



Heart of Scotland Tour Highlights



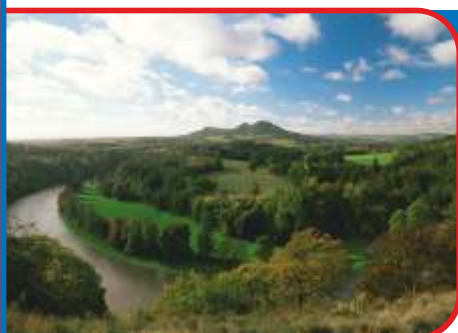
Alnwick Castle

Alnwick Castle is one of the largest inhabited castles in Europe and home to the Dukes of Northumberland for over 700 years. During this time the castle has played a role in many historical events from the Wars of Independence between the Scots and English, the exploits of the swashbuckling 'Harry Hotspur' and the Guy Fawkes plot. The castle is beautifully preserved, one of the reasons why it's such a Hollywood favourite and been used as a location for numerous films including 'Robin Hood Prince of Thieves' and all seven 'Harry Potter' movies. The adjoining Alnwick Garden is one of the world's most ambitious new gardens.

The Duchess of Northumberland's charitable vision focuses around the Grand Cascade and various water sculptures but also includes the Poison Garden and one of the world's largest tree houses.

Blair Castle

Blair Castle is the ancient seat of the Dukes and Earls of Atholl and holds an important place in Scotland's history. Strategically located in the Strath of Garry, whoever held Blair Castle was gatekeeper to the Grampian Mountains - the most direct route north to Inverness. It was twice besieged, first by Oliver Cromwell's army in 1652 and then by the Jacobites in 1746, just before their final defeat at the battle of Culloden. The grounds and gardens are home to some of Britain's tallest trees, a nine-acre walled garden and St Bride's Kirk, the final resting place of the Jacobite hero 'Bonnie Dundee'. Dating back to 1269, the castle opened its doors to the public in 1936, one of the first great houses in Britain to do so. It now welcomes more visitors than any other private house in Scotland. The exterior is magnificent but you can also explore 30 of the interior's superbly furnished rooms. The highlight, with its incredible 'wow factor', is the two story high entrance hallway covered with muskets, swords and shields.



The Borders

In modern day Scotland the political region of the Scottish Borders extends south from Edinburgh, along the east coast and inland across almost half the width of the country. Historically, however, the phrase 'Scottish Borders' was applied to the whole of the border between Scotland and England and to the areas on both sides of it. Between bouts of periodic open warfare that ravaged the area for over five centuries until the late 1600s, the area was a happy hunting ground for cross-border feuds and banditry by 'Border Reiver' families. A particular bone of contention between Scotland and England was the town of

Berwick-upon-Tweed. On the north bank of the River Tweed, which in several places is the actual border between the two countries, it was logically Scottish. But logic plays little part in politics and in the two centuries up to 1482 the town changed hands no fewer than 14 times. Since then it has remained a part of England.



Heart of Scotland Tour Highlights



Clans

The word clan is derived from the Gaelic word *clanna*, meaning children. Historically, a clan comprised of everyone who lived on the chief's territory - a geographic kinship. A clan often included loosely related septs and dependent families, all of whom looked to the clan chief as their head and protector. Through time, with the constant changes of 'clan boundaries' and migration, clans evolved into large numbers of members who were unrelated and who bore different surnames. Often those living on a chief's lands would, over time, adopt the clan surname. Today, anyone who has the chief's surname is automatically considered to be a member of the chief's clan. Most clans have their own tartan patterns, usually dating from the 19th century, which members may incorporate into kilts or other clothing. Tartan patterns consist of criss-crossed horizontal and vertical bands in multiple colours. Tartans originated in woven wool, but are now made in many other materials too.



