

SCOTTISH HIDEAWAYS

From castles to thatched cottages,
we've uncovered some of the
coziest places in Scotland to
thaw out in until spring

WORDS **SALLY COFFEY**

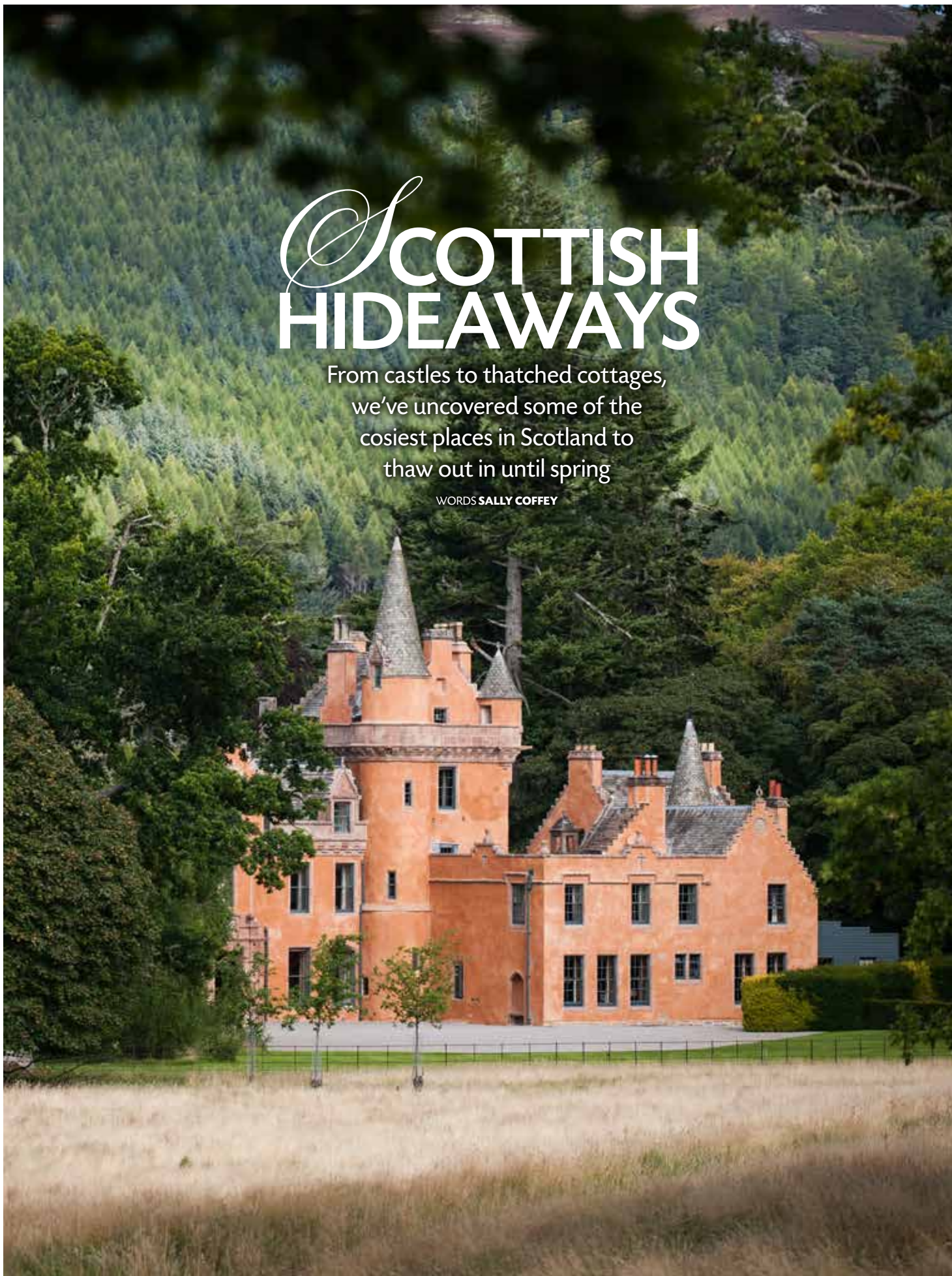


PHOTO © MARGARET SORAYA



Left to right: You can take a tour to Castle Stalker, which offers the most spectacular views; the Torridon Hotel is secluded and has acres and acres of grounds. Previous page: Majestic Aldourie Castle

Forget the Scandinavian trend of *hygge*; this year is all about *còsagach* – a Gaelic word meaning to feel cosy and sheltered. Having realised that the things that it does well (whisky, lambs wool blankets, cashmere and Fair Isle knits) lend themselves to this idea of snuggling up somewhere homely and inviting, Scotland is hoping to show the world that nowhere does home comforts as well as here.

