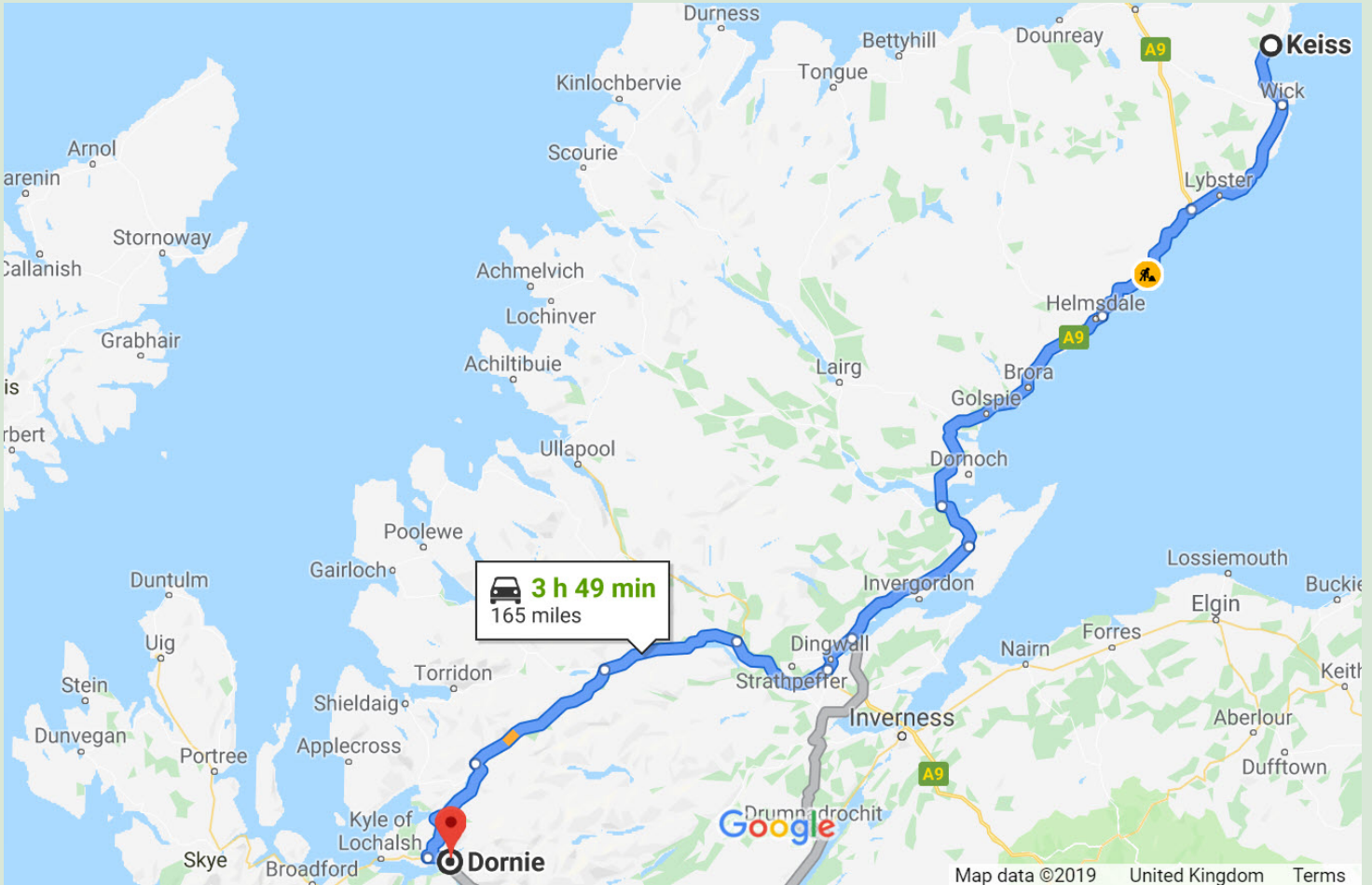


Wooly's Wanderings - Part 3 of 4

Scotland – Day 8 – Keiss to Dornie & Surrounds



Day 8 Another long drive.

