

REBECCA RECOMMENDS

Inspirational destinations & properties of excellence



Chasing the Magic of Scotland at G&V Royal Mile Hotel, Aldourie Castle and The Torridon

Scotland and all its sublime beauty and historic riches has long lived in my heart - the cashmere, the whisky, the lochs! I have been fortunate enough to host many of our Rebecca Recommends FAM trips to this magnificent country (unfortunately this year I was not able to attend.)

However, my close friend and colleague Penta Davies was happy to accompany some of our favorite travel advisors in my stead on a journey to some of Scotland's finest properties. I had but one request - that she would seek out my old pal, Bramble the European Eagle Owl (pictured below), while she was at Aldourie Castle!

[Aldourie Castle](#) is one of three distinctive Scottish properties Rebecca Recommends represents, together presenting a complete picture of the country's breadth of experiences. The castle is a stunning three-and-a-half-hour drive from Edinburgh (with a stop for cashmere sweaters and woolens along the way, of course) to Loch Ness. It was first declared a "laird's house" in 1626 and is now a classic example of 19th-century Scottish baronial architecture.

Deep in the heart of the rugged Scottish Highlands, we're smitten with [The Torridon](#), originally built as a shooting lodge for the Earl of Lovelace in 1887 and today a sought-after spot for walking, rock-climbing and kayaking adventures in the dramatic Scottish countryside. Whisky is so highly revered here that it's ladled into the porridge at breakfast - what a way to start the day!

And back in Edinburgh - which, it's important to note, is just a six-and-a-half-hour direct flight from New York City - we adore the design-driven [G&V Royal Mile Hotel](#), a fashion-forward hideaway in the city's medieval heart.

And now to Penta and her recent travels (although I could gush on and on about this lovely land and our properties there). Scotland is particularly close to Penta's heart because it's here her husband proposed to her seven years ago.

Having worked with Rebecca Recommends in one capacity or another for more than a decade, Penta has a passion for the properties my team represents and returned to regale us with tales of how much the travel advisors had fallen in love with the majestic Highlands, the picturesque lochs and ancient, attractive Edinburgh. There's a friendliness and graciousness that exudes from every corner of Scotland and I promise, it will enchant your clients as well.

Please contact me or any of the Rebecca Recommends team if we can give you more information about G&V Royal Mile Hotel, Aldourie Castle, The Torridon, Original Travel UK (which helped with the trip) or any of our clients. We love to hear from you.

Rebecca

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G&V: A STYLISH HOTEL IN A VIBRANT CITY



You'll find seasonal, modern cooking at Cucina, the pulsing heart of G&V. Cucina is open all day, every day.

Our tour of Scotland started in [the UNESCO World Heritage city of Edinburgh](#), where we stayed at the G&V, perfectly positioned in the very heart of the medieval Old Town. It is within easy walking distance of Edinburgh's many beautiful and historic landmarks and several very tempting shopping districts, including those in the Georgian New Town (a mere 150 to 200 years old).

G&V is the only five-star hotel on the historic Royal Mile, combining comfort and modern design that celebrates the best in Scottish talent. Standout touches include Nespresso machines, iPod docks, LCD TVs, complimentary high-speed Internet and other modern indulgences in all 136 guest rooms and suites overlooking the ancient capital.



Scotland is known for its bold designs, so beautifully represented in this stunning, airy public space.

The [award-winning Italian restaurant Cucina](#) has an extensive menu with something for all tastes, combining Italian cuisine with Scottish sustenance. The recently opened and very chic [Epicurean bar](#) offers a [unique take on cocktails](#) and Scottish drinks, enhanced by flowers and herbs from the hotel's EvoGro hydroponic - just one of the ways that the G&V is cleverly cultivating home-grown produce despite their city-center location. An urban spa retreat and vibrant gym allow guests to escape from the bustling city and unwind in whichever way they prefer.

