

Scottish Skeins and Skerries

***FINALLY**, a day cool enough to sit in our computer room and finish this newsletter. Our home is only partly air conditioned and the last few weeks have been grim, dear knitters. The heat and humidity were so bad that I sat (topless) in a darkened room typing very slowly indeed. I'd have been bottomless too except for sticking to my chair. Under these circumstances ambition did not thrive. Don't worry though, darling readers! I'm still here and you're still there. What's more, I'm very glad to have this newsletter to write, even though I've given up all pretence of sticking to a strict schedule.*

*This issue will be, once again, something totally different. In May 2002 I was very lucky to join Joyce James' **Scottish Skeins and Skerries** tour of Scotland, Shetland, Orkney, and the Outer Hebrides. I kept a travel diary so that I could share it all with you. In the next issue I'll discuss some of the practical things I learned about Scottish knitting but this issue will just be what I hope is "a rattling good read". If you have access to the internet and would like to see a few photos from my trip see the end of the article for the web address. I'm the one in the beret! And please take some time to have a look at my friend Marsha's excellent Needle Arts Book Shoppe site. If you'd like street addresses or telephone numbers for anything mentioned in this article please just ask.*

Before I begin, let me explain about the financial constraints of my trip. No, I didn't save long and hard for it. In fact, I did something everybody advises against. I cashed in an investment, the last one from my days as a wage earner. This not only paid for the trip but paid off my Visa balance -- as well as saving me the chagrin of losing everything on the stock market in the following months. I think I did the right thing, don't you? I also put aside £500 for spending money. As everything except a few lunches was included in the trip this was plenty, I reasoned. And although I'd heard that the Skeins was a great shopping extravaganza I certainly did not intend to be among the biggest spenders ... We were also warned by Joyce that the maximum total weight for each person's luggage on some of our short haul flights was just 15 kilos. All I can say about that is, ha ha ha.

Friday, May 17, 2002, Toronto ON

I arrive at the airport at 6pm for a 9pm flight, feeling ridiculously early, but I spy several fellow travellers the instant I step in the door of the terminal. Surprise! Our British Airways flight has been cancelled due to massive air traffic control computer failure at Heathrow. There's chaos in Europe, we're told.

Toronto is little better, but after some clever work by our tour guide Joyce, who gives the appearance of being unflappable, we are re-routed on Air Canada. The catch is that our flight doesn't leave until midnight and we have only standby tickets and must keep our luggage with us until boarding. To make things even more complicated it seems that several of the group may have managed to get out on an earlier BA flight.

and nobody knows for certain where anyone is. Drat! My boarding pass won't allow me to do any duty free shopping and I was counting on stocking up with expensive cosmetics to use on the trip. Looks like they will have to take me as I am. The good news is that we still have our knitting with us to help pass the time until boarding. This is my first experience of travelling with a guide and I can see immediately that it's the better way to go. Our group slinks away to a quiet spot, avoiding the huge line-ups of worried people trying to change their itineraries.

Saturday, May 18, London and Edinburgh

All night squashed into a little seat with a crying baby and a massive snorer nearby. So far this trip is a lot like being at home with Mr. KN. It's so bad that a flight attendant finally wakes the guy. I keep my headphones on for protection and finally get to see both the Harry Potter movie I've missed at home and *Driving Miss Daisy*, which I'd always meant to rent but never got around to. I sleep maybe half an hour in total.

In the morning we navigate Heathrow successfully, learning to keep left in the corridors and on the moving sidewalks. We switch to British Midland and another terminal for our flight to Edinburgh. It's a nice departure lounge and there are Scottish people here! The flight attendants have amazing uniforms which include both gloves and big stiff brimmed hats. In order for the hats to work they all must wear "bun in the back" hairstyles. An overenthusiastic designer has clearly been given free reign here. Methinks only *very* young women would put up with it. "Bring on the Lippizanners!" chuckles Kathy.

I have my first try at buying something from a kiosk and counting out the change in sterling. Then I have a hard time figuring out how to open my water bottle, because "they are different from at home".....Little do I know that this will become a predominant theme during this trip.

Our plane is surprisingly large and very full as the airlines are still clearing up after the previous day's chaos. I really know I'm in Scotland when I'm seated across from a Sean Connery clone and therefore waste no time in making conversation. Spirits are high as on the one hour flight we are served both drinks and good sandwiches. I call that really trying! This level of

friendly service too will become a theme on the trip. Who says it can't be done?

