

Words by LOUISE HOFFMAN

WINTER HAUNTS

During the colder months, the mountains, valleys, forests and coastline of Scotland take on an altogether different look and feel. Here are six of the best places to soak up the atmosphere

Autumn and winter in Scotland have their own special kind of beauty, which can invariably be enjoyed in peace and solitude after the summer tourists have departed. And while many of the main visitor attractions are closed, the best places to experience the magic and

wonder of the season can usually be found far off the beaten track.

So, if you prefer your landscapes and landmarks to be quiet, enigmatic, hung with brooding cloud or carpeted in autumn leaves, explore some of these atmospheric spots over the coming months.



RUTHVEN BARRACKS, near Kingussie

Ghost hunters will enjoy a trip to Ruthven Barracks near Kingussie, in the Cairngorms National Park. It was once the site of a 13th-century castle, which was associated with the infamous 'Wolf of Badenoch', Alexander Stewart, 1st Earl of Buchan. He's known for destroying Elgin Cathedral and much of the surrounding town in 1390 after falling out with the Bishop. It's he you may spot playing chess against a devilish opponent – the re-enactment of a game that is said to have ended with the deaths of every soul in the castle. The ruin you see today is of the 18th-century barracks built on the site by the government following the Jacobite uprising. Attacked several times, it was eventually set alight in 1746 after the Battle of Culloden.



THE HERMITAGE, Dunkeld, Perthshire

Once an 18th-century pleasure ground for the Dukes of Atholl, this enchanting forest is particularly attractive in autumn when the leaves turn to copper, the red squirrels forage and salmon leap up the breathtaking Black Linn Falls on the River Braan. Breathe in the seasonal scent of pine needles as you wander among the soaring Douglas firs, following a 1.5-mile woodland trail along the river. Highlights of the route include the mossy Hermitage Bridge, the grotto-like Ossian's Cave, and a romantic folly known as Ossian's Hall, which is nestled among the trees above the falls. If you fancy a longer walk, you could continue on to the Rumbling Bridge, high up over the gorge where the waters of the Braan are at their most ferocious, and the abandoned village of Tomgarrow, which once housed local slate quarry workers. ►



EILEAN DONAN, Dornie, Kyle of Lochalsh

Few sights in Scotland elicit quite the same level of awe and appreciation as Eilean Donan, the medieval castle that sits on an island at the point where three lochs meet and is accessed by its own bridge. For many, Eilean Donan is familiar as the castle in the *Highlander* film, or for its turn in the James Bond film, *The World is Not Enough*. But it is its location, just a few miles from the bridge that takes you over to the Isle of Skye, that ensures it is one of the most photographed castles in Scotland. It certainly epitomises that chocolate-box view of Scotland, of centuries-old castles that have been preserved in time, except what you see today is largely the vision of its Edwardian owner who had the ruins of the 13th-century castle fully restored. Still, don't let that take away the magic. Eilean Donan is open year round and is a very atmospheric castle to visit in all seasons, but perhaps even more so in winter when she wears a cloak of snow and ice and is far quieter than normal. Her winter allure hasn't gone entirely unnoticed though – the castle is a popular spot for winter weddings so be sure to check opening times before you set off.



KILDALTON CROSS, Islay

Standing in the graveyard of the now-ruined Kildalton Old Parish Church on Islay, the southernmost island of the Inner Hebrides, is the Kildalton Cross. Remarkably, this early Christian high cross dates from the 8th century, and is one of the finest examples of its kind in Scotland, being beautifully carved with knotwork and biblical scenes.

With its spiritual significance, and Islay's wild landscape beyond the low stone wall of the churchyard, this is a truly special site, especially at sunrise, sunset, under starry skies, or – if you're really lucky – during a seasonal appearance of the Aurora Borealis.

Also nearby are three of Islay's renowned whisky distilleries – Ardbeg, Laphroaig, and Lagavulin (see page 40). These are open for most of the winter and are well worth a visit, perhaps to purchase a little something to warm your cockles after a day out exploring. ►

SB



RANNOCH MOOR, Highland Perthshire

On a crisp, sunny winter's day, there are few sights more mesmerising than the bleak, snow-capped peaks and beautiful wilderness of Rannoch Moor; while in hazy, muted light or under a blanket of cloud it can take on an almost ethereal appearance.

This 50-square-mile area is made up of boggy moorland, rivers, lochs, boulders and mountains, which ends on arrival in Glencoe where you are greeted by such sights as Buchaille Etive Mor (pictured). The region also supports an array of wildlife including red deer – herds of which can often be seen roaming the lower ground (and sometimes crossing the road) in winter.

Perfect for peaceful contemplation, take a low-level walking route through this varied terrain or simply admire it from the warmth of your car. You can even take a train journey through 23 miles of it on the West Highland Railway.

While touring the area, *Outlander* fans may like to visit the village of Kinloch Rannoch, a key film location at the very beginning of the series when Claire enters a stone circle and travels back in time. ►

DUN DORNAIGIL, near Hope, Sutherland

Completely isolated in the atmospheric hills of the Northern Highlands, on a bend of the Strathmore River near the majestic Ben Hope, are the remains of an ancient fortification or roundhouse known as a 'broch'.

Such structures are only found in Scotland, and this is a particularly impressive one. Much still remains of the 2,300-year-old building – the most intact part of the exterior wall rises to a height of seven metres and the large triangular stone lintel above the entrance is still in place.

Getting to Dun Dornaigil is no mean feat. The road from the settlement of Hope, approximately 10 miles north, is particularly narrow and uneven (best avoided in bad weather) – but it's certainly worth the effort to experience this enigmatic Iron Age site. **S**

