

All aboard for a highland fling

The Royal Scotsman train's inaugural Homes and Gardens tour reveals the dramatic climatic challenges and floral glories of Scotland while conveying its passengers in great style, finds Kathryn Bradley-Hole



HERE'S a good tip if you want your garden to grow better, healthier plants: get hold of some rock dust. Not just any old pounded rock, but the magical ground of volcanic dust quarried in the Cairngorm Mountains. 'It's brilliant—we put it on absolutely everything,' says Panny Laing, who farms the 4,000-acre Logie estate with her husband, Alastair. She must be right, for her extensive garden, perched high above the salmon-rich Findhorn river on the north side of the Cairngorms, is a picture of fecundity.

Framed by huge trees, the white-walled Logie House sits above a rocky bank, below which spreads out a verdant lawn. Paths lead away from it, leftwards to the attractive traditional walled garden, or steeply downhill through great trees to the lively river walk. Logie is one of those places that has regional, rather than national renown in gardening circles, yet those who have been there are seduced by its calm beauty, the contrast of relaxed, abundant planting and smart lawns, the majestic location. Also, not least, the little courtyard of farm buildings known as Logie Steading, where local traders include artists, antique dealers, a cafe, a second-hand bookshop and a nursery. The farm shop sells all manner of local produce, including prize-winning meat from the estate's appealing suckler herd of rare-breed Longhorn cattle. This is a prize find indeed, for locals and for any visitors self-catering in the vicinity.

We aren't self-catering, although we do get to sample the best local fare everywhere, for our little band of travellers—some 30 or so, from all over the world—are being cosseted aboard *The Royal Scotsman*, one of the locomotive jewels of the Orient-Express

luxury travel company. From spring to autumn, it crosses the dramatic Scottish countryside, depositing its guests here and there to experience the country's culinary and cultural highlights. This summer, I joined the inaugural Country Homes & Gardens of Scotland tour, with its focus on the varied horticultural gems within reach of the train's scenic route up the eastern seaboard and through the Highlands, thence to the western lochs.

A sumptuous afternoon tea is laid out as the Scotsman coasts through the fertile farmlands of Angus and Aberdeenshire: rich

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pastures that have long made the local cattle breeds famous. Our first stop is the romantic red sandstone ruin of Edzell Castle, where wailing peacocks stalk the lawns. From high up in the 16th-century tower house, we peer down into an immaculate box parterre (replanted in the 1930s) enclosed by remarkable walls. Formerly the seat of the Lindsays for many generations, Edzell's fascinating walled garden, complete with intricate carvings and mysterious recesses for seasonal flowers and nesting birds, was laid out from 1604, and contains an appealing two-storey summerhouse in one corner of the wall.

Next day, we venture off to Foulis Castle—actually a handsome 18th-century house—and are warmly greeted by Hector Munro, clan chieftain, and his octogenarian mother, who is full of interesting anecdotes, dispensed while she leads a tour through the house. Munros have lived on this spot since 1034, when 'they came to help get rid of the Vikings'. Among the old kitchen implements and paraphernalia are ancient Chinese tea bricks—heavily patterned and formed from compressed black tea. In the spirit of true Highland hospitality, however, we are offered stronger stuff in the form of a tasting of Glen Ord single-malt whiskies, one of which is made with the Munros' barley harvests.

Later, arriving at the vast 30,000-acre Attadale estate at Strathcarron, Wester Ross, we explore the luxuriant and atmospheric 20-acre gardens, for the last half-century in the care of the Macphersons. The house was built some 250 years ago by the Mathesons, of Jardine Matheson and East India Company fame. Later, when Attadale



was bought by the Schroder banking family, its rhododendron collection was planted and the infrastructure of garden paths was laid. A long water garden lining the drive and fed by springs is one of the loveliest in Britain, with its waterlilies and rich stream-side plantings, set against the mountainous backdrop of the western High-lands. Mrs Macpherson is an arts patron and an artist in her own right (as is her daughter), and contemporary sculptures are carefully deployed through the water and rhododendron gardens. Very recent developments include a fascinating Zen dry gravel garden

Ewan Tait; Kathryn Bradley-Hole



Borders and gateway at House of Pitmuies, near Forfar. Preceding pages *The Royal Scotsman* en route in the Highlands



Attadale House sits in a dramatic west-coast location, enjoying views of the peaks of Skye, especially from the rhododendron garden

behind the house, and near it lies a formal sunken garden and carefully tended herb and kitchen gardens.

Attadale has its own halt, but we take the lochside road in our smart coach, and rejoin the train a few miles on, where it has been stabled for the night at Kyle of Lochalsh. This is surely one of the most dramatic of terminuses. It's midsummer and the sun hardly seems to set behind the silhouetted peaks of Skye and Raasay, although it streaks the clouds with vivid purple hues.

