

SCOTLAND *in Style*

Returning to Scotland, *Norah Casey* takes an incredible train journey to the West Highlands, leads a ceilidh dance on a deserted platform and meets a stranger she is strangely connected to.



I guess you're wondering about the stranger. It's a great story in true Hercule Poirot style and a strong connection that we both stumbled upon by chance. But you'll have to wait a while before I let you in on the secret because first we're off on a train. And not just any old train.

When people ask me why I went to Scotland to train as a nurse I tell them I thought it was pretty much the same as Ireland but had the advantage of being just far enough away to feel like an adventure. And it is. I sent a friend some pictures while rolling towards Fort William and he replied with: *Connemara looks great.*

My nursing days took me to a small hospital at Loch Lomond for a few years followed by a final year in Edinburgh. Way back then I was an impoverished student nurse trying to survive on the much-overrated reward of job satisfaction rather than a decent wage. And now here I was returning in style. Ireland is soon to have a train just like this from the exclusive Belmond group (formerly Orient Express) who have a portfolio of 46 hotels, trains and river cruises in 22 countries – including the Venice Simplon-Orient Express from London to Paris to Venice. I figured



As the train started to roll out of Edinburgh's Waverley station, our epic journey began

the Belmond Royal Scotsman would more closely resemble the Grand Hibernian, so I headed back to my old stomping ground of Edinburgh for an incredible once in a lifetime train journey.

This was an adventure like no other. A trip on board one of the world's most luxurious trains, a walk on the stunning silver sands of Morar, more reminiscent of the Caribbean than the wild west coast of Scotland; a panoramic view of the *Harry Potter* bridge at Glenfinnan and the rarest of sights, the top of Ben Nevis, only seen on 30 days of the year.

The journey began as we checked in at the luxurious Balmoral Hotel where our luggage was whisked away and the genteel process of preparing us for departure began over cups of tea and covert glimpses at our companions for the following four days. It was our first encounter with our man in charge - Ian Gardiner, a retired Brigadier who fought at Oman, the Falklands and much more besides. A great raconteur with the energy of a man half his age who was more of a genial host of a lavish house party than a tour guide. I had been a regular commuter at Waverley station back in the day but had never experienced anything like the spectacle of two dozen of us trooping after a large bagpipe player in full kilt regalia. It attracted a bit of attention as you might imagine and by the time we got to the platform where the distinctively sleek Belmond Royal Scotsman awaited we had amassed quite a crowd. But only the



fortunate few got to board, which luckily included us. At the red carpet entrance we met Fred Laseen the train manager who was to cater for our every whim for the journey. As we settled into the comfort of the observation lounge sipping a glass of Champagne the bustle of the station receded and we were transported onto the set of *Downton Abbey*! As the train started to roll out of Waverley station our epic journey began.

There are a few things to note about a four day five-star train journey. Firstly, I can testify to the fact that it is possible to put on a stone in weight in that short period of time. Because Fred and his impeccable crew sought out many and varied ways to tempt us to eat. The food was far too delicious to pass up and myself and my fellow passengers would justify the pleasure of all that fine dining with promised diets tomorrow or that we would skip afternoon tea (not a chance). The kitchen on the Royal Scotsman is tiny so it was a constant wonder how chef James Souter could produce plates cooked to perfection. Each night as I passed the tiny galley, pastry was rolled out to rise overnight for fresh pastries and croissants for breakfast. Our morning specials included Arbroath Smokies or Kippers, and regular staples of porridge with cream (and whisky) and traditional full Scottish breakfast complete with haggis, black pudding and all else besides. One memorable day we ate breakfast and two hours later sat down to an early lunch of traditional Cock-a-leekie soup. We laughed guiltily but devoured it all the same. Our first night we ate sea bass with candied fennel followed by venison with celeriac and beetroot. It was sublime and matched with perfect wines. And afterwards as we ambled back to snuggle up on the plush couches in the



The Observation Lounge



Train manager Fred and host Ian welcoming us on board with a chilled glass of Champagne.



observation car for the evenings entertainment, a trio of stewards, Rory, Connor or Konstantin encouraged us to try one of the over 60 whiskies on board. I just felt it would be rude not to. Another point worth noting is that the carriageways are narrow and it's impossible for two people to pass so there is an etiquette about who backs up or dives into an open doorway to give way. (After eating your way through a lavish meal with fine wines and a drop of whisky, the fact that you can lean on both walls as you wend your way back to your cabin is also very useful!)