General Manager Martin Scott is rightfully proud of [the hotel's beehives](#), located on the roof. The bees produce delicious honey that guests can sample at breakfast and in some of G&V's lovely amenities. Our group was delighted to receive our own bee adoption certificates along with boxed melt-in-the-mouth fudge and other turndown treats during our stay.



Edinburgh's newest cocktail bar, Epicurean, serves aromatic infusions and colourful cocktails using home-grown flowers and herbs from an EvoGro hydroponic.

After a lovely lunch hosted by Martin Scott, we visited some of the hotel's individually conceived and [uniquely decorated suites](#), each showcasing the very best in Scottish design. The suites are wonderfully different in style and each has incredible views out over the city.

The rooms are similarly blessed with great views and many are decorated with line drawings of some of Edinburgh's landmarks. Extremely comfortable beds and ergonomically designed



The views of Edinburgh are stunning from the Garden Paradise Suite, set at the very top of the G&V. This suite is the work of Scottish textile designer, Hatti Pattison.

The day was crisp with dramatic skies highlighting the even more dramatic sights of Edinburgh and we were delighted to embark on a walking tour of the Old Town with our extremely knowledgeable and engaging Blue Badge Guide Maggie.

We discovered not only the best-known highlights such as [Edinburgh Castle](#), home of the [Scottish Crown Jewels](#), but also lesser-known cobbled courtyards and churchyards with fascinating tales of [half-hanged Maggie](#), the grisly murderers [Burke and Hare](#) (who supplied bodies for anatomy students) and [Greyfriars Bobby](#), a very loyal Skye Terrier.



Edinburgh is a well-preserved city known for the arts, theatre and design. Photo: Will Pryce

The tour was arranged for us by [Original Travel UK \(OTUK\)](#), creative travel advisors who specialize in crafting luxury tailor-made holidays to The UK and Ireland. We were fortunate to have

Dominique is a perfectionist with a passion for all things British. Her prior experience with a UK Virtuoso DMC and in luxury events means she is the perfect initial point of contact for family, couple or group trips spanning the whole of the UK and Ireland.

ALDOURIE CASTLE: THE ULTIMATE PRIVATE PARTY

The following morning we departed by luxury coach for [Aldourie Castle](#), a journey of approximately three-and-a-half hours. About halfway we stopped at [The House of Bruar](#), a charmingly Scottish shopping emporium showcasing clothing, produce, homeware and art from the country. It is widely acknowledged as Scotland's most prestigious independent store and situated just a few miles from Blair Castle and the scenic town of Pitlochry.

Almost every member of our group made purchases, from gorgeous winter jackets and cashmere sweaters to sheepskin gloves and Scottish delicacies including Irn Bru - [a locally produced luminous orange soda](#) that Scots love almost as much as whisky. My husband, who studied at Edinburgh University, recommends drinking it with a good measure of vodka!



Aldourie Castle is a five-star property available for exclusive use. The property also has four self-catering cottages. Photo: Margaret Soraya

Arriving at Aldourie Castle is not just impressive, it is breathtaking. You know before you cross the threshold that you don't want to leave. A picturesque structure of fairytale proportions and the only habitable castle on Loch Ness, [Aldourie is the ideal house-party property](#). Guests can enjoy using every room inside and wander around the 500-acre estate at their leisure.

Following a delicious light lunch in front of a roaring log fire, [we departed across the loch](#) from Aldourie's private marina on a luxury motor cruiser. It was a beautifully sunny, clear and crisp day and we sat on the top deck keeping a good look out for any signs of Nessie (there may have been sightings!) with tea, coffee and mulled wine to keep us warm along the way. [Stopping at the historic Urquhart Castle](#), sited on the northern shore of Loch Ness, we explored the ruins, climbed the tower and peeked inside the dungeons.



Margaret Williams and Caroline Wood of Travel Experts delighted in our boat trip across Loch Ness from Aldourie Castle.

Urquhart was once one of Scotland's largest castles and saw great conflict during its 500 years as a medieval fortress. Control of the castle passed back and forth between the Scots and English during the Wars of Independence. The power struggles continued, as the Lords of the Isles regularly raided both castle and glen up until the 1500s.