Unlike the sorry bunch that greet the weary traveller in Toronto, beautiful clean taxis with friendly young drivers meet us in Edinburgh and take us to Channings Hotel, where all is ready for us. Such a smooth check in!

My room is a little bit underwhelming after what I'd read about this hotel (there is no room anywhere to even stand up my suitcase let alone open it) but it becomes a sanctuary very quickly. Then the fun begins. It takes me half an hour to figure out the electrical system enough to make a badly needed cup of tea -- this too will happen again and again. But the stem ginger shortbread, renewed on a daily basis, proves to be a very firm friend indeed.

At dinner we meet the rest of the group who have managed to all make it in the end. My first reaction is that they are the usual collection of splendid eccentrics common to all knitting events. Dinner is excellent - another theme foreshadowed -- but I nod off

frequently.

Sunday, May 19

A fabulous sleep in a comfortable bed. Then it takes me half an hour to figure out how to get cold water to dilute the hot water in the bathtub. A bath seemed easier than a shower because the tub is slick, there is no mat and I had a nasty slip in an English bathtub last year. When I do finally get it filled the tub is so narrow that I get stuck in it and have a slight panic attack before I am able to get out.

Rather shaken, I finally make it downstairs for my first "full Scottish breakfast". I've been waiting for this. I promise that I'll try to avoid temptation and have only cereal on every second day (but the breakfasts are so good that this never actually comes to pass).

Groups sort themselves out for the day's activities. Maria from San Antonio accompanies Velma, Kathy and I to Edinburgh Castle -- after some preliminary "discussions". Picture four women bursting from the front door, each clutching maps and pointing in different directions and you'll understand the dynamics of the first free day of any tour.

Beautiful rhododendrons are in bloom everywhere. We decide to split up for a little while and to meet after we've each toured the castle grounds in our own way. I find the Nova Scotia plaque that I'd heard was here and ask a tourist to take my photo beside it, wearing my NS tartan scarf. This plaque commemorates an actual piece of Nova Scotia soil buried there. The so-called Baronets of Nova Scotia, who claimed the colony for Scotland in the early 17th century, were businessmen rather than settlers so they didn't actually bother visiting Canada to raise the flag etc. Instead, a piece of Nova Scotia was brought to them at Edinburgh Castle where the legal ceremony was held.

Then I wander around many seriously sinuous and gloomy stone buildings within the compound. Much blood has been spilled here and it sure feels like it. There are also a lot of prisons on the grounds. The Royal Apartments are not very sumptuous and remind me a little of the Fortress of Louisbourg in Cape Breton. I find myself in a long queue and end up viewing the Scottish crown jewels, mace, etc. (called "The Honours") which were repatriated only in 1996. Just like in Hamish Macbeth.

After the castle we tour the **Geoffrey (Tailor) Weaving Mill** in the neighbourhood and are absolutely captivated by the many beautifully coloured tartans, both old and new. We also get to see the new "**21st century kilts**" that many fabulous young Scots wear as a matter of course. They are traditional kilts made in solid black or dark charcoal grey wool. A variety of trendy black leather accessories and blousy shirts coordinate with them. Very Braveheart and very yummy!

We are fading but manage to make it down the Royal Mile. I recognize a lot of names from the Ian Rankin mysteries. We are re-vivified by an excellent lunch at Dirty Dick's, where our server proves to be a young girl from Vancouver. "I ran out of money in Edinburgh and decided to work here for a while" These lucky kids. On the way back to Channings I stop at the Hard Rock Cafe to buy the ritual T-shirt for Mr. KN.

Monday, May 20

Excursion day! We divide into two groups. Our group of one wonderful young driver and a dozen knitters heads for The Borders -- which turn out to be a lot

nearer than I'd always imagined. Commuting distance, actually. We stop at Scott's View, a lookout on the Tweed where we can see a great distance. My surname is very common here. (Charles Scott 1800 - 1896, my ancestor, came from Dumfries.) In the distance is the site of the old Roman camp of Trimontium, which I first read about as a child in Rosemary Sutcliffe's novel *Eagle of the Ninth*.