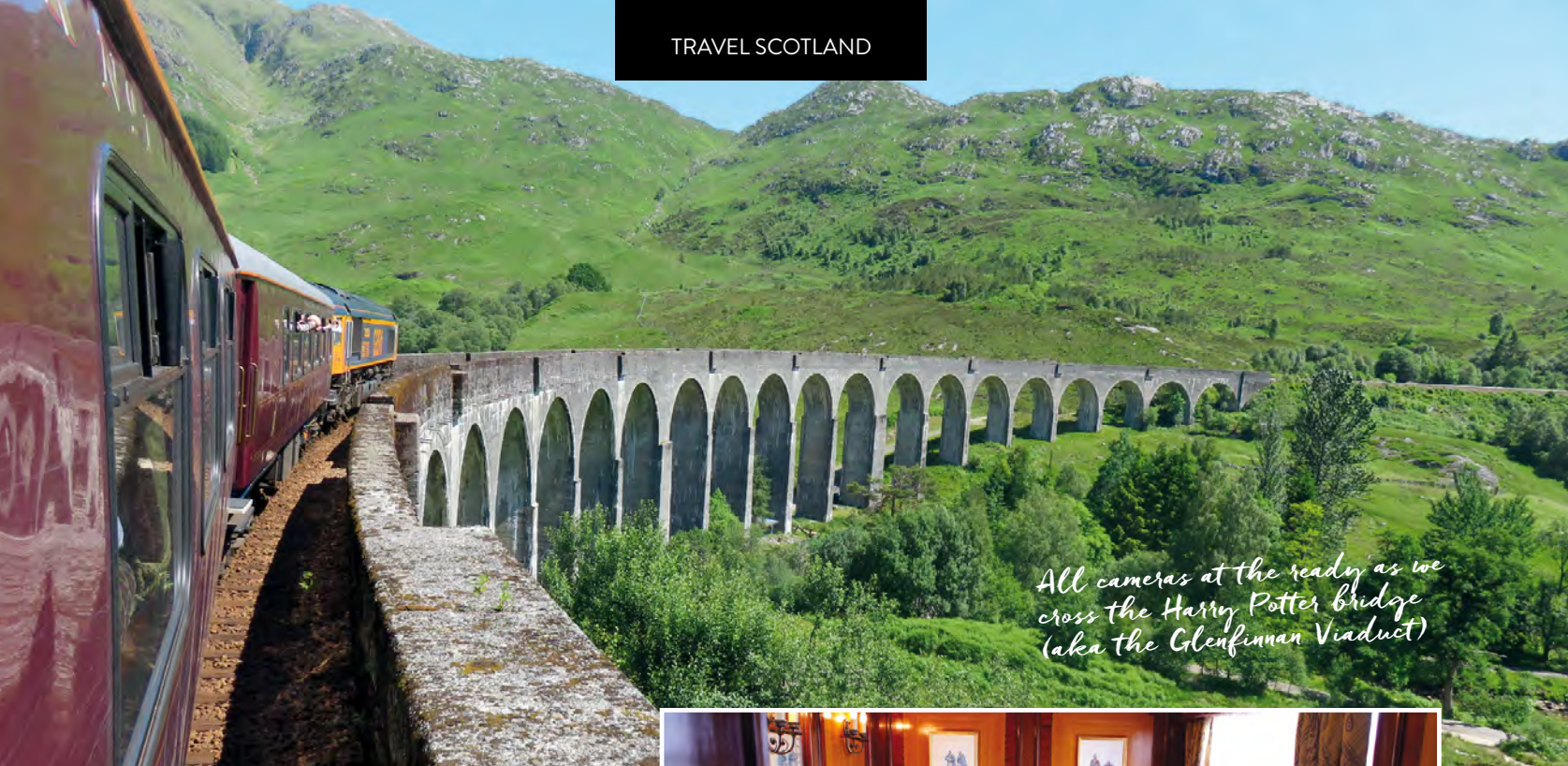
And on to the sleeping arrangements. A good time to remember that we are on a train, so the rooms are small but very plush. There were some serial train-trippers on board who reliably informed me that not all posh trains have showers. We did and it was a great novelty, not without its risks, to shower on a moving train. I learned to my cost that using a GHD was better left until we were gliding rather than rattling (its all to do with the tracks apparently). I loved my wood-panelled stateroom and escaped for an hour or so each day to read my book while we rolled by the stunning countryside of lochs and glens. I liked the motion, but was also grateful that the Royal Scotsman is stabled every night, which means tranquil sleeps.