As per usual I was awake at 05.30 and the sea fog had rolled in again but I had heard the previous day that I had missed a puffin colony at Duncansby Stacks near John-O-Groats. I had packed the night before and I knew that mum & Michael would not be up for two hours so I snuck down to the car and headed up the road with fingers crossed that I would spot some puffins. The fog was quite thick but I knew that the breeze would blow it away within the hour.

Took a ½ hour in thick fog to get up to Duncansby Head Lighthouse to find the car park crowded with RVs. Kept very quiet as most people would still be asleep and parked up on some grass and got the camera gear ready. As the fog was thick, I decided to read for a while and let the breeze do its job. Finally, at 0645 it had cleared enough for me to take the walking track over the hills and along the cliff path without



falling over the edge. The weather was closing in again so it was a forced march to get there with a walk of around 2 kms. On the way I found a Fulmar colony which I hadn't known about so stopped to take some photos. And then the rain started – bugger, no rain coat or wet weather gear for the camera (it was sitting in the car all snug, warm & dry) so it was a case of turn tail and walk back to the car. Luckily, I tucked the camera up under my jacket as I was soaked by the time I returned to the car. I did manage to get one shot of the stacks in the distance as provies that I had started my trek there. Oh well back to Keiss, a warm shower and put my clothes in the clothes dryer.



After breakfast it was a case of lugging all our gear downstairs and packing up for the next road trip. Farewell Keiss and hello Dornie in a few hours. Why Dornie you ask? Well Mum has always loved the name the Kyle of Lochalsh but we couldn't get a nice Air B'n'B there so our new digs would be in Dornie just down the road.

10am departures meant we would break our journey for lunch near Dingwall before we did a cross country stint from the East side of Scotland to the West Coast. Once again past Glenmorangie without stopping – I know I am a heathen for bypassing these famous distilleries without a taster. Michael was our food researcher and restaurant finder for our trip and found a lovely pub at Dingwall so off went salivating at the prospect of another good pub lunch of..... you guessed it Haddock & Chips. Much to our horror we could not find the restaurant after doing three laps of this small town. My mother was starting to get very stroppy from the back seat that Brothers One & Two were useless at navigation and keeping an old lady from her lunch! We checked and rechecked the address but had been subtly fooled as the pub was not in Dingwall but in the small hamlet of Culbokie 4 miles away across the loch on the Black Isle. That sort of represented our thoughts as well as we reversed course to get over the Cromarty Firth to the Culbokie Inn. So, if you ever travel this way don't let an address fool you check the map location not the town.

To make up for it lunch was wonderful and the staff very attentive and friendly. As we could not get into our next accommodation until 3.30pm we decided a small tour of the Black Isle was in order. So, with directions from the Inn staff off we went down narrow country lanes heading, we thought, for Cromarty. Well it was a small tour as we managed to travel in an ever-diminishing circle and ended back at the Inn. Mother by now was seriously not impressed with our navigation skills and demanded that we stop fluffing about and drive to our destination post haste. Off we go then to drive through Dingwall for the fourth time, that town will never be forgotten, and onto Achanalt, Knockban & Achnasheen. These weren't really towns but small whistlestops along an old rail line with a very narrow gutted road beside it. The countryside was beautiful but the driving was a white-knuckle affair as Ayrton Senna's mates were coming the other way at 80km/hr around blind corners. It was the hairiest 90 minutes of driving I had experienced for a long time. I think I am now qualified to drive the Tasmanian Targa now as at least all that traffic is one way.

Finally drove into the small village of Dornie with the able help of our onboard navigator. This small village is home of one of the most photographed castles in Scotland – Eilean Donan Castle. When we arrived two things struck as odd – a) the doors to our accommodation were not locked and no key was to be found and b) the previous guests (some very messy Uruguayans) had not cleaned up and the beds were not made. Rang the caretaker and bless her heart she was there in 10 minutes. There had been a miscommunication and she had not been told we were coming a day early. Wow she was a whirling dervish and had all three rooms stripped, fresh linen, vacuumed and took out the trash. Finally, time to relax with an extremely large G&T out on the veranda overlooking the loch keeping a good weather eye out for midges



as the west coast in summer is notorious for them. Good tip from the caretaker was only sit outside when the breeze blows as the midges couldn't handle it but as soon as it drops, they will be on you in hordes – this turned out to be very good advice as I was the only one of us bitten once over the next few days. As the house had not been cleaned prior to our arrival we were offered free dinner and drinks in the local pub the following night as a small recompense for our troubles. It was a much-appreciated gift considering there was three of us.

