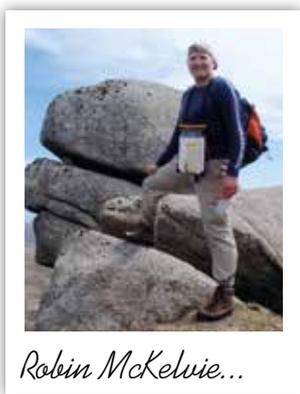


SOUTHERN CHARMS

Scotland's balmiest region is a huge hit with these discerning youngsters – and their delighted parents, too!

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY: Robin McKelvie



Robin McKelvie...

... is a travel writer, broadcaster and blogger who has visited over 100 countries

My plan to start our tour in Inverness had seemed inspired when I first came up with the idea. It now seems brave, perhaps even a little foolhardy. Rather than follow a well-furrowed route around the Highlands, my family and I are heading in search of the southern charms of Dumfries and Galloway on a seven-night odyssey that will also offer a taste of the Highlands, Borders and Perthshire en route. I want to have my campervan cake and eat it and enjoy a mini 'greatest hits of Scotland' en route to the south and back.

Picking up the 'van, my wife and two daughters, Tara and Emma, look unconvinced by the sound of Dumfries and Galloway instead of the Highlands. Tara has pressing concerns, "Will it have beaches, ruins and nice food like the Highlands?" she asks. I confidently assure her that it will!

I fill her imagination with thoughts of the best ice cream in Scotland, bountiful wildlife and the blinking lighthouses that

await in Scotland's balmiest region, as we burrow down the A9 through the grand Highland mountain massifs.

That great Scottish writer, Robert Louis Stevenson, once declared: "I travel for travel's sake, the great affair is to move." He could have been talking of motorhomes, where we find the journey is part of the fun.

We ease south through the Highlands, gazing out at the mighty Cairngorms and stop for a ramble around Ruthven Barracks. Here the girls' foam swords are out as we bring the history books alive with tales of Jacobites and Redcoats. Lunch is in Dalwhinnie, where I sneak in to snap up a distillery-only bottle of single malt at the local distillery. I'm glad now that I've included a little of the Highlands in our tour!

Our first overnight is at Biggar in the Borders. Before that there is the epic sight of the trio of Forth Bridges to savour as we cross the Forth Road Bridge. To our left lies the Victorian majesty of the UNESCO World Heritage-listed Forth Bridge and, to the



Trip summary

OUR MOTORHOME

2016 Globecar Globescout Vario. We hired it from Highland Campervans 01667 493976 highlandcampervans.com as we're planning to buy a motorhome and wanted to try various layouts out first



2016 Globecar Globescout Vario

THE JOURNEY

We started and finished this trip in Inverness and spent seven nights on sites in August

THE COSTS

Fuel average 40mpg.....	£65
Motorhome hire	£895
Site fees	£153
Attractions Family of four: Dundrennan Abbey, Glenluce Abbey, Sweetheart Abbey, Cream o' Galloway	£120

675 miles

Total £1,233

right, the Queensferry Crossing, the highest bridge in the British Isles. We have covered a good bit of ground already and Dumfries and Galloway is within striking distance.

For now, Biggar proves ideal with wee shops to explore on its quiet, historic High Street. The girls are more entertained by the buzzards swooping above the campsite and a squirrel hunt than by the playground, which is always a good sign.

On our second day we roll through the southern uplands and deep into Dumfries and Galloway, Scotland's real southern charmer awash with history. Robert the Bruce celebrated his seminal victory over English forces here and the lush countryside swirls in castles and battlefields.

The most beguiling legacy for me is the trio of abbeys that recline here. They will no doubt be busier than ever this year; it has been designated the Year of History, Heritage and Archaeology by VisitScotland and the Scottish Government. The well-preserved Dundrennan and Glenluce

ABOVE LEFT UNESCO World Heritage listed Forth Bridge

ABOVE RIGHT Feeding the lambs at Cream o'Galloway



abbeys – with their dramatic settings – are both worth visiting but, for me, Sweetheart Abbey is the most captivating.