The social heart of the Royal Scotsman is the Observation Car, a great space for losing time, having a wee dram and soaking up the stunning scenery rolling past the windows. We were blessed with equal amounts of sunshine and rain so the outside viewing platform (unique to the Royal Scotsman) was a great hub for chats and snaps in the early evening.

The sense of a rather grand house party pervades the journey. You get to know your companions fairly quickly. There are two dining cars, one with tables set for six and the other with tables of four. It's



Amiable host Ian and fellow travel companions on Morar Sands



All cameras at the ready as we cross the Harry Potter bridge (aka the Glenfinnan Viaduct)

free seating so by the time three meals have passed you will have met almost everyone else. And those you don't meet at the table, you might chat to over canapés and aperitifs before dinner or during an off-train excursion. I found myself in a cosmopolitan group – Swiss, German, English, American, Indonesian and Australian. The confined quarters, grandeur of the surroundings and lavishness of the wining and dining meant we got to know one another very well so by the time we got back to Waverley we were hugging and exchanging contact details.

And they were all different – not a bit like an Agatha Christie novel (but it didn't stop me wondering!). There were three generations of a family; grandmother, daughter and grandchildren enjoying time together. A sweet honeymoon couple who were on their way to Paris after the trip, an older couple who were engaged and very much in love, two delightful ladies of a certain age – one of whom was a real Lady who along with her companion were brilliant company at any time of the day. We made firm friends with a Scots-born man and his wife who now live in Texas and an Australian couple who shared my love of conservation. We were a mini-family for those few days comfortably swapping stories and sharing travel experiences. Of course the man who made sure we got on so well was seamlessly embedded in our company. The secret to Ian's great ability to bring us together is that he made it appear so effortless. I suspect a lot of hard work goes into that. He was the heart and soul of the party, rolling up his trousers to paddle at Morar Sands, delivering an impromptu Robbie Burns recitation when I asked him to and setting off at 7am at Spean Bridge on a 'march' to a monument so we would be back in time for breakfast and departure.

But the most memorable night was our last night. It was a formal dinner so kilts and black-tie for the men and cocktail dress or gowns for the women. Most of the men opted for the kilts and we happily snapped them for an hour or so. We were giddy, it was like an end-of-term dinner party only much more glamorous. When we finally settled into the dining cars for the finale feast we were in high spirits. The rain had



The plush staterooms

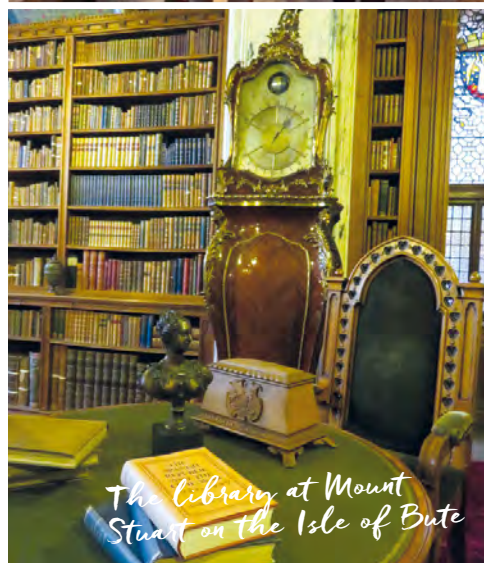
“The sense of a rather grand house party pervades the journey. You get to know your companions fairly quickly”



A ceilidh on the platform to end the trip!



