

OVERLAND ADVENTURE TO THE SCOTTISH HIGHLANDS

Text & Photos by Hendrik de Backer



Earlier this year we decided to load up our Wrangler and organize a trip to Scotland, a land of beautiful nature, a lot of culture and history, and of whisky and haggis.



Living in Belgium, we decided that the best route would take us up to Ijmuiden to catch a ferry to Newcastle-upon-Tyne, from where we would have a 400-kilometer drive north to the region of Loch Lomond and The Trossachs National Park. The ferry is a great and relaxing way of crossing the North Sea.



The Trossachs National Park encompasses around 1,800 sq. km. of some of the finest scenery in Scotland, and forms the border between the Lowlands and the Highlands. It is an area of contrasts, from rolling lowland landscapes in the south to high mountains in the north, and has many lochs and rivers, forests, and woodlands. Nowadays, the Trossachs are a haven for walkers, cyclists, photographers, wildlife enthusiasts and many other outdoor pursuit seekers, and hosts a huge number of events and festivals both indoor and outdoor each year.



FALL 2009

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We found a great 4-star accommodation in The Portnellan Lodges near Crianlarich. Our lodge was sitting on the top of a hill with a view across the glen, and included all imaginable comfort, including a great collection of maps for local tours. On our first evening, we immediately started planning, sitting on the terrace, with smoked salmon and smoked whisky (a Laphroaig 10y Cask Strength). We decided to fill our holiday period with a number of excursions and day trips as follows:

Killin and Ben Williams, Aberfeldy

Killin is a small town, known for its magnificent and scenic Falls of Dochart, with an ancient stone bridge spanning an original clansmen burial ground. It is a great place to stop and have a walk, and standing amidst the bustling waters above the gravesite, one feels a very special mixture of awe and respect for the Scotsmen buried there.

Killin is quite small, and once you exit the town centre, a narrow and winding road takes you up to the Ben Lawers Mountain visitor center from where you can start a hike up to the top at 1,214 meters. We were rewarded with spectacular roads and sceneries, and a great surprise to find a big lake on the plateau on top.

The road from Ben Lawers connects via Bridge of Balgie to the town Aberfeldy, where the Dewars distillery can be found. A first stop for a whisky souvenir J.



Oban coastal drive and Hell's Glen, Loch Fyne and Inverary

Famous for its distillery but also for having flying boat squadrons in the early years of World War II, Oban was a must-visit city on our list. The road from Crianlarich to Oban turns and bends between the hills, and sudden bursts of sun erupting between the clouds promised a lot for a great day.

Oban itself was a surprise to us. A rather small and cozy town, draped around a small bay with some fishing ships. We visited the Oban distillery shop and were welcomed by a very kind man who was very happy to stamp my whisky collectors bible. We had lunch at the Mac Tavish Cavern where I had, of course, a dish of Tatties and Neeps, being mashed potatoes and mashed turnips, accompanied with a great portion of haggis. Haggis is traditionally made from sheep intestines, cooked in a sheep's stomach, but is also easily found in pubs as a snack or lunch. The Haggis ingredients and its cooking ways sound a bit weird, but the taste is just so very nice!



After our visit to Oban, we took a special scenic drive through Hell's Glen and then up to Inveraray near Loch Fyne. The Hell's Glen is a narrow and now almost abandoned track through the hills, and a pleasure to drive! Inveraray is the town next to the Loch Fyne, and home to an ancient prison museum, and also to the Loch Fyne Whiskies company, who employs the principle of a living cask in the style of a Spanish whisky solera: "When (the cask is) half drawn down, a new malt is introduced and the character changes." A great concept, with a great shop, and a fantastic value for money whisky!

Blair Athol, Highland Wildlife Park and Fort William

Having a friend who is totally crazy about wolves, we were advised to go and visit the Highland Wildlife Park, located up North near Kingussie. We plotted a route and this took us near Blair Athol.

The Blair Athol Distillery in the picturesque town of Pitlochry, Blair Athol is one of the oldest working distilleries in Scotland. The Distillery produces a 12-Year Old Single Malt Whisky with a strong fruity flavour and a smooth finish, and is a great visit. Unbelievable but through, I met a Brazilian co-Jeeper in the parking lot who owns three Jeeps himself. We exchanged our email addresses and were on our way.

