

An aerial photograph of a red SUV driving on a winding asphalt road through a rugged, hilly landscape. The terrain is covered in dry, brownish grass and sparse vegetation, with some patches of green. The hills are steep and eroded, with visible gullies and ridges. The sky is not visible, as the landscape fills the frame.

CALL *of* *the* WILD

As the last frontier of Great British wilderness, the Scottish Highlands offer true adventure for the discerning traveller. And, thanks to a number of inviting hotels, there's no shortage of luxury either. It is, therefore, the ideal country for a road trip

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Day 1

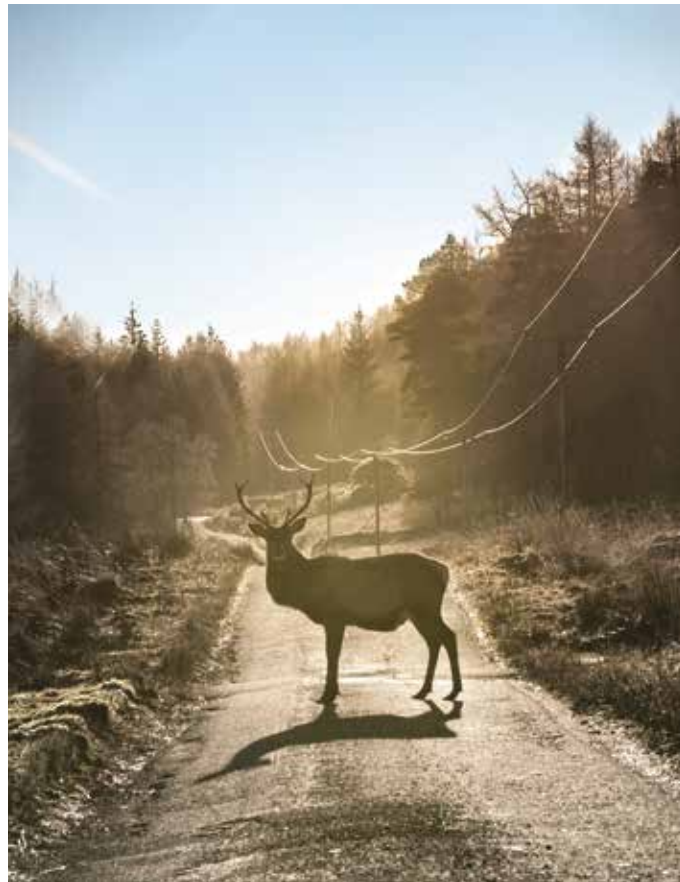
The late afternoon sun perches longingly atop a distant peak, casting the valley below in an auburn hue. On the distant high ground, two young stags lock antlers and grapple for footing, sliding on the damp moss. Down below, a light breeze wisps along the surface of Loch Etive, momentarily disturbing the glass-like water. I'm in the Scottish Highlands, home to awe-inspiring scenery, world-renowned field sports and some of the finest luxury hotels in the country.

Arriving in Edinburgh on a mild winter morning, I'm eager to discover what the Highlands have to offer. From national parks and vast lochs to mountain ranges and castles, there's something magical about this place, something intangible and remote; one truly has to spend time here to feel its presence. And what better way to explore such a land than on a road trip in a new Range Rover Sport? As I career towards Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park, two hours from Edinburgh, I do so in refined opulence, in a vehicle that is perfectly suited to life on wild roads.

Before long, the motorway makes way for a vivid backdrop of mountain peaks and glens. The traffic disappears too and I instantly feel removed from everyday life. I find myself stopping every few minutes to step outside, breathe in the crisp air and soak in the scenery. Heading northwest I follow the A82 towards Glencoe, considered one of the most beautiful roads in the UK. Turning off towards Glen Etive, I travel along a heavily worn single-track; the very same road featured in *Skyfall*. Scotland, for me, represents a frontier, a last vestige of the wilds of Great Britain, where within a matter of hours one can be transported from the vibrancy of the city to the complete unknown.

As the sun sets, I continue further onto Glencoe, hugging the 15km Loch Linnhe all the way to Inverlochy Castle Hotel, the first overnight stop on my tour. Arriving in darkness, the might of the castle is only felt once inside. Stepping through the vast oak doors, I'm transported to a bygone era of refined classicism. Originally built as the baronial home of William Scarlett, Third Baron Abinger in 1863, the castle is a remnant of Scotland's aristocratic

(Top) The Highlands are a balm to the soul after the busy streets of a city
(Right) A young stag strikes a pose
(Far right) Inverlochy Castle Hotel



heritage. Once visited by Queen Victoria, who remarked during her visit that she 'never saw a lovelier or more romantic spot', Inverlochy captures the very essence of Scotland. It also boasts an exceptional field sports programme, from shooting and stalking, to wilderness tours and fishing on Loch Na Marag, which lies within the castle grounds.

Settling down to a divine six-course supper at the highly coveted Albert and Michel Roux Jr at Inverlochy Castle restaurant, it's hard to imagine that earlier that morning I was in London, surrounded by high-rises and traffic. I'm struck by the proximity to Scotland and its wild beauty; how easy it is to reach, and how starkly different it is to anywhere else in the UK.