Doone Castle

Doone Castle may look familiar, even to those who have never visited before - it depends on your taste in films and TV. The castle is a place of pilgrimage for Monty Python fans from all over the world who visit the place where some of 'Monty Python and the Holy Grail' was filmed. It also features as 'Winterfell' in the first series of 'Game of Thrones'. It will soon be thrust into the limelight once again as a prominent location in the 'Outlander' series. It does, however, have more traditional claims to fame. Doone Castle was built at the end of the 1300s for Robert Stewart, Duke of Albany. As the third son of King Robert II and younger brother of Robert III, he became effective ruler of Scotland from 1388 until his death in 1420. Uniquely for Scotland, the castle has survived relatively unchanged and complete from this period. Visitors get a real sense of a living, working castle with a labyrinth of rooms, interconnecting passageways and staircases. The highlight of any visit is a walk along the ramparts with views along the River Teith and north to the Highlands.

Edinburgh

Edinburgh is situated on the southern shore of the Firth of Forth and is the second biggest city in Scotland with a population of around 480,000. It has been recognised as the capital since at least the 15th century and is home to both the Scottish Parliament and Government. Castle Rock, on which Edinburgh Castle was built, and Arthur's Seat, the city's dominant landmark, are the remains of volcanoes subsequently eroded by glaciation during the last ice age. The earliest known human habitation is in Cramond where evidence was found of a Mesolithic camp dated to c.8500 BC. The Royal Burgh was founded by King David I in the early 12th century. The city has long been known abroad as a centre of education. The University of Edinburgh, founded in 1583 and now one of four in the city, is consistently placed in the top 20 of the QS World University Rankings. Edinburgh's buoyant economy is centred on banking and insurance, making it the biggest financial centre in the UK after London. The Old and New Towns of Edinburgh were listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1995 in recognition of the unique character of the Old Town with its medieval street layout and the planned Georgian New Town. There are over 4,500 listed buildings within the city, a higher proportion relative to area than any other city in the United Kingdom. The city is also famous for the Edinburgh International Festival which, since its inception in 1947, has grown into the biggest annual international arts festival in the world. In 2004 Edinburgh became the world's first UNESCO City of Literature, an accolade awarded in recognition of its literary heritage and lively literary activities in the present. The city's historical and cultural attractions have made it the second most popular tourist destination in the United Kingdom, attracting over one million overseas visitors each year.





Heart of Scotland Tour Highlights



Dunkeld and The Hermitage



Dunkeld, one of the best preserved historic towns in Scotland, is set on the banks of the River Tay in the heart of Perthshire's 'Big Tree Country'. Birnam and the town were joined in 1809 with the building of the Dunkeld Bridge by the famous Scots engineer Thomas Telford. Dunkeld is thought to date back to the sixth century when a monastery was founded beside the river. Kenneth MacAlpin, the first King of Scotland, moved the bones of St Columba to Dunkeld around the middle of the 9th century which established the town as the first ecclesiastical capital of medieval Scotland. Construction of the present day

Dunkeld Cathedral began in the 12th century and additions were added up to the 16th century. The entire town was burnt to the ground in 1689 during the Battle of Dunkeld between the Jacobite forces of Bonnie Dundee and the local government garrison of the Cameronians. From the remaining ashes, the picturesque little houses were built in the early 1700's. The nearby Hermitage, popular for short walks, sits on the banks of the River Braan in Craigvinean Forest. It is home to Ossian's Hall of Mirrors, a Georgian folly built by the Dukes of Atholl and situated by an often spectacular waterfall – the Black Linn Falls. Also at the falls is one of the tallest trees in Britain, a Douglas Fir standing at 59m tall.

Eilean Donan Castle

Eilean Donan Castle is one of the most iconic images of Scotland, recognised all around the world. Situated on an island at the point where three sea lochs meet, and surrounded by some stunning scenery, it is one of the most visited and important attractions in the Scottish Highlands. Although initially inhabited around the 6th century, the first fortified castle was built in the mid 13th century to protect the surrounding lands of Kintail against the Vikings. Since then, at least four different versions of the castle have been built and re-built as the feudal history of Scotland unfolded through the centuries. Partially destroyed during the Jacobite uprising of 1719, Eilean Donan lay in ruins for the best part of 200 years until Lieutenant Colonel John MacRae-Gilstrap bought the island in 1911 and proceeded to restore the castle to its former glory. After 20 years of toil and labour the castle was re-opened in 1932. The name Eilean Donan, or island of Donan, probably relates to the 6th century Irish Saint who formed a community on the island during the late 7th century.