The Highland Wildlife Park is located in a number of valleys and is accessible by car. It has both domestic and exotic animals, and allows you to stop and get out of the car on specific places. The kids loved it.

On the way back we visited Fort William, which was a disappointment for us. Almost no people on the streets, no interesting shops, but we did find a shop selling some of the greatest Scottish pies I ever tasted. On the way back home, we were hammered with showers and rain until all of a sudden, the clouds opened and we were surprised and awarded with one of the most beautiful rainbows we have ever seen. This is Scotland at its best, we believe.



Callander, Duke's Pass and Achray Forest Drive

This daytrip took us on a magnificent and sunny Easter Day to Callander, one of the larger towns in the region and bustling with people on Sunday morning. It's a big contrast with the quietness in the hills. We had a great lunch in The Waverly Pub and after lunch, we sat out to find the Duke's Pass to get to the Achray Forest Drive. The pass is a stretch of a few kilometers of narrow and winding road, consuming your concentration to the max! It swivels around the lochs and over the hills, and gives a great drivers feeling. Maybe we should have taken the Grand Cherokee instead of the Wrangler here. J

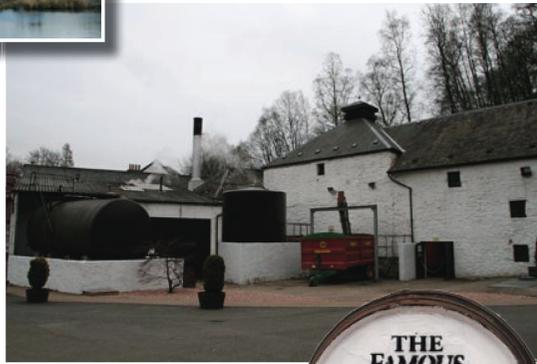


After the pass, and only exceptionally open for the Easter Weekend, we had an opportunity to drive the Achray Forest Drive which is a trail consisting of about 12 kilometers of winding, unpaved forest road and normally used by harvesters. It is a fantastic experience to cruise the track along the borders of the lakes.

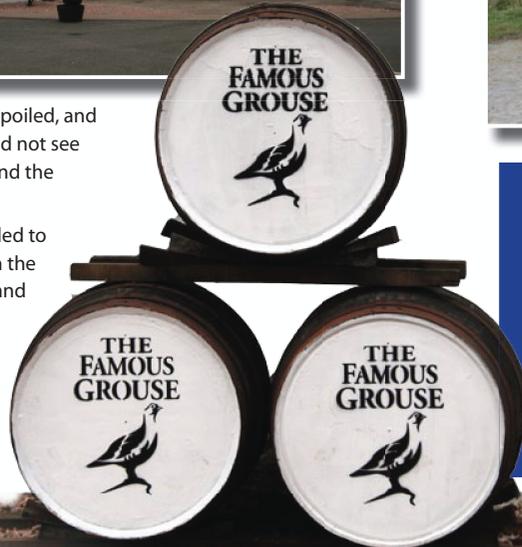


Loch Lyon and Glenturret

Nearing the end of our Scotland exploring holiday, our last daytrip took us back to Killin and again up into the mountains. Instead of going in the direction of Ben Lawers, we chose to try out a road that is marked as a dead end and indeed, the road gets worse every hundred meters. However, we continued to drive and started to crawl slowly up into the hills with the Wrangler until, at a certain moment, our pace had dropped to about walking speed. We discovered a number of deserted meadows full of sheep, lakes, and lochs that seem so unspoiled, and historic landmarks we never would have believed to be there if we did not see them ourselves. The combination of the deserted track, the nature, and the solidness of the JK made up for another great morning drive!