Its ruins are deeply romantic, home to an epic love story. Lady Devorgilla, mother of the future King John I of Scotland, was so enamoured with her husband that, when he died, she had his heart embalmed and carried it with her wherever she went.

When she eventually died 20 years later, she was buried still clasping his heart. I only tell my girls part of the story, but they seem to feel the romance anyway and whirl around this majestic ruin in their own dreams of fairies and princesses.

Our first campsite in the region, Solway View, proves the ideal base – and not just for exploring the abbeys. We enjoy two nights at this seriously relaxed little gem, set on a working farm. The girls feed orphaned lambs before bundling off to the park.

We take a stroll down to the water to paddle in 'Scotland's Riviera', as Dumfries and Galloway is also known. Abbeys and >



ABOVE Enjoying seafood in Portpatrick

BELOW CLOCKWISE Walking on the Southern Upland Way at Castle Kennedy; marker post on the Southern Upland Way; Caerlaverock Castle in Dumfries and Galloway

ambling around the site easily fill our days as the modern world slips further and further away at a site where I don't mind not having a mobile signal.

En route to our second Dumfries and Galloway campsite we discover some of the superb produce this bountiful region is so renowned for. I am already a big fan of Belted Galloway Beef – which is up there with Aberdeen Angus – but there are also myriad smaller scale 'foodie' producers. We discover the Galloway Lodge Preserves from Gatehouse of Fleet (a real foodie town). The plum and coriander jam proves a winner with our breakfast toast.

The big surprise for me, though, is what becomes my favourite Scottish salmon; Marrbury smoked salmon is ridiculously delicious. Scotland's most celebrated chef, Andrew Fairlie (who has his eponymous restaurant at Gleneagles), has hailed it as the best smoked salmon in the world. We enjoy it in the café at Carsluith Castle. My girls seem to agree with Fairlie and savour handfuls of salmon by the historic ramparts.

There is no competition for my girls' favourite attraction over the week: Cream

o' Galloway offers what I argue is Scotland's finest ice cream. This is a real foodie success story, of a couple who used the milk from their own dairy farm to diversify into ice cream. When that side of the business started to take off they added a playground for visiting families.

Today, what it is a superb family attraction offers a sprawling adventure playground, myriad slides, go-karts and a flying fox. 'Go Boing' joined the fold a few years back. This web of multi-coloured ropes forms rooms and corridors where youngsters can fling themselves around. It keeps Tara and Emma amused for hours.

After wearing the kids out, we move on to the Burger Barn, which serves up burgers made from beef sourced from the creamery farm. There's also a range of tours that shed light on how the farm and the creamery operate. My favourite tour proves to be the ice cream tasting option, where you get to taste 10 of the 30 Cream o' Galloway varieties for yourself.

The Sands of Luce site is where an epic, seven-mile beach tempts. New pitches for motorhomes were put in a few years ►

“ We sit back and **enjoy** a barbeque **bathed** in pink light as the swollen sun **melts** over the sea”





ago and, at a site with static caravans, motorhomes don't get a raw deal. We enjoy a prime pitch overlooking the water and can see the kids on the beach just below.

We can make out England across the water, with the shadow of Northern Ireland haunting the background. The kids are big fans of this site and instantly make friends. The water is shallow and warm and the girls lose hours as we sit in deckchairs watching the clouds drift over. Sunsets are of the spectacular variety in this part of the world and we sit back and enjoy a barbeque bathed in pink light as the swollen sun melts over the sea.

The Sands of Luce lie on the cusp of what we find is the most scenic part of Dumfries and Galloway, the Rhins of Galloway. This rugged, remote peninsula juts out deep into the wilds of the Irish Sea.

