



# ENCHANTED

*Glenapp Castle, a hotel in Ayrshire, Scotland. OPPOSITE The Hebridean Sea Safari camp on the Isle of Jura.*





# ISLANDS

An ivy-covered castle, camping by the seashore, and the power of a six-year-old's imagination: **Leslie Jamison** and her daughter find themselves transformed by a sojourn in southwestern Scotland. **Photographs by Murray Orr**





AT FOUR IN THE MORNING, far from civilization on an island in the Inner Hebrides, I woke to the drumming of rain on the canvas roof of my tent. Wind whistled between the tethers, and waves crashed just below. My daughter slept beside me under a thick duvet, two stacked sleeping bags, and a pair of wool blankets: a Scottish August. We were perched on a cliff on the Isle of Jura, and through the tent's small window, I could see the sea glimmering in the moonlight—elegant, indifferent, vast. It felt like the edge of the world, or at least one of its thin places, where the boundary between the tangible and the sublime had grown porous.

Seventy-five years earlier, George Orwell wrote his iconic novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* on this island, as one of its only residents, in a whitewashed farmhouse four miles down the coast from where we were. He came with his young son, and was grieving the death of his wife. It felt fitting to me that one might imagine a dystopian future while retreating as far from the dystopian present as possible. Orwell called the island “un-get-at-able.”

Indeed, it was not exactly easy for my six-year-old daughter and me to get there—we’d traveled by air, land, and boat. It seemed somewhat miraculous, this cluster of tents overlooking churning waters bobbing with harbor seals and gleaming black great cormorants, nestled between rugged hills dotted with red deer, wild goats, bog cotton, and foxglove. It was as if we’d found ourselves inside an illustration in a book of fairy tales.

MY DAUGHTER AND I were on Glenapp Castle’s Hebridean Sea Safari, a trip that consists of two days at the opulent South Ayrshire hotel followed by three days exploring remote islands by boat. At Glenapp, we’d surrendered to surreal luxury: a canopy bed with blood-red brocade curtains, a man in a kilt serenading a haggis before slicing it open, heritage carrots and turnips from the gardens just below our window, and a Victorian greenhouse with its own secret carp pond.

My ancestors were Scottish, and the desire to explore that heritage, and to allow my daughter to start exploring it, was one of the motivating impulses behind this trip. I come from many generations of hardscrabble farmers, descended from four Scottish clans: MacDonald, Cumming, Duncan, and Leslie. My own name is my mother’s surname and when, as a child, I asked about its origins, I misheard her reply as “large Scottish clam,” and imagined a monstrous creature nestled at the bottom of cold, unforgiving seas.

The history of my people bears little resemblance to the Scotland of the American imagination. I grew up with tales of agricultural poverty, brutal cold, and inherited depression.

My great-great-grandfather hanged himself in the barn one winter. My great-great-grandmother was believed stillborn and left in the woodshed until the ground thawed enough to bury her; someone heard her crying in the middle of the night and went out to rescue her. By the grace of that wailing infant, the rest of us got to exist.

My family has always identified with what we understand as Scottish virtues—fortitude, stoicism, industriousness (I have only inherited the last!). I grew up with the Leslie family crest beside our front door: *Grip Fast*. My daughter has surprised me with her interest in our Scottish background, enthusiastically pasting a “heritage” poster board with images of Highland cattle, the caber toss, and yes, the rebellious warrior princess, Merida, from Disney’s Highland epic, *Brave*.

What does it mean to be from a place? I didn’t want to claim Scotland; I hardly felt I had the right to it. I just wanted to feel awe in its presence, and to give my daughter memories that







**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP**  
**RIGHT** *Glenapp Castle staffer Kevin Boyd recites Robert Burns's "Ode to a Haggis" above the titular delicacy; a suite at the hotel; a lolling seal, seen from Glenapp's Sea Safari boat; Barnhill, the Jura farmhouse where George Orwell completed his novel "Nineteen Eighty-Four."*



might draw us closer to this otherwise abstract word, *Scotland*. I wanted to counterbalance its Disneyfication with a set of visceral sensations: rainy days and wet socks, warm fires and churning seas, gray stone against gray skies.