The last of the government troops garrisoned here during the Jacobite Risings blew up the castle when they left. Urquhart's iconic ruins remain, offering glimpses into medieval times and the lives of its noble residents.

The setting sun turned the surface of Loch Ness a shimmering silver as we sailed back, making the view of the castle from the loch even more magical. We returned to afternoon tea in the Red Drawing Room with the most delicious scones and cakes before retiring to our rooms to prepare for the evening.



Sample fine wines from the Castle's cellar and enjoy delicious food in the sophisticated dining room.

bedroom is entirely individual. One of the thrills for a party of guests is when the time comes to assign bedrooms to family and friends.

Each room is named akin to its character or location in the Castle and scattered about the upper floors so you can get to know the layout of your luxury Scottish Highlands property before you even arrive for your holiday or special event. There is a bedroom at Aldourie to suit every age and personality and all will be sure to please.



All of the 13 bedrooms at Aldourie Castle are different, and it's great fun to choose your favorite.

We had so much fun [exploring the castle](#), exclaiming over the richly furnished and quirky bedrooms, turret showers, a hand painted room with an enormous claw footed bath in the middle of it, secret passages and a narrow spiral staircase leading to a tiny round turret room with vibrant murals.

We later assembled for pre-dinner drinks and were treated to a wonderful bagpipe rendition from Spud, Aldourie's charismatic piper, firstly outside where we danced to the light of a warming bonfire and then in the Library, where Spud entertained us with tales of how he had played 'Like a Virgin' on his bagpipes for Madonna as she arrived in Scotland for her wedding to Guy Ritchie!



Lavinia Turner, General Manager at Aldourie, joined us for an outstanding dinner in the dining room and told us some of the many ways to enjoy the castle and its superb location: running across the loch in giant plastic spheres ([water zorbing](#)), a mini-[Highland games](#), falconry, Segway races, fishing, canoeing and Nessie hunting by speedboat, to name but a few.

Following Lavinia's expert advice, several of our group ventured downstairs in our pajamas to breakfast in front of the welcoming fire in the Laird's Room. There was a feast on offer and many of us took our time whilst others went out for a final explore, coming back with tales of woodland trails, a tree house, croquet lawns and an enormous rainbow which had kindly positioned itself directly over the castle and the loch. This was too good to miss so we ran out to catch a glimpse and take a photograph or two!



A full rainbow appeared over Aldourie Castle while we were there.

[Glen Ord Distillery](#), the only remaining single malt scotch whisky distillery on the Black Isle (not an actual island, but a peninsula), is just a half-hour drive from Aldourie Castle, and seemed the ideal place to stop off for a fascinating tour and tasting. In hindsight, 10 a.m could be considered on the early side for drinking whisky, but as we discovered, there are people in Scotland who start their day with a 'wee dram' (small measure)!

The tour is very interesting with gleaming copper stills and barrel upon barrel of whisky aging to perfection in dim, cobweb-strewn stores. We learned that the best wood for the 20-foot high washbacks comes from Oregon Pines and that single malt scotch whisky is colored and flavored by the use of barrels which have previously contained Bourbon (generally from Kentucky) or sherry.

A STUNNING DRIVE TO THE TORRIDON

From the distillery, the stunning drive to The Torridon took one-and-a-half hours. Part of [the celebrated North Coast 500](#), the road from Inverness to Achnasheen is as remote and wild as you could wish for and beautiful at any time of the year. Summer is especially impressive as the flowering heather turns the hillsides purple.



The Torridon is a perfect place to stay while exploring the North Coast 500, a scenic road with stunning coastal scenery.

The North Coast 500's route follows the main roads across the coastal edges of the North Highlands, taking in the villages and towns of places like Ullapool, Durness, John O'Groats, Dornoch and Inverness. The Torridon is an ideal stopping place. It has retained the feel of a luxurious hunting lodge, with wellington boots lined up in the porch, an enormous open fire in the entrance hall and an air of relaxed contentment underlining the luxuriousness of the furnishings.

