

Travel uniquely scotland

# Uniquely Scotland

Armed with a guidebook, a GPS and a car, we found ourselves in the lush lands of Scotland. The rolling hills, the endless bodies of water, charming towns and imposing castles literally begged to be explored, savoured and treasured like a box of chocolate coated strawberries. This we did, and did it with abandon.

TEXT: ARIEL CHEW IMAGES COURTESY OF ARIEL CHEW / THINKSTOCKPHOTOS



**W**hen in Caledonia (the old name for Scotland), ye shalt drive. The roads are good and being a part of the UK, the inhabitants there drive at the same side of the road like Malaysians do.

Well, except when you are in Edinburgh (pronounced as 'Edin-beh-rough'), which is an absolute delight to walk about in. My friend Mei and I arrived at the quaint and historically rich city in early August, last year just in time to soak in the annual Fringe Festival. The world's largest art festival features a huge assortment of comedy and theater by artists

all over the world, with 2,000 shows all clamouring for audience.

We managed to catch several shows - some amateurish, others professional and truly impressive but the best part had to be walking down the crowded streets filled with street performers and fun-loving revellers while hearing the haunting strains of bagpipes in the background. At that time of the year, Edinburgh experiences its highest foot traffic ever with tourists from all corners of the world stomping along the Royal Mile for a huge dash of culture and glorious Scottish hospitality.





1. The enthusiastic and fun tour guide in Edinburgh regaling spooky tales at the Greyfriars Kirkyard cemetery
2. The torturous hike up Arthur's Seat
3. A pub named after the loyal dog, Greyfriars Bobby
4. Perched atop a volcanic rock is the magnificent Edinburgh castle. It can be seen at many points along the Royal Mile

### A FREE TOUR AND A GRAND HIKE

The Royal Mile, which spans from the glorious hilltop Edinburgh Castle to Holyrood House, is full of delightful shops, eateries and 'closes' (tiny alleys between two buildings). This was where we discovered the fabulous pork sandwiches from Oink and took many interesting photos along the quaint cobbled streets. We signed up for a free half-day tour with SANDEMANs NEW Europe Edinburgh and had an animatedly patriotic laddie (young man in Gaelic) as our guide. He brought *Braveheart* and Scottish history to life as we walked down memory lane along the Royal Mile. He made us stop in front of a bar and regaled us with tales of a woman named Maggie Dickson, who was hanged in 1813 after being falsely accused of murdering her newborn child. She miraculously survived the hanging and was free to live out her days undisturbed. That bar was named after the poor or lucky lady; whichever way you choose to look at it.



We also wandered along the Greyfriars Kirkyard cemetery, which is associated with Greyfriars Bobby, a loyal dog who guarded his owner's grave for years until it died. This was also where JK Rowling got her inspiration for the names in her famed *Harry Potter* series. We later passed by the cafe where she spent her days crafting the book with her baby daughter in tow. Edinburgh is truly an inspirational place for writers - there was even a Writer's Museum there. Moving there may just be what I need to get my novel kick-started!



The tour ended at 3pm and our feet felt a little tired. The sun was still shining and the summer day was still a long way from dusk. The rather accurate weather forecast app predicted that it would be slightly rainy the next day. So we decided to make the most of the good weather and walk to Arthur's Seat, an extinct volcano, which looked deceptively near. We spent hours walking and hiking before we finally reached the pinnacle with its breath taking views of the Edinburgh landscape. Not forgetting, it also took us hours of gruelling walk back home. Note to self: No matter how close a mountain seems to you, DRIVE.

### AH, SCOTLAND, HOW WE LOVE YE!

The next day, we ditched the walking and rented a car. It was time to discover more of Scotland. We found that Scottish people, most of them blond and blue eyed, are friendly, forthright and frightfully fast drivers. Whilst driving through a town, busy highway or meandering road, we were frequently overtaken by skilful Scottish drivers who brazenly ignored the speed limits. A Scottish friend, who has amassed a wealth of traffic summons, had cheerfully warned us that the traffic police were vigilant and there were speed cameras everywhere. I was such a model driver in Scotland, it would have done my parents proud.



5. Edinburgh is a delightful blend of old and new

We've been welcomed by many B&B owners when we were desperately looking for the loo in our road trip. These generous souls were genuinely interested in where we were heading and gave helpful directions on the best way to get there and even gave us tips of the best places to eat.