If you want to sample the famous warm Scottish welcome, then the Torridon Hotel and Inn in Wester Ross is a good starting point. On arrival at the hotel, which is set within hundreds of acres of its own grounds on the edge of Loch Torridon in the west Highlands, a roaring fire greets you and stag heads peer down protectively.

Staff are courteous and will whisk your luggage to your room – many of which have jaw-dropping views of the imposing mountains of Beinn Alligin, Beinn Dearg and Liathach – where you can refresh before sitting down for dinner.

Rooms are individually designed with fine contemporary fabrics and the odd nod to the hotel's Scottish surroundings, including a cuddly Highland cow to keep you company, and bathrooms include

claw-foot baths, fancy toiletries and luxuriously soft robes. Downstairs, the 3 AA Rosette 1887 fine-dining restaurant is suitably refined and chef Ross Stovold serves up a daily changing menu of four or seven courses.

Choose between local dishes such as Wester Ross salmon, Beinn Eighe venison or Skye scallops, and afterwards go to the hotel's whisky bar where the very knowledgeable barman will talk you through some of the 350 malt whiskies available.

The next day, steel yourself for the drive to nearby Diabaig. The hairpin bends and steep inclines are worth it, though, as the view from the high road of the loch below is breathtaking.

Alternatively, join in one of the activities offered free to guests of the hotel, such as archery, sea kayaking or a guided walk around the grounds (depending on the season). Guests of the neighbouring (and still very good) inn will have to pay separately.

If it's stunning locations you're after, then visit Airds Hotel, in the village of Port Appin, Argyll, on the edge of the Great Glen. Standing on the banks of Loch Linnhe, this charming white-painted former roadside inn is perfectly placed for exploring the nearby isles of ▶

Mull, Islay and Jura. On arrival, a smartly dressed butler will usher you into a lovely lounge with a roaring log fire and the offer of tea served with homemade shortbread or a glass of prosecco.

Bedrooms are super-comfy with big beds, Bulgari toiletries, fruit and a decanter of Whisky Mac with wee glasses – all to make you feel right at home.

Perhaps you would like to settle down for the afternoon in one of the two pretty lounges and play cards or a board game. There is also a snug whisky bar with a fine choice of gins (70 per cent of the UK's gin is made in Scotland) or you could sit in the conservatory and look out at the loch lighthouse with the snow-tipped Morven hills in the background, where you may even be able to spot the majestic Glen Coe in the distance.

If you are ready to explore, then arrange a tour of Castle Stalker – the castle that is perched on a rock in the middle of the loch and which dates from the 15th century when this was very much Clan Stewart country. This being Scotland, the weather can be rather changeable, so make good use of the wellies by the front door and the cagoules and umbrellas in the wardrobe.

As evening approaches, it's time for drinks and canapés around the fire or, in summertime, out on the front lawn that runs down to the loch edge. Head chef Chris Stanley and his team produce almost everything on site, providing a great seasonal evening menu including such delights as pork cheek with spiced apple, followed by hot apple pie soufflé with caramel creme anglaise.

Coffee and petit fours are served back in the lounge in front of that oh-so-important fire, where everyone chats late into the night.

Make sure you nip outside to check out the night sky: with hardly any light pollution this is one of the few places in Britain where it is possible to see the Northern Lights and even the Milky Way.



Skye is an enigmatic island, well worth exploring, not least for the drive from Broadford to Elgol, which offers sublime views of the mighty mountain of Blà Bheinn

Clockwise, from top: Blà Bheinn on the Isle of Skye; Mary's Thatched Cottages; escape to the remote Isle of Eriska; snuggle up in the cosy lounge at the Airds Hotel





PHOTOS: © SEBASTIAN WASEK/WWW.ROBERTHARDING.COM

A 30-minute drive from Airds brings you to another west coast hideaway: the Isle of Eriska. It was here in 2014 that the Torridon's chef, Ross Stovold, earned a Michelin star and the food is still incredibly impressive.

However, it's for the sense of seclusion and privacy that most people visit the Isle of Eriska, which, as its name suggests, stands on its own private island, accessed via a rickety bridge.

It's great for wildlife spotting – watch as handsome Highland cattle graze nearby and keep a look out for grey seals and otters, which have been known to swim in the waters.

If a busy itinerary of sightseeing has left you feeling a little frayed, then recharge in the hotel's spa or by playing a few rounds in the 9-hole golf course.

Better still, book into one of the new hilltop reserves, which come with their own hot tubs and balconies overlooking Loch Linnhe.

