

Highland-Tour III

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I'm on a tour bus somewhere between the Isle of Skye and Glasgow next to a good friend of mine. He's throwing up into a white plastic shopping bag. I feel for the guy. But I'm also worried about my clothing.

It was two days ago, on a Wednesday, that he text-messaged my mobile. When I got his message, I'd just come out of my first shower in 36 hours, and was looking forward to my first real sleep in 48. Tuesday night was rough.

I towelled off, and looked at the little screen on my phone.

"Want 2 go 2 scotland?"

Everyone texts here because it's cheap, just 13p, while regular phone calls cost 20p/min. Everyone texts and nobody calls, and what once took a ring and 30 seconds now takes 8 beeps and 10 minutes. Progress.

"When?" I cobbled into the cramped plastic number pad. I bought the cheapest phone in stock.

"This wkend." 39p total.

"Friday?" 52p.

"Thrsday." 65p.

"Ok. Flying?" 78p.

"Bus." 91p.

By bus, Edinburgh is eight hours away.

"Crap." 1.04.

"Yeah." 1.17.

"Ok, sounds good im in."

My phone rang in my hand. Him. One pound, thirty pence later, he calls me to firm up details. Unbelievable.

We left London around 10:30 that Thursday night and pulled into Edinburgh (pronounced Ed-inn-burr-uh), Scotland near 7 a.m. the next morning. I spent the last three hours with my head rattling against the bus window in a fool's gambit for sleep, glancing

now and then at my watch and bargaining with my subconscious.

"Ok, just fall asleep now," I thought, doing math backwards in my head, "and it'll be two and a half hours. That's good. Two-and-a-half, that's better than nothing. Just get a little rest. That's it."

"I don't have to get any sleep at all!"

"C'mon, please, I need just a little. Give me an hour, just a little hour."

"What's in it for me?"

"You can... you can have all the nightmares you want. Deal?"

"I can do that anyway."

"Not if you don't go to sleep." Point: me.

"So?" Point: subconscious.

"Just a half an hour... a little half hour, that's nothing! You can think about latent homosexuality the whole time, just a half-"

"No."

"I'll do anything, honest..."

"No."

"I'll... I'll get you... counseling. Counseling, yeah, I promise this time. Shrink... couch.... the works..."

"No deal, you said that last time. Nope, you can just sit there with your head bouncing against the window and wrestle with your own concept of self. Mwahahahaha!"

We stumbled off the bus into the February cold. Right away, you notice a change from London's flat and ordered streets. London is square, the kind of city you could build with Legos, and does not stray far from the sharp edges of the classic set. Edinburgh has jagged curves and character; hills and bare faces of rock hanging over the Forth river, watched over by Edinburgh Castle high above. London is a city I could visit, but Edinburgh is a place I could live.

WHERE THE HELL IS WAYNE, MAINE?



We found the correct address, and a man with a clipboard ushered us up the steps of a 27-seat bus.

He's in his mid thirties, our guide, and named 'Will'. He has the look of a Pierce Brosnan stunt double from the Remington Steele years.

"Do you all see that castle 'aye over there?" Will cuts across the music through the mic that hangs over the steering wheel and looks into the mirror. There are times when his diction isn't unlike the Animal Planet's Crocodile Hunter.

"You'll see those all over Scotland, and they weren't nay built to protect the country from outsiders. Nay, lads and lassies, those castles were made to keep the locals under control."

It's hard to tell whether our guide is just putting on his expressions for us tourists, the way he puts on his special tour-guide jacket in the morning, or whether he really does talk like that. Myself, I vacillate between belief and skepticism; thrown this way or that with each "aye" or "lassie". It's almost as if these Scots are too willing to speak native.

"And, do you know, there's still a garrison of men up thar? In case we Scottish decide to up and revolt against the government!"

This is a theme that runs throughout the tour; the Scots do not like the British. Most of the stops on our tour ended up like this: This is a beautiful resource that was captured from the Scottish people and ruined by the British in 1714. If you take a look to your left you'll see the battlefield where the Scottish highland warriors made their last stand against Lord Redpants, second knight of King John, and died in a valiant battle. Next stop is a village where English imperialism still threatens everyday life.

The United Kingdom is made up of England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Technically, these are separate countries. In reality, they are glorified states that bow to London. But while they're down there bowing, they spit and curse the English under their breath.

In two days, we've driven through scenery unrivaled by any I've seen in films or on television, unmatched by anything I've ever seen with my own eyes. True, sometimes it's been so cold and so windy that we just run off the bus, snap a quick picture, and then enjoy the 'view' on the tiny screens on the backs of our cameras, but even then the country is magnificent. The Scottish highlands are full with a rugged beauty I'm convinced doesn't exist anyplace else. Will calls the views "dead sexy." He's right. If I were a British royal in the 1300s, I'd want to get my hands on them too.

Right now, we're taking the views on faith. We're all sitting on the bus, staring out the big windows and sleeping a little when we can. The magnificent Scottish highlands are out there. Somewhere. But it's snowing heavily, and we can't see very far past five meters. My friend next to me, who mixed a little too freely with some of the Australian tourists last night, isn't doing too well with Scotland's narrow, winding roads or our 8:30 start time.

I'm making the best of it. I've got a little Scottish blood in me, and I feel like Will and I are in this together; battling the elements and adversity to show these tourists our homeland.

I've left Will the elements, and most of adversity. For the moment, I'm going to try and get my friend to stop retching into that bag.