



# My Heart's in the Highlands

By Dr Jenny Lim

The idyllic remoteness of northeast Skye

**I** imagine my joyful glee when the August 2010 work schedule came out and I discovered I had ten consecutive days off starting 23 August. A quick Google search revealed that I could make it for the Edinburgh Festival, as well as the Edinburgh Military Tattoo on 28 August. Hooray! Thus started the last minute planning for my Scottish adventure.

“Thank God for the Internet,” I intoned, as I searched the web for information. Fodor’s Travel Talk Forums ([fodors.com/community/](http://fodors.com/community/)) and TripAdvisor ([tripadvisor.com](http://tripadvisor.com)) have always been invaluable, and of course googling the country du jour will inevitably unearth other gems. I fly standby on US Airways, the airline that my husband works for. Hence I don’t usually pre-book anything in advance. But knowing Edinburgh would be packed during the festivals, I wisely reserved a room at the University Halls in Edinburgh for four nights, and bought a ticket to the Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo by telephone. The Military Tattoo is an

annual series of military drum performances by British Armed Forces, Commonwealth and international military bands and display teams. The event takes place throughout August, as part of the wider Edinburgh Festival.

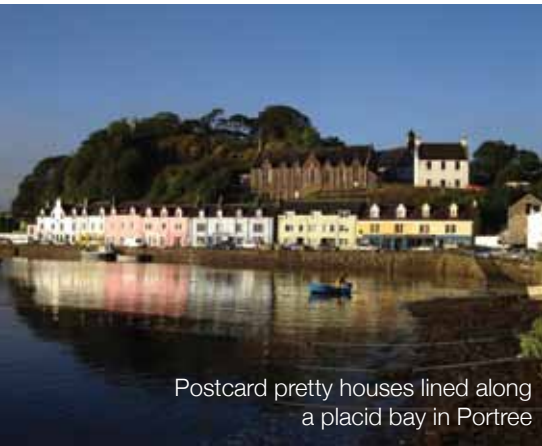
Business class to Glasgow was fortunately not full, and I arrived well-rested and fed at 7.05am. I took the Glasgow City Flyer bus and arrived at the attractive glass-roofed Queen Street Station. I bought my Highland Rover rail pass, picked up timetables and brochures, including one that detailed the rail journey I was embarking on. The West Highland Line links Glasgow to the West Highlands of Scotland, and is one of the most scenic railway lines in the world, ranking up there with the Trans-Siberian Railway in Russia and the Cuzco to Machu Picchu line in Peru.

A 164-mile, 3 1/4-hour long ride on the clean, comfortable train took me to the town of Fort William. On the way, I admired picturesque scenery of villages, rivers, lochs

and moors, and finally, impressive Ben Nevis, the highest mountain in the United Kingdom, towering over Fort William in the distance.

At Fort Williams the train disgorged half its passengers, many with hiking gear, but promptly filled up again, and we continued on to the fishing village and ferry terminal of Mallaig. This 90-minute, 49-mile trip is even more spectacular, and justly famous, as it crosses the River Finnan by means of a majestic viaduct a quarter mile long and a hundred feet high. Filmgoers today know Glenfinnan Viaduct’s 21 arches best from the Harry Potter films, where it was used as part of the Hogwarts Express route from London to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

Still feeling energetic upon arrival at Mallaig, I took the ferry to Armadale to start my trip on the Isle of Skye. By then it was getting chilly and cloudy, but I came prepared and the blustery cold 30-minute ferry ride was still an enjoyable part of this holiday. Truly, the scenery so far was deeply



Postcard pretty houses lined along a placid bay in Portree



The desolate beauty of northwest Skye



The Skye Museum of Island Life at Kilmuir in Skye



The Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo

impressive and had not been overhyped.

Upon arrival at Armadale Pier, I discovered the last bus out had left, so I had to walk 1.2km uphill with my roller bag in tow to tiny Ardrvasar, which has the closest accommodations. The only hotel in the village was out of my budget but the very friendly hotel owner directed me to a pleasant bed and breakfast (B&B) nearby. After a quick shower, I walked to Armadale Castle, which sits on 40 acres of woodland and has nature trail walks. The castle and museum were closed but the grounds are always open to the public. After admiring the castle and the surroundings, I went to the busy hotel's pub for the best beer-battered haddock fish and chips I have ever eaten, and the obligatory beer was pretty good as well.

The next morning, I took another walk around Ardrvasar and Armadale before checking out and waiting for the public bus that would take me to Portree, the capital of and largest town in Skye. The bus was like a big tour bus with panoramic windows, and I could have happily stayed on the bus all day as the scenery was so amazing.