First a tour of the Lochcarron mill in Galashiels. I recognize this brand name. They specialize in cashmere, mohair, and tartan weaving. We are shown how a great many tartans can be wound sequentially on one warping loom, provided they all require the same number of warp threads. Today's tartan designers, and there are many of them, must keep this in mind. This mill is powered by the river Tweed and in the nineteenth century there were 10,000 looms in the factory and housing for the workers in the vicinity. Although fewer than fifty people now work here business today is very good because of new trends in decorating and because of the demand for corporate and commemorative tartans. We are shown samples of Princess Diana Memorial and the new tartans of Tennessee, Nevada(!) and New York City. The Japanese also adore kilts and a huge rack of custom made beauties lies waiting for shipping.

Then to Melrose for lunch and a stroll around Melrose Abbey. Emily leaps from stone to stone, carrying a great big camera. She has brought 70 rolls of film. Kathy is walking on air after finding several long sought graves of family members. She's been clutching a sheaf full of genealogical charts since she got here. Many Scotts are also buried here. I eat a Vanilla and Honeycomb ice cream cone!

Then to Traquair House in Peebles, a home of the Stuart Jacobites. There are many secret stairwells and bolt holes in this castle, which is still occupied by descendants of the original family, who make their living partly from their modern Jacobite Ale brewery on the premises. I see a rosary and several beautiful little purses that belonged to Mary Queen of Scots. They give me knitting ideas.

The trip home is lovely and green, through smooth hills stained with patches of dark heather and blooming gorse. There are many, MANY sheep and lots of gambolling lambs. Also belted Galloway cows. And stone circles formerly used as sheep pens.

At dinner I briefly introduce my Scottish Diamond glove project that we'll be knitting *en route*. People seem stunned by it. Have I chosen the wrong thing? Early start for Lerwick tomorrow. Hope I make it. Shetland or bust!

Tuesday - Thursday, May 21 - 23, Shetland: A *miscellany of impressions noted after the fact. The first few days passed in a haze because there is beautiful yarn and fabulous knitwear everywhere and I barely had time to scribble things down This is a place I could really get to love!*

Another merry flight in the tiniest of planes. We leave Edinburgh in sunshine and finish our trip in brooding Celtic mists. Or Norse mists, more accurately. "Call us anything but don't call us Scottish!" our bus driver Magnus cautions us. We quickly learn that the days of oppression by Scottish lairds are perpetually fresh in the Shetlander's mind. Leaving the airport our first sight is of rounded green hills with the ghosts of old stone buildings silhouetted against the sky. These prove to be the ruins of Jarlshof, of which more later. This view alone seems worth the price of the trip. Am

easy to please or what?

I am initially disappointed with Lerwick though. Although it is spacious and comfortable our hotel is located in what I would call an "industrial section." (I later discover the romantic older town, filled with charming shops). But I understand -- and celebrate -- the reasoning behind this choice when we make the first of many yarn buying visits to **Jamieson & Srnith**, which just happens to be about 50 paces from the hotel door. Over a hundred shades of 2-ply jumper weight yarn stock the shelves. I am completely stunned by the range of colours, hitherto glimpsed only on a shade card. The sales staff are excellent, helping people to choose colours for our glove project and for their sweaters. A rumour circulates that Alex has bought enough yarn for eight sweaters. I stay cool though. I'd made a list before leaving home and stick to it pretty closely.

Shetlanders speak the strangest English I've ever heard, barring Rhodesian and some of the Caribbean dialects we hear in Toronto. Their accents are soft and they roll their rrrrrr's very charmingly. They have a funny way with vowels too. As the tour progresses we hear people remark that Joyce's "nuttin' bus" full of

big spenders is back in town.

Now the shopping really begins! There are oodles of knitwear in Lerwick and the sweaters are fascinating. The size range is better than I'd thought, but usually seems to stop at XL. Alas, I am 2X. Meanwhile, everyone else on the trip seems to find a sweater that was meant just for them. Some thin people find many more than one.

The glove knitting class goes down pretty well, considering that we meet in the public bar of the hotel, with Shetland witnesses all around! A few people become quite seriously involved with the pattern, which is very pleasing.

We are completely *boulevardé* by our visit to the Croft House Museum. This is my favourite type of museum -- an old-time house. I love to try to imagine how people lived in the past, but in this case I am at a total loss. Most rooms seem too small for anyone to stand up in and the house and tiny barn are joined together by passages you pretty well have to crawl through. Life here must have been very nearly subterranean in days gone by. It seems impossible but our bus driver Magnus

tells us that he was born in such a house.

