

SCOTLAND 3
HEIGHT, HISTORY AND HAGGIS....
HIKING THE HIGHLANDS

Dr. Elaine Doll-Dunn

The sun sparkled loch a thousand feet below lapped gently at the shore...stark contrast to the glacier carved rocky outcropping where I clung, high up in the Cuillin Mountains. I looked up from the breath-taking vista to the big Scot leaning down to me, long arm outstretched. Before I released my death grip on the solid slab of sedimentary, however, I quavered, "Iain, did you love your mother?" Blue, blue laughing eyes twinkling in a bearded leather face...he grinned; "Aye, lass, I loved my mother, give me your hand." And I was up and over to the next impossible boulder. Acrophobia is such a cross.

It's scrambling, bouldering, or mountaineering; but not hiking as I pictured when signing up for the trip to Scotland. Don't get me wrong, it was wonderful, do-able, challenging and scary, but the Highlands and Islands were well worth the cost in pounds and adrenalin. Couldn't have happened without our redoubtable guide, though, an amazing muscle of a man who led us up the craggy peaks and down the butt-slide descent; occasionally he would break loose and scurry up the flat steep plane of a rock just because he could, and because he was scheduled to climb Mt. Blanc in Switzerland the next week. Talk about your addictions.

Scotland is the land of my grandmother, Hattie Mac Peak, and ever since a sample of the country when Erin married there, I've wanted to run a marathon or hike across it. Be careful what you Google....REI Tours is irresistible. They orchestrated a wonderful trip full of experiences, challenges and indelible impressions. We climbed Monros---any hill over 800 feet--for seven days, and by the seventh I was, if not desensitized, at least coherent.

My good friend, Jan Gollither (out-door life guru) and I flew into Inverness and met our team; Larry from New York, Brian from Canada, Collin and Toby from Texas, and our amazing guide, Iain Thow from Scotland. With encyclopedic knowledge of flora, fauna, history and lore, he was an education in and of himself. He has also climbed all 280 Monros...twice! I can't say enough about how he led, nurtured and made this trek possible for all of us who came anticipating a walk-in-the-park turned climb-every-mountain.

These things I learned:

1. Hiking boots lack style.
2. A sheer rock face is more fun to look up at then down from; it's a preposition thing.
3. When your guide says, "Grab the heather!" Be sure you know it from bracken.

4. At the end of the day in a picturesque pub with stories to tell---- a wee dram is a bit generous.
5. It takes more that 12 days to get used to a car hurling toward you on the wrong side as you rocket down a winding mountain road.
6. Black pudding is dried blood. Focus on the spices.
7. Haggis is best left unidentified.
8. Scotch Highlander Cattle, "Heeland Coos", look like mischievous teenagers, way cute.
9. Always take a nice outfit, even when advised to pack light. Everyone dressed for dinner. Rhinestone earrings added to a hiking outfit don't cut it.
10. Loch Ness is 26 miles long, which invites the obvious...there is a marathon along it. Lloyd Scott of England did it under water in an antique diving suit; took him twelve days...he never saw the monster.

Pertinent points:

1. I lost my water bottle on some perpendicular peak; Iain scrambled up a rock and filled his extra from a water fall. Purest in the world he assured me.
2. I was mistaken for a famous English actress in Manchester...I'm afraid to Google her...
3. Ran into two different people I know from South Dakota in Amsterdam...small world.
4. Attended Mass in Inverness; the first Catholic Church built in Scotland since the reformation. The priest's hero is Father DeSmet!
5. I really wanted to buy a kilt...till I tried one on.
6. Iain got caught in a wind/hail storm on a mountain after he left us for the evening. Said he felt like he was in a washing machine. I'm happy I was snuggled up to a blazing fireplace in the great room of Sconser Lodge sampling a single malt scotch. And I don't even like scotch.
7. The potent ingredient in midgie repellent is myrtle....Iain pointed out the small plant to us. I knew there was a reason for my name.
8. I have a pair of low mileage hiking boots and a walking stick with finger indentations I'll sell cheap.
9. I have a whole new relationship with Cabela's; until this endeavor I thought it was a wine from Spain.
10. A seven hour layover in Manchester, total fatigue, great fear of height, missed flight and lost luggage; I'd go back tomorrow.

Bottom line?

Scotland is the Black Hills on steroids.