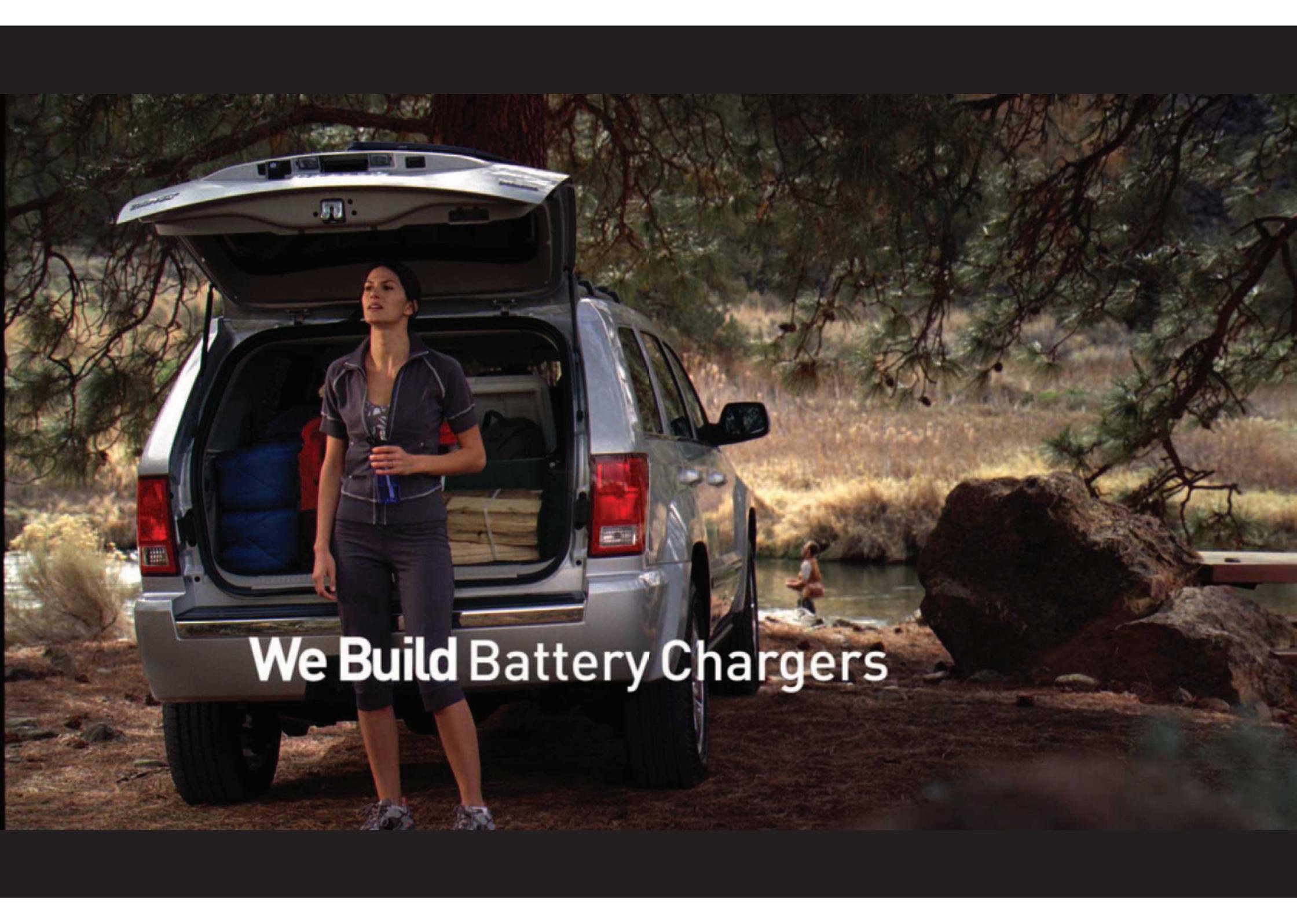
In the afternoon, we set out for one more whisky stop and we decided to go and visit the Glenturret distillery, home of the main component in the Famous Grouse blended whisky. A great-guided tour is set up there and we enjoyed the actual making and distilling of the whisky, including a tasting session. The guided tour explained all the phases in the whisky making, all during a live whisky making process in the different distillery halls. We left with a special collector's item bottle of Famous Grouse on Scottish Oak whisky as a perfect memory to a fantastic holiday.



LINKS

- <http://www.portnellan.co.uk/>
- <http://www.lochlomond-trossachs.org/>
- <http://www.dewars.com/>
- <https://www.lfw.co.uk/>
- <http://www.highlandwildlifepark.org/>
- <http://www.thefamousgrouse.com/>





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