

Campers and Curling

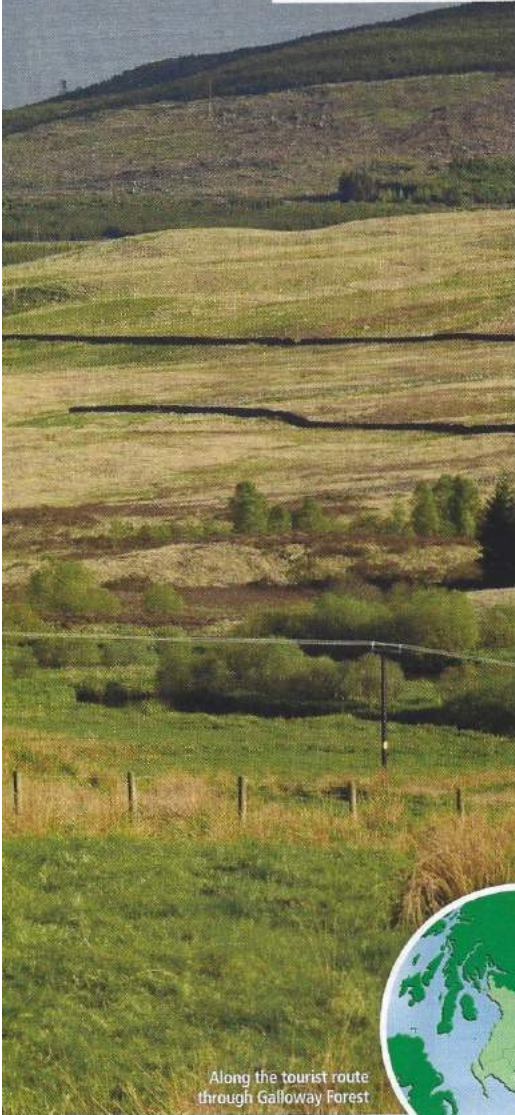
Mike Trippitt and George the campervan take a trip north of the border in search of the perfect curling stone

WORDS & PHOTOS MIKE TRIPPITT





Isle of Whithorn



Along the tourist route through Galloway Forest

Leo Sayer's hit single *Moonlighting* eases my VW campervan, George, and I gently towards the Scottish border:

"My mother will have lost her mind. We're only ten miles from Gretna, they're three hundred behind."

We're not running away in pursuit of wedded bliss, but rather heading for Scotland's deep southwest to explore its coast and glens, and to search for a perfectly smooth piece of granite.

My armchair interest in curling, the sport of sliding stones along a sheet of ice towards a target, rekindles every time the Olympics come around. I become an honorary Scot and join an army of dilettantes baying for British success.

So as memories of the 2018 winter games fade, I plan to see an oft-forgotten corner of Scotland and find out how a 20-kilo stone gets from a tiny Scottish isle to an Olympic ice rink.

But I stop first at Gretna Green where, due to differences between English and Scottish marriage laws, runaway weddings were performed in the blacksmith's shop for two centuries, amid exciting tales of eloping lovers and desperate parents.

Back then, the blacksmith's shop was the first place over the border where couples could stop and get married. The ceremony involved a 'marriage by declaration' in front of 'a recognised person of standing in the village and two witnesses.'

"That is all that was needed," says Susan Clark, fourth generation of the family owners of the Old

Blacksmith's Shop. "The blacksmith therefore became a marriage celebrant and the anvil assumed altar-like significance. Legend has it that as a blacksmith joined two pieces of metal together on the anvil, so too people were joined together over the anvil."

'Anvil Marriages' were outlawed in 1940, yet Gretna Green remains a centre of romance. Marriages are performed here daily. Its heritage is well preserved, and my time here has been a good start to my trip.

Island of Ailsa Craig

Before coming to Scotland, I was surprised to learn that curling stones used at the Olympic Games are made of granite from Ailsa Craig, a small island nine miles off Scotland's west coast. So once Gretna was behind us, I call Mark McCrindle who has been running boat trips to Ailsa Craig since 1982.