For something a little more intimate, try Mary's Thatched Cottages in Elgol on the Isle of Skye. This

collection of four humble stone cottages are located on a croft that has been in the same family for six generations and accommodate a maximum of four people each. The cottages are actually sensitive recreations of traditional blackhouses (old Highlands buildings constructed with dry stone walls packed with earth and topped with wooden rafters and thatched roofs).

Once ruins, they have been rebuilt using the original stone, and traditional features include veiled boxed double beds, stone fireplaces with inglenook fireplaces and flagstone floors.

Mary's Thatched Cottages offer the best of both worlds: a peep into the past while providing 21st-century levels of comfort, including underfloor heating. Skye is an enigmatic island, well worth exploring, not least for the half-hour drive from Broadford to Elgol that you take to reach the properties, which offers sublime views of the mighty mountain of Bla Bheinn.

There is nothing humble about the accommodation provided at Aldourie Castle overlooking Loch Ness. ▶

Clockwise from top:
The Mackintosh bedroom at Aldourie Castle; the more intimate Garden Cottage on the Aldourie Estate; the dramatic ruins of Loch Ness's Urquhart Castle

This five-star property is the only habitable castle on the shores of the famous loch, but as an exclusive hire property, you have to rent all of it if you want to stay.

Still, if you have a major birthday or family gathering coming up, its elegant bedrooms and lavishly decorated social areas will provide a most regal setting.

During the day you can recline on a chaise lounge and immerse yourself in a good book from the wood-panelled library, while after dinner you can enjoy a glass of whisky in the Billiard Room.

If this is a bit too extravagant, then you can rent one of the quaint cottages on the estate – perfect for couples or small groups – such as Ivy Cottage and Garden Cottage, which offer full access to the grounds of the estate and lots of charming period features.

If you like the idea of living like a king without having to hire a whole castle, then Dalhousie Castle Hotel and Aqueous Spa, Scotland's oldest inhabited castle could be for you.

This 13th-century fortress, just eight miles southeast of Edinburgh, is a great base for exploring the capital and offers grand bedrooms – many of which have four-poster beds – bedecked with splendid Scottish fabrics and antique furniture, each reached by a maze of staircases and secret passageways.

The hotel also boasts a luxurious hydro spa in its basement, and you can have dinner in its ancient and atmospheric barrel-vaulted dungeon.

You'll be in good company, too – past guests at the castle have included Queen Victoria and Sir Walter Scott, who both played their part in promoting tourism in Scotland.

Thanks to the romantic writings of Sir Walter Scott and Queen Victoria's well-documented love affair with the place, people now come to Scotland to admire its dramatic scenery and discover its deep-rooted heritage, but there's no harm in luxuriating in some home comforts while you're here. And that is what the Scottish call *còsagach*. **B**

For more Scottish travel inspiration, including cosy hideaways and spectacular scenery, visit www.britain-magazine.com



Right: Dinner at Dalhousie Castle is atmospheric
Below: The castle's romantic and impressive exterior

BOOK AHEAD

The Torridon Hotel & Inn

This luxury hotel in a former Victorian shooting lodge once owned by Lord Byron's daughter, Ava Lovelace, also has a very comfortable inn next door. www.thetorridon.com

Airds Hotel

This west coast hideaway offers a good restaurant, games by the fireside, and a whisky bar, but the real highlight is the view, including a glimpse of the nearby castle. www.airds-hotel.com

Isle of Eriska Hotel

Set on its own island, most people come to this hotel and spa to unwind, spot wildlife or play a few rounds of golf. www.eriska-hotel.co.uk

Mary's Thatched Cottages

These charming reconstructed blackhouses are up for sale, so make sure you visit while you still can for a window into the past. www.isleofskycottages.com

Aldourie Castle

Splash out on a once-in-a-lifetime castle stay, or opt for one of the more economical and very homely cottages. www.aldouriecastle.co.uk

Dalhousie Castle Hotel & Aqueous Spa

Winding staircases and hidden passageways abound in this castle hotel near Edinburgh, which once hosted Queen Victoria. www.dalhousiecastle.co.uk

TRAVEL

GETTING HERE

By no means the quickest way of reaching Scotland, the Caledonian Sleeper train from London is nonetheless the most special. Setting off from London Euston in the evening, you can have a drink in the Lounge Car (first-class passengers can even order an evening meal),

before settling down in your cabin for the night. Come morning, you'll arrive in Scotland, refreshed and ready for the day ahead. Plus, later this year the first of the new fleet of trains will be unveiled, offering passengers even more comfort. www.sleeperscot

GETTING AROUND

Trains and buses (as well as trams in Edinburgh) are good in the major cities, and the West Highland Rail connects much of the Highlands. Some hotels will arrange transfers, but the best way to get around is by car. www.scotrail.co.uk; www.avis.co.uk/Scotland