

ROMANICING

THE

HIGHLANDS

Bewitched by the cult TV costume drama *Outlander*, **PATRICIA MORRISROE** spends nine days driving through Scotland, in search of the breathtaking castles, mystical stones, and folklore that has made the show a smash.

Photographs by
MARTIN SCOTT POWELL

It all started a year ago

when a Facebook friend posted that she'd binge-watched *Outlander*, a Starz original series based on Diana Gabaldon's hugely successful novels. I'd never heard of the show nor did I know that Gabaldon was the high priestess of Highland romance. I'd never even been to Scotland, but with an opening in my TV schedule, I decided to give it a try. From the moment I set eyes on the brooding landscape and heard the female voice-over—"People disappear all the time"—I disappeared into *Outlander*.

I watched all 16 episodes and then made all my friends watch. I wasn't so much a fan as an *Outlander* zealot. When my hairstylist of 15 years questioned my taste, I wondered if I should leave him. Luckily, my husband, Lee, liked it. I frequently caught him staring into space, but he chalked it up to the complexities of the time-travel plotline.

The story centers on Claire Randall, a former World War II combat nurse who touches a prehistoric standing stone while touring the Highlands with her husband, Frank. Suddenly, she's hurled back to 1743, with the British and Highlanders on the brink of war. It's not the

best time for a bonny Sassenach—Gaelic for English person—to be stumbling through the woods in a skimpy white dress. After nearly being raped by her husband's Redcoat ancestor, she meets and marries Jamie Fraser, a Highland warrior, who vows to protect her with his body. Since he's built like a Greek god, it's no idle pledge.

Outlander could easily have turned into a cheesy bodice ripper, but with its lush cinematography and exquisite costumes, it's reminiscent of Stanley Kubrick's *Barry Lyndon*. Caitriona Balfe and Sam Heughan are brilliant as Claire and Jamie, but the real star of the show, the one with the photogenic angles and luminous coloring, is Scotland. Since the series first aired, in 2014, the country has experienced a surge in tourism, with fans not only flocking to the show's spectacular locations but to heritage sites as well. *Outlander* has helped transform a country known primarily as a golf destination to one imbued with mysticism and romance. When it came to planning our next vacation, there was only one place I wanted to go.

"We could be like Claire and Frank driving



The town square of Falkland in Fife, which substitutes for 1940s Inverness in *Outlander*



STYLING BY HANNAH TEARE; HAIR BY LYDIA O'CARROLL USING DRIBE AT CAROL HAYES MANAGEMENT LONDON; GROOMING BY PAULA MANN USING PAUL MITCHELL AND DERMALOGICA AT AARLONDON; MAKEUP BY JOHN CHRISTOPHER USING MAC AT CAROL HAYES MANAGEMENT LONDON; PRODUCED ON LOCATION BY FILMING SCOTLAND LTD; CASTING BY PAZ CASTING NYC

Hopetoun House,
Edinburgh. Right,
Culloden House,
Inverness



through the Highlands on our second honeymoon,” I told Lee.

“Claire falls through a rock, and Frank spends the next several years looking for her,” he said. “How’s that romantic?”

“I’ll let you be Jamie,” I said, “but the show’s producer described him as the ‘king of men.’”

“So that means...?”

“You’ll be doing the driving.”

Two months later, we’re in 18th-century France watching the real Jamie film a scene in the Frasers’ new Paris apartment. (The couple sailed to France at the end of season one in order to “change the future.”) *Outlander* is in the midst of shooting the Paris interiors at a studio near Glasgow. After Heughan and another actor do multiple takes, I meet costume designer Terry Dresbach, who is sitting in front of a row of mannequins dressed for the French court in peacock-blue gowns. “There’s been a lot of research on French clothing of that period,” she says, “so it’s important to get it absolutely right. With 18th-century Scotland, we could be a little looser.” Unlike the bright colors we associate with clan tartans, the ones in *Outlander* are so beautifully muted Giorgio Armani could have designed them.

Next, I’m introduced to Heughan. Dressed as a French aristocrat, his hair pulled back in a ponytail, he looks totally different than he did in the first season, when he was kilted and caked in blood. (For those who prefer “Highland Jamie,” he and Claire return to Scotland later in the season.) Heughan is disarmingly sweet, reacting to compliments with an ingenuous “Oh, wow!” Before *Outlander* he was a relatively unknown stage and TV actor and is now one of *People’s* Sexiest Men Alive, with a passionate fan base known as Heughan’s Heughligans.

