

The Highlands and Islands – A personal ‘fam trip’

Mick rang.

He had been asked to attend a seminar in Inverness to speak to a group of hoteliers about filming and film crews’ requirements. He was busy and would I go instead?

-.....Hello? Hello?

- Sorry Mick, I was just looking out my kilt (Lindsay tartan since you’re asking).

Scottish Film, Film Commissioner for the Highlands and Islands, Trish Shorthouse had arranged the seminar along with 4TM Services. The idea was to get together a group of hotel and guest house owners to talk about the specific problems and requirements that Film, TV, Photo-shoot crews and the like, have when looking for accommodation in a fairly remote area. Those interested would be able to sign up to a Film Crews Friendly Portal as part of a one-stop shop for productions coming to the Highlands and Islands area. The benefits to the Production are that the Hotel or Guest House would already have some idea of what might be required and have signed up to the idea of hosting an entire film crew in their hotel. Actually it’s a good idea. The Hotels will have already embraced the strange and sometimes asinine requests that crews can have along with breakfast at tea time (night shoots), the bar open at 8.00am (also night shoots) and continual room changing (not necessarily night shoots).

Because I was coming up from London, Trish suggested that we spend some time looking at the area on a personal Fam Trip.

We started with a quick gallop around Loch Ness, starting at Inverness and working our way along the western shore towards **Urquhart Castle**, keeping a sharp eye out for the monster. Urquhart Castle, is the stunning ruin that adorns many a biscuit tin and shortbread box and with good reason too. It has terrific views over the loch, which if anything, are improved by the light rain and dramatic skies that met us as we arrived in the carpark. The castle is now owned by Historic Scotland and has an excellent visitor centre and gift shop.

Next we reached the bottom of the loch at **Fort Augustus**. This is where the loch becomes the **Caledonian Canal** and a series of five canal locks, laid out as a staircase, lift boats travelling west through the great glen, a height of some 80’ as they head towards Loch Oich and the imaginatively named Loch Lochy. The canal is a total of 60 miles long and crosses the entire width of Scotland. Built by Thomas Telford between 1803 and 1822 to try and stimulate jobs in the area at the beginning of the 19th century it now carries mainly pleasure cruisers and the occasional fishing boat.

In order to avoid the rain we repaired to the **Lovat Arms** for cream teas. A family run hotel, the Lovat offers dramatic views across Loch Ness, the Canal staircase and the surrounding hills. Since we were able to recruit a further delegate to the seminar, the Lovat Arms is also now signed up to the Film Crew Friendly portal making it a great base for recces in the area.

Pressing on around the bottom of the lake we started back along the western side of the loch, along the B862, which winds its way through the hills that form the backdrop to the loch. We reached the beach at **Dores** where in 1976, the Loch Ness monster was 'sighted'. The (then young) man has spent the next 30 years or so, living in a caravan on the beach and scouring the loch for a second sight of the possible Plesiosaur. In the meantime he has lost many of his friends and doesn't get out as much as he probably should. In anticipation of a sighting and capture at any moment, 'Nessie' has been given its own classification – *Nessiteras Rhombopteryx*.

The road changes character as it passes through the hills here. Travelling through moorland and past small rivers and lochs, the road undulates and twists through the landscape making a fine road for helicopter vehicle shots.

With the light now falling, we made our way back to Inverness and the award winning, **Trafford Bank Guest House**, which was to be my home for the evening. This is a lovely guesthouse, which just goes to show the very high standard of accommodation in the area.

The following day Trish and I headed for the Moray coast to the east of Inverness, where the seminar was to be held. There was time to visit **Fort George** at Ardesier. Built by the English in 1725 at the end of the Jacobite rebellion and the battle of Culloden, which concluded it, the fort was to be an example of absolute English military power. The site covers some 42 acres and is described as perhaps the strongest fortification ever built in the UK. Within the walls and moats are the barracks and parade grounds that have changed little since the mid 18th century. Still in use by the army today, the barracks were once home to over 1600 men.

We drove from Fort George to the **Horizon Centre, Forres** where the seminar was to be held. The centre is part of a new industrial and business park, providing offices and business support to small businesses in the area. It would make a good base for a production office, with its instant telephone and fast broadband links as well as meeting rooms and well equipped lecture room where rushes or rough-cuts could also be screened.

Following the seminar and Q & A session, which followed, we travelled to our accommodation for the night at the **Knockomie Hotel**. This is another fabulous family hotel with 15 luxury en-suite bedrooms, restaurant and malt whisky 'library' with over a hundred different whiskies to choose from.

Following a lovely meal in the restaurant as guests of the Scottish Film Commission and a fine nights sleep, there was time to visit the nearby **Culbin Forest** a manmade forest of Scots and Corsican Pine, planted by the Forestry Commission to help prevent the incursion of sand dunes on the Moray coast.

The trees have helped to build up a thin layer of soil and humus, which supports a colossal range of wildlife, flowers, mosses and in particular lichen. The lichen carpets the ridges and paths like drifts of strange grey-green snow. At the centre of the forest the Forestry Commission have built a tall viewpoint and tower with views over the trees to the Moray Firth and the hills beyond.

Travelling further through the forest we reached the Moray coast and the encroaching sand dunes. Here the pine forest thins out onto the sand beach and Moray Firth. Seals and the occasional Dolphin can be seen in the area. Although the beaches have an empty desolate feel they can be easily reached by technical vehicles, travelling through the forest, along well-kept tracks. Further to the east of the forest is **Findhorn Bay** and the view across the mouth of the river to the village of **Findhorn**.

Finally there was just time for a lightning visit to **Cawdor Castle**. This is a privately owned castle still lived in by the Dowager Duchess Lady Cawdor in the winter months and open to the public in the summer. The castle, which is more like a fortified stately home, has a lovely domestic feel to it. I'm not sure that Lady Cawdor would allow filming in the castle but possibly a photo shoot or documentary crew. There are the famous Cawdor Gardens here though time prevented me from seeing them.

Many many thanks to Trish Shorthouse and Jenny Yeomans from the Scottish Highlands and Islands Film Commission (www.scotfilm.org - 01463 710221) for making the visit so memorable.

Contacts:

Urquhart Castle

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www.traffordbankguesthouse.co.uk

Fort George

www.undiscoveredscotland.co.uk/nairn/fortgeorge

Knockomie Hotel 01309 673146 www.knockomie.co.uk

Culbin Forest 01343 820223

www.forestry.gov.uk/scotland

Cawdor Castle 01667 404401 www.cawdorcastle.com