

Caledonian Canal Cruise

August 2004

It started as some of our trips do, with Sally asking a simple question. She asked if there were any river cruises in England. I just happened to have a brochure for European River Barges in our bookcase, and after looking at the itinerary, we thought it would be a nice thing to do. The barge is small enough to negotiate the locks, and has a complement of 8 passengers and 4 crew. The barge sails down the Caledonian Canal from Inverness to Fort William. The canal was built in the 1800's to allow fishing boats to go from one coast of Scotland to the other without having to go around the northern tip where the weather was bad.

I am interested in trains, and one of the most picturesque trips is the West Highland Line that goes from Fort William to Mallaig on the West Coast of Scotland. The highlight is passing over the Glenfinnan Viaduct, which has 23 concrete arches. There is a steam train called the Jacobite that was featured in one of the Harry Potter movies that makes that trip. The viaduct is just outside Fort William, so I would not have to take a 2 hour train trip to see it. The problem is that the barge reverses its itinerary every other time, so we do not know if our cruise will start at Inverness or Fort William. If it starts at Fort William, all bets are off. The pickup point is at a hotel on the Ness River in Inverness, and is right next to the Glen Mhor hotel, where we had spent a few nights previously. I e-mailed the hotel, and since we had been there before, they offered us a 10% discount. The hotel was quite a bit less expensive than the one at the pickup point, and its restaurant also featured "Taste of Scotland" menus, and was quite good.

Because we are using frequent flyer miles, we had to leave for Inverness a day early. I dug out my Single Malt Scotch books, and found a distillery named Glenmorangie just north of Inverness. I got on their web site and got directions and train schedules. That way the day will not be wasted (for me, anyhow).

After leaving the barge, we will spend some time in Glasgow, as I want to go see the Burrell Collection. We also will meet 2 Scottish ladies that I met through the Brain Injury chat room. Since Sally's experience meeting the lady in Laughlin was so positive, she has no trepidation about meeting these ladies.

We had an afternoon flight from LA to Heathrow, but the flight to Inverness leaves from Gatwick, which is southeast of Heathrow and about an hour away. There is a Speedlink bus that connects the two, but the pain is we had to collect our luggage and go through Customs and Immigration first. We had 5 hours between flights, so we will not have to rush.

Some time before our trip, we got a notice from British Airways that they had cancelled the early flight, and they put us on a flight that arrived at noon, but left us on the 7:50 PM flight to Inverness. I called BA and told them that was unacceptable, as that required an 8 hour layover! They hemmed and hawed at first, and then the magic words of "Involuntary Reroute" were spoken. I asked to speak to a supervisor, and she said since they changed our flight, they put us on a later flight, even though there were no frequent flyer seats open. Now we have comfortable 3 and ½ hours between flights and I do not have to take off any time from work.

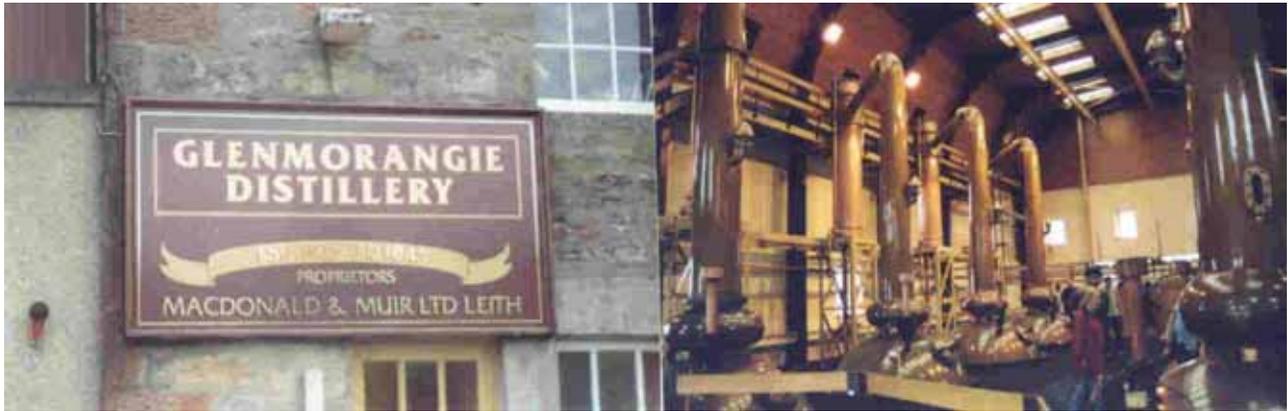
The flight from LA to London was uneventful, helped by a canny gate agent that regrouped our seats with a family of 5 so that Sally had an aisle seat. We landed at Heathrow, claimed our luggage, and went through customs and immigration. I had arranged for a wheelchair for Sally, so it was less of an ordeal for her. We caught the bus, and were taken to Gatwick where we caught the flight to Inverness. There was a wheelchair waiting for Sally, and we took a taxi to the Glen Mhor.