Guests greet each other with warm smiles and salutations, as if acknowledging that we are all rather privileged to be staying in such a lovely place. Food and drink are an important part of the experience here. The inn even has its own herd of Highland cattle, which do appear on the menu.



Hardy Highland cattle are a slow maturing breed, making the meat unusually tender, flavorful and succulent, and they're on the menu.

Highland cattle and Tamworth pigs could be seen merrily grazing or lazing in the grounds of The Torridon.

The two-acre kitchen garden (well worth the short walk to see it), provides a vast array of fruit and vegetables including raspberries, strawberries, loganberries, apples, plums, cob nuts, rhubarb and cherries, gooseberries, blackberries, redcurrants, blackcurrants, potatoes, carrots, parsnips, beetroot, purple-sprouting broccoli, sprouts, kale, turnip, Jerusalem artichoke and globe artichoke as well as numerous herbs, all of which are used in the kitchen by [The Torridon's passionate chef, David Barnett](#).



The Torridon's interior is cozy and distinctive, with a roaring fire.

In the cozy whisky bar we sat down to a lunch of hearty homemade soup, generously filled sandwiches (some with delicious Scottish smoked salmon) and sweet, light shortbread in the shape of a Highland "coo" (cow). The whisky bar stocks over 350 different malt whiskies from well-known favorites to some rare and special bottles. The bar was awarded gold status by the Whisky Magazine Awards and was one of the first 50 establishments to be awarded "Best Whisky Bar in the World" status by Whisky Magazine.

The bedrooms have been recently redecorated and are an appealing combination of modern and traditional fabrics and designs, color schemes that complement the scenery and a sense of utmost luxury throughout. The rooms each have a unique identity and all are beautiful but the magnificent master suite is simply divine, with everything you could ever ask of a luxury hotel - opulent décor, stunning views of the loch and mountains, a huge bed, lavish bathroom and the options for private dining in the suite's sitting room.



The bedrooms at The Torrison have just been redecorated and are very comfortable.

That evening we met Dan and Rohaise Rose-Bristow, owners of The Torrison, for cocktails and dinner and learnt more about the history of the hotel and estate. Charming and relaxed, Dan and Rohaise make running a luxury hotel, inn, activity center and estate look easy but they are clearly both very hands-on and constantly striving for perfection. Rohaise admitted that she is already thinking about the next redecoration project even as we commented on how lovely the rooms look!

The Torrison is an outdoor lover's paradise, [with its own activities center](#) offering mountaineering, sea kayaking, canoeing, archery, clay pigeon shooting, rock climbing, low level and coastal walks, gorge scrambling and bike hire plus bespoke activities when requested and where possible - coasteering was mentioned as an additional option. Programmed activities are complimentary for all hotel guests during their stay.

I would love to say that our activities day dawned dry and fair, but we awoke to rain and it continued for most of the day. Undeterred, we put on waterproof jackets and those of us without waterproof footwear found that those wellington boots in the porch came in handy!



Brett Vodak from Destination Europe was very good at archery and hit the target every time!

We embarked on a guided walk around some of the easy paths that roughly follow the edge of the sea loch that The Torridon overlooks, taking a beautiful grassy trail over a little footbridge and discovering spectacular scenery and glorious flora and fauna. Eagles, dolphins, seals, otters, pine marten and red deer are often seen on walks such as this and our guide Charlie pointed out trees and plants of interest along with several of the nine Munros (a Munro is a mountain in Scotland with a height over 3,000 feet) that can be 'bagged' for keen walkers and climbers staying at The Torridon.

The whisky bar was the perfect place for us to dry out over lunch before we headed out to try our hands at archery and clay pigeon shooting. Despite the wind and rain, there were some great shots (instructors Hugo and Charlie were heard to mention the Olympics) and lots of laughs. We thoroughly enjoyed ourselves, safe in the knowledge that Gaelic Coffee (with Scotch whisky and cream) or hot chocolate and deep warm baths awaited us back in the hotel.



