

Traveling Europe & The Highlands

The autumn meeting of the European Masonic Association (EMA) this year was in Bratislava, Slovakia, and I was excited to attend. I had a preconceived idea that since Slovakia, was part of the Soviet-Bloc, and thus trapped behind the Iron Curtain during the Cold War, it would be gray and drab. In actuality, the old town in Bratislava was quite colorful, particularly the churches as shown here.



The largest of them was St. Martin's Cathedral, which is where the kings of Slovakia were crowned in olden days (like Scone in Scotland). The cathedral is adjacent to a still-standing portion of the medieval city walls.



The cathedral has some amazingly ornate decoration inside.



While passing through Vienna, I also slipped into St. Steven's Cathedral. It was as impressive as the UK cathedrals I have visited.



I found the old town of Bratislava to be a wonderful place to wander through the narrow streets (no cars allowed) and stop into various shops and eat at street cafes, as can be seen here in front of Michaels Gate, one of the entrances to old town through the ancient city walls.



The food was wonderful, and the best was this venison goulash over dumplings filled with sheep cheese.



I was able to figure out the Slovak bus system well enough to get to the ruins of Devin Castle. The site was originally a fortress of the Celts, then the Romans. It then became a Christian mission site, and eventually a castle for the kings of Moravia.



It was a defensive stronghold in the 15th century, when these stone cannon balls were fired from cast iron cannon. Then in 1809 it was dynamited by Napoleon.



The castle is built atop a hill that is full of caves and fissures, and many of these are incorporated into the castle passages, such as I have circled in yellow in this photo.



During the Soviet era, the barrier known as the Iron Curtain ran right below the castle. There are numerous memorials to the nearly 400 people who died trying to escape across the barrier and swim the Danube

River to freedom in Austria. This heart sculpture made of the old barbed wire from the wall and the memorial using the bullet-ridden stones of one of the checkpoints were the most memorable.

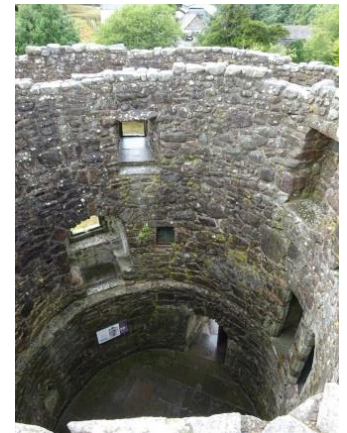


After almost three years living in Scotland, I am still amazed that I have only scratched the surface of all the archeological and historic sites in a country that is no bigger than Indiana. Here are a few visited recently.

This is Drumcoltran Tower, built in the 1500s



This is Orchardton Tower, built around 1450, the only round tower house in Scotland.



This one had a beautiful, multi story spiral stairway.



MacLellan's Castle began as a tower before it was expanded.



Balvaird Castle from the 1500's, also began as a tower.



There are remnants of tower houses all over the Scottish Borders. You pass them often as you travel, most in ruins, and many not even labeled, like this one.



Burleigh Castle began as a tower house in the late 15th century.



Next is Dundrennan Abbey built in 1142.



When Robert Burns spent time as an excise agent, his circuit included the village of Gatehouse of Fleet, which we visited this summer. In the Murray Arms Inn, he wrote "Scots Wha Hae" in 1793.



Dunnottar Castle, is one of the most spectacular in the world. With a floor grate through which William Wallace supposedly snuck into the castle during the wars with England, and a tower in which the crown jewels were hidden during Cromwell's battle against the crown.



There are a significant number of remnants of Pictish stones scattered about the northern Highlands. Perhaps the most impressive resides in a church dedicated to St. Serf, a 6th century Pictish bishop, who legend claims slayed a dragon with his pastoral staff.



The church contains the 9th century Dupplin Cross, honoring Constantine, king of the Picts, the only remaining undamaged Pictish cross. It is amazing, beautifully carved on all sides.



Several times I have gone hiking in the Glen Devon Woodlands. Note the wee dog gate in the fence next to the ladder for hikers and the colorful growth on the ancient stone wall.



This farmhouse in Fife hides the entrance to a cold war shelter that could have housed up to 300 people, including the national leaders in the event of nuclear war.



The underground bunker is 10 feet of solid concrete walls reinforced with tungsten bars.



Chapel, radio room, communications center, bunk room, Air Force control room, and operations center are shown in these photos.



This is a dis-used public salt-water swimming pool at St. Monas. It fills each day at high tide and is left full of shallow seawater to warm in the sun between tides.



This windmill used to draw salt water from this containment, into the small buildings whose foundations are still visible, where the water was evaporated over coal fires to produce salt.



Lady Tower at St Monas in Fife.



Black Rock Gorge between our house and Inverness is like a miniature Black Canyon of the Gunnison in Colorado. It is 40m meters deep and 5 meters wide so that you can barely see into the shadows

at the bottom. You can faintly see the light reflecting off of the water flowing at the bottom.



