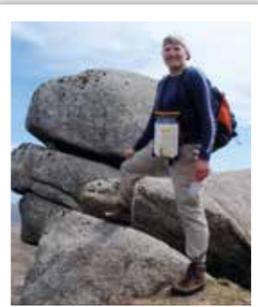




Happiness is the **Highlands**

A 'newbie' family head into the dramatic Scottish landscape to try out their 'funny hotel' on wheels

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY: Robin McKelvie



Robin McKelvie...

... has visited over 100 countries. His family – daughters, Tara and Emma, and their mum, Jenny – are one of Scotland's most travelled

With a travel writer as a dad, it is no surprise that our four-year-old daughter, Emma, has stayed at over 100 hotels. Or that her big sister, Tara, trumps her, having clocked up over 200 in her seven years.

However, they are very much surprised and more than a little intrigued at their first sight of our rental motorhome. "That's a funny hotel," exclaims Emma, while big sister has her suspicions, too. "We're all going to stay in that? For five nights?" she quizzes, clearly unconvinced.

I am also simultaneously going to try to convert them – and their similarly doubtful mum, Jenny – to a foray deep into my beloved Scottish Highlands, rather than the flight to the warmth of the Canary Isles we normally escape to in the holidays.

I fear it may be a tough sell; both the motorhome and the history and drama that I find so appealing about the Highlands. I keep my doubts well hidden.

Delving inside 'Camper' – the name my girls instantly bestow on our motorhome – they are reassured to find that it is considerably better equipped than our family car. "It's like a hotel room on wheels," they giggle.

Our luggage disappears into cupboards. The girls are strapped in at a table with seats where they can play games and we are off with *Peppa Pig* playing on the TV. It's a good start. The 100-mile drive to our first site at Caolasnacon in Lochaber may be a different matter.

Some parents fear the prospect of being cooped up in a motorhome with young children, but we don't find it claustrophobic at all. I find it makes a refreshing change nipping back to spend an hour sitting with my daughters rather than just catching glimpses of them in the back of a car from between the headrests.

I try to fire their imaginations with tales of Bonnie Prince Charlie and Harry Potter, both of whom have rampaged through the soaring mountains, tumbling glens and gushing rivers of the Highlands.

I show my trump card early, too, with the promise of the best beaches I've seen across the 100 countries I've visited. I'm not lying.

The journey goes without a hitch, bar an emergency stop in Glencoe to refuel the tired ones with sweets. We ease down towards the banks of Loch Leven to Caolasnacon campsite, a site I know well as the author of *Cool Camping Scotland*. I've never been here with a motorhome, though, and relish not having to struggle to put a tent up.

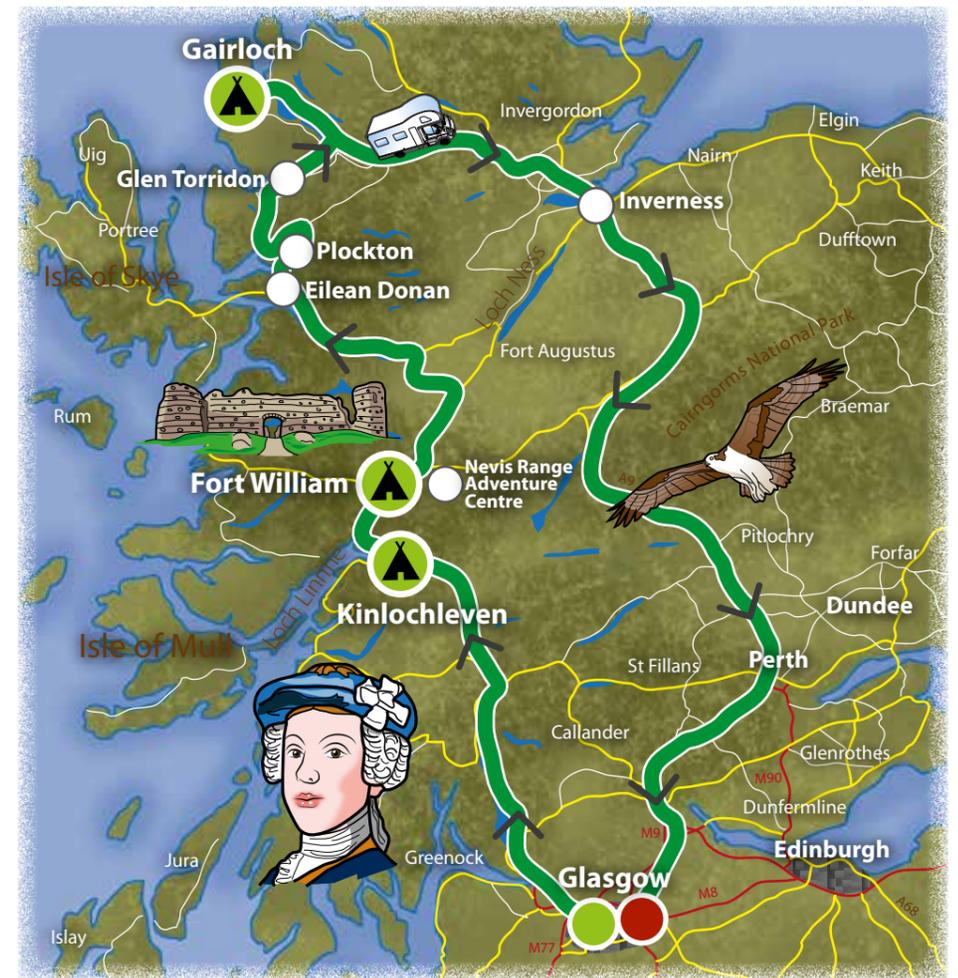
There are no pitches as such, so we just choose a spot with an epic view of mountain and loch and turn the engine off. We hook up and head straight down to the banks of the loch to look for fish and fairies. The sun breaks through the clouds. We are all enjoying the simple pleasures of the Highlands. Phew!

