

Isle of Skye casts its surreal spell

By Yvonne Gordon
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

ISLE OF SKYE, Scotland — “There are three rules,” says Murray. “No whistling. No taking away of anything. And don’t leave anything metal behind.”

We’re driving into the Fairy Glen on the north of the Isle of Skye, and Murray, our guide, is explaining the dos and don’ts. These rules are part of a list of superstitions about the fairies. I’m not exactly a believer in fairies — I felt a cynical eyebrow-raising coming on when I heard the place name — but as soon as I see it, I realize that there is something unreal about the landscape here, something a bit supernatural. It can’t have been made by nature, or even by man, can it?

The Fairy Glen is a small valley with a set of tiny green hills, each about the height of a double-decker bus. Some hills are round, some pointy, and each hill has a set of circular ridges going around it, all covered by grass. The fairies are said to live in these grassy beehive-hills. Narrow pathways wind between the hills and there are mysterious rock formations and spiral stone patterns in the grass. When two sheep appear at the side of a hill, they seem to be the only thing of normal size.

In fact, there seems to be something slightly supernatural about much of the island. The Isle of Skye is the largest island of the Inner Hebrides in northwest Scotland. Its 639 square miles has some spectacular scenery — everything from dramatic coastal cliffs, sea views, and rocky peninsulas to vast glacial valleys and the Cuillin, a mountain range with craggy peaks, waterfalls, glens, and lakes.

The weather changes frequently, adding to the mystery, as things appear and disappear behind clouds — but in clear weather, views across the sea and sky seem endless.

We drove here from Glasgow, traveling north through Loch Lomond National Park, with warning signs for deer on the road, then for wild goats. The farther north into the Highlands we got, the narrower and more twisty the road became. Roadside trees faded to give way to a barren, brown landscape, wide valleys with small lakes, waterfalls, ferns and heather, and a backdrop of dark rocky mountain peaks, the slivers of snow on top glistening like strips of silver.

Along the way, Murray told us ancient stories of fairies and folklore, and of Scotland’s turbulent history. At the pass of Glencoe, as the road cut through rock and past a waterfall, road signs warned of zigzag bends, landslides, and ice in

winter. For a while, the only signs of human life in this lonely landscape were the stacks of peat that had been cut for fuel.

Just before Skye itself is Eilean Donan, a restored 13th-century castle set on a tiny island where three lochs — Duich, Long, and Alsh — meet. Visitors can wander the entire castle, exploring nooks and crannies in the banqueting hall, kitchen and bedrooms, and learn about its turbulent history, of Vikings and Jacobites, kings and clan chiefs. It’s an interesting way to spend an hour or two.

Skye itself has been accessible by landbridge since 1995. The road into the island winds through the Cuillin, with the towering Black Cuillin peaks, some of the most dramatic mountains in Scotland, and the lower Red Cuillin hills. As we passed a black, pudding-bowl-shaped mountain, a cloud sat on top like a dollop of cream.

One of the most famous hills on Skye is the Quaraing, which is reached by a twisty, steep, single-track road. There are sheep and signs warn of falling rock. The hills to either side are full of curious grassy ridges and furrows.

At Quaraing, there all sorts of strange columns and inexplicable rock features, set on slopes that run right down to the sea in the distance. Pointy hills and odd rock pinnacles give the area an otherworldly air. Some have nicknames — The Needle, a jagged pinnacle 120 feet high; The Table, where a flat terrace of bouncy grass ends in a sheer cliff drop; The Prison, another rock formation. The area, created by an ancient landslip or landslide, is part of the Trotternish ridge.

Another oddity created by the landslip is the Old Man of Storr, which is hidden behind a cloud as we approach. For five seconds, it’s uncovered and we can see a tall pointy piece of rock, standing straight up, 160 feet high, looking like an old man hunched over. Then, just as quickly it’s gone again, captured by the mist. Even without the rock pinnacle, the landscape is strange and fascinating, the slopes filled with hundreds of rocky, grassy bumps and ridges.

Storr and the rest of the Trotternish peninsula overlook the Sound of Raasay. Stories tell of a fairy queen that once lived across on Raasay Island. Apparently her cattle would swim across to Skye each night, graze on the island, and then swim back. A local man on Skye used to hear the fairy queen calling her cows back each night. One night, he laid clods of earth from the church between the cows and the shore. The cattle



PHOTOS BY YVONNE GORDON FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Just before Skye is Eilean Donan, a restored 13th-century castle (above). The Scottish Highlands’ roads are narrow and twisty.

in past times, this is where the drovers used to bring their cattle to swim them across to the markets on the mainland.