When we stop at the **Shetland Designer**, Wilma Malcolmson's modern shop, all heck breaks loose. It is filled to bursting with the most beautiful sweaters I've ever seen, as well as piles of hand knit gloves, berets, lace scarves etc. The walls are covered in hundreds of astonishing colour swatches. Inside is shopping pandemonium and, guess what? I find a beautiful Fair Isle cardigan vest in a colourway called Pheasant that actually fits *and* suits me! Somehow this causes a dam to burst somewhere in my psyche and I end up buying three berets and four pairs of gloves as well as my vest.

"Shall we go full Fair Isle tonight?" Kathy asks as we prepare for the evening. And indeed, our entire party is resplendent at a special dinner at the Lerwick Hotel later that night. We are entertained by a group of young women fiddlers who set our toes tapping. This music sure sounds like Nova Scotia.

Friday, May 24

What a day! It begins with the usual early morning shopping at Jamieson & Smith. Then to the Shetland Textile

Museum at Weisdale Mill where I am in heaven because I see the originals of so many antique pieces of lace and colour pattern knitting that I've studied in books. This must be where all the knitting photographers come for illustrations. I also get to meet Margaret Stuart and tell her how the book *Classic British Knits*, written by Madeline Weston and herself, changed my life. I'm photographed with Margaret and Bess Jamieson, and finally get to autograph the copy of *Canada Knits* that they have in their library.

Then to Burrastow House for such a wonderful lunch that I'm compelled to buy their cookbook on the spot. Dessert is a fruit salad with cream, also Pavlova, and a chocolate cake so dark that it looks like a slab of peat. Most of us have all three. This is a wild and remote seaside spot. How many calories can I burn simply trying to stand upright in the wind?

Then to Sandness to **Jamieson's** woollen mill. The bargains here are terrific and people (myself among them) stagger from the shop under huge loads of bags, greeted by rounds of applause. Maria and Alex are definitely vying to be Top Shopper. At the Weisdale Mill Maria buys an exquisite wedding ring Shetland lace shawl for £150. Alex is now up to the yam for nine sweaters, not to mention the ready mades he's collecting.

Then to our rendezvous with the Shetland Guild of Spinners, Weavers, and Dyers, where we have a mutual show and share. They are spinning cobweb lace yam and knitting intricate lace scarves as well as Fair Isle garments. We can NOT figure out their finger movements, no matter how hard we try. The knitting belt, which they all use, is essential to their technique; also tying up the finished work in their belts. These women all learned to knit before they could read or write. Now every Shetland child learns hand knitting in school, but not until age seven.

Aha! There is a sale tablewhere (after a series of lucky events that leave some now impecunious knitters eating my dust) I become the proud owner of an exquisite lace scarf, like those from Sarah Don's book that I keep in my bathroom at home for periods of intense study. And I thought all the people that did this quality of work were dead!

I got lucky here because many people are now totally out of cash and the guild doesn't take plastic. I dip into my secret reserves -- but am afraid to count what's left. On the return trip our bus stops at the bank machine in Lerwick.

Back to the hotel where a great dinner awaits us just 90 minutes after our last meal. That's life in the holiday lane.

And tonight there is the nightmare of packing our suitcases for flying tomorrow. Some knitters get together to ship a huge parcel by courier to the hotel in Glasgow where we will spend our last night. I'm still okay for suitcase room, but I had to go to the bank machine twice in Lerwick. My budget is now totally blown. What was I thinking of? I must have had some pretty big lunches to go through all that money so fast.

Saturday, May 25

Our last day in Shetland. It's sunny and nice. We visit the Jarlshof archaeological site before heading to the airport. I have read about this place for years and can hardly believe I am actually here. And despite my many trips to Nova Scotia I have never smelled air as briny as this.

It's a neat little flight to Orkney. Kirkwall is very interesting -- a winding tangle of stone streets and a very pronounced Orcadian accent. The local youths are short, bandy legged, and look like they'd be wicked in a fight.

The farms are bigger here and there are more cows and fewer sheep than in Shetland. Flatter land. No ruined croft houses. Many many sandy beaches are visible from the plane. No wind to speak of.

On my walk before dinner I manage to get lost on the streets of Kirkwall. Then it starts to rain and my feet hurt. One wrong turn here and you're a goner.

