



Naturally, while we were there, we visited the abbey ruins.

Our Scottish winter travels this year took us south to the Kingdom of Fife (that is how the county of Fife refers to itself) and then north to the Arctic Circle to search out the Northern Lights.

Our Fife adventure was to visit the spiritual home of Scottish whisky, Lindores Abbey. The earliest written reference to Scotland's national drink was in 1494 when the monks were commissioned by King James IV to turn eight bolts of barley malt into Aqua Vitae, as it was called in that day. Although the Abbey is now nothing more than a ruin, a few years ago some history conscious investors constructed a modern distillery alongside the ruins. Today they make a modern style whisky, but they also make a historically accurate version of Aqua Vitae, which was traditionally flavored with botanicals.

We joined two of our friends for the Apothecary Experience, which lasts half a day and you actually make your own botanical infused Aque Vitae. Here you can see the working table, where we each developed our own mixture of flavors and produced our own personal bottle of Aqua Vitae. It was an extremely interesting experience, and one that I would recommend to anyone.



The abbey was once one of the most revered sites in Scotland, and was the burial site of two infant sons of King David of Scotland, as well as the last Black Douglas.



Auchtermuchty was home to one of Scotland's most famous musicians, the accordion player Jimmy Shand.



I have talked before about the memorials that you find in Scottish towns, memorializing those who gave their lives in the two world wars. Here is Auchtermuchty's.



We spent the whole week in Fife, renting a self-catering cottage in the Fife woods near the village of Auchtermuchty. We were so far out in the woods that we had no sense of being anywhere near a town, and we were constantly hearing the autumnal sound of a rutting stag up on the ridge, calling his females and marking his territory.



We stopped in at the nearby town of Glenrothes, where we visited an ancient stone circle. In Scotland, it is not all that unusual to have a stone circle in your backyard, as you can see the house in the background.



In fact, one ancient site, known as the Balfarg Henge, in the village of Balfarg, and was discovered during earth moving to construct a new housing addition. Upon it's discover, the entire addition was reconfigured so that the ancient henge was preserved as its centerpiece, and all of the houses are built around it. The henge consisted of a circular trench, and then an inner circle of wooden markers, with a stone monument at its center.



We visited the town of Cupar, which had some very attract stone churches, dating back hundreds of years.



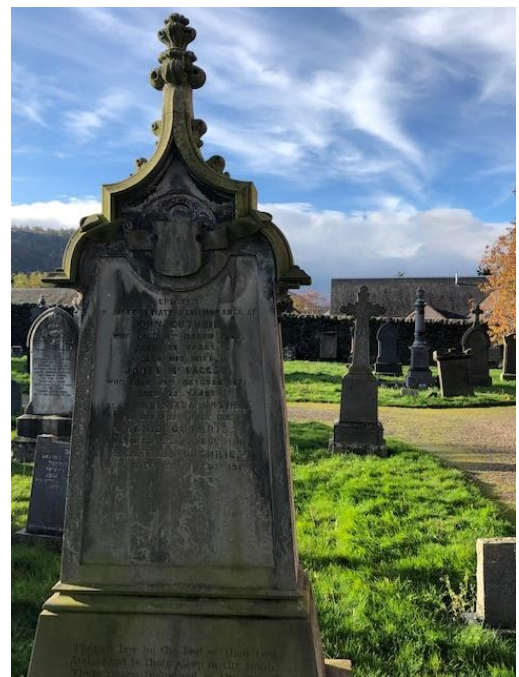
Reformation, a Presbyterian church. It is still in use today by the Church of Scotland. The adjacent graveyard has many detailed carvings on plaques and headstones.



Many towns and villages in Scotland have preserved the Mercat Cross, which was the marker of the central location where the town would set up its market stalls for sale of food and other wares. The one in Cupar is very distinctive, topped by a unicorn.



Next on our tour of Fife was the village of Abernethy and the Kirk (church) of St Bride. The first church there dates to the year 460 AD, when Nectan, King of the Picts, and a converted Christian, dedicated the site to St Bride. Worship continued at the site through the Celtic and Medieval periods in various buildings. It eventually became a Catholic parish and after the





At the end of the cemetery are two special archaeological sites. There is a Pictish carved stone and an 11th century Round Tower.



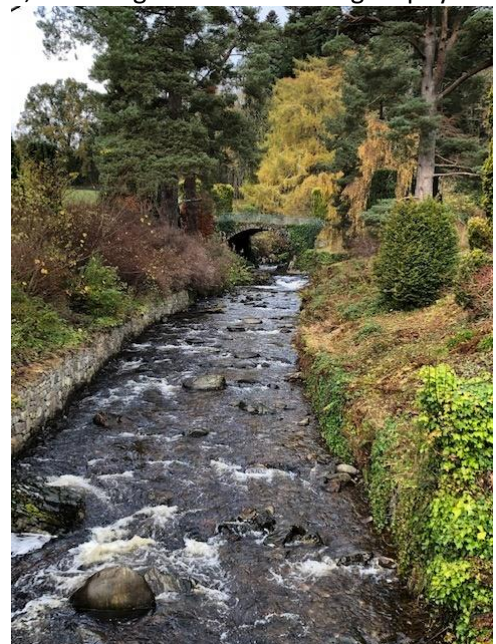
Round Towers are fairly common in Ireland, but this is one of only two in all of Scotland. They were originally built as free-standing bell towers adjacent to churches. Because of their small diameter and considerable height, they were rather challenging to build. Here you see the tower, standing behind this village's Mercat Cross. There is also a picture of the manacle mounted in the wall of the tower where miscreants could be bound and pilloried.



