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Leisurely trip turns into pop culture tour

By Kim Foley MacKinnon



Kim Foley MacKinnon

Doone Castle in Scotland has been used for filming scenes from "Monty Python and the Holy Grail," "Outlander" and "Game of Thrones."

When my husband, Rob, and I headed to England and Scotland for our 20th anniversary this summer, we didn't mean for it to be a book and movie tour. But in the end, Monty Python, "Fawlty Towers," James Bond, "Outlander" and "Game of Thrones" forced their way into our vacation.

Maybe we are just a little bit geeky – reading and watching way too many of these popular books and shows – or maybe modern culture is just inescapable. The irony is that we purposely skipped the big cities, like London and Edinburgh, during our two-week jaunt to meander through the countryside and smaller towns.

We chose to explore southern England during the first half of our trip, and within hours of getting off the plane – jet lag firmly ignored – we arrived at Stonehenge. It was a lifelong dream that was just as magical as I had imagined. It didn't even matter that visitors can no longer go right up to the stones; just seeing them in person was enough.

English countryside

Our first days were spent exploring the Cotswolds, a rural section of the countryside with villages crafted from the famous golden Cotswold stone. We stayed at the gorgeous Ellenborough Park in Cheltenham. The stunning property dates back to the 1500s, and its award-winning Beaufort Dining Room was the perfect place for our anniversary dinner.

Nearby explorations included Sudeley Castle, where King Henry VIII's last wife, Catherine Parr, is buried, and where our excellent guide Kirsty made history come alive. We stopped for lunch at the Three Ways House Hotel, where we had to-die-for sticky toffee pudding. Coincidentally, the hotel is home to the Pudding Club, a quirky group dedicated to celebrating British puddings.

As we made our way north, we visited Lincoln Castle and the Lincoln Cathedral before staying overnight in York. We happily left the car in a parking lot after checking in to the Lamb & Lion Inn, which is attached to the medieval wall of the city, and set out to explore on foot. Here we spent a very entertaining couple of hours on a Ghost Bus Tour (conjure up the image of the Knight Bus in "Harry Potter" and you wouldn't be far off). The England portion of our trip ended in Newcastle, where we stayed at yet another historic property, the Jesmond Dene House, built in the 19th century.

Scotland's castles

In Scotland, we set up stays at small inns and bed-and-breakfasts. After a little adventure trying to locate our first accommodation in Scotland at the Hillview Cottage in Stirling, we wondered at the somewhat unusual decor, including a moose head mounted on the wall. John, the owner, confessed his love of the BBC comedy show "Fawlty Towers," and said it took more than a year for him to find a moose head (it's in a pivotal scene).

On John's tip, we headed to Doone Castle and asked for the coconut shells they keep behind the desk, so we could recreate the classic scene (think horse trotting) from "Monty Python and the Holy Grail." We weren't the only ones. Once Rob started clapping

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them together, a nearby family did the same. Besides the "Holy Grail," "Outlander" and "Game of Thrones" have used the castle in filming. We found references to the "Outlander" books everywhere we went, including Loch Ness, Culloden Battlefield and Dunvegan Castle, among others.

The Isle of Skye was another highlight of our trip, since it's where my husband's family can trace its roots. We even saw the ruins of the castle that belonged to the MacKinnon clan's first chief. Dedicating two days to the area, we took in the always-scenic countryside and were rewarded with a rainbow one afternoon.

Heading to a much-anticipated overnight at Glengarry Castle in Invergarry, we detoured briefly at the Ben Nevis distillery, founded in 1825, where besides learning about the whisky, we discovered that the building has been used as a film set and that nearby Glencoe was featured in the James Bond film "Skyfall."

Wanting to indulge in the luxury of Glengarry Castle, a 19th century castle turned upscale hotel that sits on Loch Oich, we checked in a bit early and learned we could take a rowboat out on the loch. It was an irresistible activity on a rare sunny afternoon as Rob rowed us by the ruins of Invergarry Castle, where Bonnie Prince Charlie once stayed and sheep now graze on the banks. It was one of those timeless moments you can't schedule or plan, which made it all the more memorable. It was the perfect end to our trip.

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