Balfe had little professional acting experience prior to the show, but she’d worked for a decade as a successful model. Like Heughan, she’s warm and friendly, while also projecting the confidence of someone who knows she is beautiful, even in a bathrobe, scruffy boots, and no makeup.

Twenty minutes later, we’re waiting in the cafeteria for a ride back to Edinburgh when Heughan strides back into the room. “Are you two still here?” he says in a commanding baritone. “Go out and see Scotland!”

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Our first stop is **Hopetoun House** (44-13/1331-2451), the country's finest stately home and the fictional residence of *Outlander*'s Duke of Sandringham.

Designed by Scottish architects William Bruce and William Adam, it's been in the Hope family since 1699. Midhope, the 16th-century tower house that doubles for Lallybroch, Jamie's ancestral home, is part of Hopetoun's 6,500-acre estate. I ask the woman at the Hopetoun ticket counter for directions, but she explains that since the area is used for bird shooting, it's too dangerous.

After we tour the house, with its libraries filled with rare vellum-bound books, we head to the Stables Tearoom for a ploughman's lunch—Scottish cheddar and Galloway pickle on thick crusted bread. While Lee pays the bill, I do some reconnaissance.

"I just spoke to a guard," I tell him. "He says Midhope is perfectly safe because they only shoot clay pigeons."

"It's not the clay-pigeon part I'm worried about," Lee says.

"Hmm, I wonder what Jamie would do."

We're suddenly heading down a long dirt road, passing signs that read **UNAUTHORIZED VEHICLES PROHIBITED**. Several dozen red grouse block the path, moving so slowly they appear to be sleepwalking.

I spot Lallybroch—I mean, Midhope. We get out of the car so we can take pictures.

"What's that noise?" Lee asks.

"I didn't hear anything." I walk closer to the house.

"It's gunfire!" he says. "Let's go."

"It's the Redcoats," I say, thinking this is hysterically funny until the noise grows louder. We jump into the car, only to encounter the somnambulant birds. I hear a thump.

"Oh, my God! I think you killed a grouse, and not even with a gun."

Lee looks in the rearview mirror. "I dinna kill it, Sassenach," he says, doing a passable Jamie impression. "You have my wurt."

We drive north toward Inverness, the capital of the Highlands, checking into **Culloden House** (44-14/6379-0461), a magnificent Georgian mansion, where Charles Edward Stuart—the Bonnie Prince—stayed before the fateful Battle of Culloden. We've been assigned the Garden Mansion, which opens onto an

The real star of *Outlander*, the one with photogenic angles and luminous coloring, is Scotland.



Highland cattle on the grounds of Inverloch Castle, in Torlund

18th-century walled garden. Lee asks if I can stop talking about *Outlander* for a few minutes while he takes some pictures. He poses me on a bench bearing a gold plaque.

“What does it say?” he asks.

“Diana Gabaldon. From the Ladies of the Lallybroch.”

A bagpiper, standing in the twilight, calls us to dinner. I notice a disproportionate number of women sitting alone. “*Outlander* fans,” the waiter whispers.

The next morning we head to the battle site. Until *Outlander* I knew very little about the Jacobites, who were dedicated to reinstating a Stuart monarch to the British throne. The Highlanders, who comprised the bulk of the Jacobite army, were vastly outnumbered, and when the battle was over, more than a thousand lay dead. The British instituted a brutal program of repression, banning kilts and tartans. After passing through the excellent visitor’s center at **Culloden Battlefield** (44-14/6379-6090), we walk along the wind-swept moor, the graves of the fallen clansmen marked with stones.

Not far from Culloden is another burial ground, **Clava Cairns** (44-16/6746-0232), which dates back to the Bronze Age. A circle of standing stones marks each cairn, or grave site.

“So this is where Claire touched the stones?” Lee asks, referring to the imagined Craigh na Dun.

“No, that was in Kinloch Rannoch,” I say. “But these look the same.” I place my palm against one of the slabs. “You’ll be sorry when I disappear into the 18th century,” I tell him.

“Aye, Sassenach,” he says. “But without running water, I fear ye’d be the sorry one.”

We follow the route along the mythical Loch Ness until we reach **Eilean Donan Castle** (44-15/9955-5202), one of Scotland’s most famous sights. The castle is situated at the intersection of three lakes, surrounded by a row of mountain peaks known as the Five Sisters of Kintail.