We had bought groceries with us from Keiss so we made up a slap-up dinner and washed it down with a Spanish Rioja – very tasty and enjoyable. This new accommodation, unbeknownst to us, had underfloor heating and the previous guests had turned it up to maximum.



The place was getting hotter and hotter so we opened all the big glass sliding doors to try and cool it down to no effect. Called the caretaker back to sort it out. Felt like a right bunch of wallies when she walked in and straight up to a control panel (*right in front of our noses*) and turned it down from 32 to 20 degrees. It took nearly a day for the pace to cool down properly – note to self never put underfloor heating in any house I will live in.



Next day was another early start for me (05.30 *again*) which was becoming a bit annoying. But I was awake so picked up the camera gear and drove down to the castle to get some early morning shots and see if I could spot some sea otters. The sky was rubbish and it was still early so decided to drive into the Kyle of Lochalsh. I love this name as it rolls off your tongue but it is just another fishing village and a rather scruffy one at that. It is the gateway to the Isle of Skye and there is now a bridge joining Skye to Eilean Ben.



For years this was a toll bridge but it is now free. Straight across the bridge if you turn left there is another small village called Kyleakin which is a much prettier town. The ruins of Caisteal Maol and old 1400's ruined castle jutting out into Loch Alsh. Back to the house by 0800 to kick Mother & Michael out of bed for a sightseeing trip to the Isle of Skye.



Off to our usual late start at 10am to crossover onto the Isle of Skye. According to the caretaker the previous evening the highland cows were everywhere. Yea right just like there are kangaroos bounding up and down our streets. First stop was at Carbost – the home of the Talisker Distillery. It was crowded with tourists so we did not stay for a tasting but purchased two tasting packs of 10, 12 & 4 yo single malt scotch whisky plus a silly hat which I am sure will outlast the whisky. On to our lunch destination – the Old Schoolhouse at Dunvegan for my favourite lunch.... You guessed it Haddock & Chips. This one only rated 5 out of 10 from our previous meals. Sorry but I do not leak loud music being pumped into a restaurant that suits teenagers whilst I am trying to have a conversation and eat my lunch in peace. The food was good, not excellent, but the ambience was rubbish and we were pleased to get out of there. We won't be back no matter how many good ratings that they get. Next was a side trip to Dunvegan Castle. Unfortunately, never managed to even park and get out before we spotted two coachloads of



tourists being dropped at the gate. Whilst I don't expect to find these venues to be empty, I cannot put up with large crowds so it was back on the road again. Next time!



Out on the A850 then a left turn up the B866 on our way to Stein and the Loch Bay Restaurant. The landscape has a wild beauty as this part of the island is very sparsely populated the major danger being other motorists coming the other way as they also are enjoying the scenery. The trip for the following day would definitely be at least an hour and half from Dornie. One task accomplished now to find some highland cows. Michael & Mum snoozed whilst I followed a different road to Portree then back to the Kyle of Lochals with not a single bloody cow to be seen!! The mountain scenery on the East coast of Skye was quite special with towering cliffs and crags with waterfalls cascading down their sides from the rain. There is no such thing as a blue-sky day around these parts as it rains every day sometimes more than once. Now wonder the place is so green.



Back across the bridge at Kyleakin to the Kyle of Lochalsh then around to the left down the coast road through Drumbuie to Portloch. These two small villages apparently have a freedom of movement edict from the local council so that the cattle can roam the streets and fill the potholes with poo. By this stage Mum was getting excited expecting to see cows everywhere. Sad to say not a single cow was to be seen but there were plenty of Chav's in their souped WRX's in the narrow streets exchanging flares and finger salutes if you blocked their pathway. Silly boys as 2 ½ ton of splendid German machinery seriously outclassed their Japanese toys cars as they were forced to give way in the narrow streets. I know I know

smugness does not suit me but it best pleased me to teach these young swine some civility. Once we had navigated back through the narrow streets without spotting a solitary cow and only some scruffy looking sheep it was time to do the back-country roads to Dornie just in case the cows had moved up there for their holidays from the tourists. No cows but did spot this young stag in a paddock near the road who obliged by standing still as I grabbed the camera and took a few shots.