Although the weather is bright, the wind will prevent Mark taking me to the island in his boat *Glorious* for the next couple of days. We agree to keep in touch with our eyes on the forecast.

Although no longer inhabited, climbers, birders, tourists and sightseers take the four hour round trip from Girvan to Ailsa Craig to experience the island's unique solitude and seabird colony.

"The best weather for going is a southwesterly or westerly wind," says Mark. "It makes the sea calm. When the wind is in the north east, it's impossible to land because the jetty is on the northeast side of the island and there is too much wind going into it to enable us to get tied up."

Before I go to the island, I plan to tour the southwest coast and spend two nights on the Mull of Galloway.



Relaxing in Solway

Once Dumfries is behind us, the Galloway Tourist Route leads us west. Although only a few miles across the border, this landscape is true Scotland. Villages of single-storey pebbledashed cottages, whitewashed and gleaming in the sunlight, nestle on a green carpet that rolls down to the Solway Firth.

At Powfoot, I pause to take in the view across the sands and rivulets exposed at low tide. This coastal idyll is a sleepy fishing hamlet, but it could have been so different. Victorian plans to develop Powfoot into a 'Blackpool of the North' never came to fruition, although three terraces of redbrick villas, a bowling green, pavilion and a great storey are a lasting legacy of the folly.

Powfoot is also home to a colony of natterjack toads. This rare, protected creature, much smaller than its common relative, thrives on the Solway Firth. The Toads Crossing warning sign at the village entrance makes me smile, although toads lying prone and dead in the road is a mournful sight.

Thirty miles west, creatures that start their lives flat rather than end them that way are revered and celebrated. The compact and quirky village of Palnackie is home to the delightful World Flounder Tramping Championships.

After a walk down to the harbour – an inland riverbank with a fishing trawler moored there incongruously – I make for the Glenisle Inn to find out more.

Landlord, Bob Anderson, tells me that catching flounder by the traditional method of standing on them has been practised here for centuries, although the world championship was conceived in the pub in the 1970s 'over several glasses of Scotch.' He says the last championship

“The old lighthouse keepers swear they could see England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales on a clear day...”



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was in 2015, and hopes there'll be another in 2019.

Meanwhile, the worn, copper world championship cup sits amongst other flounder tramping trophies on a shelf in the bar.

Mull of Galloway

The journey from Gretna Green to Port Logan on the Mull of Galloway is a revelation. Superlatives flow freely when wide vistas and sprawling landscapes are at every turn. But I was unprepared for the stunning coastline mixing sumptuously with breathtaking peaks, valleys, and rich, lush forests.

To my left, the view south is of

1 Mull of Galloway Lighthouse

2 Powfoot's Toad Warning

3 Drummore

sandy foreshores, craggy headlands and a calm sea to a blue horizon. To my right, emerald hills reach skyward and are roamed by sheep and cattle. Fisherman and farmers live side by side in surf and turf harmony.

But it's not so much the individual views that so appeal (though they do), it is more that the landscape changes within the blinking of an eye. I am in awe of this most wonderful of drives.

I'd had an inkling that the Isle of Whithorn, a tiny fishing harbour 20 miles south of Newton Stewart, would have photo opportunities, so decided to stop.

It's now late afternoon, the tide is low and small boats settle in the mud within the drying harbour. A group of men sit outside The Steam Packet Inn enjoying a pint in the warm sunshine. This is a peaceful, carefree world I think.

A stone wall leads around a small grazing pasture towards St Ninian's Chapel. I turn a corner, and the sight of a beautifully simple, white stone memorial bench stops me in my tracks. I read the inscription, and am drawn to sit down and gaze out to sea in sombre reflection. 'Aged 17... aged 17'. The words wash around in my mind dispelling other thoughts. It's no age.