Flora



Scotland enjoys a wide diversity of temperate ecologies, incorporating both deciduous and coniferous woodlands and moorland. Approximately 14% of Scotland is wooded, much of it commercial forestry plantations of non-native Sitka Spruce or Larch. Prior to human clearing and climate change there would have been much larger areas of native Caledonian and broad-leaved forest. Although much reduced, remnants of the beautiful native Scots Pine woodlands can still be found in places. 17% of Scotland is covered by moorland and peatland. Caithness and Sutherland have one of the largest and most intact areas of

blanket bog in the world, supporting a distinctive wildlife community. Much of the Scottish coastline consists of machair, a fertile dune pasture land. Machairs have received considerable ecological and conservational attention, mainly because of their internationally unique ecosystems. The thistle has been the national emblem of the Scots nation since the reign of Alexander III in the 13th century. The national flower however, is the Scottish Bluebell or Harebell. Other species synonymous with Scotland and the Scottish Highlands, are the bright yellow and thorny Gorse bushes, Rowan trees with their abundance of orange berries and of course the famous purple heather moors.



Heart of Scotland Tour Highlights



Food and Drink

With our rolling, rural hillsides, clear coastal waters and lush, fertile lands, Scotland produces some of the best, and most sought after, natural produce in the world. From mouth-watering Aberdeen Angus steaks, to world-renowned sea-food such as wild trout, salmon, oysters and langoustines, not to mention our water of life – whisky – the 'Made in Scotland' stamp has become synonymous with taste and quality. The natural larder of the country produces large quantities of raspberries, strawberries, dairy products and poultry but beef, at more than £560m per year, is worth more than them all put together.

Scotland's 16,000km coastline is home to a vast resource of fish and shellfish. Exports of fish account for around 60% of total food exports. Exports of fresh Scottish salmon alone are in excess of £350m. Scotland's national dish, haggis, is a savoury pudding containing sheep's heart, liver and lungs, minced with onion, oatmeal, suet, spices and salt, traditionally encased in the lining of a sheep's stomach. It is traditionally accompanied by neeps and tatties (turnip and potato), particularly when served as part of a Burns supper. Scotland is also famous for naturally healthy oat-based products such as porridge and oatcakes - the latter being first produced as far back as the 14th century when Scottish soldiers would carry a sack of oatmeal which they would moisten and heat on a metal plate over a fire when they were hungry. We have a notoriously sweet tooth too; among the many sweets produced around the country perhaps the most famous is tablet - a medium-hard sugary sweet made from sugar, condensed milk, butter and vanilla essence. Other 'national dishes' include fish and chips, mince 'n' tatties (minced beef and potatoes) and Scotch Broth soup. Everyone knows about Scotch Whisky but did you know that Scotland is the only country to have a soft drink more popular than Coke? Why not try our other 'national drink', Irn Bru.



Forth Bridges

Opened in 1890 the Forth Rail Bridge is a massive and remarkably imposing piece of engineering which remains one of the world's most iconic structures. When it was first constructed, the bridge was the largest steel structure in the world and regarded by many as the eighth wonder of the world. Today it is still the second largest cantilever bridge ever built. In 1964 the Forth Road Bridge opened to traffic and since then the Queensferry towns have been home to two world-class bridges. In 2016 a second Forth Road Bridge will open giving the estuary the most impressive concentration of very large bridges anywhere in the world.

