



COOL PLACES, WARM PEOPLE

BY LILLY LONGSHORE

Scotland is known for the verdant beauty of its Highlands, its historic stone castles dotting cliffs and countryside — and Nessie, of course. Scotland also offers some of the warmest, friendliest hospitality found in Europe. Its unique geography includes the northern one-third of the Island of Great Britain as well as 790 additional surrounding islands, totaling a land mass roughly the size of the state of South Carolina. Many worthwhile tourist sights are packed into this relatively small area, a good thing for travelers.

Andrea Reaves, a disability advocate in her home state of Arkansas and the mother of a 2-year-old, is the wife of a native Scotsman. She is also a C6-7 quadriplegic due to a car accident as a teenager. Last year she traveled to Scotland with her family using a rigid frame manual chair.

“I wanted to go and see for myself all the things my husband has told me about from his childhood,” Reaves says. “And after having my daughter, I wanted her to meet her family.”

Reaves flew into Glasgow and stayed at the wheelchair-friendly Glasgow Holiday Inn. Only 47 miles east in the capital city of Edinburgh is the most visited tourist destination in Scotland, Edinburgh Castle. “I was amazed at how much they try to accommodate people with disabilities. I thought the wheelchair accessibility was wonderful,” Reaves says. “Many areas throughout the castle were accessible.



Andrea Reaves and her husband pose in front of the famous Greyfriars Bobby statue.

Considering we spent eight hours there, I was perfectly fine with the few areas that were not accessible.”

Paul Ralph agrees with Reaves. Ralph is the founder of the United Kingdom’s Disabled Access Day and an affiliate of Euan’s Guide, the fabulous tourist review website for people with disabilities. He is also a native Scotsman who resides in Edinburgh and uses a power chair for mobility. “Edinburgh castle is a really good attraction to visit,” says Ralph, “particularly as it has an excellent mobility vehicle that will take you personally around the site, as and when you need it.”

When Reaves arrived at Edinburgh Castle, staff took her via the accessible van from the parking area to the top of the volcano where the 384,000 square foot castle is sited. She toured gardens, trails and grounds around the castle. Nine sites on the grounds are wheelchair-friendly, including the Crown Room, St. Margaret’s Chapel and the Museum of the Royal Scots.

Located opposite of Edinburgh Castle along the Royal Mile is Holyrood Palace, the main residence of the Kings and Queens of Scots since the 16th century. “Holyrood Palace really goes the extra mile,” says Ralph, “little things like being invited to use the Queen’s private lift to access the upper floors, and discovering with the help of friendly staff that there was a different route leading out of the Abbey that gave ramp access into the building.”

Of the hundreds of castles throughout Scotland, Cawdor Castle, made famous as the setting of Shakespeare’s Macbeth, was also a must-see for Reaves. It is located in the beautiful Scottish Highlands near Inverness.

“I wanted to go there basically because of its history,” says Reaves. “It’s quite accessible ... the gardens are full of beautiful flower beds, there’s nature trails. Those areas are all easily wheelchair accessible. There are many areas within the castle that are.”

Near Inverness, Reaves made sure to visit Clava Cairns, an ancient Bronze

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Age burial grounds. She needed some help to navigate around tree stumps and across grass, but where there's a will, there's a way. "My favorite, favorite TV series is *Outlander*," Reaves explains. "I wanted to go to where it was filmed and to some of the sites, like Clava Cairns, where the character Claire touches one of the stones."

In the TV series, Claire is mysteriously transported from the 1940s to the 1700s by touching a stone at Clava Cairns. "I'm not sure if I touched the exact stone as Claire did, but at least I got to go and touch them."

HOSPITALITY RULES

Kindness and warm hospitality is a theme that runs through stories from those who have traveled Scotland.

Barry Long, an inspirational speaker and president of Talk and Roll Enterprises, traveled the United Kingdom for five months in 1995. Long, a T5 paraplegic from a motorcycle accident, backpacked in his manual wheelchair re-fitted with common, easy-to-replace bike tires.

"Hospitality overcame inaccessibility," Long affirms. "I was trying to get from Carlisle, England, to Inverness, Scotland. This Scottish guy saw me along the road and stopped in his Austin Mini — the smallest car in the world," Long laughs. When Long's chair wouldn't fit into the Austin Mini, the man asked Long to wait in a nearby pub and he would send someone back for him. Forty-five minutes and a pint of ale later, in walked the man's brother — a tree farmer with a truck — who paid Long's tab and took him all the way to Inverness, a 254-mile ride.

"When I got to the hostel in In-

verness, it was up four flights of stairs," Long remembers. Since the hostel wouldn't work, the tree farmer took Long to a four-star hotel in Inverness. He even negotiated a lower backpackers' rate so Long could stay with comfortable accommodations for the next three weeks.

"The hospitality was absolutely fantastic!" His enthusiasm is still strong. "The constable of the town came and took me to distilleries, and to privately owned castles. None of them had ever seen anyone backpacking in a wheelchair before."