The weather was sunny in Armadale, but I arrived in pretty Portree one hour later to a light drizzle which became progressively heavier. Such is the erratic weather in Skye, it seems. Unfortunately the B&Bs and inns along the scenic harbour were full but a helpful B&B owner called around and found me a room up the hill. Portree is popular not only because it is a pretty place, but also because it is the base for travellers exploring Skye.

After settling in, I explored the town and went to the tourist information centre. They booked me a rental car for one day with the option of keeping it for more days. I returned to the harbour and carefully scrutinised the menus of various waterfront restaurants; finally deciding upon one for dinner. It was not to open for another 15 minutes, so I queued behind a lovely English family of four from London. We struck up a conversation and ended up having dinner

together, which the father insisted on paying for. After dinner, I joined them for a concert by two distinguished Scottish folk musicians, which was held in the local secondary school auditorium a 10-minute car ride away. The concert was sold out, but they added plastic chairs in the auditorium, and gave me and other walk-in customers handwritten tickets. This was one of the unexpected pleasures of travelling alone.

The weather was perfect the next morning and my car rental ride was on time. She actually lived down the street from my B&B and was asked by her boss to pick me up on the way to work. Half an hour later, I was driving myself on the single lane roads of Skye, chanting, "Turn left keep left, turn right keep left." Isle of Skye is the largest and most northerly of the Inner Hebrides, an archipelago off the west coast of Scotland. The island can be seen as a series of peninsulas that radiate from the mountainous centre of the Cuillin Hills. As it was the shoulder season, there weren't many cars around, and it was sheer pleasure driving along the panoramic coastal and mountainous roads without worries. There is much to see in Skye and one can happily spend a week there. I decided to spend the entire day driving around and making scenic stops along the way to see as much as I could. This was very easily done. With well-posted signs around, one could not get lost for too long on Skye.

I resisted the temptation to take a ferry to visit the even more remote Outer Hebrides, another archipelago further off Scotland's west coast, and decided to head back to Portree for the night.

The next morning was another clear and sunny albeit cool day. I drove to a bus stop, left the rental car with keys in the ignition as instructed, and waited for the public bus to Kyle. Another exceedingly scenic bus ride and short walk took me to the train station in Kyle. The Kyle line, from Kyle of Lochalsh on the west to Inverness on the east coast of Scotland, is another of the world's most spectacular rail journeys.



At the edge of the world: sheep grazing on a clifftop in Skye

The line has been likened to a symphony in three parts: pastoral, mountain and sea. Once again, the beautiful and dramatic scenery had not been hyped up and I was not disappointed with the 2 1/2-hour train ride. I had to be in Edinburgh the next night for the Military Tattoo and decided to spend this night in Inverness, despite reading many unflattering comments online about the city, regarded as the capital of the Highlands of Scotland.

I was glad about my decision when I arrived in Inverness and found it to be an attractive and interesting small city. The tourist information centre was packed with tourists desperately looking for rooms for the night. Accommodation was hard to come by in Inverness for once, as it was the weekend and the Edinburgh Festival was going on. Fortunately they found me a single room in a fancy B&B close to the river. It was priced higher than my usual budget, but was money well spent.

This much-maligned city is very walkable, with interesting historical buildings such as Inverness Castle and the Town Hall.

The houses, restaurants and hotels along the riverside were trendy rehabilitated historical buildings much older than a century. Ever since my husband and I gutted and restored our 103-year-old house in Florida, I find myself paying attention to the details of old houses. There were men fly fishing in the river in the late evening and early morning, and I wished I could have bought a salmon from them and had sashimi there and then. But I had to settle for the smoked variety at the most favourite restaurant of a friendly, well-dressed passerby I asked a recommendation from. She did not disappoint and I had a very good meal at a French-inspired restaurant, cooked using local ingredients.

The next afternoon found me in Edinburgh, and it was jam-packed with tourists! Quite a shocker after the idyllic remoteness of Skye. But being a city girl at heart, I soon adjusted and started enjoying the crowds and the street activities. I walked miles and miles during the four days I was there, and lucked out again with sunny but cold weather. I finally achieved my lifetime longing of participating in one of

the most exciting and accessible festivals of performing arts in the world!

Being a new passionate gardener, I also had to visit the beautiful Royal Botanical Gardens, and that was enjoyable and inspiring as well. Another personal highlight in Edinburgh was the breakfast buffet served at the University Halls, where I was staying. Haggis for breakfast every morning was a treat to look forward to.

Unfortunately I came down with a cold, and was pretty exhausted after four days in Edinburgh. Instead of spending a night in Glasgow, I left a day early for home. This was yet another memorable trip and I am very blessed to be able to travel like I do.

*Be happy while you're living, for you're a long time dead.*

– Scottish proverb **SMA**



Jenny Lim lives in North Florida where she works in the Urgent Care section of the Emergency Room. She is married to a commercial pilot. They have no kids.