Sunday, May 26, Kirkwall, Orkney

I was wrong about the wind.

A very good day of archaeology, folk life, history, and sunshine. The sea is everywhere, but because the Churchill Barriers link many islands we can cover a lot of ground. Scapa Flow is a great bowl of pale blue water. It reminds me a little of Lake Pontchartrain in Louisiana. Because of the moon the tides are exceptionally low. We even see a whelk picker on the distant horizon. And the Ring of Brodgar's standing stones is very moving. Orkney is one of the top archaeological areas in Britain and I find all the pre-history very thrilling.

And what a great time of year! Inside all the little croft house museums we visit I can hear birds chirping. I finally figure out that they live in the nooks and crannies of the stone walls. And every bird has food in its beak and is intent on a mission.

There are marvellous places to live here. Sure would like to spend more time.

At **Stéphane Jaeger's** farm studio. The style of knitwear in Orkney is entirely different from Shetland, focusing on natural tones and textural patterns rather than intricate colourways. The **jewellery** is world famous though and some knitters make major purchases of very beautiful things. Later there is some very heavy duty shopping at the craft co-op in St. Margaret's Hope. I am able to resist the undyed yam of the famous seaweed eating sheep of North Ronaldsay but others do a great job of cheering up the local economy. Ann from Arizona buys at least five bags of it and surges into the Top Shopper position.

Monday, May 27

Our day off in Orkney. I poke around the streets alone after a late breakfast. There are lots of real shops and real people here, not just tourists like ourselves. St. Magnus cathedral really is lovely. Then I spend 1.5 hours in the museum (a personal best), most of it going through the photo archives.

I keep running into Kathy so we lunch together at the Mustard Seed, a café and bookstore a bit off the usual tourist track. A lucky find too. The food is award winning.

Back to the hotel for tea, shortbread, feet up, BBC4, a magazine, knitting. Whisky??

Tuesday, May 28, Inverness

After a 5:00 am wake-up call (!) we leave for the airport at 6:30. It's a cool morning in Orkney but the sun is blazing in Inverness when we land and we are dressed all wrong for the mainland weather.

First a tour of **Hector Russell, Kiltmaker**. It's a working studio, shop and museum combined and our guide is very dishy in his Highland dress. I have kilts on the brain, if not somewhere lower. Been reading too much Diana Gabaldon. Afterwards in the shop Alex stops to make a secret purchase.

The friendly and cooperative spirit of our group wears *very* thin when we converge on the knitting corner of a famous second-hand bookstore and several "real finds" are quickly made. We are all crouching down by the shelves, red faced with heat and emotion. It takes about ten minutes to empty the shelf of anything of any possible interest,

The bus then leaves for Elgin, for a tour of **Johnston's** famous super modern cashmere operation. We're getting pretty good at mill tours by now but this one is very slick. We are not allowed to visit the area where the cashmere is de-haired. For many years it was a Scottish trade secret but I believe the Japanese finally figured out how it was done.

The shop is very very posh and we have a look around but we are all a bit travel weary and looking, as my friend Ruth said as a child, a bit "bed-raggled". Nevertheless, finding a bargain basket hidden away in a corner, I succumb to a luscious 100% cashmere lace shawl at less than half price (£40, not £89). After this lucky find people take heart and one or two others pull out the stops. By now our group is wearing a lot of new stuff, including *beaucoup de* fine jewellery.

Luggage has become a serious preoccupation. The planes we're on are tiny and have almost no room for hand baggage. Rod, who has to carry drinking water and medical paraphernalia with him, resorts to wearing all his sweaters at once on every flight. Still, we shop onTalk about strategies for diverting the attention of customs officials begins to be heard. We decide that there are actually only two barriers to continued shopping which, once transcended, open up a whole new ball game. They are 1) buying a new suitcase, and 2) passing the customs duty free limit.

Maria continues to be an independent spirit. Not only did she rent a car and take off for a day on her own in Shetland, she's taking a taxi to Tarbert tomorrow to spend the day on Skye with musical friends of hers. I admire her nerve.

A free drink on the 40 minute flight to Stornoway cheers everybody up *very* quickly indeed. It's a lovely night in the Hebrides when we land. We are taken to a posh modern hotel near the centre of Stornoway. I remember it from our visit here 15 years ago, when we were too poor to stay there. I hardly recognize anything else though. In those days Stornoway seemed like an exotic outpost, but today people even mow lawns in front of bungalows here. And we have passion fruit for dessert.

