Unique Scottish Customs to Experience

Scotland is a land boasting a rich heritage full of unique customs and traditions.

From the thrill of the Highland Games and the patriotic national dress, to romantic, musical and mysterious traditions, there are so many fantastic reasons to explore this beautiful country. We have rounded up some of the most notable customs and traditions that can be experienced during a stay in one of our lovely Scottish holiday cottages.

1) Highland Games

One of Scotland's greatest sporting traditions is the Highland Games. Between May and September, watch this quintessentially Scottish custom across the country at over 80 different events and see competitors put their muscles to the test wearing their national dress, the Scottish kilt.

From heavy contests such as the hammer throw, tug-o-war and the caber (tree trunk) toss, to field events including a hill race and a cycling competition, the games are a spectacle like no other.

Amongst the games there are masses of bands, with pipers and drummers marching in unison, solo piping competitions and Highland dancers giving dazzling displays including the famous Highland fling (folk dance).

2) Haggis hurling

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In recent years a new tradition involving Scotland's famous haggis has developed, where instead of it being eaten, it is thrown as far as possible whilst the competitor is stood atop a whisky barrel.

Originally it was invented as more of a practical joke by Robin Dunseath for the 1977 Gathering of the Clans in Edinburgh, and then used to raise funds for charity at the Highland Games.

It has since become a professional sport and there are strict rules to which competitors must adhere to qualify. The idea behind the competition comes from tales of 17th-century women tossing haggis across the river to their husbands as they worked the fields, saving themselves the time of finding a crossing point. The husbands would have to catch the cooked haggis in the front apron of their kilts so it didn't fall to the floor and get dirty.

For the game, the haggis must be made traditionally and is judged on the basis of distance and accuracy of the hurl. The haggis skin must remain intact and be fit to eat after landing.

3) The iconic tartan and kilts

Scottish kilts, known as 'The National Dress of Scotland', have deep cultural and historical roots and are a sacred symbol of patriotism and honour for a true Scotsman. Kilts are made of tartan, worn around the waist and accompanied by a sporran, which is a small bag worn over the kilt, a kilt pin which holds the two pieces of tartan together at the front, and a sgian dubh, a small dagger which sits in the sock.

Originating back to the 16th century, the kilt first appeared as a thick, woollen full-length garment whose upper half could be worn over the head as a hood, or as a cloak draped over the shoulder. It wasn't until the late 17th or early 18th century that the knee-length kilt was developed and was worn throughout the Highlands and northern Lowlands.

Its design allowed those who wore it to move much more freely, essential in the Highlands of Scotland where the weather can become very damp. The tight weave of the wool created a strong barrier between the rain and skin, and could easily be removed and used as a blanket during cold nights. Its popularity soon increased once the Highland regiments of the British Army adopted the design, and over the centuries has developed to include pleats and brightly coloured tartan patterns, unique to the clan to which the wearer belongs.

During the 19th century, Scottish kilts often used family tartan and were worn as a form of ceremonial dress at occasions such as weddings, sporting events and the Highland Games. Nowadays, the kilt is recognised the world over and is worn by many for both formal and informal occasions.

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4) The music of the bagpipes

No visit to Scotland is complete without hearing the iconic sound of traditional Scottish music, and of course, Scotland's national instrument, the bagpipe. Although this wind instrument has its origins in the Middle East, it has travelled and evolved in Europe, and the Scottish people have long-since made the Great Highland Bagpipe an outstanding part of their culture by keeping the pipes alive as part of their musical tradition.

The bagpipes consist of a bag, usually made of sheep or elk skin, filled with air, then pressed by the arm to push air through three pipes which rise out of the instrument.

There is a fourth pipe, holding nine holes for chord and pitch changes, and the unique, constant sound that is created stirs exhilarating emotions and can be heard from far away.

5) Experience the excitement of hogmanay

Hogmanay is an important part of the Scottish calendar, occurring as part of the New Year's Eve celebrations. Although many of the old Hogmanay traditions have now disappeared, some of the unique customs have been carried through the generations and remain part of the celebrations today.

6) The strike of midnight

The main custom of Hogmanay is partying with friends and family as soon as the clock strikes midnight; bells are rung, many towns and villages have street parties and fireworks are set off. Immediately after midnight, it is traditional for everyone to stand in a circle, cross over their arms and hold hands with people on either side singing Robert Burns' 'Auld Lang Syne'. Everyone is in good spirits, bringing in the New Year on a happy note.

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7) First footing

After midnight, to ensure good luck for a household, the 'first foot' over the threshold should be a dark male, taking with him symbolic gifts such as coal, shortbread, salt, black bun and a wee dram of whisky. These gifts mean the household will be safe, warm and have enough food for the year. This custom is taken very seriously and blondes and redheads are considered bad luck.