We head right down to the southerly point of this otherworldly escape, which is protected as the RSPB Mull of Galloway Nature Reserve and is alive with seabirds. The girls use binoculars, but we don't really need them with guillemots, kittiwakes and puffins filling the air all around.

We look out for whales, but have to 'make do' with a pod of dolphins. From here, Ireland looks to be within touching distance

TOP TIP

The Galloway Dark Sky Park

holds regular stargazing events, which cost £15 per adult or a family of four for £38. Or just head deep into the forest and look up!

 scotland.forestry.gov.uk/forest-parks/galloway-forest-park/dark-skies/

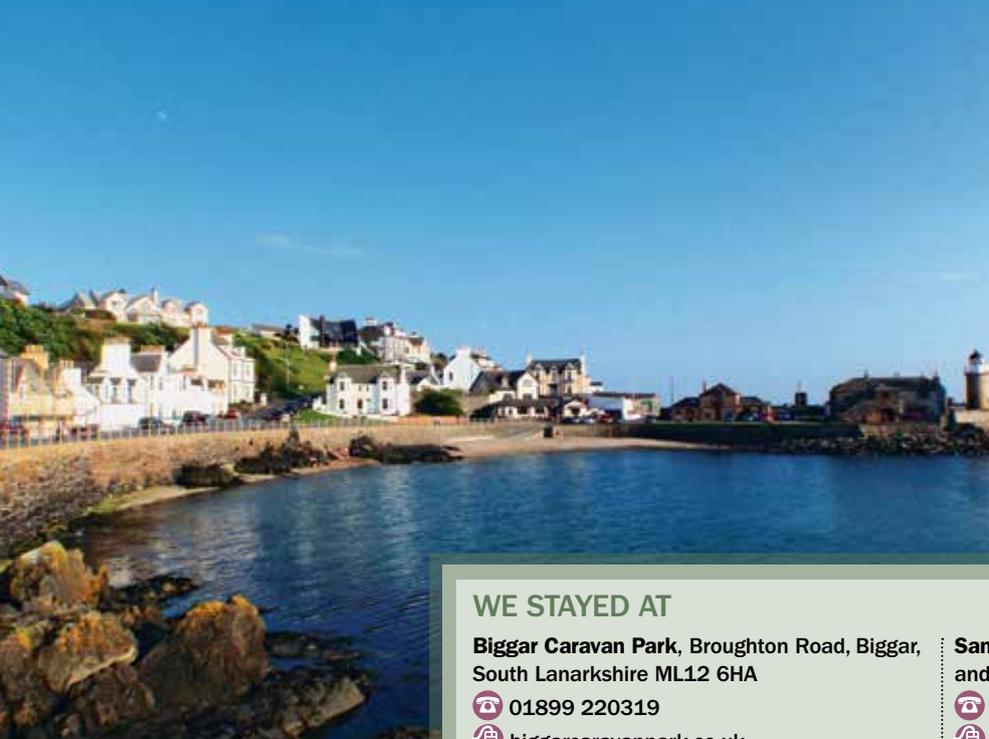
across the water. The peaks of the Lake District sneak into view to the south, too.

Tara and Emma get more than they bargain for with a special late night trip to see 'Twinkle Twinkle Little Star'. The Galloway Forest Park was the first reserve in the UK to be recognised as a Dark Sky Park. We head deep into the forest on remote roads to where we find complete darkness. The girls don't just meet Twinkle Twinkle; they meet her siblings, cousins and massively extended family, as an infinite array of stars and planets explode all around bringing out loud 'wows' from our astonished daughters.

Dumfries and Galloway serves up plenty of opportunities to enjoy the outdoors beyond birdwatching and stargazing. The 212-mile Southern Upland Way – one of Scotland's great long-distance trails – kicks off at Portpatrick and takes in a rich sweep of the region as it burrows east into the Borders. I've walked a 100-mile stretch in a week before, but we settle for a relatively short ramble on what is arguably the most dramatic stretch of the whole walk.