Supper finished, my eyes begin to drop and I make my way to the King's Suite, past the games room, which has remained unchanged for decades and lavishly displays a host of mounted stag heads.

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Day 2

Waking early to capture the glory of the Scottish sunrise, I make my way out onto the open road in search of Ben Nevis, which lies only a few miles from the hotel. Once again I'm struck by the enormity and drama of this land.

Today I'm driving into the heart of the Cairngorms. Given the time of year, the weather is aberrantly warm. When the light hits the boughs of the pines, an ethereal haze appears within the forests. As too does the reflection of the surrounding wilderness on the calm lochs that pepper the landscape. Passing Loch Laggan, it's difficult to miss Ardverrick Castle gleaming on the distant shoreline – this impressive 19th-century baronial house has played set to a number of films and TV series over the years. Its turrets and coned roofs make it seem as if plucked from a Disney film. It is yet another insight into what the Highlands offer visitors: a refined wilderness escape, but also a snapshot into another time, a simpler time. Tradition, it appears, is still firmly rooted in the land.

As the high sun finally begins to sink towards the horizon, I arrive in Blairgowrie at Kinloch House Hotel, a member of the prestigious Relais & Châteaux portfolio. Famed for its

proximity to exceptional field sports, fishermen and shooting enthusiasts travel from all over the world to try their luck on the surrounding estates and rivers. In fact, as I enter the fine hall featuring all manner of taxidermy, a party of Dutchmen have just returned from a day's shooting on the nearby Cardney Estate – it's their fourth visit this season alone. The nearby fishing is similarly world-renowned. The River Tay is known globally as a fishing Mecca – with a five-year average of nearly 6,000 salmon and grilse – while the smaller tributaries offer numerous spots for trout fishing. The salmon season runs from January to October, with peak runs through the autumn months.

Embraced by the heat of the open fire, I settle into an incredible meal at the hotel restaurant before retiring for the evening. As I drift to sleep, I understand exactly what it is that Scotland offers in abundance: nostalgia. Innately, there is something in the land that offers more than I can imagine.

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Day 3

I wake early to overcast skies and snowfall. In the spirit of Scotland's immersive nature and unpredictability, it's no surprise that the weather has turned. The previous day saw beaming sunshine and warmth, and now the land is covered with a fine dusting of snow.

Today is a short drive to one of Scotland's most famed estates, Gleneagles, to take part in possibly the most traditional of all field sports: hawking. Weaving through Perthshire's gentle landscape towards Gleneagles, the snowfall increases, almost an inch deep as I pull the handbrake on.

Entering the British School of Falconry, which was established in 1982, coming to the hotel a decade later, I'm introduced to Margot, our hunting Harris hawk. The premise of hawking is simple: working as a team, the hawk flies high into the canopy of nearby trees to gain a better vantage point from which to spot prey. It is a breathtaking sport to participate in, and offers an intense adrenaline rush when a chase is on. The proximity to such a formidable animal is all encompassing, and flicking through the undergrowth in search of prey – be

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(Main) Margot the Harris hawk in action
(Right, top) The Range Rover Sport tackled many forgotten paths
(Right, bottom) The iconic Gleneagles Hotel
(Far right) Edinburgh, a city of many charms

it rabbit, woodcock, pheasant or hare – makes the entire process of hunting incredibly visceral. Although Margot failed to catch anything this time around, the thrill of hawking was second to none.

Walking the short distance to Gleneagles Hotel, its size hits with intensity. As the pinnacle of Scottish luxury, Gleneagles was the original Highland destination for members of high society when it first opened in 1924. It boasts an impressive 18-hole golf course, where Europe cruised to victory in the 2014 Ryder Cup, as well as some of the most renowned grouse moors in Great Britain. Inside, it's all grandeur. The interior wouldn't be out of place in *The Great Gatsby*, and the picturesque nature of the hotel, especially blanketed by snow, transports me to another era.

With snow still falling, the allure of Gleneagles' numerous off-road tracks is too tempting to ignore – I'm eager to discover what the Range Rover Sport is capable of. As a high-performance vehicle, it has transported me through the Highlands in unabated comfort, but it's when travelling down a long-forgotten

forestry track that I appreciate why Range Rovers are the vehicle of choice for so many. They are fervently able, and exciting to drive.

Back at Gleneagles, I head to the Dormy Clubhouse, one of the hotel's four distinguished restaurants, for a hearty meal, before enjoying a dram in the Century Bar.

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Day 4

All too quickly it is the last day of my trip. But there is one last stop to make – it is criminal to leave Scotland without dipping into the intoxicating culture of the country's capital, Edinburgh. Cobble streets, shop windows displaying whiskies of varying strengths and colours, tartan spilling onto pavements and the distant hum of bagpipe drones float over the city. It's a hard place to leave.

The staggering beauty of this land, coupled with the exceptional level of luxury and field sports, make me wonder why Scotland isn't the destination of choice for all. ●

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