The next morning I headed out to the train station to catch the train to Tain, where the Glenmorangie distillery was located. On the way to the station, I passed a church that had a floral display of the Old Ness Bridge the last time we were here. The latest floral display was of 2 dolphins.



I had found out at the Scotsrail website, that there was no taxi rank at the station at Tain, and I figured that I could somehow depend on the "kindness of strangers" to help me. It turned out that the only other people that got off the train were a couple from Inverness who were just there for an afternoon. I asked where I could get a taxi, and they suggested that the Royal Hotel could call me one. Of course it was uphill from the station, but I soldiered on, and sure enough, I was able to get a taxi.

I arrived at the distillery, and they had my name down for the 12:30 tour, and I caught it in progress. It was quite interesting, and this distillery had the highest stills in Scotland. After the tour we were taken to the tasting room to taste some of the product.



I had Sally take a picture of me holding the decanter with their 21 year old scotch, and showed it to the people at the distillery. Since I had tasted most of their products, I opted for a scotch that had been matured in casks that had held Burgundy wine, and liked it quite a bit. I then visited the gift shop, and I saw a beautiful copper model of their still that was for sale. As pretty as it was, and over 12 inches high, it had 2 things holding me back-it was about \$80, and we had no place to put it in the house! After the tasting, I went to the museum and took a picture of an old "spirit safe" that was used to test the alcohol levels coming out of the still.



I then waited for the taxi to pick me up at 2:30 to catch the 3:00 train. After an anxious 10 minutes, the taxi showed up and took me to the station. It turned out the train was 20 minutes late, so there was no real problem. Who should I see at the station, but the couple from Inverness, who had directed me to the hotel? There was also another gentleman who had a set of golf clubs with him. They asked how I liked the tour, and I told them I enjoyed it very much. The golfer also corrected my pronunciation of "Glenmorangie", saying the accent was on the second syllable. He also told us about meeting 2 Texans at the golf course who ordered a whisky that was \$40 a shot! They then proceeded to mix it with 7up! I told him that nightmare would keep me awake for a week

The train ride back to Inverness was uneventful, and when Sally asked if the train ride was winding, I replied that "the train to Tain ran mainly on the plain", at which point she hit me.

The next day we moved our luggage to the Glenmoriston Hotel to be picked up for the cruise. While waiting in the lounge, we met 2 fellow passengers, Mike and Mary Beth, who were from Florida, and we hit it off with them. I turned out they had worked for a company that made amateur radio equipment, and since I was a "ham" radio operator, I was quite familiar with it.

We met the other two couples, Ken and Char and Dick and Pat, who were friends and were from the Chicago area. We were then met by Kirsten, who would be our driver and guide during the trip.

