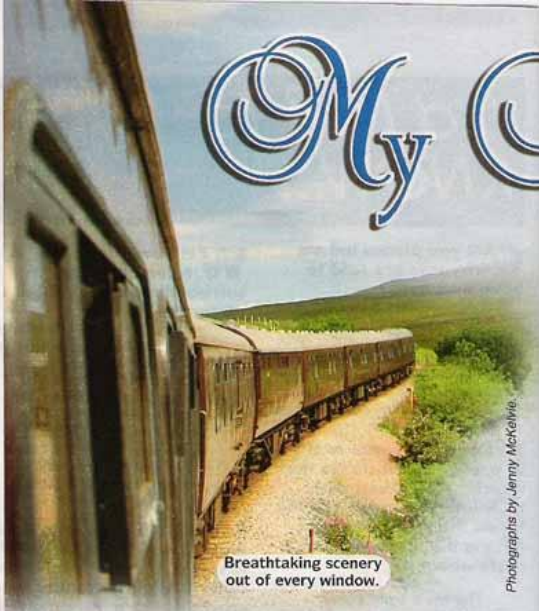


My Incredible Journey



Breathtaking scenery out of every window.

Photographs by Jenny McKelvie.

SAVOURING a night in that grand Edinburgh railway hotel, the Balmoral, once the old NB, was the perfect way for me and my husband to get in the mood for our trip on the Royal Scotsman.

The following morning, a piper, resplendent in full Highland dress, led us along the platform past envious commuters and on to the waiting train.

Inside the regal, deep burgundy carriages, with the skirl of the pipes still in our ears, we began to sense what a sublime journey lay ahead.

As we waited for the luggage to be taken to our cabins, we sipped glasses of chilled champagne, and chatted to our fellow passengers.

Settling quickly into the decadence that is the delightful hallmark of this whole experience, we scarcely

noticed the train pull out northwards.

The champagne was followed by an extravagant afternoon tea. Appetites sated, we settled down to enjoy the dramatic east coast scenery from the comfort of the observation car.

The first stop on our journey was the Strathisla Distillery in Keith, where we were promised a ceillidh.

I'd fretted about what to wear on this trip, and when, twenty minutes and a wee dram of Chivas Regal later, I found myself demonstrating the Gay Gordons, I was glad I'd opted for flat shoes!

Not being a native Scot, I didn't learn country dances at school, so why train host Iain chose me to show off was a mystery. However, I was soon twirling, twisting and waltzing happily along.

We took it in turns to travel the wrong way round the room, trod on one another's toes and didn't know when to switch partners, but did we have a good time!

Back on board, a feast of tender Scottish lamb and a wickedly calorific dessert was waiting.

While the chefs' delicious

meals and carefully selected wines were highlights of the trip, the really good thing about dinner was the chance to get to know the other passengers.

Because you're encouraged to switch dining partners, the journey begins to feel like a luxuriously extended country

Jenny McKelvie forced herself to undergo four luxurious days seeing Scotland the most indulgent way she could find — aboard the Royal Scotsman.

house party.

One of the best things about the Royal Scotsman is that all drinks are included in the price. You can be as generous as you like with your new friends!

For me, the highlight of the whole trip came next day, when the Royal Scotsman took us to Plockton in Wester Ross. The scenery was spectacular; charming villages and romantic castles glided by as the train snaked along the shores of Loch Carron, and we snatched glimpses of the high peaks of Torridon and the distant Cuillin.

As everyone vied for a place on the outside deck of the observation car, I felt so proud of Scotland, my adopted home.

Plockton was the perfect end to a world-class journey. We were treated to an

exclusive seal-watching trip, and Callum, the boatman, guaranteed we'd see seals. He was right!

For me, the most memorable part was the distant and haunting view of the mountains of Skye.

As we rocked on Loch Carron's gentle swell, my

husband summed up my feelings.

"Plockton has to be the most beautiful place in the world!"

Our journey continued that evening in a whirlwind of fine dining, listening to intoxicating reels played by a local fiddler, and dancing on the station at Kyle of Lochalsh.

Wearing my most elegant evening dress, I skipped my way through Strip the Willow and finally mastered the Gay Gordons, with Skye ever present on the horizon. It was almost unreal; you felt privileged to be there.

Day three was almost as magical. After an early breakfast, we were whisked off to nearby Eilean Donan Castle. There was something extra special about arriving there on the coach belonging to the Royal Scotsman, and the castle itself rose to the occasion, with its mirror image reflected in Loch Duich.

Then there was the return rail journey to Carrbridge, through mesmerising scenery, and the observation car became the most popular place on the train once again. Dinner was a formal affair



The freshest of local produce!

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again, with dinner jackets and evening dress, but my husband, in full Highland gear, stole the show. The other women on the train clamoured to have their photographs taken with him.

A delicious meal was followed by a visit from an eighteenth-century Highlander! He fairly captured our imagination with historic tales of battles and of his way of life, including his weapons and clothing.

I thought he was on the point of removing his plaid, but luckily he only wanted to show us how the pleats went.

Our final day began at the Highland Wildlife Park in Kingussie, meeting Scottish fauna galore.

That evening at another exquisite dinner, we were all a little forlorn at the prospect of leaving the train for the final time. We'd seen and done so much on our four-day trip, and the other passengers seemed like old and valued friends.

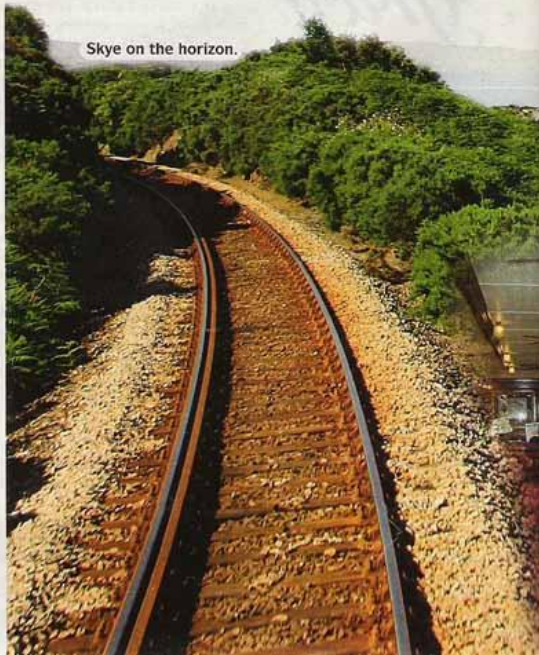
I simply wanted to start this incredible, luxurious journey into the rugged beauty of the Highlands all over again.

The End.

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

The Royal Scotsman operates a range of journeys from one to seven nights each summer season. Tel. 0131 555 1344 for further information, or visit the website: www.royalscotsman.com.

Fiddler at work at Kyle.



Skye on the horizon.



Relaxing on our magical journey.

Set up for another delicious meal.

Plockton, "the most beautiful place in the world".