

Loch Linnhe, south of Fort William

RUGGED

BEAUTY

Jan-Eric Österlund takes the high road on a photographic trip to the Highlands of Bonnie Scotland.

REPORT AND PHOTOGRAPHY JAN-ERIC ÖSTERLUND

There's water everywhere... pouring down from a leaden grey sky with the strong wind blowing it sideways into my face, however I try to turn. The moorland is soaked by thousands of years of rain and my wellies sink down into the bog, where I expected a firm turf to step on. The sea is not far away, breaking into the land in lochs created by the glaciers from the last Ice Ages, dividing the islands neatly into smaller parts. And beside me is a waterfall which I am trying to photograph. Yes, it's water everywhere: I see it, I

feel it, I hear it, I even imagine I can smell it, too.

I am in Scotland on the Isle of Mull where I arrived two days ago. I have always been challenged by the Scottish landscape and wanted to capture it, with its brooding clouds and windswept moors, with its lochs hiding deep secrets (does the Loch Ness monster exist?) and its white stone cottages with peat fires sending their warmth and scent through draughty rooms. The challenge of catching a contemplative mood, a Scottish 'soul' of bagpipe and whisky and

haggis in the landscape, while still preserving and enhancing the beauty of it, appealed to me.

The first morning on the Isle of Mull I drove north from Craignure – not much more than a ferry terminal – when the sun broke through in the morning and lit up a couple of rotting fishing hulks keeling over at low tide. I got out my camera and tripod and felt immediately happier. Maybe I had caught the soul of Scotland already, with this first exposure?