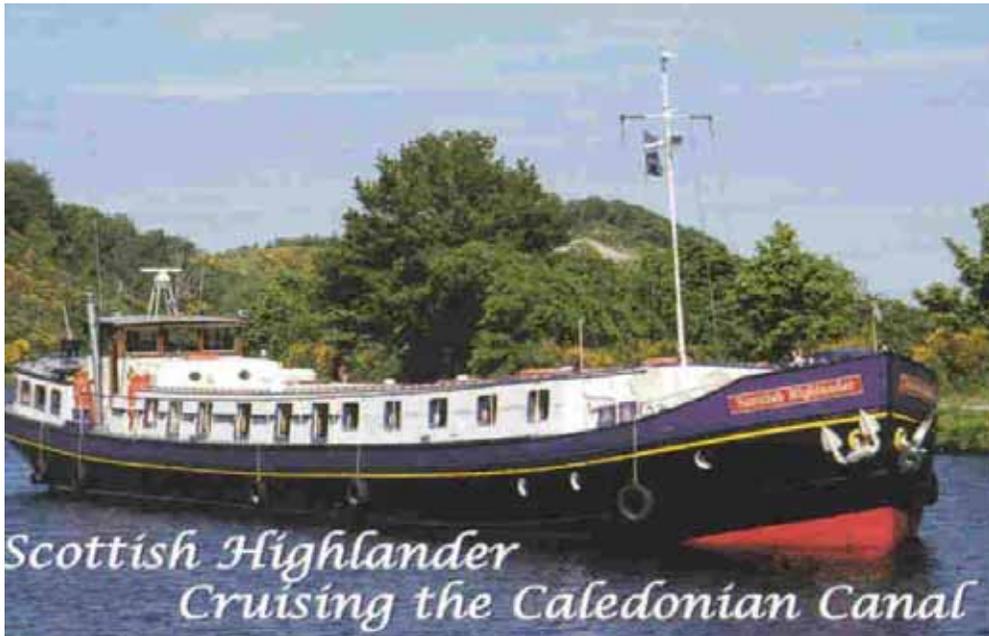
The trip to Fort William from Inverness was to be about 2 hours, so we broke it up in the middle by visiting Urquhart Castle.

When Sally and I toured the castle over 10 years ago, there was just a little trailer that sold tickets and a paper guidebook. There was now a visitor center with an elevator and a large gift shop. It was the same type of thing that happened to us when we went back to Hearst Castle in Central California. When we were there

on our honeymoon, some 29 years ago, there was just a little trailer selling tickets. Some years later they built a huge visitor center complete with an IMAX theatre.



The castle was as we remembered, and I toured the various parts of it, including the tower. We were then taken to Fort William to board the Scottish Highlander. We were greeted by Geoff, the skipper, Davina, the housekeeper, and last but certainly not least, Tommy our chef. After our champagne welcome, I was presented with a bottle of Oban 14 year old malt that I had won in a contest sponsored by their newsletter.



After getting settled in our cabin, which was more spacious than I had expected, we had a briefing from Geoff about our plans for the next day. He had a super map of the canal, and being a collector of maps, I was greatly interested in it. He explained where we would be going the following day, and what we would see. We then sat at the dining area table for dinner, and Tommy came out and explained what he had prepared, and the wines that would accompany the meal. I also noticed that they were carrying some 10 single malts, and never having tasted some of them, I planned to sample them during the cruise. The next morning we set out with Kirsten driving and acting as our guide. Our first stop was at Glen Coe, called the "Vale of Weeping" because of a massacre of some Scots while they were sleeping. The worst part of this was it happened after they had given their hospitality to the people who killed them.



We then went to a Folk museum, where they had a display of the types of tools and kitchen implements used hundreds of years ago. From there we were taken to Loch Sheil, where Bonnie Prince Charlie raised his standard to unite the clans against the English. There is a monument in the form of a tower with a figure of him at the top. We then climbed a hill on a 30 degree footpath that reversed itself half way to the top. Upon reaching the top, there was a great view of the Glenfinnan Viaduct! Unfortunately, we had to leave before the Jacobite steam train would pass over it.



