

Scotland

FROM SEA TO HILLS

**Birdwatching, beaches and beautiful views:
Scotland's got it all, as SARA WALKER finds out.**

From the vast unspoilt vistas of the highlands to Glasgow, European City of Culture, Scotland's got something for everyone. We're travelling from the low road of the coast to the high road of the hills on a three-day tour to get a flavour of this beautiful part of the UK.

DUCKS HOTEL

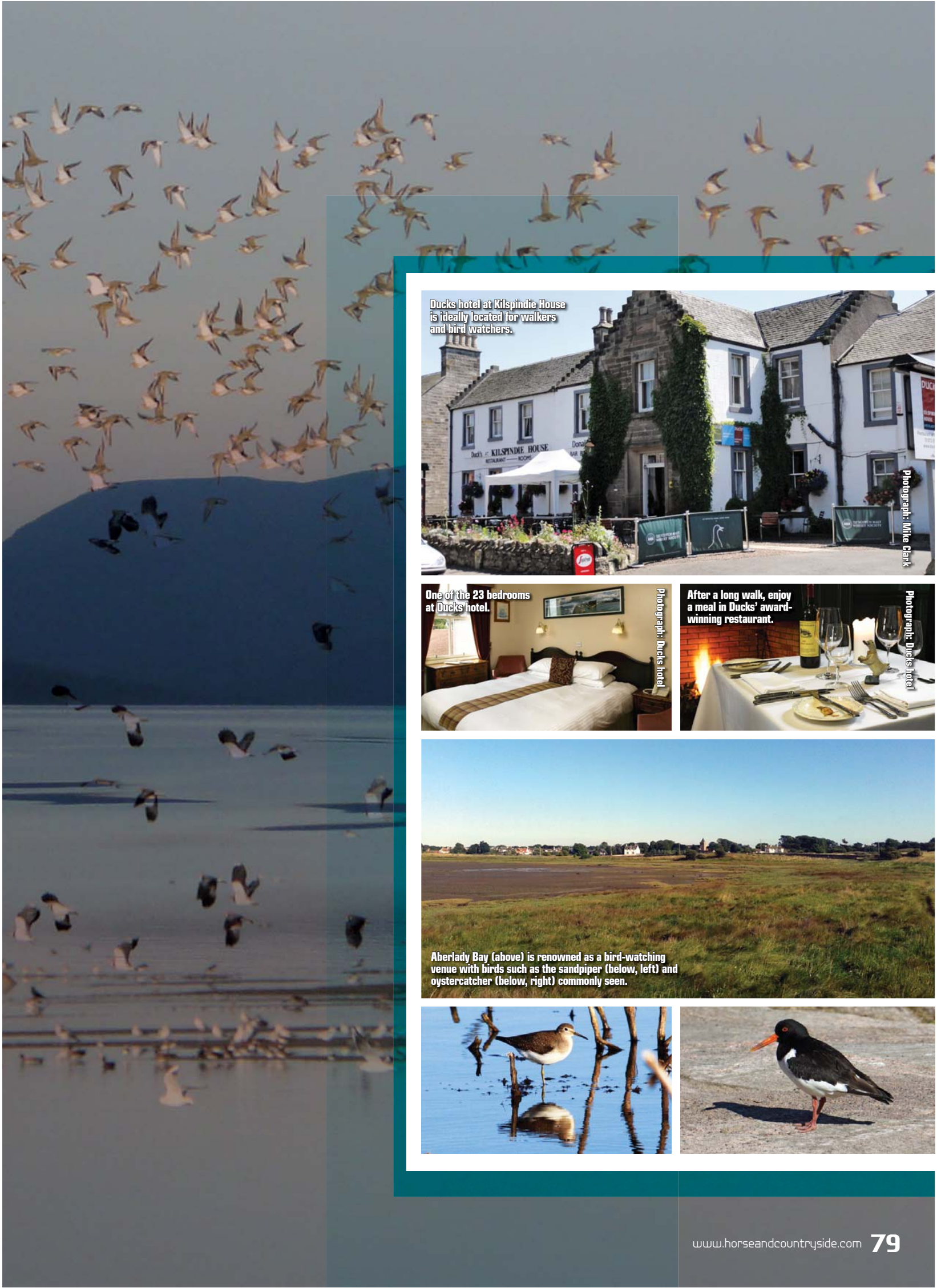
Our first port of call is Aberlady by the Firth of Forth, a pretty village which prospered as a port in the 18th century. Its position on the East Lothian coast means it's a good stopping off point for migratory birds in spring and autumn, and the area boasts not only Waterston House, the resource centre of the Scottish Ornithologists Club (SOC), but also the Scottish Seabird Centre, both within a few miles of each other. For nature lovers, there's also Aberlady Bay Local Nature Reserve, a 582 hectare site right on the beach that's dedicated to protecting the local bird, plant and animal