Glen Coe

Often considered to be one of the most spectacular and beautiful places in Scotland, Glen Coe is a large glacial volcanic valley in the National Scenic Area of Ben Nevis and Glen Coe. Owned and managed by the National Trust for Scotland, this narrow glen displays a grim grandeur. Approaching from the east on the main road through Rannoch Moor, the glen is surrounded by wild and precipitous mountains, the most famous of these being the stunning Buachaille Etive Mor, the great 'gatekeeper' to both Glen Coe and Glen Etive. Along with many other mountains, this makes the glen an internationally popular centre for hillwalkers and mountaineers. Further west at Invercoe, the landscape has a softer beauty before the main entrance to the glen. The village of Glen Coe is at the foot of the valley and on the shores of the sea loch, Loch Leven. The name Glen Coe is often said to mean 'Glen of Weeping', perhaps with some reference to the infamous Massacre of Glencoe which took place there in 1692. In fact the Glen is named after the River Coe which runs through it, and bore this name long before the 1692 incident. Movie fans may recognise the glen from scenes in 'Skyfall', 'Monty Python and the Holy Grail' and 'Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban'.





Heart of Scotland Tour Highlights



Hadrian's Wall and Romans



Hadrian's Wall is one of the most important monuments built by the Romans and is a stunning example of their engineering skills. It cuts Britain in half just south of the Scottish border. It is the best-known and largest of the Roman Empire's frontiers and stands as a reminder of one of the world's greatest civilizations. Built almost 2000 years ago to contain the fierce Picts in Caledonia, it stretches for 73 miles and was designated a World Heritage Site in 1987. Housesteads Fort in Northumberland National Park, is the best preserved of the 13 forts along Hadrian's Wall and was home to around 800 Roman soldiers.

Set high on a dramatic escarpment there are stunning panoramic views and walks in both directions past several 'mile castles' and sections of forest. The Romans arrived in Scotland in AD 71, culminating in the battle of Mons Graupius in AD 84. Although a victory for the Romans, they famously never conquered Scotland. The military presence of Rome lasted for little more than 40 years and at no time was even half of Scotland's land mass under Roman control. By AD 128 Hadrian's Wall was complete and by AD 213 the Romans had completely vacated what is now Scotland. It was the Romans who gave the Picts their name (Picti), meaning 'the painted people'. Similarly, it was the Romans who gave Scotland the name of Caledonia, meaning 'the hard place' or 'the hard people'.

Highland Clearances

In the late 18th century Highland estates started moving from small-scale mixed farming, which supported a large tenant population, to more profitable sheep farming. 'Surplus' tenants were 'cleared' off the estates by landowners from about 1780, and the Clearances were still ongoing nearly 70 years later at the time of the potato famine in 1846. Not all clearances were brutal, but some were. They were not confined to the Highlands but the Highlander's experience was certainly the most traumatic. The Highland Clearances devastated Gaelic culture and clan society by driving people from their home. The vast majority of Highlanders were forced to emigrate to the cities or overseas. The first mass emigration was in 1792, known as the 'Year of the Sheep'. Many cleared clansfolk left their native soil to live out their lives in America, Canada, New Zealand and Australia.



Inverness



The city of Inverness, Capital of the Highlands, lies at the north end of the Great Glen, where the River Ness flows into the Moray Firth. It has been a natural focus for lines of communication to, from and through the Highlands for about 2000 years. In 1250 the first bridge was built across the river and a priory founded. In 1727 the original Fort George was built here before being surrendered to the Jacobites prior to their eventual demise at the Battle of Culloden in April that year. Inverness Castle was built in the 1830s to house courts and administrative buildings. Its arrival was part of a boom in the 1800s

that saw Inverness truly establish itself as the capital of the Highlands. Today Inverness is a diverse and bustling city with a compact and attractive centre. The River Ness still provides a key focus, with attractions like the castle, Inverness Cathedral and numerous bars and restaurants to be found on its banks.