OUR TIME IN SCOTLAND, however, began at Glenapp, a castle plucked straight from a storybook, with sandstone battlements and vine-covered towers. Within moments of entering our lavish suite—complete with a claw-foot tub and plush plaid couches arranged around a fireplace—my daughter noticed a secret door in the wall. It led to a spiral staircase tucked into a corner turret. After she asked if I'd seen the crystal chandelier, and I nodded, she said, "No, the other one," and I realized there was a second chandelier hanging in the canopy bed itself. "A princess bed has its own chandelier," she said matter-of-factly, already wise to the rules of this strange new realm.

Over the course of our stay, I learned that Glenapp Castle—built in 1870 and emblematic of the Scottish baronial style—boasts a cast of colorful ghosts. There's a proto-feminist aristocratic daughter who decreed that every pregnant woman in the surrounding villages would be invited to deliver her baby in the castle; a silent-film actress named Poppy Wyndham who tried to fly across the Atlantic in a single-engine plane in 1928,

but never made it; an American veteran who turned the ground floor into a radio station and broadcast the Gospel into Northern Ireland during the Troubles. Winston Churchill stayed in the castle during World War II, and held a crucial D-Day planning session within its walls.

On our first afternoon, we took a tour of nearby Airyolland Farm, where the wife-and-husband farmers Janet and Neale McQuiston keep Beltex sheep and Highland cattle. Neale described his family as "newcomers" to the area, as they'd only been farming there for seven generations. (Janet's family, who've farmed in the Luce Valley since 1624, has been around for 11.) We met the Highland "coos" on the hill, and I noticed that the girls (Sineag the Fifth of Airyolland, Isla the 10th of Applecross) had fancier names than the boys (Fergus, Wanky Lug).

Neale explained that the cattle were organized in a matriarchy, with a female at the top of the pecking order. Because these were breeding cows, their posh names always referenced their ancestry. At "Coo University," where the yearlings grazed, we stopped to rake their gorgeous flowing hair with huge metal combs and to learn a few of their ongoing soap operas: a bull named Droigheann had recently jumped a stone fence to reclaim his girlfriends from a newcomer, while a yearling named Seamus kept sneaking back to sleep with his mom



after spending all night hanging out with the other yearlings.

My daughter and I had been warned that Scotland delivers all four seasons in a day, but our trip amended this to three: rain and gloom, crisp spring chill, and occasional glorious bursts of blue-skied heat. So frequent were the showers, my daughter started calling herself “the rainbow hunter.”

But one of the gifts of all the gray weather was the invitation to lean in to the pleasures of the rain, rather than wishing for sun. My daughter and I put on our windbreakers and approached the castle grounds as if we were explorers, starting with a stunning Italian garden designed by the celebrated early-20th-century horticulturist Gertrude Jekyll, who designed more than 400 gardens in the U.K. and beyond. Influenced by J.M.W. Turner and the Impressionists, she treated plantings like brushstrokes of color. (One of Jekyll’s younger brothers was a friend of the writer Robert Louis Stevenson, and inspired the name of his most famous character, or at least his better half.)

Immediately, my daughter began crafting a story. “Once upon a time, there was an enchanted garden, and every single flower had its own secret world....” Marveling at blooms nestled like vibrant jewels in the hedges, she pointed out one that held a world full of unicorns, another full of grandmothers, another she called simply “I-Don’t-Know-What World.” She had stumbled across the great promise of travel: that it might take you past the edges of what you know or understand.

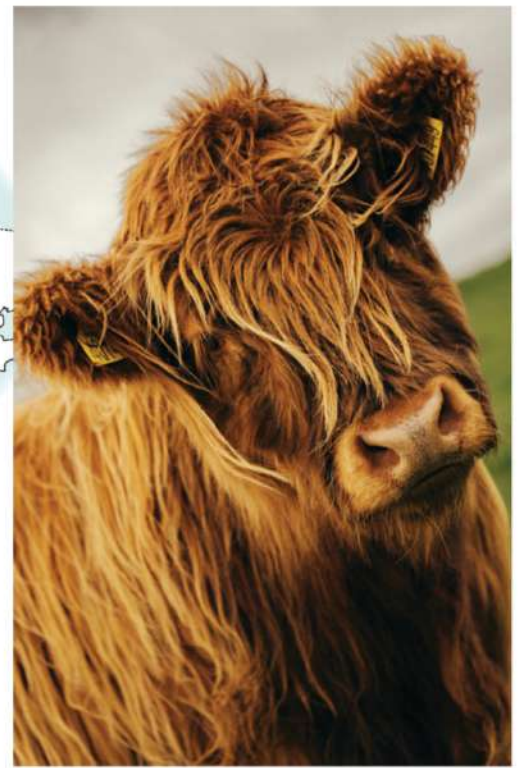
ON THE FIRST DAY of our sea safari, we fortified ourselves with an extravagant picnic lunch served on the back deck of our boat, a 37-foot orange cabin RIB. We ate charcuterie and lobster tail, cream scones and whisky-infused macarons, holding our plates in our laps as we watched a pair of ospreys perched in their nest. (Our skipper, Sandy, told me that they had come all the way from South Africa to mate.)