Reaves was also touched by the warm hospitality. "The people — as much as the scenery, beauty, and history of the country — really made the trip great," Reaves exclaims. "They are a very gift-oriented people. Family and friends

would pop into our hotel. Every time, they had chocolates or wine. Everyone that met my daughter brought a gift for her ... it's just a tradition."

SCOTTISH HERITAGE AND HIGHLIGHTS

The Scottish people are proud of their heritage, which was influenced by a variety of cultures. From invasions by Vikings to wars with England, Scottish history is rich. Six miles east of Inverness, Culloden Battlefield provides an award-winning accessible visitors center where tourists can learn about the last battle fought on British soil. It is where supporters of the House of Stuart, or Jacobites, were defeated in a bloody battle by troops from the House of Hanover in a



Paul Ralph, founder of Disabled Access Day, tours Glasgow with Gary Smith, secretary for the Hibernian Disabled Supporters Association. Both men are affiliated with the review site, Euan's Guide.

fight over the British throne.

“Culloden has a fantastic visitors center,” says Ralph, “and you can wheel out onto the battlefield!”

The battle lines have been redrawn for an accurate depiction of the historic encounter in an interactive display. Films are presented and audio devices are available in multiple languages. Live reenactments take place daily.

After the Battle of Culloden ended, the English banned the wearing of traditional kilts and tartans from 1745 to 1782, as well as the speaking of Scottish Gaelic. But the Highlands culture has survived and Scottish Gaelic is spoken throughout the Culloden Visitors Center displays as well as throughout the Highlands today.

Heading 80 miles southwest of Inverness, past 23-mile-long Loch Ness, reported home of Nessie, is Glencoe. This village resides at the mouth of a glacial valley beside towering volcanoes of the Lochaber Geopark. A Geopark is an area set aside by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization with the purposes of protecting and promoting the use of geologic heritage in a responsible and sustainable manner. The Lochaber Geopark is known as the Outdoor Capitol of the UK.

“The most beautiful area in the world that I’ve seen thus far is Glencoe,” says Reaves. “The mountain peaks, the rivers, the ridges — the whole region was beautiful!” Formed by glacial and volcanic activity, it is truly a unique and picturesque region.



The kelpies keep watch over Andrea Reaves and her family.



Carlton Hill in central Edinburgh is one of the city’s most iconic locations, site for many photographs, such as this one featuring Paul Ralph.

ON THE EDGE OF THE NORTH SEA

Leaving the west coast and heading 170 miles east and slightly north, the town of Aberdeen is situated on Scotland’s east shoreline, on the North Sea. With a population of 197,000, Aberdeen is the third largest city in Scotland. Its tall granite buildings, museums, shops, art galleries and gardens create a mix of great shopping and entertainment, yet it is still one of the best places in Scotland for nature lovers to spot dolphins and other wildlife. According to Ralph, Aberdeen is one of the most accessible towns in Scotland.

“Aberdeen is very good,” says Ralph. “The buses there are accessible, the train station also has good access, and everything is close to Union Street. Union Square shopping center also has a Changing Places toilet [a very large accessible bathroom, which includes a sling lift], which is fantastic. The Aberdeen Maritime Museum is also really impressive and has great access!”

The Maritime Museum displays thousands of years of shipbuilding history with paintings and clipper ship replicas. The history of fishing, sailing and oil and gas drilling in the North Sea is presented. A model of an authentic oil platform is on the third floor, offering outstanding views of the busy harbor and North Sea.

Long made use of public transit — the train — to visit Aberdeen. However, he accidentally got off at the wrong station, landing in a nearby small town. At nightfall, with nowhere else to go and the train pulling away, he went to the nearest business, a pub just closing.

“I knocked on the door and asked if there was a hotel around. The lady just laughed and said, ‘There’s no hotel in this town. But we’ve got a couch. Do you want to stay here?’” Long laughs at the memory. “So I stayed the night in this pub.” The owner opened up the bathroom by taking the door off the hinges, left the taps on and pointed the way to munchies and a fireplace. “I didn’t even know their names and they had absolutely given me their pub.”

Now, that’s hospitality!

Long was also given a key to a McDonald’s in one small Scottish town so he could use the accessible facilities whenever he needed. So his recommendation after traveling through 19 countries? When you get to a new town, look for McDonald’s, Starbucks or other American restaurants. Worldwide, these places almost always have accessible restrooms and even accessible employee showers.

With awe-inspiring sights, welcoming hospitality and more facilities being constructed with accessibility in mind, Scotland truly is a fabulous wheelchair-friendly destination. “I felt they were 20 years ahead of us when it came to wheelchair accessibility,” Reaves says.

And on the occasion that a helping hand is needed, it seems there is always one extended, with sincere Scottish warmth. ■

RESOURCES:

- Disability Access in Scotland, www.disabilitytravel.com/independent/accessible-scotland.htm
- General tourism in Scotland, www.visitscotland.com
- Disabled Access Reviews: Euan’s Guide, www.euansguide.com