On the way home from Fife, we stopped for a Christmas Fayre at historic Blair Castle.



We got a glimpse of their gardens, and a few of the rooms, including the rustic hunting trophy room.





If you have any motoring interest, you will be familiar with the famous Monte Carlo Rallye, which began in 1911, when 23 cars started off from various locations and traveled to meet in one place to complete the rallye. Although the actual rallye no longer uses the multiple starting points, the Historic Monte Carlo Rallye does, and some years a group of vintage cars congregates in John O-Groats, near us, to participate in that event. This year, their route took them through downtown Thurso.



I have mentioned how every village in Scotland has a memorial to those who gave their lives in defense of home and country in the two world wars. Remembrance Day here is strikingly different than either Memorial Day or Veterans Day in America. In Britain everything stops at 11:00 am for two minutes of silence in remembrance of those who gave their lives in the wars. The silence marks the signing of the World War 1 armistice agreement that marked the cessation of fighting at 11:00 am on the 11th day of the 11th month of 1918.

Remembrance Sunday (the Sunday after November 11th) is marked by special church services and memorial services in many villages. There is currently a shortage of pastors in the far north, including Thurso West Church of Scotland, where we attend. Two years ago, Wendy and I were asked to take on some of the services, and we agreed to do so, introducing the folks here to

some different approaches, borrowed from my history as a Methodist and Wendy's as a Presbyterian back in Indiana. Subsequently the Church of Scotland parishes in the villages of Halkirk and Watten asked us to occasionally cover services in their villages. This year we were asked give the Reflection in those two churches on Remembrance Sunday, and I was also asked to conduct the memorial service at the monument in Halkirk. It included a bagpiper who played Flowers of the Forest, a trio of buglers who played The Last Post and Reveille, a brief talk by myself reading a poem from World War 1, and the laying of wreaths of poppies by people representing various groups.



If your interests end with my missives about Scotland, then you can stop here. But you may also find what follows to be interesting. In seven years of living at the far north of Scotland, Wendy had never been in the right place at the right time to see the Northern Lights (Aurora Borealis). So, we went above the arctic circle in January in search of them. And we did, indeed, see a lot of interesting stuff, as follows.

Like the Saltstraumen Whirlpool, the world's largest tidal current. The maelstrom can reach speeds of 20 knots and whirlpools of more than 10 meters in diameter.



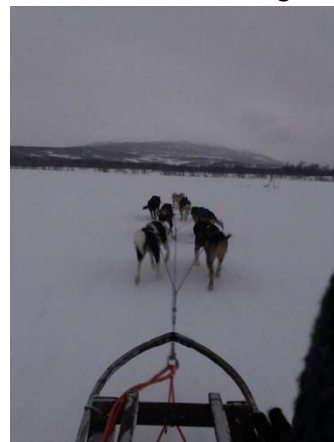
We visited a recreation of a stone age Viking village, and ate a typical meal of the time, cooked in a hole in the ground surrounded with hot stones from a blazing fire in the center of the earthen chamber.



We visited a Sami camp and rode in a reindeer pulled sled.



I went on a dogsled ride.



We went to a concert in the Arctic Cathedral, in Tromso, which features a huge stained glass window, that was created to appear completely different from inside and outside.



And the Cathedral of the Northern Lights in Alta, which is designed to remind you of the swirling of the Aurora Borealis.



In recognition of the sea-going heritage of Norway, many village churches have a model ship hanging in the sanctuary.



We visited an Ice Hotel. Here are photos of the lobby, a bedroom (with fireplace ?) and the chapel.



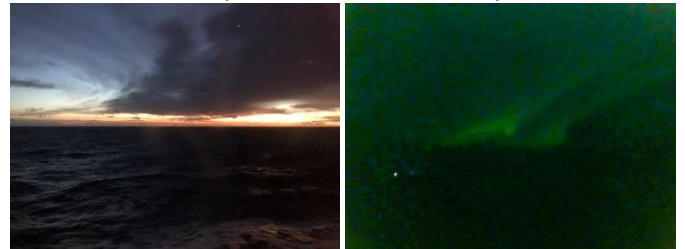
We saw a lot of ice and a lot of scenery.



And we saw how they clear and store snow. Look closely and find the workers on top of the snow bin, hiding behind a barrier.



We saw some beautiful sunsets. And yes, Wendy did see the Northern Lights, although our camera did not capture how brilliant they were.



Ironically, while we were above the arctic circle, back home in Thurso, our neighbors were treated to big displays of the Aurora nearly every night for a week. Oh well, that's life in Scotland.