8) Redding the house

Redding the house is carried out on New Year's Eve, essentially the equivalent of a spring clean, readying the house for the New Year. This tradition began in the days when every household had open fires and so the fireplaces, in particular, had to be cleaned and cleared of ashes, ready for new ones to be started. It was considered bad luck to go into the New Year with a dirty house.

9) Burning the Clavie

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On the 11th January every year the ancient Scottish custom of Burning the Clavie takes place in Burghead, a small fishing village on the Moray Firth. Dating back to the 1750s, the Hogmanay festival takes place on this date as this was when the Julian calendar changed over to the Gregorian calendar in 1752.

Whilst the rest of the UK rioted and demanded back their 11 days, the town of Burghead decided to celebrate New Year's on both the 1st and the 11th of January, getting the best of both worlds.

The Clavie is a half-barrel filled with wood shavings and tar, nailed onto a carrying post with, importantly, the same huge nail each year. This barrel is then lit and carried on the shoulders of a local through the village, a prized position handed down through the family, followed by a large crowd stopping at the houses of residents to present them with a smouldering ember from the barrel to bring the household good luck for the year ahead.

The procession travels on towards Doorie Hill, the headland upon which stands the ruin of an altar. Here, it joins a bonfire built up of split casks and as the burning barrel falls to pieces, the villagers collect the fallen glowing bits to kindle the New Year's fire on their cottage hearths and bring them luck.

10) The Kirkwall Ba'

Every Christmas and New Year's Day at 1pm, a mass football game is played out in the streets of the town of Kirkwall. The game is rather chaotic and brutal, played with a cork-stuffed leather ball known as the ba'.

Originally, the men and boys of Kirkwall were split into two rival teams, the 'Uppies' and the 'Doonies'; the team they fell into was dependent on their place of birth, so those born to the north of the cathedral were 'Doonies', with the 'Uppies' being born to the south.

These days, family loyalty is the deciding factor, with players taking the sides of their father and great-grandfathers, regardless of where they now live. The entire town of Kirkwall effectively becomes the pitch, and the aim is for either the 'Uppies' to touch the ba' against a wall in the south end of town or the 'Doonies' to get the ba' into the water of Kirkwall Bay, to the north.

Then, when the goal is finally reached, the ba' becomes the coveted trophy and is awarded to a player who has been a notable participant over the years.

11) Celebrating the great poet with Burns Night

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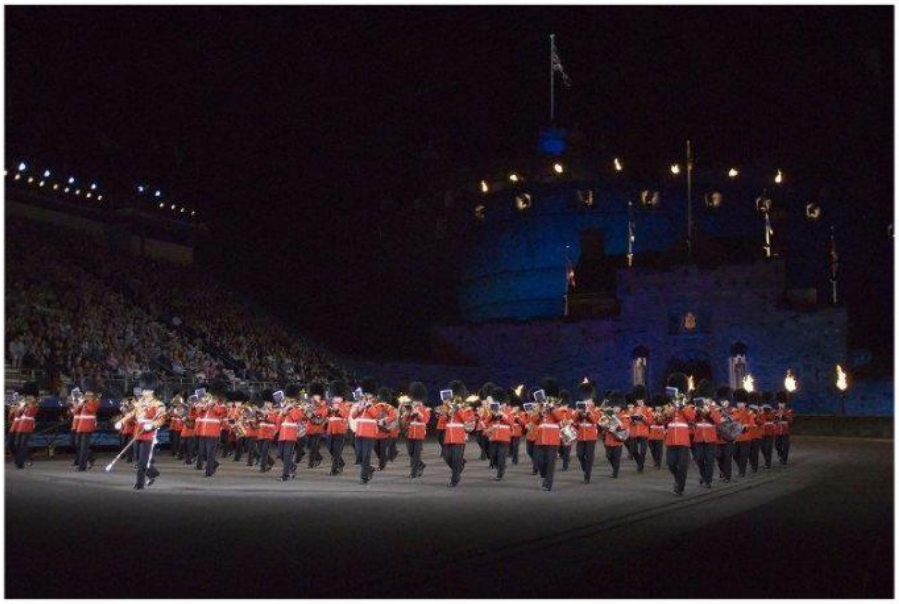
The annual celebration of Burns Night on the 25th January honours the life and works of the Scottish bard Robert Burns, the author of many famous Scots poems. A Burns supper is held on the anniversary of his birth every year, a Scottish tradition that dates back to 1801.

Whether a formal or informal evening, everyone enjoys a hearty feast which consists of haggis, neeps and tatties, rounded off with drams of whisky as some of Burns' poems and songs are recited and tributes made, usually with the beautiful sound of bagpipes in the background.

At the end of the evening, everyone joins hands and sings Burns' most popular work, Auld Lang Syne, which is also traditionally sung on New Year's Eve when the clock strikes midnight.

