

Looking back

Not even the royal train affords one the views enjoyed from the Royal Scotsman's rear verandah

DAVID ROBINSON

One of the perks in this job is the travel. I've had my share. Indian hotels where each guest has their own butler. Mexican ranches where your name is spelled out on your bed in wildflowers. Australian island hotels where you arrive by helicopter.

Whoever thought, then, that the best journey I've ever been on in my life would start and finish at a railway station I pass almost every day?

I've seen the Royal Scotsman leave Waverley station a few times. I'm not trainspotterish about this, it's just that you couldn't help noticing the skirl of the bagpipes stalling the busy concourse and a couple of dozen posh passengers making their way across it following a hard-blowing, mutton-chopped, pipe-major in full fig. Their train waited at the platform: nine carriages in old British Rail maroon, polished to perfec-

tion. You could half-close your eyes and imagine that all the other trains in the station were like that too, as if time could unreel back to that foreign country, the unBeechinged, unprivatised, still almost imperial past.

Before it was my turn to follow the piper across Waverley and board the Royal Scotsman, I had read all the brochures. So I knew my wife and I would have a twin cabin, complete with dressing table, wardrobe and en suite shower, wash basin and toilet. I knew what the observation car would look like, and that the open verandah right at the end of the train was the only one of its kind on any train in Britain. Even the Queen, on board her (much smaller) royal train, can't ever get to stand at the back of it, out in the open air, and look up as, say, the steel



cathedral of the Forth Bridge passes above her head. She couldn't do that, no more than she could wander outside, glass of 15-year-old Dalwhinnie in hand, to look at the moonlight's tracks on the North Sea as the Royal Scotsman thundered down the east coast towards Dundee.

And there are lots more things that HRH couldn't do but which we commuters on board the Royal Scotsman could. She couldn't feel the late afternoon sun warm her back as the train click-clacked down the single-track from Elgin to Inverurie across gently rolling farmland and past the quiet villages of Aberdeenshire. She couldn't feel the wind on her face as she scanned the high horizons around Boat of Garten for hunting ospreys. And if she can't do any of that, neither can anyone else, on any other train.

And that, really, is so unfair. Because this is the best way to see Scotland. You might think that looking forward from the engine driver's cabin would be even better, but it isn't. First of all, you wouldn't feel the wind on your face. Secondly, Network Rail isn't as good as it used to be at cutting back the overhanging branches. Even behind his reinforced glass, the driver told me later, on the long haul up to Drumochter, you'd see branches so thick heading straight for your head that you couldn't help but duck.

No, you've got to look back. The tracks run straight behind you all the way to the sky, or curving through valleys and villages, and all the time catching the

light and shining. A huge double silvery ribbon round Scotland - up to Dalwhinnie, down to Nairn, along to Aberdeen, down to Dundee. And then, just after breakfast on the last day, across the even more silvery Tay.

The Tay Bridge is already spectacular enough from behind the passenger windows of a two-carriage diesel sprinter. Standing outside, on the verandah of a train crossing it, watching as Dundee's tower blocks recede into the distance and the Tay estuary opens up in front

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of you, an immensity of water, air and distant hills, is the difference between mono and stereo. But maybe my wife is right and the verandah platform at the back of the train is just a boy thing. Even if it is, there's something else special about the Royal Scotsman, and I think I know what it is.

Yes, it is luxurious. Yes, the food is Michelin-worthy. Yes, the service is impeccable and the entertainment provided is truly impressive: the musicians of Session A9 who played for us after dinner on both evenings must be among the best in the country.

But the property developers, economists, restaurateurs, and financial consultants amongst whom we found ourselves – American, Brazilian, Mexican, German and British in numerical order: all completely affable, and all of them having mercifully left their work at home – are used to luxury. And of itself, luxury is boring. If you're a millionaire hotel owner, for example, it's the easiest thing in the world to buy gold taps for the bathroom, or platinum ones if you're a billionaire. Ultimately, though, who cares?

The Royal Scotsman is different for two reasons. It's luxurious, but not in a way that insulates you – as luxury often does – from the country you're in. The train might stop just a few feet away from the oyster and scallop beds at Kyle of Lochalsh or at the end of the private line at Boat of Garten, but it might equally spend the night at the end of Dundee station, which isn't quite as scenic. Either way, on the Royal Scotsman you get to see far more of the real Scotland than you would in a merely stationary five-star hotel.

