

Travel

The best of the box: Declan Lynch's TV review, back page

Lochs, rocks and 350 bottles of malt whisky

Brave the Northern Highlands with a dram of the good stuff and a powerful car, advises Louise McBride after her stay amid the spectacular scenery of Torridon

THINK Scottish Highlands and the last thing you'd probably imagine would be watching swifts flitting past your hotel window as you laze in a hot bath. Yet this is exactly what I found myself doing last June when I visited Torridon in the Northern Highlands. The swifts had chosen their home place well. With their nests perched under the eaves of the Torridon Hotel — where I stayed — they had as good a view of the sombre Torridon mountains and deep sea loch ahead as I had. And unlike me, they didn't have to leave after the weekend — they were free to stay as long as they wished.

If you've any taste for the outdoors, the spectacular scenery of the Scottish Highlands is not to be missed. Remember though, the sun may be splitting the stones everywhere else in the world — but don't expect the same in the Highlands. The further north I drove from Inverness towards Torridon, the gloomier the weather became. Yet the dense clouds, misty

mountains and relentless rain seem to suit the Highlands. The landscape becomes moody, mysterious and unpredictable. Put a blue sky and blazing sun over it and the landscape is nowhere near as dramatic as it is under a typical Scottish sky.

Be prepared for the remoteness of the Highlands. Not every village in the Highlands has a shop. Never mind a petrol station or an ATM machine. The steep single-track roads so common here can take hours to navigate, so don't leave yourself short of petrol or time. And don't make the mistake I made and hire a Fiesta to get you around. You need a powerful car for these roads — and patience. By the time you've made way for all the camper vans and traffic coming from the opposite direction, you could easily add an hour to any journey through the Highlands.

Torridon itself is a tiny village which sleeps quietly beside its sea loch and mountains. Tucked away behind forest is the Torridon Hotel — a luxurious establishment which dates back to 1887,

when it was built as the shooting lodge of the first Earl of Lovelace, an English nobleman. It remained a shooting lodge until the Sixties when it opened as a hotel. The hotel has 19 ensuite rooms and if the room views aren't enough, there are Molton Brown toiletries in the bathroom, duck-down feather duvets on the king-size bed, cast-iron freestanding baths in some of the bathrooms and, for the man in your life, a snazzy flat-screen television. If you've trouble nodding off at night, there are more than 350 malt whiskies in the hotel bar to help you on your way. The whisky guide in the bar tells me: "In whisky tasting, pungency is particularly apparent in very strong spirit, which may sting your nose and tongue and induce temporary anaesthesia." Remember that before you dive into the hotel bar's oldest whisky, which last June was its 41-year-old Lochside.

The hotel runs a range of activities for guests including mountain walks, sunset walks, kayaking, climbing, abseiling, and clay pigeon shooting. Seri-

ous hillwalkers should avoid the sunset walk which is more a gentle amble than anything else — albeit through stunning countryside. The hotel also caters for weddings of up to 40 guests — and if you're planning a romantic and intimate wedding, this hotel certainly fits the bill.

Not surprisingly, a night in the Torridon Hotel doesn't come cheap. Between this February and April, rooms start at stg.£236 (€263) a night, and that rate includes dinner and breakfast. Between May and October, the room rate per night (including dinner and breakfast) is stg.£285. There is a minimum two-night stay.

Remember to brush up if you wish to tuck into the restaurant's highland beef or Roquefort — trainers and sportswear aren't allowed for dinner. But I'd happily wear the most painful stilletoes going just to get a taste of the hotel's rhubarb and lime leaf ice-cream again. Some of the dishes come straight from the hotel's kitchen garden.

For those who can't afford the luxury of the Torridon Hotel, there is cheaper



MONARCH OF THE GLEN: Eilean Donan Castle is one of the many attractions close to Torridon. Photo: Stephen Lawlor

accommodation in the nearby Torridon Inn, which is itself in the hotel's grounds. The hotel is an ideal base for exploring the Highlands. It's about an hour-and-a-half drive to the Isle of Skye (allowing for traffic and narrow roads) and a two hour drive to Loch Ness.

On my second day in the Highlands, there was a rare appearance: the sun — and it continued to shine for the rest of the day. As I took the road from Kishorn across the Applecross mountains that day, this dry bright weather was a godsend. The road is impassable during winter and learner drivers are warned not to attempt it — I soon

found out why. The Fiesta was no match for the steep gradients and hairpin bends on this single-track road. My heart was in my mouth driving up this road, praying that I wouldn't encounter another car coming the other way as I edged around steep narrow bends. I've driven across the mountainous South Island in New Zealand, as well as the Canadian Rockies but this road is, without a doubt, one of the most challenging I've come across.

The views were well worth it, though, and the Applecross Peninsula was by far the highlight of my trip to the Highlands. The rocky mountain-

sides, dotted with wild Scottish cotton and tufts of heather, drop down to spectacular river valleys below. The view from Bealach na Ba, 2,000 feet above sea level, is breathtaking.

There are plenty of other attractions close to Torridon Hotel, including Eilean Donan Castle, probably the most photographed castle in Scotland; and Beinn Eighe Nature Reserve, which is ideal for mountain walkers.

Before leaving the hotel to head home early the next morning, I took one last look out my window. The sun was still shining over the Torridon mountains and

Highland cattle grazed sleepily in the fields below. The swifts, in their wisdom, were staying put.

Louise McBride stayed in Scotland courtesy of the Torridon Hotel. Aer Lingus flies from Dublin to Glasgow Airport (close to Glasgow city centre) while Ryanair flies from Dublin to Glasgow Prestwick. It takes about four hours to drive from Glasgow to Inverness; or four-and-a-half hours from Glasgow Prestwick. BMI flies from Dublin to Aberdeen via London. It takes two-and-a-half hours to drive from Aberdeen to Inverness.

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