Wednesday, May 29, Stornoway, Isle of Lewis, Outer Hebrides

A good day on Harris. Who every thought I'd be writing that in my diary? I am relieved to see that while Stornoway has changed a great deal, Tarbert is much the same, and the terrifying narrow road that leads to it is *definitely unchanged*.

This is a tweed day. We visit two weavers who use traditional foot powered looms -- and we leave hundreds of pounds behind. Money, that is. The spirit of potlatch now prevails in our shopping. I don't even sew and I buy three Harris tweeds. Maile from Santa Fe has bought at least four or five real beauties. The colours are so exciting and people say that the prices are very good.

Our guide and driver, who are both Morrisons of Ness

(where the Lewis chessmen were found), chat away in Gaelic.

Thursday, May 30

Lovely day on Lewis, seeing the world in Starmore colourways. We have every sort of weather. Callanish is very mysterious with its awesome views and standing stones. Because I have forgotten to bring one and it starts to rain I buy my fifth hat in the gift shop there. It's only money!

At the Morven Gallery, a magnificent modern space set in the Lewis countryside, a special lunch is prepared for us before our workshop with **Alice Starmore**. On the way in Emily and I spy the family cat slinking around a corner with a pretty hefty rabbit in its jaws. This is wild country! Alice turns out to be very petite (about 5'2", I'd say), friendly and nice. There has been a lot of unpleasant Starmore talk in knitting circles and we aren't sure what to expect, but she is very engaging and the anti-Alice faction immediately turn 180 degrees and grovel to touch the hem of her garment. Aren't knitters practical?? Her new yams and new palette are exquisite, but very expensive.

Alice now sells only through the internet. Although she doesn't allude specifically to her business troubles I form the impression that she became tired of seeing everybody make more from her work than she did and decided to take business as well as artistic control of it all.

She told us that her father was born in a blackhouse. Her mother and sisters were talented knitters of some local reputation. Her mother nursed in Glasgow during the war, where she learned Fair Isle knitting from a Shetlander. Alice, like most local girls, knit away at the kitchen table in the evenings, until she went to school in Edinburgh and won the distinction of a Churchill travelling fellowship. Then the design world opened up for her.

Her yams, however, seem shockingly expensive to us. Only the courageous Maria makes a purchase and later holds an open house in her hotel room to view it! Alice graciously autographs our books and poses for photos. I get to give the thank you. I thank her particularly for choosing knitting as her medium. I'm sure the if she were just starting out today she'd never choose to be a professional knitter. The recognition and the returns are so much smaller than in other forms of artistic endeavour.

We stop at the Harris tweed mill in Shawbost. I sure wish we'd come here first! The variety is amazing and the price very good (£6/metre). I buy a tweed that looks like the bottom of a moorland pool. Only two or three others do any buying, mostly due to fatigue.

We visit the Blackhouse Museum and are again totally 'gob smacked'. This one has no chimney and it's incomprehensible how people lived in all the smoke. The arrival of the mobile grocery shop, a big truck fitted out just like a store, causes a sensation. "I'll be back the same time next week!" the driver jokes, as we once again leave a lot of money behind us.

Another packing night. Groan. The penultimate. I am almost the only person in the group who has not bought a supplementary suitcase.

Friday, May 31

What begins as a quiet walk around Stornoway -- museums, churches, gardens and other low cost amusements, goes wild when Anna discovers a thrift shop full of bags of Alice Starmore's old yam at 50p per skein. Any knitter strolling in the vicinity is hailed and the news spreads quickly. I immediately buy 30 skeins, first covering them with my body to stake my claim. Anna discovered thrift shops early on in this trip and has found some wonderful things. When we finish a meal she always lifts up her plate to look at the markings!

This is just the beginning of a day of great hilarity. Many more people now buy extra suitcases. I settle for a Scottish SPCA backpack for my new yam. It costs £1 at the same charity shop.

Our bus takes us to the Butt of Lewis, a beautiful scenic spot right at the tip of the island where I once again get to fulfill my urge to "knit at the tips" (see KN 11:3, #53). We spread out over the sunny landscape in Fellini-esque fashion. Iain, our bus driver, takes us to a small local café in his home town of Ness, where we're treated as family and get a homemade lunch. A young girl rushes home to change into her costume and does a Highland dance for us, glad to do it despite the fact that there is no accompanying music. This would hold many people back but I immediately feel a kinship. We are both Celts, born to entertain, music or no music. Then we are off to another hall/museum, where Gaelic flows in the kitchen. Then to a unique pottery shop, where we find many perfect things we'll never find anywhere else in the world, natch.