6. One of the many lonely-looking forts we encountered in our journey through Scotland

7. The Glenfinnan Viaduct

The Scots also do not mince their words, they tell things as it is, and are honest to a fault. When my travel partner, Mei, lost her iPhone in the National Gallery, Edinburgh, she suggested going to check the lost and found counter. I personally thought that phone was gone for good. But I went along with her anyway and to our utmost surprise, the phone was there, case and all! Apparently a Scottish lady found and placed it there. This might sound cheesy but we couldn't help falling in love with Scotland and its people more and more every day!







1. The award-winning 10-year-old Talisker Single Malt Scotch Whisky

2. The Falkirk Wheel in action

3. Talisker Distillery

4. One of the many street performers during the Fringe Festival along the Royal Mile

## HOME TO THE WORLD'S BEST WHISKY

Not all things are cheery and bright in Scotland, unfortunately. The country experiences more than its fair share of rain. More than half of our 15 days there were gloomy and wet. It was on one of these rainy days that we visited the Talisker Distillery in the Isle of Skye. It would be an absolute travesty to go all the way to Scotland and not set foot in a whisky brewery. So, Mei and I dutifully booked ourselves a tour at the counter. And what a tour it was.

We were shown photos of how barley was harvested, germinated before being over peat fires, which gives Scotch whisky its distinctive smoky taste. The distillery equipment - five Copper Pot Stills and the traditional worm tubs that make the Talisker so unique - were classic and rigged ages ago. I felt rather lightheaded inhaling the strong alcoholic fumes there. We were then brought to the cellar where the brew are fermented within oak barrels as it matures to whisky. By law, genuine Scottish whisky must be produced and matured in oak casks for at least three years in Scotland. The cellar was naturally chilly,



which saves a lot on cooling costs.

You can say that the Scottish peat, Scottish water and Scottish weather have all conspired to propel the country as one of the best whisky producers in the world. The gift shop near the ticket counter offered single malt whiskies ranging from 10 years and beyond. Of course we took the complementary award-winning 10-year whisky drink during the tour and promptly gagged at the strong brew. Obviously, the drink was wasted on us but Mei bought a bottle of 16-year-old Talisker whisky for a friend back home who would appreciate it more than we did.

## THE OLD, THE NEW AND THE GRITTY

In our road trip, we noticed that Scotland was an interesting blend of the old, the new and the gritty. Glasgow was grittier and rougher than genteel Edinburgh. Even though Edinburgh was filled with





throng of tourists, its streets were clean and I could see people picking up trash after themselves. Not so in Glasgow. We had an uninspiring dinner of oily fish and chips before heading home. Falkirk Wheel, which we visited the day after Glasgow, is a fairly 'new' rotating boat lift opened in 2002 by the Queen. The first of its kind in the world, this beautiful gigantic yet functional sculpture links the two canals by a ladder of 11 locks that allowed boats on the Forth and Clyde Canal to ascend the 35m to the level of the Union Canal.

We spent a night in Oban, a tiny and sweet seaside town, truly classic in every way, with the exception of an ultra-modern 3D cinema that's lovingly maintained by the community. I was thrilled that I didn't have to miss *Guardians of the Galaxy*, which surely would have finished its run by the time I returned to Malaysia.

As for the old and ancient, we encountered many castles and forts in our road trip, some standing forlornly, as if reminiscing of the good old days when they were useful. The 15th century Rosslyn Chapel, famously featured in the book and movie versions of *The Da Vinci Code*, is of course a must-see. It warmed our heart knowing that (thanks to Dan Brown), the church received an abundance of resources that allowed it to be refurbished to its current glory. Truly, the pen is mightier than the sword.



### ONLY IN SCOTLAND

Lochs, or lakes, can of course, be found in absolute abundance all over Scotland and filled to the brim due to its generous rainfall. As we approach the highlands, we kept stopping the car to take photos of the stunning vistas of loch meet trees and mountains.

Mei, who has been to New Zealand, remarked how closely these two countries resemble each other. To me, Scotland is unique. The soothing Gaelic accent, the amazingly down-to-earth and good people, and the terribly rich and barely palatable haggis, makes it stand out in its own special way. After all, which other country can lay claim to the Loch Ness Monster, which unfortunately was too shy to come by to say hello to us, or the hairy cow with its cute fringe on the Isle of Skye?

Truly, I haven't discovered anything quite like Scotland before or since then. 🇬🇧

5. The Rosslyn Chapel, shot to fame thanks to *The Da Vinci Code*

6. One of the greatest waterways globally, the majestic 60-mile Caledonian Canal runs from Fort William to Inverness. This is the Inverness section where the boats are waiting to be linked to the next segment.

7. One of the many street performers during the Fringe Festival along the Royal Mile

8. The shaggy, long-horned and docile Highland cow is built to thrive in the rugged remote conditions of the Scottish Highlands