One of the ferry’s busiest crew members is Nak the dog, who looks after the mooring rope (by mouth); then runs in circles around the boat, overseeing the proceedings, a sheepdog rounding up his charges. It seemed fitting that after a few days of fairy glens, old men rock pinnacles, and dinosaur prints, we would leave the island on what seemed like a large, sea-going record player, run by a sheepdog. A surreal departure from a sometimes surreal trip.

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couldn’t cross the holy earth so were said to have stayed on the island. “Every cow you now see has a bit of fairy magic in it,” winks Murray, who, with his long curly hair, beard, kilt, and sporran (or pouch), looks like something out of a fairy story himself.

With rocks that look like old men and stories of fairy queens, I’m not sure what to think when we hear about dinosaur footprints at Staffin. However, these are real: an incredible set of 20-inch long footprints on a slab of sandstone rock at the shoreline, dating to the Jurassic period, 165 million years ago.

The road leads on to Neist Point, the westernmost point on the Isle of Skye. Here, a green grassy peninsula juts out to sea, with cliffs on both sides. The energetic can brave hundreds of steps down the cliff to walk to the lighthouse and take in the bracing sea air. The area is popular for spotting dol-

phins, whales and basking shark.

The Isle of Skye has echoes of so many of the countries nearby. Neist and the west share similarities with the rugged coastal cliffs and green fields of the Atlantic coast in the west of Ireland, mixed with the dramatic inlets and glacial valleys of Norway. Part of the landscape reminds me of the barren, frozen lava landscapes of Iceland. But it all has a touch of the unusual. Even the cows in the fields have long coats, curly horns, and wavy hair over their faces.

On our last day, we leave the island on the tiny turntable ferry, which runs from Kylesha to Glenelg on the mainland. The ferry takes 3 or 4 cars, which drive onto a rotating turntable so they don’t have to reverse on or off. This is the last of the hand-operated ferries in Scotland. Otters, seals, and eagles are spotted regularly here, and

TRAVEL TROUBLESHOOTER | CHRISTOPHER ELLIOTT

Downgraded on a Priceline flight

Earlier this year, I bought two round-trip business-class tickets from St. Louis to Paris for my wife and daughter using Priceline. In May, the company sent an itinerary change, changing everything to coach.

Priceline has given many different explanations, none of which has jibed with the others. First, it blamed the airlines. Only when the company learned that I still have the original e-mailed confirmation and I assured them that I keep impeccable records did it say this was a “screen error” and I never was booked in business class.

Well, either way, I purchased tickets from Priceline based on what its website showed me: business-class seats at \$1,400 each. I know this is a great deal. But understand, it was right on the heels of the Charlie Hebdo attacks in Paris, so it is not so far out of logic to assume there weren’t many people buying tickets to Paris at that time.

A “screen error” doesn’t explain Priceline’s entire system sending me confirmations of business-class tickets and then the company having to change the itinerary months later.

Priceline offered a fare for a class on its system for which I gave it money. I expect Priceline to honor it. Can you help?

DOUGLAS BENTELE
Chesterfield, Mo.

A If Priceline sold you business-class tickets to Paris, it should have delivered them. But hang on: A look at Priceline’s site suggests it didn’t, or shouldn’t, have given you those tickets.

The company’s “Name Your Own Price” feature, which you used to bid on your tickets, clearly says: “All tickets will be issued for economy class only.” (Here’s the fine print: https://www.priceline.com/privacypolicy/terms_en.html.)

I checked with Priceline, and it admits it goofed. Or, more specifically, one of its airline partners goofed.

“Due to a display error that occurred during the ongoing American Airlines/US Airways merger work, Mr. Bentele’s confirmation notice inaccurately showed business class, when he was actually bidding on — and got — an economy ticket,” says Brian Ek, a Priceline spokesman. “The error was subsequently corrected.”

This is a little bit like going

to a hamburger joint and finding steak on the menu at hamburger prices. When you don’t get your steak, you have every right to be upset. But that doesn’t change the fact that you’re still at a hamburger stand. Priceline is the hamburger stand.

You could have appealed this to Priceline. I list the names and numbers of the company’s top executives on my site: elliott.org/company-contacts/priceline/. But since this was a mistake by an airline, I’m not sure what they could have done to fix this.

Priceline offered to refund your tickets, but that didn’t sit well with you, or me. You contacted Priceline and reminded it that the Connecticut Unfair Trade Practices Act statutes stipulate that no business may amend, change, or modify any contract with the use of fine print. Priceline agreed to pay for your entire flight, albeit in economy class.

Christopher Elliott, the ombudsman for National Geographic Traveler magazine and author of “How to Be the World’s Smartest Traveler,” can be reached at elliott@ngs.org.

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