Heart of Scotland Tour Highlights

THE WEE
RED BUS

Isle of Skye

The Isle of Skye, or the 'Misty Isle', is the largest and the most northerly of the Inner Hebrides. With a population of around 10,000, Skye measures 50 miles from north to south and comprises a series of peninsulas radiating from a mountainous core. It is still possible to pass 'over the sea' to Skye using a choice of ferries, but since 1995 most visitors have reached the island via the Skye Bridge. The majestic Cuillin mountains dominate the southern half of Skye. Surrounded by cascading water and expanses of rough terrain the area offers some of the most challenging climbing in Scotland. The village of Carbost is home to Talisker Distillery, one of the finest island single malts in the country. Extending twenty miles north from the tiny capital of Portree is the famous Trotternish peninsula. The bizarre landscape here is the result of ancient volcanic activity. The coast is marked by sheer cliffs and there are pinnacles and pillars along its length, the most famous being The Old Man of Storr. At 165ft it presents something of a challenge for those who choose to climb it, whilst a walk to its base is a more popular and relatively straightforward undertaking. Not far from the 'Old Man' is the crofting township of Staffin where a single-track road cuts across the peninsula giving access to the Quirang, a spectacular forest of pinnacles and fierce rock formations. Dunvegan Castle, the magnificent ancestral home of the Chiefs of Clan MacLeod, is in the north-west of the island.



Jacobite Rebellions

In 1689, the Catholic King James Stuart was declared to have forfeited his throne. The crown was subsequently offered to his daughter Mary and her husband, William of Orange, in the so-called 'Glorious Revolution'. The revolution also established Presbyterianism in Scotland, although the Highlands generally remained Episcopalian and loyal to the Stuarts. A series of Jacobite Rebellions or 'Risings' followed, leading to an increased military presence in Scotland as government forces attempted to penetrate and subdue the Highlands. Many people believed that James was still the rightful king. They called themselves 'Jacobites' as 'Jacobus' is Latin for James. Scots and Irish loyal to King James, his son, and his grandson 'Bonnie Prince Charlie' fought for the exiled Stuarts in the Risings. The period produced many famous battles and Scottish heroes including 'Bonnie Dundee', Rob Roy McGregor and Flora MacDonald. Ultimately, however, the cause was doomed to failure with the Jacobites finally defeated at the Battle of Culloden in April 1746.

Lindisfarne and Vikings

Lindisfarne, or Holy Island, is a small island nature reserve just off the coast of Northumberland reached by crossing a short tidal causeway. 150 residents play host to some 650,000 visitors per annum to their island. It doesn't take long to appreciate why early Christian monks, seeking a place of peace and tranquillity, came to Lindisfarne to establish their monastery. Saint Aidan arrived in 635 and his work was continued by the better-known Saint Cuthbert. In 793 shockwaves were sent around Europe as an attack on the island ushered in four centuries of Viking raids and conflict. The monastery was abandoned but its site was later used for the Priory whose ruins and visitor centre you can visit. To this day the island remains a special place to Christians, many of whom visit on pilgrimage. A later period of Lindisfarne's history can be explored at Lindisfarne Castle, the island's most outstanding feature.





Heart of Scotland Tour Highlights



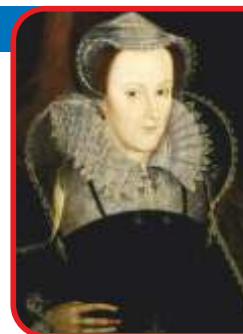
Loch Ness

Loch Ness, the world's most mysterious stretch of water, is best known for alleged sightings of the Loch Ness Monster, affectionately known as 'Nessie'. The loch is connected to the city of Inverness by the River Ness and a section of the Caledonian Canal. At 25 miles long the loch is the second largest in Scotland by surface area, after Loch Lomond, but due to its great depth, it is the largest by volume. Its deepest point is 230m making it the second deepest loch in Scotland after Loch Morar. It contains more fresh water than all the lakes in England and Wales combined. Approximately half way up the western shore of the Loch lies

the town of Drumnadrochit and the spectacular Urquhart Castle. At the southern tip is the picturesque village of Fort Augustus and an impressive series of locks linking Loch Ness to the Caledonian Canal. The village also includes a stunning abbey and is the focal point for boat trips on the loch.

