



of paths crisscross the cliffs and little coves. It was here that the excisemen played a cat and mouse game with smugglers trying to land their clandestine cargo.

The second of the new trails involves new design led work on the acclaimed Scottish Scenic Routes initiative. This project has seen innovative and challenging art and installations grace some of Scotland's most scenic corners. This year the Cairngorms National Park scenic route from Glenshee to Grantown-on-Spey will welcome an installation by a young recently qualified architect.

Moving off the land and on to the water, Scottish cruising is booming these days. Options include the ultra luxurious *Hebridean Princess* (which has been chartered twice by the Royal Family), the rugged expedition drama of Hebrides Cruises, the Hebridean forays of the twin vessels of small cruise ship specialist Majestic Line and new operator Argyll Cruises.

The latter only commenced their small ship cruises in the Firth of Clyde in 2015. This year will see the Majestic Line welcome a new ship, whose inaugural cruise in April out to ultra remote St Kilda demonstrates their renewed sense of ambition.



Best for groups

Whisky

Isle of Harris Distillery: This new distillery only opened last year, but hopes are already high that this Outer Hebridean outpost is going to produce superb malts. They are already offering an excellent gin, with the first Scotch expected in 2018. The setting is spectacular on the edge of East Loch Tarbert. Their bar has already opened, allowing groups the chance to learn about the evolving operation here by a cosy peat fire.

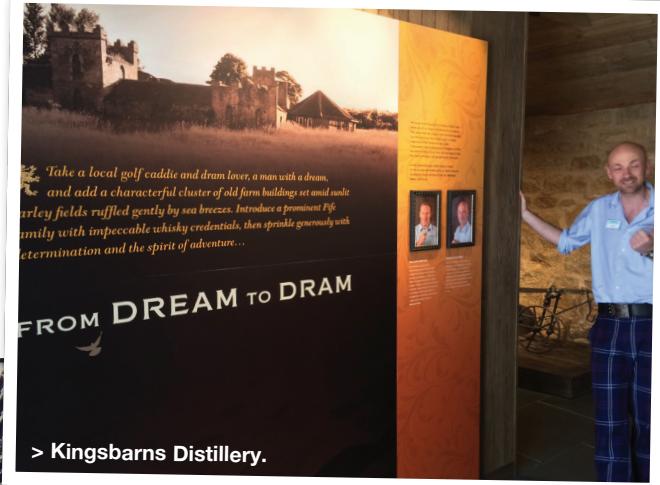
www.harrisdistillery.com

Kingsbarns Distillery: This distillery opened in Fife in 2015 and enjoys an excellent location just south of the popular golf resort of St Andrews. Its first Scotch may not be ready until 2018, but the visitor centre is already excellent. Groups can have the pleasure of a personal tour from the man behind it all, Douglas Clement.

www.kingsbarnsdistillery.com

The Spirit of Speyside Festival: Taking place in May, this event is arguably the finest whisky festival in the land. It ripples through the heart of Scotland's most famous and productive whisky region, Speyside. On offer are rare drams, tours of distilleries that are normally closed to the public and the riotous fun of a ceilidh, a traditional party with music and dancing. There are myriad group options.

www.spiritofspeyside.com



> Edinburgh Castle.



Some of Scotland's most popular group visitor attractions are also sporting a fresh face for 2016. The National Museum of Flight in East Lothian was already the UK's best-preserved World War Two airfield and housed one of the best aviation collections in Europe. This spring a £3.6 million refurbishment will be completed.

Best for groups

Edinburgh Castle: The granddaddy of all Scottish castles, this epic historic fortress dominates the Scottish capital. A range of group tours and tickets are available. The castle is also available in the evenings, either for small functions in one of the romantic castle rooms, or for lavish big ticket spectaculairs.

www.edinburghcastle.gov.uk

Stirling Castle: Many Scots actually prefer Stirling, a castle that swirls in the legends of William 'Braveheart' Wallace and King Robert the Bruce. Group tickets and tours really open up its rugged ramparts with an excellent café on site too. Evening functions range from small cocktail receptions, through to exclusive castle use for larger groups looking to savour a truly spectacular evening.

www.stirlingcastle.gov.uk

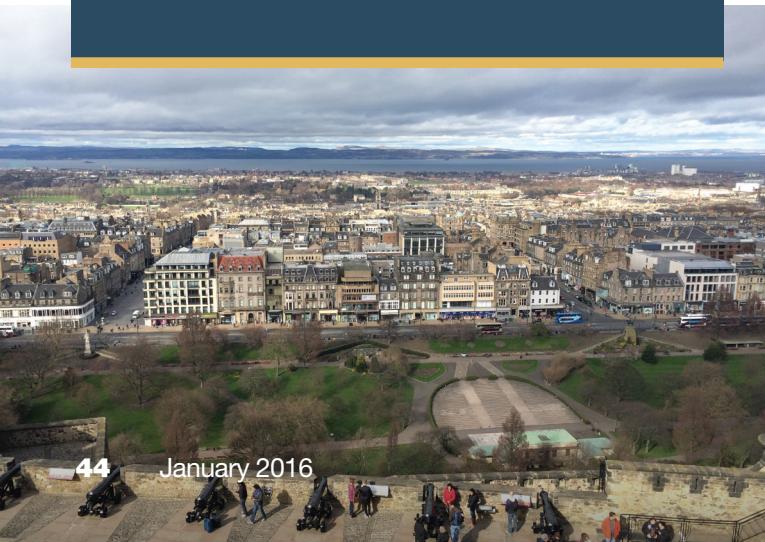
Two nationally significant World War Two hangars have been regenerated and vibrant exhibitions have been created within them.

The Scottish Poetry Library (SPL) has also just re-opened following an extensive renovation. This ambitious development provides more space for books (over 45,000 in total), more places to work and also to read comfortably (including a sofa in a child friendly area). The SPL holds the largest open-access collection of Scottish poetry in the world, together with work by international writers, and now it has the facilities to match the collection.

As the Year of Innovation, Architecture and Design bashes towards its denouement another dramatic new opening will see a state-of-the-art £4 million SSE visitor centre open at Pitlochry Dam in autumn. The aim is to showcase the pivotal role played by the engineers and builders who first brought hydro-electric power to Scotland back in 1951.

On a more natural theme the centre also delves into the lives of the famous local salmon, which make an annual journey all the way from the sea to their native Perthshire rivers to spawn. These hard working, constantly innovative salmon are the perfect symbol for a year in which Scotland is celebrating its famously creative, pioneering spirit. ■

www.visitscotland.com
www.eventscotland.org



> Stirling Castle.