

ADVENTURES OF OUR 2016 RAFFLE WINNER



(left to right) Edinburgh Hop On Hop Off Bus; Dr. Todd Husty, Mrs. Yvette Husty, Miss Abigail Husty, and David Sorenson; Outlander Tour.

THE TRIP TO SCOTLAND that I won from purchasing tickets for the raffle at the Friday scotch tasting event was absolutely excellent. It is rather funny however that the free trip ended up costing a fair amount because my daughter and her boyfriend convinced us we should take them too! Chuck with Red Scarf Travel & Tours was absolutely indispensable especially since some of our plans had to change at the last minute, as you will hear in a minute. Chuck has phenomenal knowledge and helped every step of the way. It was very personalized service which we needed and appreciated.

Our plans were to fly from Orlando to JFK in New York. Unfortunately, there were major storms in the New York area and we were told that our flight to New York could not take off because it could not land. The delay was going to cause us to miss our flight out of JFK.

We started scrambling. There was a flight available with four seats on Virgin Atlantic to London. Chuck arranged a new rental car at the rail station in Edinburgh. All we had to do was make the train transfer from the airport in London to one of the main rail stations in London and we would arrive three hours later than expected in Edinburgh. That was much better than trying to rearrange and probably lose an entire day.

It went perfectly. We had planned our trip to begin in Edinburgh but we wanted to be in Inverness the next day. We were therefore booked at a great hotel, the Fonab Castle, in Pitlochry that is also known for its fine cuisine. Unfortunately, due to construction on the highway, it took about an hour longer than expected and we missed the seating for the five course meal but had great food in the restaurant that night.

Our first morning we were greeted by cool, windy but sunny weather! We took a hike down the back of the hotel to the Pitlochry Hydro dam and salmon ladder. Downstream is an absolutely picture-perfect Scottish village. It was a great start but simply a harbinger of even more to come.

We packed it up for Inverness, the birthplace of James Douglas, my grandfather. My wife and I had been before but we were still in awe as we turned the last corner into the grounds of Culloden House whose rich history includes the bittersweet as a staging area for the battle of Culloden.

The town of Inverness expands from both banks of the River Ness that flows through it. Up and down the river there are many opportunities for good food and libation in the well-kept restaurants and taverns. It's a very clean city that feels quite safe and the people are very hospitable.

Our first full day in the Inverness area included a windy but scenic boat ride with Jacobite Cruises (perfectly arranged by Chuck) out onto Loch Ness all of the way to the Urquhart Castle. Probably because of the waves no one else was able to see Nessie other than my quick glimpse of her.

By the time we reached the Culloden battleground the skies were as somber as the fields. It was good to learn the history and help me understand why my grandfather had a hard time getting along with the English despite the fact that he lived in Canada.

We took the back roads out of Culloden and aim for Cawdor Castle. It was cool and blustery and we were hungry and happen to find the Cawdor Tavern just down the road. Both the castle and the tavern were a perfect choice. Perhaps because they are not on the main highways we were surrounded more by locals than tourists. And, as always, the hospitality is amazing.

After the castle we packed up for Edinburgh. Navigating in Edinburgh is always a challenge but we came around the corner and there was The George Hotel. This is a great pick by Chuck. The George is near everything in Edinburgh. And, as a bonus, at the end of the street in a park was a jazz festival that Chuck must've planned just for us!

My wife is a fan of "hop on hop off" buses and I found out why in Edinburgh. We caught the bus three blocks away from The George and rode around the city until we felt like getting off to tour a site. We hopped off at Edinburgh Castle and hopped back on a few hours later and hopped off at Holyrood Park so we could take the long hike up to Arthur's Seat. It's a vigorous hike but the views and the surrounding grasslands are exquisite. After hiking down we stopped at parliament and proceeded almost across the street to the Queen's Castle. We hop back on and returned home to The George. I didn't mention that the day was very sunny and warm. The bus has an upper level that is open. We from Florida got sunburnt in Scotland!

The next morning began another of the highlights of the trip, The Outlander tour from Mary's Meanders that Chuck arranged for us. It began on extremely stormy morning even by Scotland standards. Our guide drove us from castle to castle and town to town all places where The Outlander has been filmed over the past few years. Our guide was extremely knowledgeable not only about The Outlander series but also about the history of Scotland and the places that we were visiting. If you travel to Scotland it is well worth the time, even if you are not a student of The Outlander (of course you should be).

We proceeded from the tour and drove to Glasgow with rooms at the Mercure. There was some confusion about our reservations which Chuck managed quickly and efficiently. The next day, it was the hop on hop off again and again a beautiful day. Suffice it to say that we saw all of the sites from the People's Museum way upriver to the Riverside Museum way downriver.

The trip was simply too short. It needs to be a month-long or more. Chuck Spina is not only excellent at the planning but also quick on his feet and helpful when there is a problem. We greatly appreciated his help and all four of us truly enjoyed our vacation. Thanks to all who helped make it happen.