

Gliding through the glens

I SEE Ben Nevis before I see the Scottish Highlander. The country's highest mountain, often invisible in the mist, is looming over the little barge. We are moored just before the remarkable flight of locks known as Neptune's Staircase.

Beyond is the open sea – too treacherous for our tiny craft. It was built in the Thirties to carry coal in Germany but is now a haven of cosy luxury. We sail gently through hauntingly beautiful lochs and glens, and that marvel of Victorian engineering, the Caledonian Canal.

It's like being in a Scottish country hotel, all tartan furnishings and landscape paintings, as we head through some of the world's most spectacular scenery, the rift that cuts through Scotland, the Great Glen.

The crew – Dan, Donald, Dale and Sarah – are Scots, serving a maximum of eight passengers. We all get to know each other well in an atmosphere that combines discreet style and superb food, notably lots of salmon and venison.

After a silent and relaxing night's sleep I find that Ben Nevis has disappeared into what some might call Scotch Mist. The real name, Donald assures us as he whisk us off to Glencoe, is "smirr".

A swirling mist is fitting enough for the site of the massacre in 1692 of the MacDonalds by the Campbells. Glencoe is also known as Weeping Glen, because of the streams that cascade down its mountainsides after rain. Some say they pour in memory of the tears of the MacDonalds.

Cynics may think this fanciful but, either way, this is a good place to start on the myth and often mournful history of the Highlands, a place of soaring granite peaks and lonely castles, bleak moorlands, hills glowing with the russets, golds and purples of bracken and heather in the luminous clarity of the northern light.

We pass through Loch Lochy, where dramatic mountains sweep down to dark, peaty waters, and Loch Oich, one of the prettiest, dominated by the ruins of Invergarry Castle. We stroll along the towpath only slightly more slowly than the barge as it passes through the Caledonian Canal. Kingfishers dive in a dazzling flash of blue and mountain

ANNA SELBY takes a barge into the heart of Scotland

streams rush by in a foam of water. But other than birdsong and water, it is utterly quiet. A deep tranquillity infuses the Highlands.

There's also a refreshing sense of freedom. I favour long walks along the towpaths, there's a keen cyclist who heads off on one of the complimentary on-board bicycles, and one afternoon we fish, quietly and contentedly.

There are rides to mountaintops on ski lifts, visits to the Glen Ord whisky distillery and of course a bagpipe serenade.

Fort Augustus reflects the locks that run through its centre, the street dropping down with the water level, all whitewashed cottages and slate roofs, the gorgeous window boxes still overflowing with summer colour.

From our mooring we drive to further lochs – Garry with perfect reflections of trees mirrored on its surface and Cluanie, where deer drink along its shoreline. Past ruined crofts and ever higher mountains, the drive follows the Road to the Isles.

Eagles soar above, clouds scud between sunbursts on golden bracken and we drop down to Eilean Donan, arguably Scotland's most romantic castle in surely the most beautiful location imaginable.

Sitting on its own island with commanding views of three sea lochs, this was the setting for the film Highlander. Remarkably, it is still lived in, and is the headquarters of Clan Macrae who gather here every year.

Inside is a castle built on a domestic scale that was restored in the 1930s as the Clan Chief's family home but is a museum of traditional Highland life.

From here, we are too close to resist visiting the Isle of Skye. Crossing by the Skye Bridge, I feel suspended between sea and sky.

The next day combines Culloden, the brooding moor that was the site of the last major battle in mainland Britain, and Cawdor Castle, forever linked to Shakespeare's Macbeth.

This journey has been leading us towards Scotland's famous loch, Loch Ness, and the Scottish Highlander drops through the Fort Augustus locks

to navigate its peaty depths. We are equipped with sonar and Captain Dan welcomes Nessie hunters to the bridge to see what they can spot.

This is the biggest, deepest body of water in the UK. So if a monster could be anywhere, Loch Ness would be the place. It makes our little barge seem smaller than ever.

● GETTING THERE

European Waterways (01753 598 555 gobarging.com) offers a seven-day cruise from £2,490pp (two sharing), all inclusive. Price includes excursions and local transfers. Departures April–October. Scotland tourism: Visit scotland.com Visithighlands.com



ONWARDS: The road bridge linking the mainland to the Isle of Skye

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