We then returned to the barge for a great lunch and dinner. Before every meal Tommy would come out of the galley and tell us what the appetizer, main course, cheeses and wines would be. At the end of the cruise we were presented with a paper that listed all the meals, wines and cheeses that we were served! The next day we visited the Ben Nevis distillery, where the contrast between the high slim stills at Glenmorangie on the short squat stills at Ben Nevis was apparent. I sampled some of their product, and was not that impressed with it. I had a discussion with the guide who claimed it was not sold in the states. I told him of a place in San Francisco that featured his whiskey, but he was skeptical.



We docked that night at Inverlochy, and there were also a number of smaller boats docked. I was chatting with a few of the boaters when one invited me into his boat. He broke out an unopened bottle of Glenfarclas cask strength scotch, put a pourer in it, and poured me a dram. It was quite nice, but really had to be sipped

as it was about 100 proof. I had bought a miniature bottle of Ben Nevis at the distillery, and gave it to him to reciprocate.

From there we went to the Commando Memorial in Spaen Bridge. This was an area used during the war to train commandos. There was also a Commando Museum nearby where the Victoria Cross citations were displayed. The Victoria Cross is the equivalent of our Medal of Honor.



Near the statue was a mall area where people had place small plaques in memory of departed commandos. In fact, some had sprinkled the ashes around the memorials.

From there we went to the Clan Cameron Museum, which was quite interesting, and included some comments by James Cameron, director of the movie Titanic.

The following morning we navigated the Culloch and Kytra locks on the canal between Loch Oich and Loch Ness. There was a small traffic jam as they attempt to get as many boats in the lock at one time



Once in the canal, Geoff let me steer the barge for a while. Since we go so slowly, there is plenty of time to make any course corrections.



We docked in Fort Augustus, and Tommy told us that the best fish and chips shop in Scotland was there, and asked if we would like to have them for lunch. Everyone agreed, and he came back shortly with huge portions! Each person had what looked like a whole fish! He was right, as it was the best we have ever had, either in the US or the UK.

That afternoon we went to the highland museum and had a show put on showing how men and women dressed long ago. The kilt was actually the end of about 7 yards of fabric that was wound around the waist then up over the shoulder. He had a young man from the audience come down to demonstrate how one got into the outfit. After that, he had a young lady dress also.



We left Fort Augustus through a series of 5 locks, and it looked like half the town turned out to see us go through them. Kirsten took all our cameras and stood on the lock ahead of us and took our picture.



As we passed through the locks, I took a picture of a floral "Nessie" that was there. We sailed into Loch Ness and tied up at a place called Foyer. Shortly thereafter a lone piper appeared and serenaded us for a while. It really sounded good by the side of the loch.



We had been told there were some pretty falls nearby, and decided to see them in the morning. Kirsten, Dick and I set out with Kirsten setting the pace. Later I asked her if she had been a drill Instructor in the Women's Australian Army. The falls were very interesting, but the excitement came on the road back to the barge. We were walking against traffic, as is proper, when a car came speeding around a blind curve. Dick was forced to dive into the bushes by the side of the road and I dodged to the other side!



We then drove to Sally's ancestral castle, Eilean Donan (island of St. Donan). This castle had been featured in many movies including the original Highlander. We had been here many years ago, and like Urquhart, they now had a large visitor center and had opened up many more rooms. What used to be the gift shop in the castle was turned into a kitchen display complete with wax figures and piped in sounds of cooking. There was a piper playing on shore, and I could almost hear "Make way for Conner MacLeod of the Clan MacLeod" from the Highlander movie.

After touring the castle, I told Kirsten that I read that there was a view point above the castle, so we took this one track road, and sure enough, there it was. Unfortunately, the clearest shot was through an opening in the trees for power lines, which would have been in the picture.

We continued on the little road until we came to the highway, and then stopped at an old graveyard. The saddest thing was headstones of teenagers who had died. The stones were erected by their fathers.