Then we braved the churning waters of the infamous Gulf of Corryvreckan, a narrow strait between the islands of Jura and Scarba that holds “the Hag’s Cauldron,” one of the largest tidal whirlpools in the world. My daughter, who is obsessed with Greek mythology, kept crying out, “I see Charybdis!” But according to local legend, these waters are where the Celtic goddess of winter, Cailleach Bheur, washes her plaid until it’s pure white and becomes the blanket of snow that covers the land in winter. Orwell and his son, Richard, once lost their boat in the Corryvreckan and had to swim to shore. The radio of our boat crackled with a distress signal from a capsized dinghy, but Sandy was cool as a cucumber, riding the undulating swells so deftly it felt as if we were surfing.

Approaching our camp from the water was thrilling. We spotted a distant cluster of tiny white tents on a bluff above the sea, then scrambled off the boat and up a muddy path to a world where everything had been meticulously arranged for us. No electricity. No Wi-Fi. No plumbing. Just a maze of wooden boardwalks connecting a smattering of cozy tents lit by lanterns and decorated with sheepskin rugs, leather steamer trunks, and plaid throw blankets. We ate dinner in a tent lit by dangling candelabras and warmed by a squat heater, the flaps open to the storm clouds shadowing the frothy sea. Our three-course meal was so elaborate it was almost impossible to believe it had been prepared in the tent next door: scallops and langoustines fresh from the creels (traps dangling by the dock), venison with







**CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT**  
*A resident of Airyolland Farm; Glenapp Castle; duck with carrot and Chinese greens, served in the castle dining room; the Sea Safari boat; the entrance to Glenapp's lounge.*



blackberries from the castle garden, and a white-chocolate *financier* with candied ginger.

My daughter was enthralled by the practicalities of island life. She loved learning the logistics of the camp bathroom, complete with toilet valves and washbasin (and repeated the process ad infinitum). She immediately decided she and I would share one bed, and set up the second bed for her stuffed animals. During the cold nights, we appreciated the ritual of nestling ourselves beneath our many layers. We had come to a thin place, but we needed thick blankets to sleep there.

In truth, we had seen all kinds of weather, meteorological and emotional. My daughter vacillated between stupefied awe at our surroundings and moments of sublime meltdown. And I mean *sublime*—there was something humbling and terrifying about their force. She raged at me in the boat's cabin while the others in our group spotted a bald eagle in the trees. (Before they quietly shut the door so she wouldn't frighten the eagle away, I heard their exclamations: "I see it leaving the nest!") Later that day, as she played on the slippery, kelp-strewn rocks exposed at low tide, she called out: "This is when the story crashes against the shore!" This seemed like the perfect way to describe the moment when a story gets good: when desire meets resistance, when willpower meets obstacle.

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, the concept of *còsagach* emerged as a kind of Scottish equivalent to the Danish idea of *hygge*—the





**CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT**  
*Dolphins bob alongside the safari boat; an alfresco lunch on the vessel; Mark Littlejohn, the Sea Safari camp manager; Edinburgh Castle, as seen from the 100 Princes Street hotel; the Cave of Saint Cormac, on the island of Eilean Mòr.*



sense of cozy domestic contentment often thrown into relief by harsh conditions outside. But no sooner had *còsagach* caught on than Gaelic speakers rose up in protest, saying the word didn't evoke coziness so much as a damp hidey-hole, the kind of mossy burrow that a small creature might live in.