Mary Queen of Scots

Mary was born in 1542 in Linlithgow Palace, the only child of James V of Scotland and his French wife, Mary of Guise. When she was six days old her father died and she became queen. For safekeeping against the English Mary was sent to France and betrothed to Francis, the four year old heir to the French crown. The young couple were married and Francis became king in 1559, briefly uniting the French and Scottish crowns. However, Henry died from an ear infection the following year. A widow at just 18, Mary returned to Scotland where she faced many challenges. As a Catholic in a country that was officially Protestant, she was regarded with suspicion by some of her subjects. Mary accepted the Protestant-led government and initially ruled with moderation. In 1565, Mary married her cousin the Earl of Darnley. Their relationship quickly broke down and as the spoiled and petulant Darnley spent less time with Mary, she became increasingly close to her advisor, the Earl of Bothwell. In 1567 Darnley was found murdered and Mary was implicated, Bothwell by now being the chief suspect in Darnley's murder. The Scottish nobility turned against her, Bothwell was exiled and Mary forced to abdicate. She was imprisoned in Loch Leven Castle and her infant son James crowned king. Having famously escaped from Loch Leven Mary fled to England to seek refuge with her cousin, Elizabeth I. Mary, however, had a strong claim to the English throne so Elizabeth had her imprisoned and kept under surveillance. Over the next 19 years, Mary became the focus of numerous Catholic plots to assassinate Elizabeth to try and put her on the English throne. Eventually Elizabeth signed Mary's death warrant and she was executed in 1587 at the age of just 44.



Mountains

Scotland is a mountainous country with a wide variety of wild landscapes including the rolling hills of the Southern Uplands, the great granite plateaus of the Cairngorms, the peaks of Torridon and the jagged narrow arêtes of the Cuillin hills on the Isle of Skye. Of the many majestic summits, 282 reach 3000 feet or more and these are known as The Munros, their conquest being a lifetime ambition of many walkers. Named after the original compiler, Sir Hugh Munro, the list was first drawn up in 1891. The Highlands contains Scotland's most impressive mountains; notable individual peaks include the UK's highest, Ben

Nevis, at over 4400 feet, Buachaille Etive Mor at the entrance to famous Glen Coe and Ben Lomond, towering over Loch Lomond. The Cairngorms is the highest, coldest and snowiest area in the British Isles and is home to five of the six highest mountains in Scotland. Arguably the most spectacular mountains, however, are in the north-west Highlands where the breathtaking peaks include Sgurr Alasdair on the Isle of Skye, Liathach in Torridon and Suilven in Assynt.



Heart of Scotland Tour Highlights



National Parks

Scotland has two National Parks, Loch Lomond and The Trossachs National Park, created in 2002, and the Cairngorms National Park, created in 2003. The Scottish Government intends to create a third - a coastal and marine park. Loch Lomond and The Trossachs National Park consists of many mountains and lochs and Scotland's premier long distance walking route, The West Highland Way, passes through the park. The mountains of Ben Lomond, The Cobbler and the Arrochar Alps attract thousands of hikers annually. On Loch Katrine, visitors can travel on the historic steamship SS Sir Walter Scott, while cruises on Loch Lomond itself can be taken from several locations. The Trossachs, often referred to as 'the Highlands in miniature' is a particularly scenic area within the Park, its name coming from the Gaelic meaning 'land of the thorns', in reference to the gorse bushes which are widespread throughout the area. The Cairngorms National Park centres around the Cairngorm plateau, the highest and most extensive range of mountain landscape anywhere in the UK. At the foothills of the range is one of the UK's biggest tracts of natural and largely untouched woodland. It contains fragments of the ancient Caledonian pine forest, home to a variety of rare animals. Heather moorland covers over 40 per cent of the Cairngorms.



