubhouse. You don't see that even at St Andrews.

• visitscotland.com
Susan Kurosawa's Departure Lounge column is taking a break.

Chasing the emperor

Continued from Page 1

away. In these sprawling remains, among the pines, it is possible to grasp something of the man, of his passion for all things Greek, including beautiful Greek men. The Canopus lake at Villa Adriano was probably the site of an Egyptian obelisk marking the grave of Antonius, a young Greek man and Hadrian's great love. In AD130 he drowned in the Nile while accompanying Hadrian on a tour of Egypt. Hadrian was inconsolable. When he emerged again to take up his public duties, one of his first acts was to declare Antonius a god.

History has little respect for romance and less for grief. By the 16th century, the Antonius obelisk lay in fragments outside one of Rome's gates. Pope Pius VII rescued it, without knowing its provenance, and erected it in the early 19th century on the heights above the city, in a part of the Borghese Gardens known as the Pincio, the grassy equivalent of the Pantheon, a part of Rome unchanged in two millennia. Even in Hadrian's day, this was a pleasant retreat, a place to admire the city views. I jump a kerb and steer the chariot down one of the park's pathways. The obelisk stands at the end of an avenue of magnolia trees; a few yards away is the balcony of the Pincio with lovely views over Rome. Prominent among the domes is the great bulk of the Castel Sant'Angelo... Citadel, papal residence, prison, it is easy to forget that this great building, visible from Antonius's obelisk, was Hadrian's tomb.

Following empty passages curving upward inside the ancient walls, I arrive at the bare central sanctuary where his remains would have been interred. Hadrian's simple inscription can still be read on the wall. Like the man, it is enigmatic, but also surprisingly casual. A recognition of his own mortality seemed to rob him of any pomposity.

Checklist

The five-star Hotel Eden has one of the best views of Rome and a wonderful location close to the top of the Spanish Steps. More: lemeridien.com/eden. But even smarter is the Rome Cavallieri, 15 minutes from the city centre. Hadrian would have loved its restaurant La Pergola, the only one in Rome with three Michelin stars. More: romecavallieri.com. Lesser mortals should try the elegant Le Jardin de Russie. More: hoteldelrusse.it. Italy By Vespa offers luxury adventure scooter tours for a maximum of 14 people led by a historian plus tours of Italy by Ferrari. More: italybyvespa.com.au.

Around the world in three days in family-friendly Vegas

THE FAMILY TOURIST

A non-gambler's guide to sin city

CHRISTINE MCCABE

AFTER reading of Tiger Woods's exploits in Las Vegas I'm beginning to feel slightly queasy about having taken our young sons to sin city for a recent break. Yet the three days we spent trawling the surreal casino malls — and promenading after dark along

streets crawling with stretch Hummers, watching Bellagio's famous dancing fountains and oohing and aahing at the Luxor's piercing spotlight — were, I promise you, good clean fun.

Not so long ago Vegas pitched for the family demographic; marketing strategists have moved on but the city is still great fun for those travelling en famille... like a theme park on steroids. Leave the atlas at home: Maps are redrawn in Vegas but our boys don't mind as we saunter from Paris to New York to Venice, quaffing prosecco and milkshakes under faux skies while gondoliers serenade their portly passengers.

Eat well: While you can still find 99c shrimp cocktails in the seedier parts of the city, it's fair to

say it costs just as much to eat badly as eat well in a place now famous for its restaurants. Three inedible hot dogs and two coffees cost a whopping US\$31 (\$36) in a smart mall concession but we paid little more for good food at a Wolfgang Puck eatery (he's every-

It's fair to say it costs just as much to eat badly as eat well

where in Vegas). Don't just rely on the all-you-can-eat buffets; check out the specials at better restaurants. Good deals abound.

Show time: Vegas is not all girls and crooners. We resisted our sons' demands to see the frankly frightening magician Criss Angel and instead opted for Cirque du Soleil's Love, the Beatles tribute, a wonderful show that will appeal to the whole family. Look for discounted summer ticket deals; cirquedusoleil.com/love.

Fun but no pokies: From the MGM lion habitat to Bellagio's incredible horticultural displays and Mandalay Bay's Shark Reef Aquarium (a "predator based" facility with piranhas) to the refurbished Mirage volcano (erupting from dusk to midnight in front of the casino) there's loads of non-gaming fun to be had, much of it free. Be sure to pack comfy walking shoes; it's quite a hike from one casino to the next.

Getting around: Vegas taxis can be horrendous. We hailed one cab that seemed to be missing its back seat. Rent a car or jump on the monorail.

Stay in a non-gaming hotel: On 4th at the northern end of the Strip, the Hilton Grand Vacations Club is the perfect family bolthole offering spacious one and two-bedroom apartment suites (each

equipped with kitchen and laundry facilities; fab if you've just blown in from the deserts of Arizona), a well-stocked deli-casino restaurant and glamorous resort-style swimming complex with cabana suites for grown-ups (there's also a lovely day spa) and basketball hoops for the kids. We enjoyed the relative peace and quiet of the location although it didn't take long to get downtown courtesy of the monorail (and free parking is available if you have a rental car); hiltongrandvacations.com.

Despite my best censorial efforts, the boys were exposed to a few moments worthy of *The Hangover*. Eyes widened as en route to the lurid Nascar Cafe in the Sahara we were accosted by a posse of scantily clad "bodacious baristas". But such encounters did little to detract from our holiday's G-rating and after three packed days we hadn't dropped a dime. The city's Mormon founders would be proud of us.



Vegas is not all casinos and crooners

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