

It's funny, how a remote place can beckon so brightly, it blinds you to what *remote* actually means: Getting there is a pain in the neck. So on an early-summer morning, I felt a rush of relief when I plopped down on a bench on the ferry leaving Mallaig, a tiny village 150 miles north of Glasgow, at the edge of Scotland's Western Highlands. After two days of yanking a suitcase through airports, and bus and train stations, I would soon be essentially a piece of luggage myself, borne over barely touched mountains and moorlands on the back of a horse.

I was headed for Inverie, the largest village (pop. 100) on the Knoydart Peninsula. The ferry would take about a half-hour to cross the seven miles of Loch Nevis to dock at Inverie, where a familiar face from an outfit called Wilder Ways would meet me.

The previous summer, I'd taken a Wilder Ways vacation on Islay, in the Hebrides. But Islay is Manhattan compared to Knoydart, which you can get to only by boat or hiking about 17 miles through leg-busting terrain. The peninsula has been called Britain's Last Wilderness and is in an area known as the Rough Bounds. It has one tiny paved road, not connected to the UK road system, and a hydroelectric power system, not connected to the national grid.



Knoydart does not have a newsstand, and internet connections are spotty. Hurray!

As the ferry crossed Loch Nevis, the morning mist faded, revealing a sky of brilliant light-blue flecked with cirrus streaks and cumulus cotton balls. I savored my surroundings and my pending status as luggage, and noticed the young woman next to me was wearing riding breeches. She turned out to be Julie, a French ex-pat relocated to Australia and heading for Inverie for the same reason I was: To go on a weeklong Wilder Ways ride. When our ferry docked at Inverie—a row of small,

white-painted buildings set against an ascending forest—Nikki Dayton-Gelati one of Wilder Ways’ proprietors, greeted us.

After a long and complicated journey to an unfamiliar place, seeing Nikki was a comfort. She—and Cara Dayton-Gelati—is easy to get on with, as the Brits would say, so I knew Knoydart would be a worthwhile but lonely scramble for experience. Traveling solo, a scene from Steve Martin’s “The Lonely Guy” sometimes plagues me: He goes out to eat by himself, and all the diners freeze and stare as a spotlight follows him to his little table. Anyway, a horseback-riding vacation tends to deflect the Lonely Guy spotlight because you’re among a group of people doing something they love.

Less than an hour after getting to Inverie, with only enough time for a quick pee and a change into my riding breeches and boots, I was sitting on Denver, a well-mannered 16-hand Hackney/Irish Cob paint gelding. Waiting for Julie and me were Sabine (from Switzerland), Bettina (from Germany), Larry (Scotland), and Larry’s daughter, Ramona (England).

We set off on a ride that brought us through expansive tidal pools swirling with seaweed and surrounded by mountains and absolute silence, and we rode down rocky, uneven fields of bracken overlooking Loch Nevis. Terrain determines pace, so we walked a lot, which was a good way to settle into an appropriately serene state of mind.



That first day, we were out for about six hours, which was the case most days. Out on the trail, at lunchtime we would untack the horses and let them wander and graze on whatever greenery was available. As for us humans, lunch breaks involved sandwiches crisps, nuts, dried fruit, and goodies such as Kit Kats and Tunnocks biscuits. Also tea, and best of all, water. The Western Highlands is one of the wettest areas in Europe, but every day was sunny, with temperatures in the 70s.

I stayed at the Westfield B&B, which, like most of Inverie, is on Knoydart's main drag (about six feet wide). Bettina, Larry, and Ramona were at the Westfield as well, while Julie and Sabine were at other B&Bs farther down the road. The Westfield, owned by Tony and Sharon Tyler, is an airy and immaculate house, with pristine white walls and a backyard that touches Loch Nevis.

Tony is a fabulous cook, and every morning I feasted on the best poached eggs I've ever eaten. And each night—whether we ate at Tony's or at one of the few restaurants or other B&B's on Knoydart—everything on our plates had not traveled far: salmon, herring, haddock, lamb, chicken, asparagus, avocado.

Post-poached eggs, our second day of riding took us along a path heading away from the water and up into rocky hills and grassy meadows. This being Scotland, it'd be hard to go for a long without banging into something that invokes the area's complicated history. On this ride, it was the Brocket Monument, a cairn erected in 1938 by the second Lord Brocket to honor his parents. A fascist and Hitler chum Brocket laired over the Knoydart Estate, which, at 17,000-plus acres, comprises a good chunk of the peninsula's 55,000 acres. Brocket represented one of the dying gasps of Scotland's centuries-old tradition of feudalism, which ended in Knoydart in 1999, when a community-run nonprofit bought the Estate.

The last night of the holiday, Cara and Nikki would not tell us where we would be eating. Only that we should wear good walking shoes. So, after we bounced along a dirt road in the clattering old Land Rover for about a half-hour, Cara pulled over and we found ourselves on a desolate field, with a couple of cars parked nearby.

Would we be setting up a dining table in the middle of the field? No. Nikki and Cara headed toward a downward slope and we followed, past a sign that read, "Down there," with an arrow pointing...down. And so down we marched, until a harbor came into view. Adjacent to it was the Doune Dining Room, which, like Knoydart itself, is accessible only via foot or boat.

The Doune Dining Room is rustic, with a lot of knotted-pine woodwork, and we had a suitably humble meal of chicken and baked potatoes, topped off with a fantastic chocolate mousse pie. Afterward we sat and chatted. A row of windows faced west, and as the sun fell, the room's light went golden and warm. It was time to leave. Up we trudged, passing an "Up there" sign (with arrow). Someone turned around and said, "look!" Just then, the sun had hit the horizon, and it looked like the Isle of Skye was on fire.

I stayed on Knoydart for an extra night, and watched the ferry take my new friends back to the village of Mallaig, on the other side of Loch Nevis. From there, trains, planes, buses and cars would carry them back to Essen, Sydney, Geneva and London. As they faced the hubbub of transit, I bet all of them, at least once, wished they were back on a horse, on Knoydart. I did. Still do.



By Lisa, from the USA