And then to the airport, where we laugh to hear the mildly astonishing announcement that our flight is delayed because the small plane is so heavy it has to take on extra fuel. Then it's a one hour trip to Glasgow and a convoy of taxis to our hotel. Again, such friendly cab drivers and porters! Wicked accent though.

Friday, May 31, Glasgow

Very interesting city, with some of the most intriguing buildings I've ever seen. There surely was a lot of money around here at one time.

I walk Sauciehall street (don't read this name out loud until you learn how) on my free day and a couple of us have tea at the Willow Tea Room, designed by Charles Rennie McIntosh. The décor is interesting, the food overrated. There have not been many culinary disappointments on this trip. I have saved a menu from each hotel to prove it when I get home.

At our final dinner and reception together we wear as much of our finery as is clean and as we can get on. Alex surprises us by wearing his secret purchase from the Hector Russell shop -- a pair of very becoming highland trews. Maria, who has carried a portable guitar with her everywhere on this trip, sings us a song that she composed in Shetland. There are lucky draws for books, knitting kits, and yam certificates, some of which are actually won by people with room in their luggage. But even those whose bags are bursting are glad to win something. And guess what? Three people have actually finished their gloves!

Saturday, June 1

The Last Morning. We identify our luggage for the final time and pile into mini-vans. Our bags reach the roof, a real sight to behold, and it's 33 miles to the airport where we struggle through the formalities. When a wheelchair is mistakenly ordered for Anna she briefly considers accepting it for her carry-ons. This is a day for patience. Sigh.

Heathrow. Yikes! There are no seats in the waiting area. Our group disperses to explore the shops with their terrifying prices and I am suddenly lonely. Once in our jumbo jet we again hear the unbelievable announcement that take off is delayed "because of extra heavy baggage". Surely not because of us? We all know that wool doesn't weigh very much!

I will skip over the next seven hours. I am inserted with a shoehorn into a centre seat beside a lady who coughs. The movies are terrible. Only a last serving of shortbread, specially packaged for the Queen's Golden Jubilee, cheers me up.

In Toronto we lose each other in the customs and immigration line-ups. In the distance I watch Maria scoot through. I think she must have done a sort of "broken wing" act with her guitar to distract the officials from her mound of luggage. They take no notice whatsoever of me and my single suitcase.

A nice homecoming though. In the past Mr KN has learned

the hard way about the fragile emotions of the newly returned.

Gee, it sure is crowded with me, Mr. KN, and two cats in the same bed.

And what do you mean somebody has to clear the dishes from the table???

Photos of the trip:

www.needleartsbookshop.com/shetland.html

Web Sites:

Joyce James Tours: www.joycejainestours.com

21st Century Kilts: www.geoffreykilts.co.uk

Jamieson & Smith:

www.shetland-wool-brokers-zetnet.co.uk

Shetland Designer: www.shetlanddesigner.co.uk

Jamieson's: www.sheeweknits.com

Stéphane Jaeger: www.visitorkney.com/stephjaeger

Hector Russell, Kiltmaker: www.hector-russell.com

Johnston's of Elgin: www.johnstonscashmere.com

Alice Starmore: www.virtualyams.com

Sheila Fleet Orkney Designer Jewellery:

www.sheilafleet-jewellery.co.uk

P.S. Here's what I bought: 8 books, 1

brooch, 1 T-shirt, 3 lace scarves, 1 cashmere stole, 6 pairs gloves, 1 vest, 5 hats, 4 tweeds, 3 mini prints to frame, notecards, 60 skeins yam, 1 basket, 1 puzzle, 1 tea towel. And a few lunches.

.....I cast my eye at my current project, some ten inches of a woolly shawl, which lay in a small crumpled heap at the bottom of the basket. I had learned the basics, but knitting for me was still a pitched battle with knotted thread and slippery needles, not the soothing, dreamy exercise that Jamie and Ian made of it, needles clicketing, away in their big hands by the fire comforting as the sound of crickets on the hearth

from *Drums of Autumn*, by Diana Gabaldon, 1997

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