Robert the Bruce

Robert I, known as Robert the Bruce, was the king who secured Scotland's independence from England. Bruce's grandfather was one of the claimants to the Scottish throne during a succession dispute. The English king, Edward I, was asked to arbitrate and chose the weaker John Balliol to be king instead. Bruce and his father did not back Balliol and as a result supported Edward I's invasion of Scotland when Balliol surprisingly refused to support the English in a war against France. Having forced Balliol to abdicate Edward then ruled Scotland as a province of England. As a consequence Bruce supported William Wallace's uprising against the English. After Wallace was defeated, Bruce's lands were not confiscated and in 1298, along with his fierce rival for the throne John Comyn (Balliol's nephew), Bruce became guardian of Scotland. In 1306, Bruce quarrelled with Comyn and stabbed him in a church in Dumfries. He was outlawed by Edward and excommunicated by the Pope. Bruce now proclaimed his right to the throne and was crowned king at Scone Abbey. The following year, Bruce was deposed by Edward's army and forced to flee. Returning to Scotland, Robert waged a highly successful guerrilla war against the English. At the Battle of Bannockburn in 1314, he defeated a much larger English army under Edward II, confirming the re-establishment of an independent Scottish monarchy.

Rosslyn Chapel

In the village of Roslin, just a couple of miles south of Edinburgh, lies one of the most remarkable pieces of architecture in Scotland. Since its construction began in 1446 Rosslyn Chapel has evoked wonder and surprise with the beauty and intricacy of its stonework. The chapel served as a family house of worship for the St Clair family throughout most of the 1500s. The St Clair's continued Catholicism after the Reformation in 1560 eventually led to the altars being destroyed in 1592 and the chapel falling into disuse. After several centuries of restoration, not all successful, the chapel has finally been returned to its former glory. When you enter Rosslyn Chapel for the first time you begin to understand why it has exerted such a powerful influence over many generations of visitors including Mary Queen of Scots, Queen Victoria and Queen Elizabeth II. There is virtually no surface in any part of the chapel that has not been painstakingly worked on, with magnificent results. There are legends which link Rosslyn Chapel with the Knights Templar and the Masons. Sealed burial vaults below the chapel are said to contain the Holy Grail, or the Ark of the Covenant, or part of the actual cross on which Christ was crucified. In 2006 the legends surrounding Rosslyn Chapel were the focal point for the closing scenes of the film of Dan Brown's hugely popular novel 'The Da Vinci Code'.





Heart of Scotland Tour Highlights



St Andrews and East Neuk



St Andrews is situated at the east end of the peninsula of Fife and named after the Apostle and patron saint of Scotland. The town is home to the University of St Andrews, the third oldest university in the English-speaking world and the oldest in Scotland. There has been an important church in St Andrews since at least the 8th century. With the construction of St Andrews Cathedral in 1160 the town became the ecclesiastical capital of Scotland, a position it held until the Scottish Reformation in which St Andrews played a major role. The famous cathedral, the largest in Scotland and for seven centuries the largest building in

Scotland, now lies in ruins as does the castle. St Andrews is also known worldwide as the 'home of golf'. This is in part because the town's Royal and Ancient Golf Club, founded in 1754, exercises legislative authority over the game worldwide, and also because the famous links are the most frequent venue for The Open Championship, the oldest of golf's four major championships. Visitors travel to St Andrews in great numbers for several golf courses ranked amongst the finest in the world, as well as for the Cathedral, Castle, harbour and sandy beaches.

Stirling Castle

Stirling Castle is one of the largest and most important castles, both historically and architecturally, in Scotland. The castle sits atop Castle Hill, which forms part of a volcanic geological formation. It is surrounded on three sides by steep cliffs, giving it a strong defensive position. Its strategic location, guarding what was, until the 1890s, the farthest downstream crossing of the River Forth, has made it an important fortification from at least the 11th century. Most of the principal buildings of the castle date from the reign of James IV and V during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. A few structures of the fourteenth century remain, while the outer defences fronting the town date from the early eighteenth century. Several Scottish Kings and Queens have been crowned at Stirling, including Mary Queen of Scots, in 1542, and her son James VI, in 1567. There have been at least eight sieges of Stirling Castle, including several during the Wars of Scottish Independence, the last being in 1746 when Bonnie Prince Charlie unsuccessfully tried to take the castle. Several battles have been fought in its immediate vicinity, two of which were turning points in Scottish history – Stirling Bridge in 1297 and Bannockburn in 1314.