Because every day, that 680-foot-long, 457-ton maroon mobile hotel has to be provisioned, watered, cleaned, checked: every day its luxury has to be achieved. It has to be punctual: two minutes late pulling out of Waverley means a £1,200 fine; £100 for anywhere else on the journey. Engines

have – rarely, but it's happened – been known to break down (wherever it is on the network, a replacement is contractually obliged to be provided within 90 minutes); mechanical problems might need to be fixed, and if they are, schedules might need to be rearranged at short notice. There's no dishwasher on board the train and precious little room in the galley, yet culinary wonders have to be produced daily. Also daily, a whole host of provisions have to be bought, from fresh fish to replacements for whichever of the 25-plus single bar malts proved most popular in the bar the previous night.

The Royal Scotsman is, in other words, in purely logistical terms, an everyday miracle of hospitality. But it sets its sights higher than just that: the aim is to provide something very like a "house party on wheels" with a maximum of 36 guests. That it succeeds in alchemically blending so many people from so many different countries into one harmonious group, is largely down to the charm of the host. In our case, that role fell to old Fettesian retired Royal Marine brigadier, lecturer, acclaimed military historian and raconteur Ian Gardiner. Every train should have one. Sadly, every train won't, no more than it will have a verandah viewing platform at the back.

And that's sad, because I know for an almost-certainty that this is the best, most stylish, most comfortable and simply most fun way to ride the rails. It's sad, because I just don't have £2,140 for a two-day holiday on the Royal Scotsman. But if I ever do, I'll be back on board like a shot.

THE FACTS *The two-night Highland journey is, at £2,140 per person, the least expensive Royal Scotsman trip. (The once-a-year seven-night Grand Tour of Great Britain is, at £8,870 per person, the dearest). The train "stables" at night at Boat of Garten and Dundee stations. En route stop-offs in-*

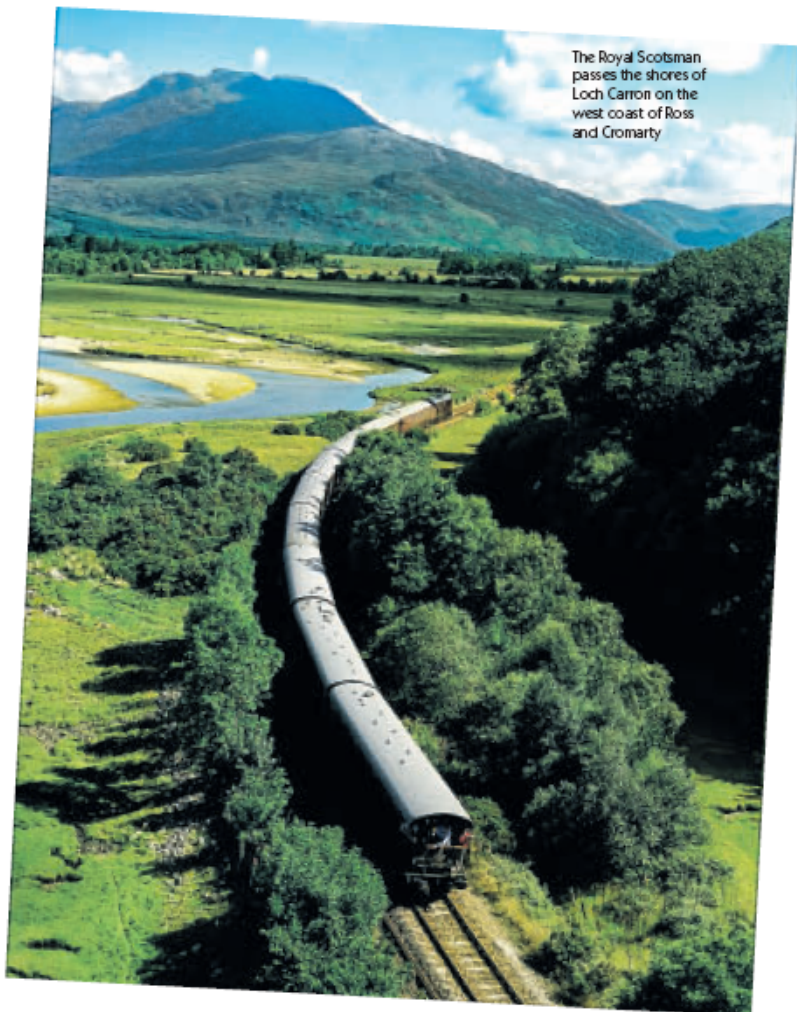
cluded Dalwhinnie distillery, fishing and shooting at the Rottemurhus estate, and a guided tour of Culloden. Once on board, all meals, drinks, excursions, entertainment and postage are free. www.royalscotsman.com Day-trips and short breaks from Edinburgh, Glasgow, Dundee, Perth and Aberdeen onboard the Northern Belle start from £150 per person. Tel: 0131-620 8400 for a brochure.



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The Royal Scotsman passes the shores of Loch Carron on the west coast of Ross and Cromarty

PHOTOGRAPHY: CORBIS/NEWS