I walk back to the harbour - the same men drink their beer at the quayside, the same fishing boats sleep in their haven. But I see things differently now.

What sorrow this community must have felt on 11th January 2000 when the fishing vessel 'Solway Harvester' sank in the Irish Sea and seven local men never returned. Two were aged just seventeen. ▶



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The view from the lighthouse

After a night by the water's edge among grasses and gorse at the Caravan and Motorhome Club's New England, Port Logan site, George and I spend the next morning on the Mull of Galloway, Scotland's most southerly point. The old lighthouse keepers swear they could see England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales on a clear day.

The 115 steps to the top of the lighthouse are not for the faint-hearted, but my effort is rewarded. Today, only the Isle of Man is visible on a misty horizon, though the view is sublime.

On the ground, there are walks around the promontory, steps down to the foghorn, a museum, and tea room and gift shop. The three-mile drive down a single-track road across the headline to the tip of the mull gives sea views on both sides. Gannets are at home here. They dive in search of food, plunging into the waves, one after another, like some sort of naval bombardment.

Orange buffoon's golf course

For the next two days, there is no chance of getting to Ailsa Craig, so from bases at New England and the Club site at Culzean Castle, George and I explore the coast road from Loch Ryan north to Troon. Although Belfast is a mere 40 miles away it is the region's links to the United States that have made their mark.

Most prominent, at least in terms of undisguised opulence, is Trump Turnberry, the international golf resort, hotel and lighthouse. The complex of white masonry and manicured lawns is decorated with gold paint; both at its entrances and on the clock tower. It stands in contrast to the charming Turnberry village and harbour.

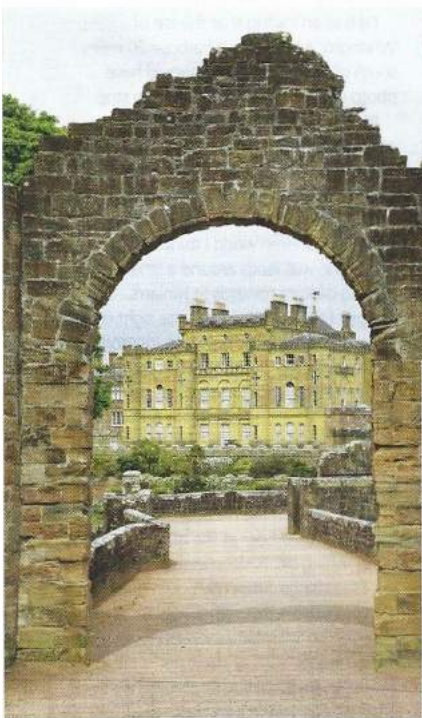
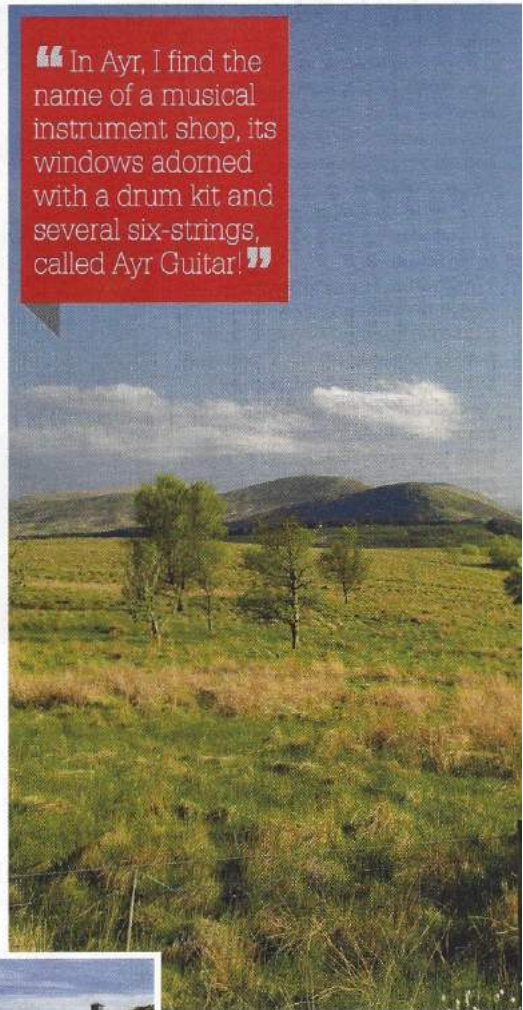
Less obvious American influence is found further up the coast at Prestwick. Its airport is the most fog-free in the UK due to its unique position between protective hills and sea air. Planes divert here when poor visibility renders other airports inaccessible.