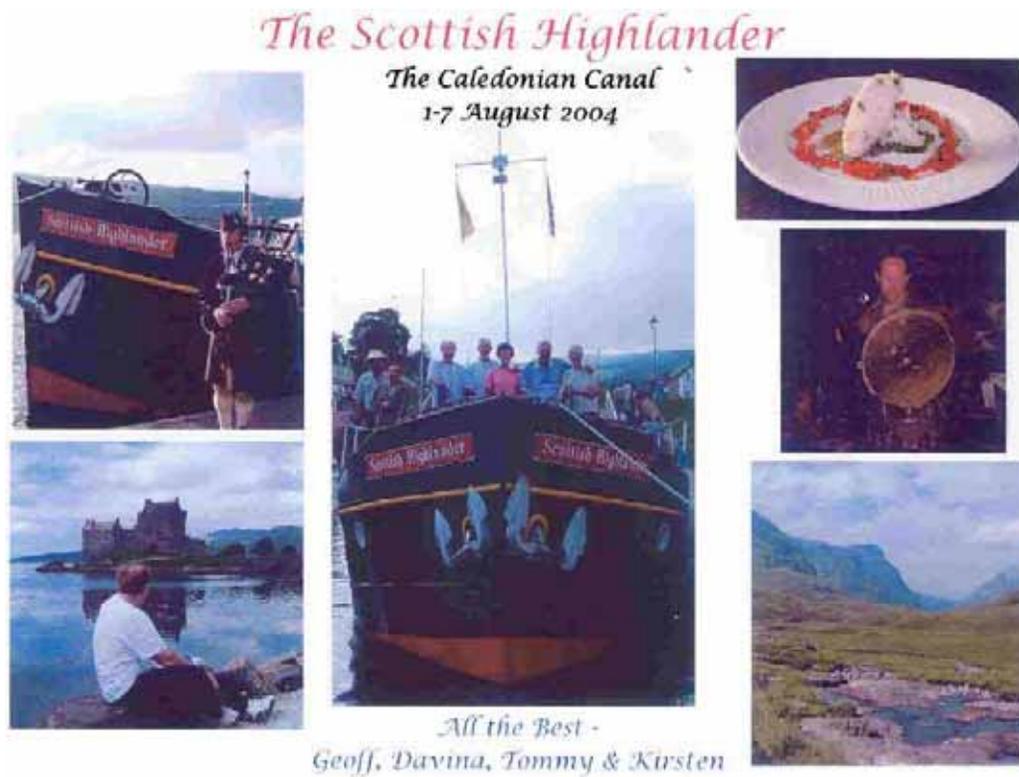
On Friday we cruised through Loch Ness, past Urquhart Castle, and docked at the barge's home in Dochgarroch. We went first to Culloden Moor, where the last battle of the Jacobite Revolution was fought and Bonnie Prince Charlie was defeated. We had a narrator who took us around the battlefield. There were red and blue flags marking the positions of both sides prior to the battle. He described some of the tactical and logistic errors the Jacobites made, including having 4 pound shot for 3 pound cannon. That meant the cannonballs were too big to fit in the cannon. He concluded his talk with saying, "....and you have just walked a mile". The only memorial to the clans was a large cairn dedicated to those that had died.



From there we went to Cawdor Castle, of Macbeth fame. There were beautiful gardens around the castle, including a maze. I wanted to try the maze, but it was closed because some of the plants were shallow rooted and hordes of people coming through would damage them.



On our last night, we had the Captain's farewell dinner. They presented each couple with a neat map of the canal signed by the crew, plus a copy of all our menus and a photomontage of our trip.



Saturday after our last meal on the barge, (sob) we were taken to the Inverness train station. We wanted to catch the 10:40 train, and had just enough time to make it. I rushed to the ticket counter, only to be told that the train was being held for the train from Wick, which was 20 minutes late. At least they are consistent- when I took that same train, it was also 20 minutes late. We had to change trains at Perth, and because the train was late we would have had to rush to catch it. The problem was that it was on another track that had to be reached by an overpass over the tracks. There was no way we could get all our luggage and Sally there in time.

