

Highland Life

August 2008

Issue 44

Your complimentary copy

Health & Beauty

Research
continues
into MS

Holiday Scotland

King of the road

Homes & Gardens

It's a grouty job
but someone's
got to do it!

**PLUS: Books
to be won**

Heart of glass



King of the road

Katrina Ashford takes a short break in the north west of Scotland

For a holiday which includes the freedom of the road, flexibility and a spot of comfort, campervanning is the ideal combination. Stop where you want and admire the views. Make lunch or a cup of tea, kick back and relax... you can even park up for the night in a suitable layby.

But you don't have to own your own van. I booked a hire with

Inverness-based Highland Campervans recently and took my husband and boys aged 10 and 12 on a wee tour of the north west to check out the experience for ourselves.

Highland Campervans has a small fleet of well-equipped vehicles which take up to four people in comfort. The vans are fitted with a gas hob and fridge, pull-out double bed and bunk in the top. There is loads of imaginative storage space and plenty of room for all the clutter the boys consider essential when going anywhere.

Optional extras include the facility to have your online supermarket shop delivered so it's ready and waiting in the van for your arrival (currently only tesco.com), tables and chairs, DVD player, a portable toilet, awning, and much more.

We decided to add the awning to our hire to give us a wee bit more space and flexibility. An added benefit of the awning is that it is detachable so, if you're staying somewhere for a while, you can just unhitch the campervan from the fixing and go out for the day without having to pack everything away in the van.

If arriving at Highland Campervans with your own car, there is secure parking available for while you're away. Alternatively, pick-ups from the train station or airport can be arranged.

After an in-depth talk-through from Catherine Bunn on the facilities of the campervan and how to drive it (it's automatic), we headed towards Ullapool.

In a little over an hour we'd arrived in the pretty west coast port. From here you can take the ferry to the Western Isles if you wish but we were staying on the mainland for this holiday.



The village's Broomfield Holiday Park is well equipped with toilets and showers, washing facilities and electric hook-ups. Facing out over Loch Broom, you can see the ferry coming in and out of the port a couple of times a day. The stony beach is fun for children – as is the playpark on the site.

Ullapool is quite touristy and has plenty of shops, offering everything from a bucket and spade to kilts. There is also a supermarket and chemist.

The village boasts a selection of delightful tea rooms and excellent hotels offering food.

For us, no visit to Ullapool would be complete without enjoying a fish supper from the chippie at the harbour.

Not to be missed is a cruise on the *Summer Queen* where you can enjoy the spectacular coastline scenery from sea level and see wildlife such as grey seals and perhaps even dolphins.

And Highland Stoneware's factory and outlet is well worth a visit. You can't miss the brightly mosaiced building on the north road.

Entertainment is offered in many hotels; indeed the weekend we visited, there was a feis on and music was heard all over the village (music fans should not miss Loopallu in September).

After an enjoyable stay in Ullapool, we headed north towards Lochinver. The road is steep and windy in places, so take your time and enjoy the scenery – it's spectacular.

At Inchnadamph, Historic Assynt has restored and reconstructed Assynt Parish Church, along with parts of Calda House and Ardvreck Castle. It has also improved car parking and provided information leaflets for visitors.

Fragments of a Celtic cross were found in the churchyard at Assynt which may have marked a site for outdoor worship and preaching c.8th–11th centuries prior to the construction of a church building. Assynt Parish Church as it stands today

closed in the 1970s and fell into disrepair before Historic Assynt restored it for community use. It houses many local records. A pretty building, it's well worth a visit whatever your religious persuasion.

Ardvreck Castle was the 15th century seat of the MacLeods of Assynt. It was the scene for much violence in its day, with murders, executions and sieges and is said to have a number of ghosts. There is not much left of this tower-style castle today, but it is well worth a walk out to see it nonetheless.

Nearby Calda House was commissioned by Kenneth MacKenzie II of Assynt for his wife Frances in 1726 who did not care for the austerity of Ardvreck Castle, it having been forced from the MacLeods in a 14-day siege 54 years before. The striking mansion was the first house of symmetrical design in the north west Highlands and its M-gabled double-pile plan influenced later MacKenzie lairds' houses in Wester Ross.

Known to this day as the White House, it must have looked spectacular with its white walls and door surrounds of imported sandstone.