I continued to Tobermory, the capital of Mull



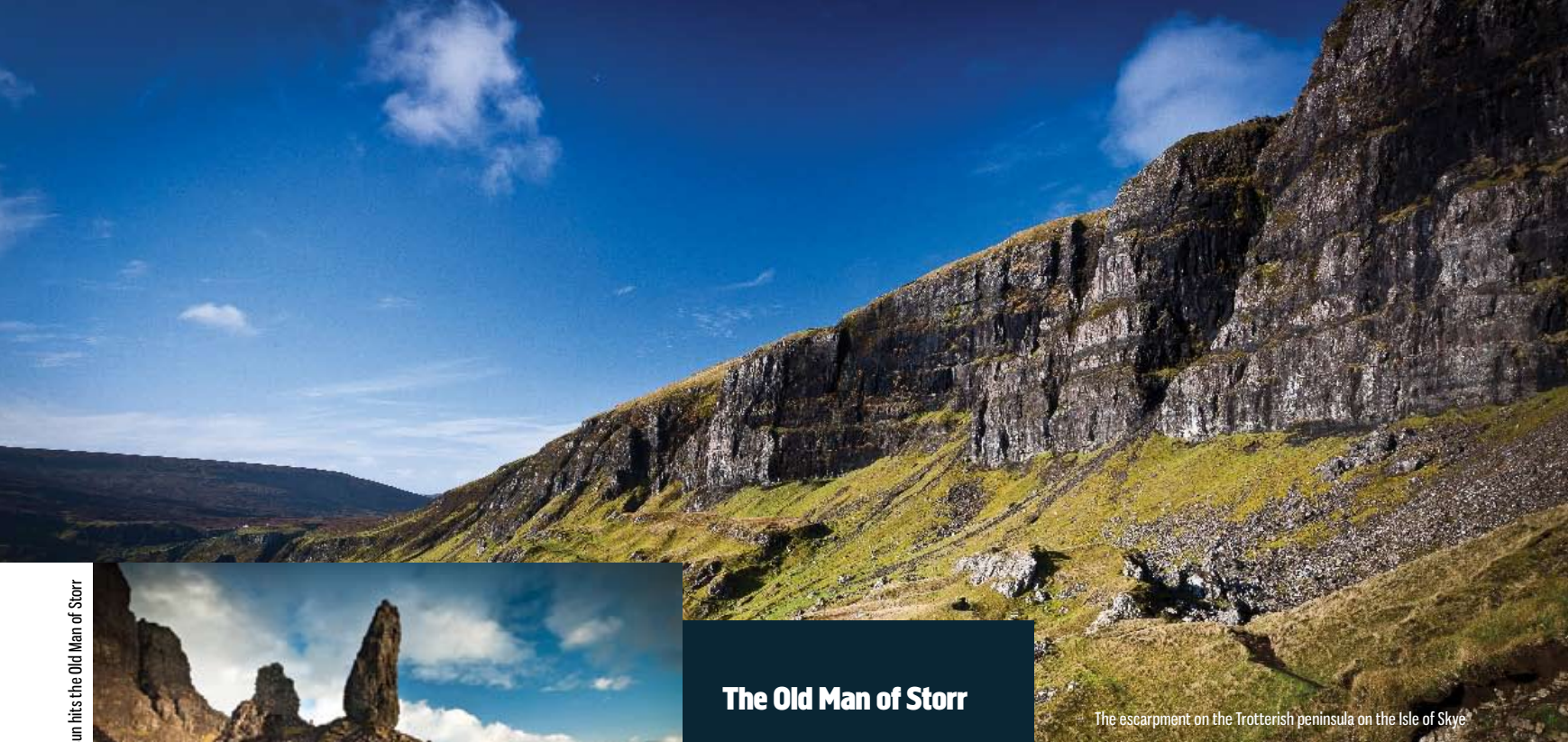
Tobermory harbour, Isle of Mull

but only a tiny village by most peoples' standards: a few houses reflected in the still water of the harbour with the dark hills and clouds above. As I was walking along the waterfront, the sun lit up the houses which exploded with colour, as did their reflections in the dark harbour water. The composition was there, ready to be captured, without the need to add or subtract a thing.

But on day two on the Isle of Mull, the rain arrived. With rain and a grey sky, the light was very soft – not very exciting for wide landscape pictures

but ideal for rivers, streams and waterfalls. The water was swirling around my wellington boots as I was standing in the stream, trying to catch the depth and movement of the running water. The soft, blurred, rippling water fits the Scottish mood – or at least my vision of it. So I was happy not to freeze the water droplets but to let long exposures create a smoothness representing time, or maybe rather the absence of time; action, but an action where nothing changed; a constant movement turned into softness; a flow becoming a path!

Walking over the bog, I saw those paths everywhere, meandering down the mountains to the bigger burns and rivers along the valleys. They connected the sky and the sea lochs doing their part in recirculating the water, relentlessly falling down on me as I got soaked both from above and below. Man's capacity to appreciate beauty, even in the most adverse conditions, never stops astounding me. But then, the next day, the sun was back again. The drama was gone for a gentler beauty.



The escarpment on the Trotterish peninsula on the Isle of Skye



The Old Man of Storr

standing tall among all the other rocks lit up by the rising sun. Below him was the tumble of lava rocks and stones and, further away, hills covered in the autumnal colours of yellow and red while on the horizon, between Skye and the mainland, were the Western Highlands.

I stayed nearly three hours and was alone all the time, apart from a few sheep and rabbits. I walked around finding new angles and positions to pay my respects to the Old Man. Sometimes he stood out, commanding the mountains and the seas below; sometimes he was dwarfed by the other bergs beside him and I thought: 'There is no real truth. It is all in my interpretation!' I sat down, contemplating the wisdom of this. The sheep approached me, sensing that I had a great philosophical issue to address although they didn't really contribute anything to my thinking! Also the rabbits became braver, bringing their paths closer and closer to the contemplating photographer as they jumped along.

Long ago, the Hebrides were filled with volcanoes exploding and pouring their lava over the older basalt rocks. Both the Isles of Mull and Skye were covered with lava flows which have broken down over time. On the northern part of Skye, the Trotterish Peninsula, the mountains of basalt and lava have cracked and big chunks have fallen down, creating the most bizarre formations. I had moved to the Isle of Skye the day before and was climbing up one of those broken-down escarpments to reach 'The Old Man of Storr'.