In the *còsagach* controversy, I saw a microcosm of a larger tension between various visions of Scotland, between the commodified sentimentality—of haggis and bagpipes, *Outlander* romance and Instagram cattle—and the actual Scotland of history, defined by agricultural poverty, harsh weather, bloody civil strife, and violent annexation. Perhaps the moral is that there are some kinds of wildness that should be allowed to remain wild. As Orwell put it, un-get-at-able. And when we venture into the wilderness, we need to accept



its terms: the whirlpool and the rain, the ocean tides, the island weather; the vagaries of a child's joy and rage. These forces are not made to live by our whims, they exist to surpass and shape us. They're there not to be tamed by us, but to transform us.

The second day of our sea safari took us to the Slate Islands: Belnahua, full of ruined homes built for the mining community that once lived there; the picturesque village of Ellenabeich, where an oyster bar perched on stilts above the sea serves creel-caught langoustines and bowls of Cullen skink, a creamy smoked-haddock soup; and finally Easdale, where we saw dark, glistening beaches layered with slate slabs, flooded quarries with ghostly pools of standing water, and flocks of wheelbarrows waiting by the tiny dock (there are no cars).

As we pulled up to our last island—a place of epic grace and wild beauty called Eilean Mòr, desolate except for a few ruins and an old bothy—Sandy, our skipper, told us that he still takes his sheep to graze there each winter. We hiked past the ruins of a 13th-century stone church: part of the weed-tufted roof was missing, leaving the old sanctum open to the sky. My daughter decided it was an abandoned pirates' house, and at the sight of a wind-rippled puddle of water, said, "This is where the pirates taught their children to sail!"

Part of the pleasure of traveling with my daughter is watching her imagination transfigure the landscape, witnessing the ways she gingerly sets down roots by telling herself stories about what might have happened there. As it happens, she wasn't necessarily wrong about pirates: Sandy told us the church eventually became an inn, where merchants and smugglers slept in a crawl space above the hearth.

In the clamor surrounding the notion of *còsagach*, one Gaelic scholar proposed a third definition of the term: neither cozy nor damp hidey-hole but something more like a "snug wee spot" that a child might make for herself under the covers of her bed or the cushions of a sofa. Perhaps this was the kind of *còsagach* we'd found: the spaces that my daughter's imagination made in the rugged landscapes we encountered.







## SCOTLAND BY LAND & SEA

### HOW TO BOOK

#### GLENAPP CASTLE

This stately pile offers all the makings of a luxurious Scottish sojourn: 17 suites with classic décor, afternoon tea, a formal garden, and a 110-acre wooded estate with walking trails. Glenapp's Hebridean Sea Safari experience combines a two-night stay at the property with a three-day guided boat tour in the Inner Hebrides, including sleepovers at a fully equipped glampsite and meals prepared by a private chef (*doubles from \$436; five-day package from \$10,350, all-inclusive*).

### GETTING THERE

#### 100 PRINCES STREET

Visitors to Scotland typically fly in and out of Edinburgh. This new hotel, housed in a former explorers' club, is ideally situated on the city's main commercial street, across from Princes Street Gardens; many of the rooms have views of Edinburgh Castle. With its tartan upholstery, marble bathrooms, and atmospheric dining room, it's a cossetting stop on the way back from the rugged coast. *Doubles from \$248.*

At the other end of Eilean Mòr, past a mossy Celtic cross standing like a lighthouse at the island's tallest point, Sandy showed us the Cave of Saint Cormac, its opening hardly more than four feet high, where eighth-century monks used to retreat for periods of secluded contemplation. "As if an uninhabited island wasn't remote enough," he remarked. "They had to hole themselves up in a tiny cave at the end of it." Un-get-at-able. We learned a few of the island's legends: Some say men who enter the cave will become sterile; others that the Knights Templar hid treasure there in the 1300s. A local 18th-century church registry claims that "nothing could be stolen from the island that did not of itself return." One account holds that the old Celtic cross was stolen, and then floated back to the island after a storm.

It was not hard to understand why for centuries people had come to Eilean Mòr to feel closer to the divine. The island was rugged and windswept, a thin place where the noise of others had grown faint. But when you travel with a child, you cannot ask for silence as you approach the sublime. Instead, you are invited to listen for the echoes of something holy, in all the noise you carry with you. 🌐