There are a sprinkling of sites and holiday parks along our route, but we chose Caolasnacon as a base because it feels wilder, rougher and closer to the Highlands I want us to have a taste of.

We recline here for two days remembering how to do nothing. There is no phone signal or mobile internet. We don't need them.

Not ready to leave Lochaber yet, we ease just a few miles north to Glen Nevis Holidays, a well-equipped site that sits in the eponymous glen just inland from Fort William, the largest town in the Highlands.

The UK's highest mountain, Ben Nevis (4,409ft) towers above 'Camper' in what is one of the most dramatic glens in the Highlands; so dramatic that it was chosen to star in the Hollywood movie *Braveheart*. ▶



RIGHT TOP TO BOTTOM High wires at Nevis Range; Robin enjoying seafood at the Crannog restaurant; stunning Eilean Donan Castle



Trip summary

OUR MOTORHOME

2014 Rimor Katamarano 12P Plus (6.61m long) on 2.2-litre Renault Master. Hired from Motorhome Rental Centre in Glasgow

01417 731212, motorhomerentalcentre.com From £95 per day



THE JOURNEY

We drove from Glasgow up the A82 to Fort William via Caolasnacon, then continued to Gairloch on the A82, A87 and minor roads, before returning mainly on the A9 via Inverness. We spent six days touring, with five nights on sites

THE COSTS

Motorhome hire	£475	Attractions family of four:
Fuel average 25mpg	£111.50	Nevis Range, Inverlochy
Site fees	£90.50	Castle and boat trip.....
		£100

2014 Rimor Katamarano 12P

510 miles

Total £777



TOP TIP

If you stay six nights at Caolasnacon Caravan and Camping Park, you get the seventh night free

The girls are incredulous that anyone would dare hike to the top of Ben Nevis. I forget about tackling the mighty Ben on this visit, settling to train the kids up for a proper mountain adventure one day with some practice at the Nevis Range adventure centre just a short drive from the site.

They have set up a high wire adventure course right at the base of Aonach Mor. Here, the girls tear around the obstacles safe in the harnesses that let mum and dad enjoy the experience, too.

My eldest daughter and I then move on to the more challenging treetop course, disappearing into a world of briefly nervous faces and then big, life-affirming smiles as we battle our way around together.

Tara is unplugged from her tablet and I from my laptop, as we lose ourselves in the trees, along with the rare red squirrels who call these forests home.

By now, trusty old 'Camper' is on hand with sandwiches and cold drinks when we are finally exhausted.

Fort William and Lochaber market themselves these days as the 'outdoor

capital of the UK' and the Nevis Range is its epicentre. It's genuinely family friendly, with a gondola easing you up the mountainside to a visitor centre and restaurant. We choose to hop on bikes and try out some of the trails at a mountain bike centre that has hosted the World Championships.

There are blue and green trails to suit families and beginner riders, but also more challenging red routes for me to test myself on. I even try a little stretch of black downhill before we wheel back out in 'Camper', bound for the ocean.

One dramatic positive my wife and I find with the motorhome and a young family is how easy it is to get places. Often on trips it's a struggle getting the kids out of the hotel room, then a hassle waiting for a taxi as they career around the lobby. With 'Camper', we just rock up at our next stop – in this case, the Crannog Restaurant in Fort William by the ocean, and that's it.

It's one of the best places to savour seafood in the Highlands. Boat trips run from the pier next to the restaurant, so we take a cruise before dinner.

BELOW Mountains loom over Loch Torridon



ABOVE CLOCKWISE Exploring Inverlochy Castle; view from Sands Caravan and Camping Park; 'Camper' negotiating Glen Torridon

By now, Emma is a full convert to motorhomes and is disappointed that 'Camper' cannot join us for our cruise along Loch Linnhe. I settle back with a dram and a satisfied smile as we sail in the shadow of Ben Nevis and the girls scan the waters for sea eagles, dolphins and pirates. The former two are regular visitors to this coastline, as are whales, but we have to make do today with an osprey and a couple of porpoises. On the menu at the Crannog is a rich bounty of local seafood. The girls devour hot smoked salmon, while dad and mum share a seafood platter.

