

Scotland

Scotland was officially united with England and Wales in 1707 when the Scottish parliament was disbanded and absorbed into the English one. The countries have shared a monarch since 1603, when James VI of Scotland became James I of England, yet a long history of fierce fighting and border disputes between the English and Scots ensured that the Scottish people preserved their independent spirit and unique character, which can still be seen today. The 1998 Scotland Act, which established a Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh, has been a more recent progression in the country's determination to ensure its own national identity.

Relics of Scotland's and England's chequered history can be seen in the border territories where ancient fortifications, battlefields and ruined abbeys are found against a backdrop of rolling hills and moorlands. The River Tweed which runs through this area gives its name to the textile industry for which Scotland is famous worldwide.



'The mark of a Scot of all classes [is that] he ... remembers and cherishes the memory of his forebears, good or bad; and there burns alive in him a sense of identity with the dead even to the 20th generation.'

Robert Louis Stevenson, Author (1850-1894)

Tweed, tartan and other textiles can be found throughout Scotland and there are over 2,000 tartan designs, although not all of these are officially connected with Scottish clans or family groups. Visitors at the local mill shops can find out if their family is part of a Scottish clan and if they are therefore entitled to wear the associated clan tartan.

The capital city of Edinburgh, situated near Scotland's border with England, offers many opportunities for visitors to explore the country's rich history. Edinburgh Castle is built on the core of an extinct volcano and while it has been destroyed and rebuilt several times, St Margaret's Chapel - the oldest surviving part of the castle - dates from 1130. The castle ceased to be a residence for the royal family from the 16th century but was developed as a seat of government and military power.

Scotland is famous for its beautiful and rugged natural landscape and nowhere can the true magnificence of this be seen better than in the Scottish Highlands in the north. Comprising the northern half of mainland Scotland, the Highlands is a vast wilderness with the local populations mostly centred in small areas along the coast. In the north west Highlands, near the fishing port of Ullapool, is the Inverpolly National Nature Reserve which is home to rare species of birds and animals such as pine martins, wild cats, buzzards and golden eagles.

The Great Glen, a series of deep narrow lochs which cut across the country from Fort William to Inverness, divides the southern Highlands from the north and provides the home of one of Scotland's most well-known myths. The Loch Ness monster is said to live in the murky depths of the 23-mile-long Loch Ness and it has been a central attraction of this area for the last 70 years, with a number of photographs to support its existence. However, recent extensive sonar and computer searches have so far failed to track down the elusive monster.

The Highland Games are an integral part of Scottish life and take place throughout Scotland during the summer. The games consist of a number of sporting events, including tossing the caber [a large tree trunk] and hammer throwing, as well as piping and dancing competitions. The original games were organised by clan chiefs who would recruit the strongest competitors for their armies and bodyguards. The Braemar gathering, which is held near the royal residence of Balmoral in September, is attended by the Queen every year.

On the west coast of Scotland are a number of islands, the largest of which include Skye, Mull, Jura, Islay and Arran, which offer yet another aspect of local Scottish life. The tiny island of Iona, a five-minute ferry ride from the Isle of Mull, is the last resting place of 48 early Scottish kings, including Macbeth.

Evidence of Scotland's earliest inhabitants, the Picts, can be seen throughout the country in the form of mysterious standing stones, about which very little is known. Decorated with intricate symbols, the stones are thought to record Pictish lineages and alliances. One example, the Ringing Stone near Rothiemay station in Aberdeenshire, is said to ring when struck by another rock and can be heard in the village of Portsoy seven miles away.