Storr is the big mountain, about 700 metres above sea level, on the north side of Skye. Towards the east, the mountain has collapsed and an escarpment has formed a large black wall a couple of hundred metres tall, with a tumble of rocks below. The Old

Man of Storr is 48 metres high and very narrow, standing just below the main mountain of Storr, looking over the east side of Skye towards the mainland.

Lots of photographers had been there before me. I just wanted to see the 'Old Man' for myself and to photograph him. I had to rise early and started my climb more than an hour before sunrise to catch the first rays lighting up his form. I was totally alone and used my torch to find the path but it was well worn and easy to spot. I scouted out a position and set up my tripod just as the sun rose above the horizon. As it lit up the Old Man, the landscape was transformed. The darkness was gone, replaced by hope and aspiration. The rays of golden light engulfed him and made him glow. He was magical in his pride,

The Three Chimneys and The House Over-By

The first time I went to Scotland I was only around 20 years old. We set off on a journey with great expectations and very little money. I remembered even now, more than 40 years later, the over-cooked food served devoid of fresh greens. This time I was prepared for the worst but I was very pleasantly surprised!

Lots of small seafood places have appeared in the countryside and, with my love of shellfish, I could rest assured that a mussel soup or a dish of scallops would warm my body and brighten up my day. On the second day on the Isle of Skye, I drove 45 minutes from my hotel to a restaurant I found in the Michelin Guide which went by the simple name of The Three Chimneys and The House Over-By. It was a great evening experience and well worth the long drive. I had a seven-course dinner of which five courses were seafood, served in a charming house that was once a crofter's cottage. The freshly-caught mackerel and scallops melted in my mouth.

My hotels and restaurants were mostly simple and run with great Scottish charm. The evenings ended with a glass of single malt from the well-stocked bars. I love my Armagnac but for two weeks my habits changed and I was educated into the world of the single malts by knowledgeable bar staff eager to share their experience. In contrast, on the very last day of my two-week trip I stayed at Inverlochy Castle, just outside Fort William. A typical Scottish baronial house, it was a world away from the small hotels I had hitherto sampled here, very elegant but maybe a little pretentious. However the food certainly lived up to the restaurant's Michelin star!

The Old Man of Storr captured from Loch Leathan



This page had an
advertisement
in the magazine

After the Isles of Mull and Skye I turned back to the mainland and drove north along the sea lochs to Torridon and Gairloch, where I teamed up with a group of photographers. One afternoon our driver slammed on the brakes as, through the trees, he had spotted a photo opportunity: the autumnal colours reflected in the millpond surface of Loch nan Dailthean. We squeezed through a gap between the trees and found a safe spot to admire the landscape, the stillness in marked contrast to the howling winds that had chilled our bodies on the previous day. We didn't see one landscape but two, the lower one being a perfect reflection of the real one above. The only thing telling us that one was a reflection were the reeds shooting up through the 'mirror' loch.

This is the other Scotland: the sky is blue, the air is warm and calm, the colours are vivid and the story is there for us to

tell. But how to limit a composition when everything is so beautiful? In the end I decided to stitch a panorama together. If you cannot make up your mind, catch it all! It is a glorious panorama but, of course, far too wide to fit anywhere so the decision I couldn't quite make, when I took the photograph, will have to be made on the computer instead, when I crop the picture.



Loch nan Dailthean northeast of Poolewe

Neist Point Lighthouse, Isle of Skye at autumn sunset



12th century Kinlochaline Castle northeast of Mull in the western Highlands



Listing keels in the Sound of Mull



Ghairbhe River at the eastern part of Glen Torridon



Loch Tollaidh, northeast of Gairloch in the northwestern Highlands

A snow-covered Ben Eige seen from Glen Torridon

Reeds shooting through the water in the reflection of Loch nan Dailthean



13th century Eilean Donan Castle, situated at a sea loch near the Isle of Skye

Battleground and Massacre

I spent the last two days of my Highland tour on my own again, returning south but, this time, inland. I travelled again through Glen Torridon and saw the Isle of Skye from the mainland. I passed the Eilean Donan castle, arguably the most photographed castle in Scotland. It stands on a tiny island in a loch about ten miles inland from the Isle of Skye but it is still on a sea loch. The indented coastline of the Highlands makes it difficult to know if you are at an inland lake or a sea loch but in this case it wasn't hard to tell; it was low tide and the kelp around the shore disclosed immediately that this castle had direct access to the sea.