Molly dawg and I went exploring in the Strathnaver valley, which has had people living along the Naver River for centuries.



We found the Gloomy Memories Memorial to those who lost their lives due to the Clearances.



Here is a large house structure remaining from the Clearances of 1819 (left) as well a smaller structure (right) such as a newlywed couple might have constructed to begin their life together. These are from one of many Clearance villages to be found in the north Highlands. The Earl of Sutherland was one of the most notorious of the land owners who forced the crofters off the land in order to run large numbers of free range sheep.



This is the Memorial to the 93rd regiment, the Sutherland Highlanders. When the MacKays of Caithness controlled the Strathnaver, it was said that the clan chief could put out a call for support and have 800 men from the region at his command when needed. But in the 1800's, when the Sutherland clan controlled the valley, and the bad blood created by the Clearances was a factor, the men refused to come when called, saying of the Sutherlands, "having preferred sheep to men, let sheep defend them."



From older times, legend claims that the Red Priest's stone is the grave stone of the Maol Ruadh (Red Priest), also known as St. Maelrubha (died 722 AD). He was supposedly a follower of St. Columba, and aided in bringing Christianity to Scotland, until killed during Viking raids. The stone lies near the remains of a chapel, lending credence to the legend.



Collapsed remains of the Skail Chambered Cairn, a site of religious ceremonies 5000 years ago, and Syre church, a sheet-metal chapel used in religious ceremonies of somewhat more recent times.



Borgie Chambered Cairns, featuring a long cairn and then a horned cairn, which has the curved remains of a ceremonial space at one end, complete with standing stones.



With a bit of climbing, I found what appears to be the lintel stone of the entrance, with the collapsed main chamber behind it.



A stark reminder of more prosperous farming times.



Dun Dornaigil is the remains of a Neolithic broch, which would have originally been 40 feet tall and the center of a village. The triangular lintel piece over the doorway is a very unusual ornamentation for a broch.



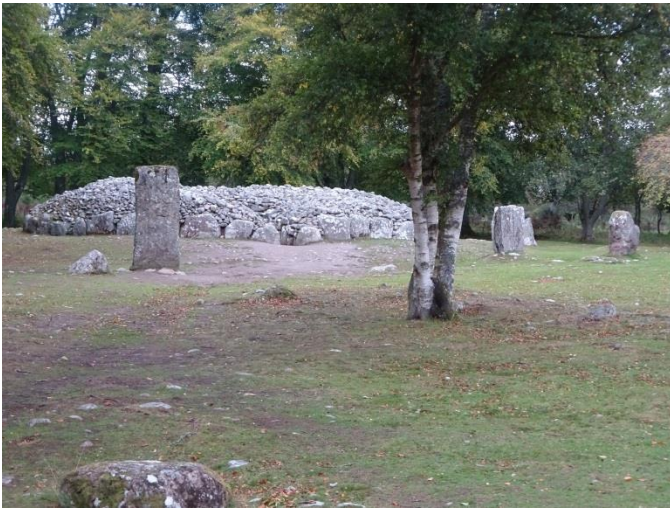
In this damp climate, we have an abundance of snails, which I encounter along my hiking and walking paths quite often. In October the new crop of babies became apparent, and there were tons of tiny ones along my path.



As well as the parents.



The Clava Cairns, near Inverness, were built such that the entrances align perfectly with the setting sun on the day of the equinox.



This railway bridge impressively crosses a valley near Inverness. Like I said, I keep finding more and more things to explore here.



After three years living in Scotland, our time may almost be up. By the end of the year we must apply for an extension of our visas. While the university still wants us both, the decision will be made not by them, but by the UK government. And as with all governments, who knows what decision they will make. We sincerely hope to still be here next year, continuing to educate the young engineering students of Scotland and continuing to explore this wonderful country. Wish us luck....as we do not want to leave Scotland and Caithness.....despite the winds.



Local poem we recently found:

*Now come all ye people, come over the ord,
There's a welcome awaiting that you can afford,
Be ye a pauper or be ye a Lord,
Ye will always be welcome in Caithness.
There are lochies and burnies, brochans and braes,
Quaint little hamlets and havens and bays,
All places you'll cherish the rest of your days,
With a warm hearted welcome in Caithness.
From the mountains of Morven there can be seen,
Moorlands and meadows and rivers and streams,
Of all the fine places that I've ever been,
There is no finer county than Caithness.
For the land there below, the place of my birth,
Is caressed by the waves of the wild Pentland Firth,
Of all the fine places that I've ever been,
There is no finer county than Caithness.*

Recently encountered on one of our main roads in Caithness. It ain't Indiana. But we love it here.



One way or the other, we will be in Indiana for two weeks at the beginning of April, 2019. Hope to see some of you then.

"Did not strong connections draw me elsewhere, I believe Scotland would be the country I would choose to end my days in."

Benjamin Franklin