



Whisky, Wildlife, Walking And More in Cairngorms NP, Scotland

By Don Mankin



I lifted the glass to my nose and sniffed, trying to detect the alleged floral and vanilla notes with a hint of oak or something like that. I then sipped the strong, amber liquid and sighed deeply. I'm not sure I tasted everything that I was supposed to (does anybody, really?) but I know what I like. And I liked this wee dram of 18 year old single malt whisky very much.

This was about as soft as adventure gets, literally -- soft beds, easy walks and gourmet meals of fresh salmon from the River Spey, fresh scallops from the Moray Firth and ever more creative uses for haggis. It was a welcome change from my usual, more grueling adventures (see, for example, [\[satrip.com/home/the-lost-world-of-venezuela.html\]\(http://satrip.com/home/the-lost-world-of-venezuela.html\) \).](http://www.yourlifei-</p>
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It was the last day of our brief exploration of the many diverse attractions of Cairngorms National Park, less than a three hour drive north of Edinburgh. We were here at the invitation of Visit Scotland--Scotland's national tourism association who hosted our visit to the Park. For four glorious, sunny days in mid-June, my wife Katherine and I drove, hiked, rode and kayaked through the Scottish countryside, then retired every evening to the classic, oak-lined bar of the world famous Boat Hotel in the heart of the Park for a drink, dinner and a good night's sleep (www.boathotel.co.uk).

The first full day of the trip set

the tone for the next three -- diverse, leisurely and active but not strenuous, all enveloped in a colorful setting of forests, hills, lochs, streams, meadows of purple and yellow flowers, and fields of cows, sheep and horses. The gently rounded Cairngorm Mountains, still streaked with snow, served as a backdrop throughout our trip.

We started with a two hour kayak down the legendary River Spey which flows through the heart of the region and lends its waters and name to the Speyside malts revered by knowledgeable whisky drinkers around the world. Mindful of our dearth of white water experience, our guide from Full On Adventure (www.fullonadventure.com) chose a relatively easy stretch of water for our morning "paddle," more of a float than a paddle. We drifted effortlessly down the mostly flat water invigorated by the crisp, fragrant air and the deep green hues that can only be found in places like Scotland encased in rain for most of the year.

After a lunch of fish and chips back at our hotel, we took a two and half mile walk to the RSPB Loch Garden Osprey Center (www.rspb.org.uk) on a trail through the edge of the sun-dappled forest alongside the narrow, lightly traveled road. These rare birds of prey are making a comeback in Scotland and one family migrates every year from Africa to breed and nest in a tall pine tree in

the reserve. The visitor center has several powerful spotting scopes and a closed circuit TV trained on the nest to give visitors an unobtrusive look at what's going on in the nest.

While watching through a scope, I saw the newly hatched chicks start to squirm. Then, without warning, the daddy swooped in with a large fish in his talons and hovered above the nest as the mom and chicks squirmed and flapped their wings in excitement. For the next few minutes, I continued to watch as the mom served the meal to her chicks. The image of the daddy hanging above the nest with a fish in his talons with his kids stretching their necks in anticipation is frozen in my memory. I guess I have seen an image like this in photos or on TV but never in person. There is no comparison.

Over the next two days, we explored the Park on foot, by car and via a beautifully-restored classic steam train (www.strathspey-railway.co.uk). One morning we hiked around Loch an Eilein on the Rothiemurchus Highland estate (www.rothiemurchus.net). For two hours, we hiked in hushed silence through an ancient Caledonian pine forest with frequent peek-a-boo views of the loch. At one point the view through the trees opened up to reveal an old castle on an island about 30 yards off shore with the Cairngorm Mountains in the background.

One afternoon we drove into the mountains to visit the Cairngorm reindeer herd (www.cairngorm-reindeer.co.uk). A relatively short hike up a ridge took us to a herd of about 40 reindeer. While Katherine fed and petted the reindeer, I admired the view and absorbed the subarctic temperament of the place. The day was capped off by a sheep



Katherine and Don Mankin on the River Spey. Photo: John Mason of Full On Adventure

dog demonstration on a working farm just a few miles away (www.leaultworkingsheepdogs.co.uk). It was a big afternoon for feeding and petting friendly, furry animals.

We could have filled up several more days with other activities – riding a funicular up a mountainside, hiking in the mountains, white water kayaking and canoeing, cycling, mountain biking, horseback riding, fishing, bird watching, and of course, golf. But by our last day we only had time for one more activity on my bucket list for this trip--a visit to as many distilleries along the Malt Whisky Trail as my blood alcohol level would allow.

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The Malt Whisky Trail begins just a half hour drive north of the Park on the A95 what passes for a major highway in this part of the world. Sixteen distilleries are located within a scenic corridor of about 10 miles along the highway and a couple of miles on each side. Most offer tours and free tastings. We managed to hit just three before

my legs turned to rubber and good sense kicked in. Katherine tentatively took over the driving until we found a place to eat lunch and take a long walk on a small portion of the Speyside Way, the 80 mile path that runs along the River from the heart of the Park to the coast.

Now sober, we headed to Aberdeen to pick up the Angus Coastal Trail south to Dundee, our destination for the night. After stopping at a couple of picturesque fishing villages along the way, we pulled into the St Cyrus Nature Reserve. We took a walk on the wide deserted beach sandwiched between the sea and a line of cliffs a couple hundred yards inland, then drove to the top of the cliffs for a view in the other direction. As the sky grew dark, we watched a pair of hang gliders swoop in arcs of yellow and red along the cliffs. One of the aviators stretched out his hand to skim the tops of the bushes on the sides of the cliff as he flew by as if to convince himself that it wasn't just a dream.

Don Mankin is a travel writer, business author, psychologist, organizational consultant and executive coach. The Wall Street Journal called his latest book, "Riding the Hulahula to the Arctic Ocean: A Guide to 50 Extraordinary Adventures for the Seasoned Traveler" (National Geographic, 2008), one of the best travel books of the year. For more information on Don or Riding the Hulahula, check out his website www.adventuretransformations.com.