We spend two nights at the romantic **Inverlochry Castle** (44-13/9770-2177), an outstanding country house hotel. Each of the 17 rooms has views of the glens, lochs, and mountains. In 1873, the widowed Queen Victoria stayed with her servant John Brown, the six-foot Highlander who was possibly her lover. It’s nice to think that the Queen, having lost her cherished

Albert, found romance with her own Jamie.

We drive three miles to Fort William, where the scenery becomes increasingly dramatic. On one side is Ben Nevis, Britain’s tallest mountain, on the other, Loch Linnhe. Fort William is named after the British garrison where the Jacobites seized 600 men during the rebellion and where Jamie was held prisoner and tortured.

“Where’s the fort?” Lee asks. “All I see is an outline of rocks. There’s nothing here.”

“That’s because they used Blackness Castle for Fort William,” I say, “but you can just imagine—”

“No, I can’t. We’re next to a busy roundabout.”

The following day we drive north to Kinloch Rannoch, in Perthshire, where Claire touched the stones. The small village is in a lush green valley, beneath the otherworldly Schiehallion, known as the Fairy Hill of the Caledonians. With its lakes, ancient forests, and moorlands, Kinloch Rannoch is an eerie, magical place.

“The spot should be easy to find because of the stones,” Lee says, as we begin walking.

“There aren’t any stones,” I tell him. “They used fake ones.”

“So we’re looking for fake stones?”

“Actually, I think they took the stones away.”

“So we’re looking...for what?”

We have so much fun we forget what we’re looking for. The forest is so remote the only other living creatures we encounter are dragonflies, red squirrels, and birds.

Our next stop is **Gleneagles** (44-17/6466-2231), the hotel and golf resort, where we meet our guide for an *Outlander* tour with **Dream Escape** (44-84/5260-1085). We begin at **Doune Castle** (44-17/8684-1742), which was once Camelot in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, before it became Castle Leoch, the seat of Clan MacKenzie. From Doune, we visit Culross, a well-preserved 17th-century village in Fife; it doubles as Cranesmuir, where Geillis Duncan, Claire’s friend and fellow time traveler, lived.

It’s raining when we reach the ruins of **Aberdour Castle** (44-13/8386-0519), where *Outlander* filmed the abbey scenes in last season’s finale. Dating back to the 12th century, it’s one of Scotland’s oldest castles, with a beehive-shaped dovecote and terraced gardens. Inside, a tiny gray-haired guide excitedly tells us that they used the kitchen to shoot Jamie’s dramatic rape scene. I’d read that the scene was shot in the studio, but she insists otherwise. “*Raped, raped, right in the kitchen*,” she

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Clava Cairns, a burial site near Inverness dating back to the Bronze Age

SCOTLAND

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says, with a pronounced burr. I look at Lee and suppress a laugh.

We end the tour in Falkland, which stood in for 1940s Inverness, where Claire and her husband checked in to Mrs. Baird's B&B—in reality, the **Covenanter Hotel** (44-13/3785-7163). (A tiny pop-up image of Jamie stands guard in the window.) Right down the street is **Falkland Palace** (44-13/3785-7397), the country residence of the Stuart monarchs.

The next day we drive back to Edinburgh, stopping at **Blackness Castle** (44-15/0683-4807). Because of its resemblance to a grounded vessel, the 15th-century fortress has been nicknamed the “ship that never sailed.” It sits on the banks of the River Forth, looking every bit as ominous as it does on TV.

On our last night in Scotland, Lee wants an authentic Scottish dinner, so we go to **Stac Polly** (44-13/1556-2231), located in a rustic stone cellar with flickering candles and tweed upholstery. Lee orders haggis in phyllo pastry.

“How can you eat sheep’s brains?” I ask, turning up my nose.

“It’s sheep’s organs,” he clarifies. “And it’s delicious.”

Before heading home, I’m determined to try some whisky, which Claire swigs like water. If she lived now, she’d definitely be in rehab, but since falling through the stones, she’s been under a wee bit of stress. The bartender at the **Balmoral** (44-13/1556-2414) brings me Royal Lochnagar, said to be a favorite of Queen Victoria’s. I take a sip and then another, finishing off the glass.

“This has been a good trip,” I say, feeling pleasantly flushed.

“Aye, Sassenach,” Lee says, smiling. “A *verra* good trip.” ♦

Season two of Outlander is now on Starz.