Sadly, not so back to our digs for a rest before driving down to the pub for our free dinner. What a quaint little pub run by an eccentric Irishman. He greeted us at the door like long lost rellos explaining that he was in the Witness Protection Program as an explanation of a transplanted Irishman In Scotland. More importantly he knew we were coming and had a table organised for us as the place was packed. Even better he suggested that we try a local gin called No. 7 distilled by the Fairytale Distillery which promised that 'you'd be away with the fairies' after drinking two of them – he was right as it was pretty potent stuff. For pub grub the dinner was lovely and no I did not have Fish & Chips.

Next day started rainy and cloudy (*as per usual*) for our trip up to Stein but it cleared away by the time we go to Portree and turned left for Stein. It was a pity that we were on such a strict timeline as I could have easily spent a week or two just exploring Skye and the surrounding Western Isles of Harris & Lewis.

We arrived on time for our seating at 1230 (they were insistent that you do not be late as they run a very tight ship) – no bookings no service so you cannot just turn up. It is a small restaurant that can only seat 24 so it was quite cozy. The food was exquisite and the wine delightful. And whilst the serves were small they were very filling. I don't normally take iPhone photos of meals but this time I did so you can see for yourself.



The only downside to enjoying such food was that I knew that we had a long drive home. We thought that we would try and locate the cows once more on their off chance they had returned from their holidays and once more were wandering the streets again. Nope, nada, nyet no coos!!!!

Oh, well then Plan B drop Mum & Michael off at Dornie for a snooze whilst I went and tried to find the Fairytale Distillery in Ardelve. This turned out to be more difficult than what I first thought. How could this be so hard for heaven's sake as there are only 5 houses in Ardelve!!! Drove back to the Dornie Pub to see if the publican had been pulling my leg but he assured me it was there and that I needed to have a proper look this time – cheeky sod. And I did find it on the right-hand side 2nd house in with a sign the size of an A3 paper off the road in the driveway which you cannot see if you are going more than 5 klm/hr coming from Dornie. It was run by a lovely Austrian couple and she ran a small bakery making strudels and biscuits whilst her husband tinkered with a small still in a small Hansel & Gretel style mini chalet. They were charming hosts and it was interesting that they had only been in business for 6 months and all their business was local. Because he was still experimenting on the botanicals being used in each batch, he had taken to numbering them – he was currently working on No. 29 whilst I was there but by far the most popular, he told me was No. 7. By the way no. 29 brought tears to my eyes as I tasted a wee sample in the distillery room. This was improved somewhat by the second sample of his new Summer Edition although that was not on sale as yet.

A small piece of history as to why we are seeing an explosion of small batch gins these days is that the governments have removed the restrictions on the minimum size to distil alcohol which used to be 5000 litres. Now small distillers can produce down to 250 litres (some smaller) by using the source liquor from one of the large distillers and adding their own botanicals. Some you will find are firewater but some have distinct possibilities in a small niche market. This however is becoming soaked, no pun intended, by the explosion in numbers of these small distilleries. I wish them well in their endeavours and purchased enough of each batch to help fund more R&D. See what a nice bloke I am in funding small business R&D on product development. I returned to our digs in time to prepare dinner and share a couple of large G&Ts with brother Michael before settling in for an early night.



Next day Michael and I had planned to do most of the Scottish 500 we had missed when we turned back from Eribol up on the North Coast. The plan was to leave early (08.00) and head to Tarbet up in North West Sunderland for lunch. If we had driven straight there, we may have made it in 5 hours but as we decided to crossover and visit Applecross to see the Chapel of St Maelrubha, we had no hope. It took us 4 hours to navigate our way up over Bealach Na Ba on an un-named road in some of the steepest country we had seen so far with nearly twenty switchbacks to get to the top but what a view greets you from the top. The wind was howling and freezing so it was a couple of snapshots and back in the car. The road down was only half as bad but still quite slow. All of these roads are single lane with small pull ins to let passing cars through. Looking out from Applecross you could see the Islands of Raasay & Rona away in the distance across the Inner Sound. Days like this you appreciate being out of the elements as the wind was cutting. I would hate to be up here in winter as it truly would be miserable. We passed a stand of cut down pine on the way into town and I kept thinking to myself please not let there be a log truck coming back this way as we progress as I am sure that both of us would not fit on such a narrow road. As time was marching on and we thought we still might make Turbet (*no chance*) for lunch we pressed on and as feared we found the logging truck!!! Luckily for us he had pulled off in a picnic area to inspect his truck. A blessing no less on our dash for lunch. No service for your phone out in this country so we hurried on until we finally had service in a small town called Torridon. By this time, we were adrift by a ½ hour for our