Ray teaches us how to wear the kilt!



The library at Mount Stuart on the Isle of Bute

been incessant during the day. And as we travelled by ferry that afternoon to the Isle of Bute the fog settled in. But awaiting us at the other end was the spectacular Mount Stuart – more beautiful and captivating inside than out. So now here we were all decked out in our poshest of clothes inside the richly-decorated warmth of the Royal Scotsman being minded by a small but perfect team. We dined on warm goats' cheese salad followed by fillet of Aberdeen Angus beef with Strathdon Blue butter and Madeira jus followed by a pave of dark chocolate with pistachio ice cream, perfectly complemented by a glass of Muscat. As we settled into the observation car for some traditional Scottish music entertainment I remembered reading somewhere that on the final night a group of intrepid travellers had danced the *Gay Gordons* (I promise it is the real name of a Scottish ceilidh dance) on a deserted platform. I had to do it. And more importantly I had to convince everyone else to do it. I know all the ceilidh dances because there wasn't a lot to do in the part of Scotland I lived in. Ian said it was a bit damp with all the rain and probably not a good idea. We were parked at Kilmarnock, a station I knew well. After multiple rain checks and pleas, he corralled the troops and we headed out onto the platform in our finery – thank the Lord no one was there to see us. Our intrepid musicians gamely followed. We opted for *Strip the Willow* and myself and Ian led them through the steps. What followed was one of the funniest spectacles I've encountered – a chaotic group of mad-looking eejits in kilts and gowns swinging and banging into each other. We were magnificent, in our own way. When we retired to our opulent cocoon for a final wee dram, we deserved it.

Sadly, the next morning it was time to leave and as we wheeled our cases away it was hard to adjust to the ordinariness of life after being treated like pampered royalty.

The Grand Hibernian is launched in August with the Realm of the Giant journey from Dublin's Heuston Station to Belfast and the Giant's Causeway and the Legends & Loughs journey to Cork, Galway and Westport. Full details of the Royal Scotsman at Belmond.com. ■



THE STRANGER WITH A SECRET

It quite often happens when you're a travel writer that you get to know the staff in hotels. So when I arrived at the Waldorf Astoria I was greeted by the charming and helpful Guest Relations Manager Dean McVey – his partner is from Cork so there was an Irish connection.

We agreed to meet for tea with Dale

There was only one thing wrong with Edinburgh when I lived there and that was having to get up for work every day. It's the perfect city for losing a few blissful days immersed in the music, culture and history that the city is famed

for. There is always something happening in Edinburgh from comedy to film and the city is just the right size to embrace and envelop you in whatever festival it's hosting. So the only decision you really need to make is where to stay. This time I chose something old and something new, both perfect.



The Queen of Edinburgh

The majestic and opulent Caledonian, or The Caley as we called it, is one of the city's grandest hotels with a heritage that dates back to 1903 when it rose magnificently above Princes Street Railway Station. With views overlooking Edinburgh Castle, Louis XV-style décor, fine dining and luxuriously-appointed bedrooms the hotel was soon a magnate for royalty and celebrities including Burt Lancaster, Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton. The *grand dame* of Edinburgh had lost some of her gloss when I lived in Edinburgh, although we were regulars all the same because it was always a great place for jazz. Now part of the Waldorf Astoria group, The Caledonian reigns supreme once more. After a £24 million refurbishment a few years ago the transformation is incredible.

Where once the old station platform stood there is now the beautiful, light-filled lounge, Peacock Alley, where afternoon tea was just being served as we arrived. The sense of history is not lost amid the new grand interiors with the original station clock by Hamilton & Inches overlooking the scene – still set five minutes fast so passengers don't miss their train!

The Waldorf Astoria Edinburgh is home to fine dining again with double Michelin star chefs Chris and Jeff Galvin overseeing French-inspired gourmet dining at The Pompadour by Galvin. It also boasts the UK's only Guerlain Spa which won the Best Luxury Hotel Spa award this year for the whole of the country.

We stayed just one night before departing on The Belmond Royal Scotsman and I made a point of walking up and down its magnificent staircase as often as possible. Better still my room had a view of the Castle.