*“We **relax** on the sands with a wee dram and **epic** views out towards the **dramatic** Cuillin Mountains”*

There is something I've been hiding from my wife. I have to reveal it now. The next stop may only be 130 miles as the AA route planner flies, but it's a tough drive. Even the 'good' roads snarl and hurl around improbable bends and gradients. Then there is the single track with passing places. The drive north to Gairloch in Wester Ross is the sort of drive where you start to fully appreciate that Scotland has over 10% of Europe's coastline and three times more

than England, even without its 800 islands. Straight stretches in this part of the world are at a premium.

I fear boredom from the girls or, worse still, travel sickness. I need not worry. We pepper the day with stops and treats and it goes better than even I hoped. En route we take in Inverlochy Castle, just outside Fort William, where Tara recognises a picture of Robert the Bruce and wants to know more. Our Highlands tour brings alive some of the historical names that have been bandied around in her school classroom.

On another stop at the deeply scenic Eilean Donan Castle, Tara is keen – for the first time in her life – to learn about the Jacobites and Bonnie Prince Charlie. Touring the Highlands with children works on so many levels. I'm trying to imagine what it would have felt like to be one of the castle's garrison when, in 1719, British warships sailed into the loch and launched a fierce attack that practically levelled the castle. Tara is diverted by Bonnie Prince Charlie before she joins her sister in the gift shop. We all savour the views on a sky-splitting, sunny day.

Plockton, for me the most picturesque village on the Scottish coast, makes for a leisurely lunch. We paddle in the shallow waters and spot some seals just offshore, before we order a platter of 'Plockton Prawns' for us all to share at the award- ➤



WE STAYED AT

Caolasnacon Caravan and Campsite, Kinlochleven PH50 4RJ

☎ 01855 831279 🌐 kinlochlevencaravans.com

📅 March – October 💷 Two adults, pitch and electric: From £18

Glen Nevis Holidays, Glen Nevis, Fort William PH33 6SX

☎ 01397 702191 🌐 glen-nevis.co.uk

📅 15 March – 5 November 💷 Two adults, pitch and electric: From £24



Sands Caravan and Camping Park, Gairloch, Wester Ross IV21 2DL

☎ 01445 712152 🌐 sandsholidaycentre.co.uk

📅 March – October 💷 Two adults, pitch and electric: From £19

winning Plockton Inn. By prawns in these parts, the locals mean gigantic langoustines.

Finally, we take on the toughest part of the drive on paper, the tortuous, sinewy, single track through Glen Torridon. By car, this drive may indeed be insufferable with kids. In our motorhome it's a joy. I retreat back to the table and we spend an hour deer spotting. The girls point and yelp excitedly as we count over 50 red deer, the UK's largest land mammal. "Scotland's lions", as Tara calls them.

Our last site on this Highland odyssey is the one I've been holding in reserve, trying not to build it up too much. We might be using the games room at Sands Caravan and Camping Park just north of Gairloch rather a lot if the sunny weather breaks. I needn't have worried as the Highlands again aid me in my mission, with glorious blue skies greeting our arrival on a pitch right behind the sand dunes. The dunes are all that lie between us and a sweeping Atlantic beach.

Less than five minutes after switching off the engine the kids are flying around the beach, as we relax on the sands with a wee dram and epic views out towards the dramatic Cuillin Mountains on the Isle of Skye just across the water. Never mind this being a great motorhome moment in the Highlands. This, my wife and I agree, is as good as family holidays get.

Before I had kids I wasn't the biggest fan of Sands. Now, if I had to sit down with the owners to outline just what I would wish

ABOVE Sands Caravan and Camping Park

ABOVE RIGHT The McKelvies on the boat trip on Loch Linnhe

for at a site for my family, it would probably be just a little short of what they offer here. As well as that beach, the dunes await with rambling trails. Then there is an outdoor play park that has had real thought put into it. Since my last visit, they've also added the Barn Café in a traditional-style Highland cottage. There's no deep fried kids' menu here. The girls enjoy homemade burgers with meat from Sands Farm, while I tuck into their farm sirloin steak.

As well as all the usual suspects, the shop at Sands has got a bottle of Sauternes dessert wine, Lockerbie Cheddar and packs of the delicious Loch Duart flaky smoked salmon. I feel a picnic with oatcakes coming on. We enjoy it in the dunes without another soul in sight, listening to the songs of the birds that call this machair world home. Then it's marshmallows around the campfire time as we enter the land of family holiday folklore.

We had only been intending to stay one night at the Sands, but my arm is twisted to stay for another and we shuffle our plans to head back via Perthshire. I'm delighted, of course. Not only have the Highlands been tolerated by my young family in their unusual motorhome abode, but they also really want to stay longer – as does my visibly relaxed wife.

And what about the Canary Islands? Tenerife and Gran Canaria have not been mentioned once since we clapped eyes on 'Camper'! **mmmm**

ALTERNATIVE SITES

Bunree Caravan Club Site,
Onich, Fort William PH33 6SE
Tel: 01855 821283

Morvich Caravan Club Site,
Inverinate, Kyle IV40 8HQ
Tel: 01599 511354

Kinlochewe Caravan Club Site,
Kinlochewe, Achnasheen IV22 2PA
Tel: 01445 760239



www.caravanclub.co.uk