Wildlife



The fauna of Scotland is similar to the rest of north-west Europe although many of the country's larger mammals including wolf and bear were hunted to extinction several centuries ago. Scotland's diverse landscape supports many species of wild mammals, including otters, red squirrels, grey and harbour seals and the most northerly colony of bottlenose dolphins in the world. Many populations of moorland birds, including the black and red grouse live here and the country has internationally significant nesting grounds for many seabirds.

The golden eagle has become a national icon, with white-tailed eagles and ospreys having recently re-colonised. Scotland's seas are among the most biologically productive in the world; it is estimated that the total number of Scottish marine species exceeds 40,000 including minke, pilot and killer whales and basking sharks. Scottish waters are also internationally renowned for Atlantic salmon. Perhaps the most iconic of all Scotland's animals is the red deer, present in large numbers throughout. The country also has a significant population of roe deer. No discussion of Scotland's wildlife would be complete without mentioning the famous Highland cows or their grazing friend the Scottish Blackface sheep.



Heart of Scotland Tour Highlights



Whisky

Scotch whisky, often simply called Scotch, is malt or grain whisky and the most tightly defined spirit in the world. The name whisky evolved from the Gaelic words 'uisge beatha', meaning the 'water of life'. The earliest record of whisky production in Scotland is in 1494 but there seems no doubt that whisky was being made long before then and probably introduced in to Scotland in the 4th or 5th century. All Scotch whisky was originally made from malt barley. Commercial distilleries began introducing whisky made from wheat and rye in the late 18th century. All Scotch must be aged in oak barrels for at least three years. Many Scotch whisky drinkers will refer to a unit for drinking as a 'dram'. Whisky production was first taxed in 1644, causing a rise in illicit whisky distilling. Around 1780, there were about 8 legal distilleries and 400 illegal ones. In 1823, Parliament eased restrictions on licensed distilleries with the 'Excise Act', while at the same time making it harder for the illegal stills to operate, thereby ushering in the modern era of Scotch production. Today the Scotch whisky industry goes from strength to strength as one of Scotland's largest exports and enjoyed in over 200 countries.



William Wallace

Sir William Wallace led the Scottish rebellion against Edward I of England during the Wars of Independence. He inflicted a famous defeat on the English army at the Battle of Stirling Bridge and is remembered as one of Scotland's greatest patriots and a national hero. In 1296, Edward had taken advantage of a succession crisis in Scotland and imposed himself as ruler with an English administration. Within months, Scottish unrest was widespread. In May 1297, Wallace attacked the town of Lanark, killing the English sheriff and unrest quickly became full-blown rebellion. Men flocked to join Wallace and he began to drive the English out of Scotland. In September 1297, Wallace defeated a much larger English force at Stirling Bridge. This and subsequent military successes severely weakened the English hold on Scotland. In early 1298 he was knighted and appointed 'guardian of the kingdom' in the name of John Balliol, the deposed king of Scotland. In July 1298, the Scottish and English armies met near Falkirk, and the Scots were defeated. Wallace escaped and resigned the guardianship. He then travelled abroad, notably to France, to seek support for the Scottish independence cause. On his return to Scotland in 1303, he discovered Robert Bruce had accepted a truce with Edward. Wallace was excluded from these terms and the English king offered a large sum of money to anyone who killed or captured him. Wallace was seized near Glasgow in 1305, and transported to London. He was charged and tried with treason, which he denied, saying he had never sworn allegiance to the English king. His execution was to make an example and he was hung, drawn and quartered. His head was placed on London Bridge, and his limbs displayed in Newcastle, Berwick, Stirling and Perth. Wallace came to international fame in 1995 as subject of the Hollywood movie 'Braveheart'.