The Waldorf Astoria Edinburgh – The Caledonian, is a beautiful blend of history and opulence with exquisite interior touches. A lovely place to reside even for a short while.

It has just taken a raft of Scottish Hotel Awards to complement the multiple spa and restaurant awards it has garnered since the relaunch.

Waldorf Astoria Edinburgh – The Caledonian, Princes Street, Edinburgh;
Tel +44 (0)131 222 8888; Email guest_caledonian@waldorfastoria.com;
Waldorfastoriaedinburgh.com

MacPhee the general manger once we were settled. In the lovely surroundings of Peacock Alley, we began chatting about some mutual acquaintances and Dean asked how I knew Scotland so well. I explained about my nursing background and how I had trained at this tiny hospital in Loch Lomond and was the only Irish nurse for miles around. It turns out that Dean came from a place not too far from the Vale of Leven Hospital and was in fact born

there. After a bit more chit chat we realised he was born there when I was there...helping deliver babies! So the next morning I met Dean again as we were getting ready to leave and he told me he spoke to his mam the previous night, and she said that a black-haired Irish nurse had delivered him who hadn't been at the hospital that long. It had to be me. We hugged and laughed with excitement at this new bond. My first born. Can you believe it!

A Grand Residence

The Chester Residence is a beautiful, multiple award-winning, collection of grand apartments and the best kept secret in Edinburgh. These handsome Georgian townhouses were sympathetically and stunningly restored to create 23 contemporary apartments. I loved the place and hardly wanted to venture outside. It's the space that makes it special – not just the lovely clean lines and bespoke interiors (think Louis Vuitton and Armani Casa) it's the actual space. Two large double bedrooms with ensuite bathrooms, a separate bathroom for leisurely soaks (with Molton Brown toiletries), and an extensive open-plan kitchen, lounge and dining area leading to our own private garden. As someone who travels for a living, space is usually at a premium in choosing accommodation. And here we were in this gorgeous supersized apartment ambling through from room to room just because we could. We had just spent four days on the luxurious Royal Scotsman which although sumptuous, was nonetheless confined by space.



The Chester Residence is like borrowing someone's beautiful home for a few days. Scottish artists adorn the walls and the colour palette and mood lighting is relieved by playful colour pops in the bedrooms. Even the reading material has been carefully selected by the thoughtful owners with celebrated Scottish authors Ian Rankin and JK Rowling's books to hand. Every room including the bathroom had in-room technology, wifi throughout and flat-screen televisions. Breakfast was delivered each morning and there is a full reception concierge and housekeeping service. Princes Street and the heart of the action is just a few minutes' walk away.

Best of all The Chester Residence is affordable luxury. At the time of writing they had some amazing special offers especially if you are visiting outside of the high festival periods. A three-night stay in a luxury one-bed apartment for two people with breakfast next January costs from just £300.

The Chester Resident 9 Rothesay Place, Edinburgh; Telephone +44 (0) 131 226 2075; Email: enquiries@chester-residence.com; Web chester-residence.com



The Chester Residence doesn't have a restaurant but luckily Edinburgh has some superb dining options. James Thomson is restaurant royalty in Scotland. He launched the world-renowned The Witchery in 1979 and his portfolio now includes the city's first rooftop restaurant The Tower above Edinburgh's National Museum. With views over the Royal Mile and the Dickensian rooftops that inspired JK Rowling's Diagon Alley this is a special place to dine. We had a beautiful evening arriving in daylight and watching the sun slipping slowly behind the Castle. The food was as interesting as the skyscape with a menu that heroes Scottish produce.

It was one of my favourite meals, a selection of Scottish rock oysters and Isle of Mull lobster thermidor. I also sneaked a taste of delicious haggis from Dingwall with pineapple salsa – I love haggis anyway but this was amazing. If you get to Edinburgh, then The Tower has to be on the list. You'll be joining regulars, Kate Winslet, Ricky Gervais and the entire All Blacks team, Joanna Lumley declared; "Tower you are fab," and of course *Harry Potter's* author pops in on occasion. *Tower Restaurant, National Museum of Scotland, Chambers Street, Edinburgh; Tel: 0044 131 225 3003; tower-restaurant.com*