As I was getting a luggage cart, a train employee showed up with a wheelchair for Sally. He took us to the ramp that led to the overpass and delivered to a small snack shop. We had lunch there, and about 15 minutes before the train was due, he showed up and took Sally to the platform. The train to Glasgow was at least air-conditioned, and it was a real shock when we got to Glasgow.

It seems that Glasgow was suffering from a tropical heat wave, and our hotel was not air-conditioned, so we slept with the windows open. To further complicate matters, the hotel was in receivership and the bank would not let them buy all the food necessary to serve a full menu.

I opted for a fish and chips shop nearby, to pick up a light dinner. Sunday we were to have lunch with two of the ladies that I met in the brain injury chat room, and they were there exactly at noon, as we had planned. We sat and chatted in the lounge for a while, then ordered lunch. The waiter/bartender was apologetic, but the limited offerings sounded good. We chatted through lunch, and then adjourned back to the lounge. It was really enjoyable finally meeting the two of them after conversing for many months by computer.

That night for dinner, I wandered up to KFC and picked up some chicken salads after the big lunch we had. The next day it rained, but I headed out to the Burrell Collection. William Burrell was a wealthy ship owner who had a passion for collecting. The collection has more than 8,000 items! Interestingly enough, he bought some of the items from Hearst at fire sale prices when Hearst had to divest some of the items he bought. After walking past the gift shop, I came upon the Courtyard, whose central piece was the Warwick vase. It was about 3 feet across, and was originally from Emperor Hadrian's villa, and had been restored. One head that was added was a lady who was having an affair, so the restorer gave her pointed ears, like a Vulcan. One wood carving that caught my attention was of 5 nuns, and I thought it was cute.



I took a guided tour through the Collection, and then wandered a bit on my own. I headed back to the hotel, and had lunch with Sally. I discovered that we had a little refrigerator, so we kept some of the previous night's dinner in it.

After lunch I took the train into Glasgow Central Station to go to a place called the Potstill. It was written up in a guidebook as having 400 different single malts. I walked up the street looking for number 142, and was a little concerned when I passed number 157 on the other side of the street. I then remembered that the British numbering was not exact, so I headed up another block. I looked up, and there shining through was a sign with a potstill on it! I went in and was greeted by a young lady named Jenny, and since it was mid afternoon, I was the only one there. She had me try one malt, which was not too bad, she brought down 2 bottles made by Bowmore on the Inner Hebridean island of Islay. They were named Dawn and Dusk, and since I liked one called "Darkest", I asked to have a tasting portion of each. They were both quite nice, but I realized that they were both cask strength, (about 100 proof), so I had to add water. All in all, it was a nice experience.

I headed back to the train station, and realized that while, there was one little platform where I got on, there were 16 platforms in the station! It took a little detective work, but I did find the right train which would take

me back to the hotel. I remembered that in the train stations in London, there was usually a shop that sold "filled baguettes", which were basically submarine sandwiches. They make a new batch every 3 hours, so they are always fresh. I picked up a couple for our dinner and caught the train to the station near our hotel. Tuesday we got a taxi to take us to the airport, and checked in for the flight from Glasgow to Heathrow. Sally and I got separated when they assigned our seats, and she sat next to a man who worked for the British Waterways. These are the people who are responsible for maintaining all the canals in Britain. Sally told him of our experience and he gave her his card and asked us to e-mail out trip story to him.

We had a few hours to kill in Heathrow, so I did the three last things I do in Britain-Have a pint of bitters, have a Cumberland sausage and buy scotch at the duty free store.

The flight home was uneventful, except they were having problems at the airport with their baggage system, and Sally's walker was not there. I filed a claim, and they finally delivered it the following Monday. Sally summed up the trip by saying, "I am only sorry I do not have this trip to look forward to". It is a little cryptic, but it meant her only regret was we were not going on the cruise again.