The site expanded in the fifties and sixties when the United States Air Force used it as a stopover. In March 1960, Sergeant 53310761 Elvis Aaron Presley arrived at Prestwick on his way home from army service in Germany. It is the only verified time that 'The King' set foot in Britain.

Culzean Castle

Scotland's links to America can be seen again further down this coast at Culzean Castle, 12 miles south of Ayr, with the castle and country park owned by the National Trust for Scotland. Guided tours, information points and a beautifully illustrated guidebook tell the story of this Robert Adams-designed neoclassical mansion. The guided tour takes 45 minutes, but there is enough to occupy a visitor for several hours. The picturesque

“ In Ayr, I find the name of a musical instrument shop, its windows adorned with a drum kit and several six-strings, called Ayr Guitar! ”



grounds and views of the coast are as memorable as any. After the Second World War, US General Dwight Eisenhower, Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces, was gifted the use of part of the castle by the then owners as a thank you on behalf of Scotland. He first used Culzean in 1946 and subsequently during his presidency. The top floor apartment – 'The Eisenhower' – is now available for hire.

Enjoying the fresh Ayr

Just as the scenery of the Solway Firth captivated me, so too does the west coast. The A77 from Loch Ryan in the south to Ayr in the north joins villages, beaches, harbours and bays, where countless opportunities exist for walking, camping, sightseeing and birdwatching.

Just before the coastal village of Ballantrae, Ailsa Craig comes into view for the first time. From here it appears sharply pointed; rising from the sea like a giant flint spearhead. But at Girvan, from

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WHERE WE STAYED

New England Motorhome and Caravan Club Site
Port Logan, Drummore, Dumfries & Galloway DG9 9NX

☎ 01776 860275

🌐 caravanclub.co.uk

Culzean Castle Camping and Caravanning Club Site
Culzean, Maybole, Ayrshire KA19 8JX

☎ 01665 760627

🌐 campingandcaravanningclub.co.uk

Ken Bridge Hotel Caravan and Camping Site
New Galloway, Kirkcudbrightshire DG7 3PR

☎ 01644 420211

🌐 kenbridgehotel.co.uk



where boat trips operate, and to where Ailsa Craig granite is brought ashore, the island appears more rounded, almost like the curling stones that start life there.

Looking out from Girvan's seafront car park amongst other campervans and motorhomes, I contemplate what it must have been like to work the quarry on Ailsa Craig.

"Hard," says 77-year-old Ian Morton. "Very hard." Ian was a quarryman on the island until 1967, before quarrying ended two years later: "It was hard grafting, but it was good. It certainly had an effect on my fingers."

Back then health and safety was not as it is today: "On a Monday morning I used to go up to Tormitchell quarry to pick up boxes of explosives: gun powder, gelnite, plastic explosives, cordtex and detonators. They used to say to me: 'Have you no fear throwing all that into the back of your car?' I'd say 'Pal, if it goes bang I'll not know a thing about it!'"

I ponder how granite from the island is

4 Culzean Castle

5 Mull of Galloway

6 Sunset over Arran from Culzean Castle

7 Along the tourist route through Galloway Forest

8 Rough Common Green granite 'cheeses'

9 Highlan' Coo

10 Royal Troon Golf Club with Arran beyond

still used to make curling stones when quarrying ceased nearly 50 years ago. I'd need to head inland to find out.