Midnight approaches, but we've borrowed a brilliant young fiddle player, Ronan Martin from Skye; the night sky is fairer than some of the day had been, so many of us have strayed out onto the terminus platform where Mr Martin's post-prandial jigs and reels can be properly (or more often improperly) danced at the water's edge.

Back on board, the train is well set up for its fabled house-party atmosphere. The guest cabins are cosy, with miniature ensuite bathrooms and there are two dining

carriages, with no pre-booked seating, so there's the stimulation of having different company at each gourmet meal. Then there's the Observation Car: in effect, a long, narrow drawing room ingeniously fitted out with numerous sofas and club chairs. A complimentary bar occupies one end, and an open-air verandah lies at the other—ideal for taking photos of the constantly changing landscapes. I discover that many people on board have travelled this way before, for *The Royal Scotsman* ➤



has gathered a devoted following.

As this is midsummer, the heather-clad hills resemble giant Hush Puppies, as the dark-brown suede of the moors won't turn purple until August. I don't think any of us spot an osprey, but when we arrive at the 20,000-acre Rothiemurchus estate, in the heart of the Cairngorms National Park, we learn from Lucy Ford, the head ranger, that three pairs of these magnificent but critically rare birds are nesting here. They find the brown trout of the Spey much to their liking. The relict Caledonian pine forest of Rothiemurchus is also one of the last two strongholds for the capercaillie, a spectacular woodland grouse that Miss Ford reminds us is, alas, 'heading for extinction'.

The focus of Rothiemurchus is its Doune, the family house of the Grants, who have lived here for 450 years, and which Philippa and Johnnie Grant have been carefully restoring for many years. The setting for the Doune is glorious: a Grade I-listed historic landscape with huge trees and a 17th-century false-perspective avenue, very rare in Scotland. Mrs Grant, who is fully occupied in the countless sporting, tourism and conservation activities that keep this huge estate viable, confines her passion for gardening to an enclosed courtyard hard up against the house. It is beautiful, and full of choice plants, but none of us envy her when she explains: 'We have extremes of climate; 25 degrees of frost for 10 days this winter, but in hot summers, it can get up to 33°C.' As in Scandinavia, the growing season is very short, but growth is frantic during the almost permanent daylight at midsummer. 'We don't get a frost-free month!'

At our last horticultural destination, the pretty House of Pitmuies, near Forfar, we find that Marguerite Ogilvie, like our previous



Facing pages Turreted and crow-stepped Logie House seen from the walled garden, where plants grow lustily with the help of pounded rock dust. *This page (clockwise)* Meanders at Achnasheen, in the Highlands; typical Highland drystone wall, with rhododendrons, at Achnasheen; attractive Longhorn cattle at Logie House

A perfect viewpoint

The Observation Car's verandah is an exhilarating spot to catch the air and perhaps to reflect on the 200-year-old memoirs of Elizabeth Grant, the 'Highland Lady' of Rothiemurchus: 'Such was our Highland home; objects of interest all round us... And the face of Nature so beautiful—rivers, lakes, burnies, fields, banks, braes, moors, woods, flowers, wild fruits; the picturesque inhabitants, the legends of our race, fairy tales, raids of the clans,

haunted spots, cairns of the murdered—all and everything that could touch the imagination... We brewed our own beer, made our bread, made our candles; nothing was brought from afar but wine, groceries and flour, wheat not ripening well so high above the sea. Yet we lived in luxury, game was so plentiful, red-deer, roe, hares, grouse, ptarmigan, and partridge; the river provided trout and salmon, the different lochs pike and char; the garden abounded in common fruits and common vegetables; cranberries and raspberries ran over the country, and the poultry-yard was ever well furnished. The regular routine of business, where so much was done at home, was really a perpetual amusement. I used to wonder when travellers asked my mother if she did not find her life dull.'

hosts, has set out a wonderful tea in her drawing room and conservatory. With its old-fashioned walled potager, immaculate and extensive herbaceous borders, romantic woodland walks with turreted doo'cot, pretty rose gardens and fine park, this is a truly splendid conclusion to a wonderfully varied and invigorating trip. 🐦

I travelled to Edinburgh by rail with National Express East Coast (08457 225225; www.nationalexpress-eastcoast.com) and stayed at The Howard (0131-274 7402; www.thehoward.com), an elegant boutique hotel which organises fine dining at The Bonham nearby.

For information on the Royal Scotsman tours, visit www.royalscotsman.com or telephone 0845 077 2222. Next year's Country Homes & Gardens of Scotland tour runs on June 7 and August 27. Prices from £4,020 per person for this exclusive four-night journey