12) The Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo



Set against the magnificent backdrop of Edinburgh Castle, The Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo is a unique and memorable celebration of music, dance and military pageantry (spectacle). With its roots dating back to 1950, it has become a showcase of military talent of the British forces and their counterparts from around the world, attracting audiences of about 220,000 at the event and around 100 million on television.

It is one of the most iconic events on the festival calendar with highlights including the mesmerising sounds of military pipes and drums playing the inspiring battle tunes of Scotland's famed regiments, highland dancers giving breathtaking displays, and daredevil stunts of accomplished motorcyclists.

Expect fireworks, a mass chorus of Auld Lang Syne from the audience and an exciting military flypast: a fantastic Scottish tradition that is perfect for the whole family. Tickets for this one-of-a-kind event sell out fast so be sure to get your accommodation in Edinburgh booked well in advance.

13) Eloping to Gretna Green

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Thanks to its romantic wedding traditions, the Scottish village of Gretna Green is one of the most popular wedding destinations in the world. The tradition of eloping to Gretna Green dates back to 1754 when Lord Hardwicke's marriage act meant that the marriage age remained at 18 in England and Wales but did not apply to Scotland. Couples began racing to the romantic village of Gretna Green, which was the first easily reachable village over the Scottish border, where it was possible for boys to marry at 14 and girls at 12 with or without parental consent.

Scottish law allowed for 'irregular marriages' meaning that almost anybody had the authority to conduct the marriage ceremony, providing there were two witnesses present. At the Blacksmith's Shop in the village, the blacksmith took up the role of 'Blacksmith Priest' and for nearly 200 years couples were married over the now-famous Marriage Anvil.

The blacksmith would bring down his hammer upon the anvil, the tool of his trade, to seal the marriage and the sound, heard throughout the village, would signify the couple had been joined in marriage. This anvil is now the iconic symbol of romance and legend has it that good fortune in the affairs of the heart will be had by touching it.

It is now possible to visit the famous Gretna Green Blacksmith's Shop during a holiday in Scotland and see the actual room where couples past and present get married. There is a fascinating display of memorabilia and artefacts, bringing to life the drama of Gretna Green runaway weddings.

14) The mysterious Loch Ness monster

The legend of the Loch Ness monster has been bringing people to the dark expanse of Loch Ness in the Highlands for centuries. With over 1,000 eye witness accounts dating back to AD 565, and a wealth of unexplained evidence, the famous mystery of Nessie lives on to this day.

This enormous creature is said to have a long, thin body, with one or more humps protruding from the water, and a snake-like head. She is shy though, so you need to be quick to snap a picture before she swiftly disappears into the depths of the loch.

Match the statements to the extracts by writing the correct number in the boxes.

- **There are fireworks displays:** ☐ ☐
- **It is a musical instrument:** ☐
- **The priest is the blacksmith:** ☐
- **It is a sporting event:** ☐ ☐ ☐
- **It involves bad luck:** ☐ ☐
- **It is a garment:** ☐
- **It dates back to the 6th century:** ☐
- ***Auld Lang Syne* is sung:** ☐ ☐ ☐
- **It involves good luck:** ☐ ☐ ☐
- **It is broadcast on TV:** ☐
- **It dates back to the 18th century:** ☐
- **There is music:** ☐ ☐

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Mark these sentences as T (True) or F (False).

- ☐ The Highland Games include strength feats.
- ☐ In Haggis Hurling women must catch the haggis.
- ☐ The National Dress of Scotland is the tartan.
- ☐ The bagpipe is a string instrument.
- ☐ Hogmanay is celebrated on Christmas Eve,
- ☐ There are street parties on Hogmanay.
- ☐ At midnight the oldest member of the household must be first to step over the threshold.
- ☐ Redding the house means cleaning it thoroughly.
- ☐ The person carrying the Clavie must give a burning ember from the barrel to his neighbours.
- ☐ The *Uppies* and the *Doonies* are the Kirkwall Ba' football teams.
- ☐ Scots commemorate Robert Burns' birth with a special meal.
- ☐ The Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo is attended by thousands of spectators.
- ☐ In the 18th century British boys were allowed to get married at 14 and girls at 12.
- ☐ Nessie doesn't stay long in the surface of the loch.

Answer these questions.

1. Which Highland Games events are mentioned?
2. Why did women use to toss haggis across the river to their husbands?
3. On what occasions did Scots use to wear kilts?
4. What is the bagpipe like?
5. What is Hogmanay?
6. What do Scots sing on New Year?
7. What do the symbolic gifts the "first foot" carries mean?
8. How did the *Redding the house* tradition begin?
9. What is the Clavie?
10. What happens at the end of the Kirkwall Ba'?
11. What do Scots eat and drink on Burns Night?
12. What instruments are played at The Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo?
13. Why did young English couples cross the Scottish border to the village of Gretna Green?
14. What does the Loch Ness Monster look like?

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