The Torridon's whisky bar is one of world's finest, with 350 different malt whiskies.

Alastair Mackay, Inn Manager at The Torridon Inn treated us to a private and highly entertaining whisky tasting in the library that evening. Plates on the table were piled high with different

agreeing on a favorite Scotch, (Dalmore, for those who are interested) and learning that you should not swirl a whisky in its glass before the initial nosing.

We dined at the Torridon Inn, a fun and relaxed experience where we chose from an extensive menu including the Torridon Coo Burger, Chef's Locally Foraged Wild Mushrooms & Pasta and Roasted Wester-Ross Salmon. Highlights among the Inn's starters usually include Isle of Ewe smoked salmon, local mussels or maybe even a taste of Scottish haggis, neeps and tatties.

The sticky toffee pudding was a big hit, as was the homemade ginger beer, made by Alastair himself. [The Torridon Inn](#) is a great option for hotel guests who don't want to indulge in fine dining every night of their stay.



The always dapper David Lloyd of Chicago enjoyed a beautifully blustery morning walk.

Breakfast at The Torridon can include porridge (amongst many other options). It is exceptionally good porridge, perfect for anyone heading out for a day of activities and comes with brown sugar, cream and Scotch whisky, possibly proving my earlier assumption that there are people in Scotland who like to start their day with whisky!

We said a reluctant farewell to the Torridon and began our journey back to Edinburgh. It is a fairly lengthy drive by coach but the scenery is captivating and there are plenty of interesting places to visit along the way. Our timing only allowed us to stop at [Eilean Donan Castle](#), a spectacularly sited castle set on an island at the head of Loch Duich. The first fortified castle was constructed here in the mid-13th century and stood guard over the lands of Kintail.



Eilean Donan Castle is set on an island where three lochs meet.

We stopped for a hearty lunch at [the Clachaig Inn in Glencoe](#), very popular with climbers and walkers, situated at the foot of some of the highest mountains in Scotland. The inn, dating back to the 16th century, more recently has a sign on its door saying "No Hawkers or Campbells" in a wry reference to [the Massacre of Glencoe](#) which happened in Glencoe village.

Arriving back at the G&V Royal Mile Hotel after finishing our journey, we received a warm welcome. The team at the G&V kindly recommended we dine at [The Outsider](#). It was perfect, with incredible views across to Edinburgh Castle, which was atmospherically lit at night. Edinburgh is a food-lovers' city with [many exceptional and well-regarded restaurants](#), but it is great to discover lesser-known gems like this.

As the only one of our group who had visited Scotland before, I knew that I would enjoy this experience, but I was delighted to hear just how much they had fallen in love with the majestic Highlands, the picturesque lochs and the ancient city of Edinburgh, not to mention the friendly and hospitable Scottish people. "I was so impressed that I am in the planning stages of a trip for clients next June with Original Travel UK," said David Lloyd, founder of David Lloyd & Associates in Chicago.



Hogmanay, the Scottish New Year's Eve, is a spectacular time to visit Edinburgh. Photo: This is Edinburgh.

was [recognized by Condé Nast Traveler](#) as a leader in the American Southwest and Rocky Mountains. "Scotland was more beautiful than I could ever gather from photos," she wrote. That's high praise indeed from someone used to the dramatic landscapes of the American West.

Beth Flowers, Director of Leisure Sales for Brownell Travel in Birmingham, Alabama, wrote with praise for all the properties (and a request for [the butternut squash salad recipe from Aldourie Castle](#)). "I was really surprised and delighted by The Torridon," she added. "It exceeded my expectations and I am elated to pass it along to my Scottish inquiries. The food and service were super and the whisky tasting the crown jewel."

Rebecca recommends Scotland, and we do too.

-- Penta Davies



We enjoyed archery and clay pigeon shooting with The Torridon's activities staff. (Penta is on the right.)

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