lunch and had to cancel. Next decision how far north do we push and still manage to fit in lunch before returning to Dornie.



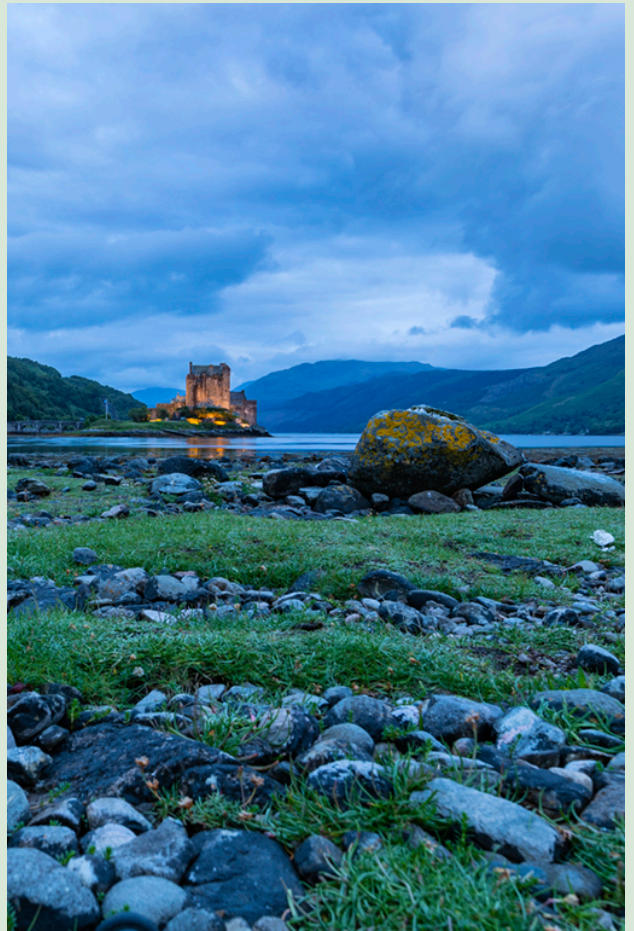
Decision made that Ullapool would be as far north that we would get with no more side trips. Pushed on and finally got into Ullapool at 2.30pm. To say the least, I was knackered from driving and concentrating for so long without a real break so was glad to stop. Now to find a pub and no I was not going to have Haddock & Chips! I settled for Scampi Salad (*a cold version water of our shrimps but much larger*).

Had not realised how hard their shells would be and needed a nut-cracker to break them open. Give me Aussie Prawns any day as they are much easier to peel and much tastier. Sadly, our time at Dornie would end tomorrow so we would not get a chance to return this was and finish that leg of the Scottish 500. Even better news was that the return journey down A roads was much quicker and we were home by 6.30pm.



As our last night in Dornie it was time to use up all the groceries we had been caring around Scotland as our next stop in Oban we had planned on eating out for most meals except breakfast. It was a very pleasant evening relaxing with a large glass of Fairytale No. 7 as brother Michael cooked dinner. After dinner I could not relax so decided that I would go down to the castle at Eilean Donan and do some night photography. No sooner had I found a nice location near the community centre for that evening shoot I could hear the bark of some otters in the loch as they came out with the evening tide. Unfortunately, the light was too low to make that properly as they were, they just two small black blobs in the water.

The castle shots turned out quite nice and I was best pleased to be back in my bed by midnight.



The next day would a shorter road trip to Oban via Fort William but that is covered in our last part that covers Oban & Edinburgh before the return to London. Until next time. I hope you have enjoyed Part 3 of Wooly's Wanderings in Scotland.