But before that, my last coastal sojourn is to Ayr, an attractive resort town with a harbour and expansive sandy beach. I laugh out loud at the name of a musical instrument shop, its windows adorned with a drum kit and several six-strings – 'Ayr Guitar'!

Curling throngs

I learn lots about curling in my search for that perfect stone. David Mdyntyre, President of Ayr Curling Club, says there are 12,000 curlers in Scotland, and though not as popular as rugby or football it is 'probably more popular than cricket' north of the border.

He says: "It's a great sport. It's for everyone. Most clubs are mixed men and women. There are juniors and there are people in their nineties still playing in Ayr. It's not just a sport, there's the social element as well. That is very important.

It is an ideal sport if you are just about to retire or if you're in your forties and now have less family commitments."

The curling season finished at the end of March, so to come and try at one of Scotland's many ice rinks, I would need to return in the autumn when the new season begins. I like that idea!

Getting stoned in Mauchline

Mauchline sits 12 miles northeast of Ayr on the A78. Scotland's National Poet, Robert Burns lived here for 4 years in a house that is now a museum. The town is laced with Burns' history; blue plaques identify notable buildings and sites.

Today, in Mauchline, I find my perfect stone. Kays Curling has been producing the world's finest curling stones here since Andrew Kay started the business in way back in 1851.

"Kays stones are ubiquitous," says director Mark Callan. "They are used by people who are just learning to play

ENJOYING SCOTLAND

curling to the very top levels of the sport at the Olympic Games. Kays stones have been used in every Olympics where curling has been a part of the games and in every World Curling Championship."

I'm shown around the factory where a fifteen-strong workforce produce from 1,800 to 2,000 stones for delivery around the world annually. I watch lathes, coring machines, polishing machines and sandblasters turn rough 'cheeses' of Ailsa Craig Common Green granite and slices of Blue Hone granite into smooth, attractive and identical three-piece stones. The urge to touch those awaiting dispatch is irresistible. But I'm intrigued as to how the granite gets here if quarrying ceased 50 years ago.

Mark Callan explains that Kays has the only licence to remove granite from Ailsa Craig, and last harvested it in 2013. The boulders removed are a mix of those left from historical quarrying and blasting, and those broken off the rock face by the weather.

He says: "The cost of removing the granite from the island is substantial. Therefore we generally plan on going once every 10 years when we take sufficient granite to give us at least 10-years worth of curling stone production. We're looking at between 2022 and 2023 for returning to the island to take some more."



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11 My Kays curling stone

12 Crossing moors in the Forest of Galloway

13 Ailsa Craig from Ballantrae

With my questions answered and the perfect stone found, I just need the wind to shift to the west to see Ailsa Craig's granite as nature made it 60 million years ago. But time is running out. I call Mark McCrindle again. With luck we'll make it over on my last day in Scotland.

Whilst waiting, I move inland to the Ken Bridge Hotel Campsite at New Galloway. We have time to travel through the glens and hills of the Galloway Forest Park. Its sparse moorland and rock outcrops contrast with areas of rich, working forest. Campsites are plentiful and outside Forestry Commission boundaries wild camping opportunities abound. I am again smitten by this

wonderful landscape.

But the weather gods deny me. The brisk northeasterly breeze remains, and my chance to step onto the rocky shores of Ailsa Craig is gone.

I came to Scotland to explore its southwestern corner and some of the west coast. The beauty of what I have seen has overwhelmed me. My Scottish hosts were welcoming and willing to pass on their knowledge. They are justly proud of their heritage.

On the A1 southbound, my journey is tinged with sadness. Not because I did not make it over to Ailsa Craig, but that I'm ten miles from home; Greta's three hundred behind.

TRIP INFORMATION

Total site fees	£72.90
Total miles in Scotland	553



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