We park at Killantringan Lighthouse and Tara gets to see the lighthouse that I promised her back on the A9. We follow the sea cliffs along the rugged coast down to ►

ABOVE The wild landscape of Galloway Forest Park;
INSET The wonderfully named Sweetheart Abbey



ABOVE LEFT The picturesque harbour at Portpatrick

ABOVE RIGHT The dramatic ruins of Dundrennan Abbey

WE STAYED AT

Biggar Caravan Park, Broughton Road, Biggar, South Lanarkshire ML12 6HA

☎ 01899 220319

🌐 biggarcaravanpark.co.uk

📅 1 February – 3 January

£ Two adults, pitch and electric: £19

Solway View, Borgue, Kirkcudbright, Dumfries and Galloway DG6 4TR

☎ 01557 870206

🌐 solwayviewholidays.co.uk

📅 February – November

£ Two adults, pitch and electric: From £17.50

Sands of Luce, Sandhead, Stranraer, Dumfries and Galloway DG9 9JN

☎ 01776 830456

🌐 sandsoflucaeholidaypark.co.uk

📅 1 March – 31 October

£ Two adults, pitch and electric: From £20

Noah's Ark Caravan Park, Newhouse Farm, Perth PH1 1QF

☎ 01738 580661

🌐 noahsarkcaravanpark.co.uk

📅 All year

£ Two adults, pitch and electric: From £22

what my girls reckon is the prettiest place in Dumfries and Galloway. I don't disagree.

Portpatrick makes for the ideal venue for lunch. This picture-perfect hideaway evokes the villages of both Wester Ross and Cornwall. Handily, it is home to a number of pubs dishing up seafood from the local fishing fleet.

The Crown offers an excellent-value seafood platter laden with local lobster, which the girls try as seagulls squawk above in the salty Irish Sea air. My girls love the platters in the Highlands, but reckon they are just as good here.

Our three nights at Sands of Luce are over all too soon. We wave goodbye with one last sunset (my girls love that they can make out the Milky Way when it turns dark) before turning tail the next morning.

Again, we don't try to bash all the way to Inverness in one go, but split the journey. This time we take in a slice of Perthshire and overnight in the trim city of Perth on the banks of Scotland's longest river, the mighty Tay. We enjoy a riverside stroll and then the play equipment in the Inch parks.

This is where King James IV was said to have tried to wean his knights off the new game of golf as it was getting in the way of archery practice!

Then it is back to the Noah's Ark Caravan Park; an ideal last night stop where the kids enjoy the Children's Playbarn and we all get in a game of bowling.

Our last morning sees an epic final flourish of Highland scenery as we ease back to Inverness. As we funnel through the glens looking out for deer, I ask my girls the million dollar question. Did they prefer a motorhome trip in Dumfries and Galloway or last year's one to the Highlands? Tara thinks carefully and then exclaims, "I loved them both". Young Emma chips in, "Can we come back here?" Mission achieved.

Mummy is smiling, too, after a week in which we've savoured the bountiful southern charms of Dumfries and Galloway, but also enjoyed a taste of our beloved Highlands and other flashes of a country that always reveals something new on every motorhome adventure. We have had our Scottish motorhome cake and eaten it! **MMM**

Campsite Finder

SEARCH

Looking for your perfect site?
Campsite Finder has over 6,000 sites to choose from

REVIEW

Stayed at a great site?
Don't forget to write a review on Campsite Finder

Out&AboutLive

outandaboutlive.co.uk/campsite-finder

YOUR TRAVELS

Want to earn money by inspiring readers with your wonderful pictures and interesting experiences? Send 2,000 words • Info for 'Your Motorhome', 'Your Journey' & 'The Costs' • Photos, including one of yourself and your motorhome • But first, read more details here: motorhome.ma/writetravel Email mmmtravel@warnersgroup.co.uk or post to **MMM Travel, Warners Group Publications, West Street, Bourne, Lincs PE10 9PH**