Eilean Donan, or the island of Donan, was probably named after an Irish bishop and saint who came to Scotland in the sixth century. It was originally built in the 13th century and, circa 1720, it played an important part in the Jacobite uprising that took place in Scotland. A small Spanish garrison supporting the uprising was stationed at the castle and the English bombarded it from three ships but, due to its very thick walls, they didn't succeed and had to storm it to destroy it.

The castle wasn't rebuilt until the beginning of the 20th century when a new owner of the island reconstructed it after 200 years of decay and neglect. The design was based on surviving original drawings and it has an air of mystery. Like so many photographers and sightseers before me, I had to stop but, without any sun brightening up the menacing walls, and with the low tide preventing any extensive reflections from the loch, this photo would never make it into the *National Geographic Magazine*.



Sunrise at Inverlochy Castle



Highland cow

I ventured into the nearby village to get a bite to eat and found an inviting pub. The bar area was filled with locals having a pint and speaking in a dialect I had to work hard to understand. Arriving with my iPad, I felt like an alien entering a place where time stood still. But I had a great lunch and a friendly chat and the iPad remained unopened on my table.

On my last morning, I drove along Loch Linnhe towards Glen Coe. It was very cold – 3 degrees – and a heavy frost had covered the car in the early morning. However, that didn't bother me as the footman at Inverlochy Castle, where I'd spent the night, had started the car, warmed it up and parked it ready for me at the hotel entrance. There was an absolute stillness as I drove along Loch Linnhe; the mist that had enveloped me while I captured the sunrise at Inverlochy had melted away, giving me the reflections I craved for.

Further on was Glen Coe, well-known to all Scots

because of the bloody massacre that took place there, a little more than 300 years ago. In 1691, King William III offered the Highland clans pardon if they swore an oath of allegiance to the crown. However clan chief Alastair Maclain waited until the last day and failed to arrive in time to swear the oath. This was later used as a pretext for the massacre that took place the following year. A regiment of soldiers from the Argyll Estates and Lowlands under the command of Captain Robert Campbell were billeted with the Maclains (part of the clan Donald) at Glen Coe but these 'guests' sacked the place and murdered their hosts (some 40 men, women and children) in one day. Those who did not die that morning (some 40 more) perished from exposure to the cold February weather after their homes were burnt down. At a subsequent inquiry into the massacre, the blame was ultimately placed on the Secretary of State for Scotland, John Dalrymple. However, it can probably best be described as a conflict between Highlanders and Lowlanders where the rules of hospitality were flouted in the (failed) ambition of wiping out a Highland clan.

When I entered the valley and started the climb it was calm

and peaceful although probably as cold as it had been that fateful February morning in 1692. Glen Coe is a valley through high mountains separating the Highlands from Loch Lomond and, further on, Glasgow. Nearby is Ben Nevis, the highest mountain in Britain but none of these mountains looked that impressive. They are very old, geologically speaking, and several glaciers have polished and rounded the mountain tops so the ragged tops of the Alps or Andes are absent here, although the grandeur of the landscape with its vast moorland dressed in autumnal colours is still awesome. Driving up the glen, now the artery bringing goods and tourists to and from the Western Highlands, I imagined the cottages burning on the day of the massacre, and men and women fleeing the soldiers only to be shot down in the river or along the mountainside.

That smoke has long ago blown away and the cries have been silenced. The air seemed as clear as in Antarctica and stillness enclosed me during my walk. Yet the memories of cowardice and treason remain in the history books and in tales still told here: a history of clan fighting and changing allegiances in a setting of snow-covered mountain tops and vast moorlands; that's the essence of the Scottish Highlands. 📍



Glen Coe, near King's House Hotel