Unfortunately amid mounting debts the MacKenzies were forced to put their house up for sale and a struggle for control of Assynt began between the MacKenzie Earl of Seaforth and the Earl of Sutherland. In 1736 some MacKenzie supporters torched Calda House to stop it being used by the Sutherlands.

The outer walls and central chimney structure remain, providing sufficient to give an idea of the grandeur of the building.

A few miles on is the pretty fishing village of Lochinver, which sits at the head of Loch Inver.

There is a number of small shops and some excellent places to eat and drink.

We were interested to take a look at the Church of Scotland

**Opposite page, top:
The long and winding
road – well, not that
long but certainly
scenic – around the
Assynt Peninsula**

**Opposite page
bottom: Parked near
Drumbeg for a tea
break**

**Below: Sunset over
Scourie Bay**



as it had been transported stone by stone from our home town of Nairn. The magnificent red sandstone building looks out over the bay and harbour.

The streets are quiet, so enjoy a wander round at your leisure.

We enjoyed lunch at Lochinver Larder which has its own range of home made pies of every filling you can imagine among its extensive menu. (You can even order more online when you get home and fill those lost holiday hunger pangs.)

The boys were high as kites after their chocolate-laden puddings so we let them tear around the nearby playpark for a while to burn off some excess energy.

After an enjoyable afternoon, we headed out back onto the road north, deciding to take the "scenic route" around the Assynt peninsula.

This road is extremely narrow, so take your time and enjoy the view – it's worth it. (It's not suitable for larger vehicles or caravans, though.)

Up and down, round tight bends, the road clinging at times to the cliff face, we travelled through hamlets with names such as Stoer, Drumbeg and Nedd. This area is part of the North Highlands Geopark and is quite spectacular.

We returned to the slightly less hairy but no less scenic "A" road near Kylesku – once the ferry crossing point, but now passed over by a bridge.

Heading north we drove for a few miles before deciding to find somewhere to stop for the night. And what a place to stop! Surrounded by hills, Scourie is a hidden gem.

At the head of Scourie Bay, the caravan site is absolutely delightful. There's a small sandy beach as well as a path to a more rocky part and the park has loads of little nooks and crannies where a tent can be erected in peace and privacy. The views out across the bay are amazing.

Unusually for a camping site, the showers are free.

There are not a lot of facilities but with scenery such as this, you can make your own entertainment. There is a small Spar shop in the village (bear in mind it's not an open all hours one, though).

A short walk from the camping site is the Scourie Hotel. While there were some up-market clients around up for the fishing and so on, all are welcome to dine here. There's a fantastic menu offering everything from local fish to venison. The children's menu is also excellent, serving the likes of real chicken nuggets – not a bit of reconstituted meat in sight!

Refreshed after our time in Scourie, we began the trip south. Estimating that it was going to take over four hours to get home, we decided to break the journey at the Falls of Shin. The drive



along the road which takes you beside the shores of Loch Shin is wonderfully scenic. Take your time – stop and enjoy the views. With a campervan, you can easily break for a cup of tea or snack in a convenient layby.

The Falls of Shin visitor centre is known as the Harrods of the north. Owned by Mohamed Al Fayed, you can buy all sorts of food and gifts, including Harrods merchandise.

The restaurant here is excellent, serving everything from a light snack to a full meal. The food is delicious and there was something for everyone in our party, even the fussiest.

We walked down to the falls and looked out for salmon leaping up the rocks.

It would be quite possible to spend a whole day here as there are walks, playparks and plenty to keep a family occupied, but unfortunately we needed to head back to Inverness to return the campervan.

That was it – holiday over.

We've been on caravanning holidays as well as camping and while there are pros and cons with each, we found campervanning an easy combination. The size of a people carrier, they're not so big that you'd find it uncomfortable driving around and there are no problems with parking, either. It's definitely a holiday option we'd choose again.

Below: Breakfast time at Scourie

Opposite: The Falls of Shin is bursting with nature



Factfile

To hire your Highland Campervan you need to show your full driving licence so don't forget to take it with you.

There are maps and tourist information in the campervans along with a comments book with helpful pieces on good campsites and places to visit.

The Highland Campervans website has loads of useful information with suggested routes, details of extras you can hire, and much more. Go to www.highlandcampervans.com for further details.