life. Our destination is Kilspindie House, just a few hundred yards from the bay and home of Ducks hotel.

Run by owners Malcolm and Fiona Duck, Ducks describes itself as a restaurant with rooms and the focus is firmly on the two-AA-star-rated restaurant and separate bistro, which both serve fresh, seasonal produce. Owner Malcolm is an avid birdwatcher and also a golfer, and has been instrumental in helping to get the area named the 'golf coast' for its 22 local courses. That's not Malcolm's only claim to fame, as manager Ros Sloan explains.

"Malcolm's father really was called Donald Duck, years before Walt Disney thought of it," she laughs. "He gets so many people asking about it that he keeps the birth certificate in the bar to prove it!"

"It's a lovely place to live, we have some of the best beaches in the world," says Ros.



Ducks hotel at Kilspondie House is ideally located for walkers and bird watchers.



Photograph: Mike Clark

One of the 23 bedrooms at Ducks' hotel.



Photograph: Ducks hotel

After a long walk, enjoy a meal in Ducks' award-winning restaurant.



Photograph: Ducks hotel



Aberlady Bay (above) is renowned as a bird-watching venue with birds such as the sandpiper (below, left) and oystercatcher (below, right) commonly seen.



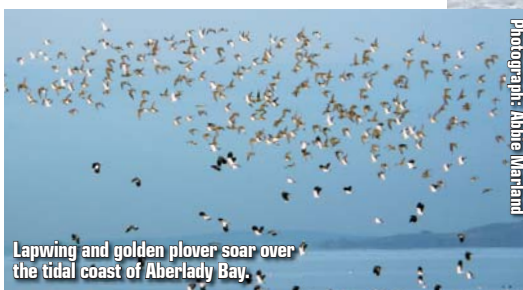


Ospreys are commonly seen in the Aberlady Bay area.



Thousands of pink-footed geese fly over Waterston House.

Photograph: Ian J. Andrews



Lapwing and golden plover soar over the tidal coast of Aberlady Bay.

Photograph: Abbie Marland

As well as birdwatchers and golfers, the hotel's popular with walkers and allows dogs in most of its 23 rooms, as well as most of the public areas except the restaurant.

True to its Scottish heritage, the evening menu in the intimate, well-appointed bistro boasts a choice of 90 malt whiskies as well as traditional dishes such as skink - a fish soup - and haggis. For the less adventurous there's also risotto and homemade beef burgers, as well as plenty of local fish. We eat parsnip soup and venison Milanese; a simple but delicious vegetarian dish of sun-dried tomatoes and cous cous and a meltingly light sticky toffee pudding that has us fighting for the last spoonful.

The following morning, we briefly stretch our legs on the beach opposite the hotel, admiring the stunning vistas across the Firth of Forth. To our right, the beach ends in the nature reserve where our dog isn't allowed, so we jump into the car for the five minute drive to Gullane Point. Here, there's a long stretch of even golden sand, and Monty, off the lead, gallops along the water's edge, sending great joyful plumes of sea spray high into the air. Afterwards, we walk into the town for a cup of coffee at Gannets' Deli before making the short trip to Waterston House for a chat with Keith Macgregor, SOC honorary president, about the local birdlife.

Founded in 1936, the SOC has 15 branches all over Scotland and aims to promote the study, enjoyment and conservation of wild birds and their habitats across the country. Waterston House has the largest collection of books about birds in Scotland, and the club also hosts lectures, outings,

conferences and exhibitions as well as running very popular 'birdwatching for beginners' courses throughout the year.

"We're very lucky with our location here," says Keith. "As we're on the east coast we get a lot of passage birds in the spring and autumn, migrating between Scandinavia and Africa, and sometimes if the weather's bad they drop in here for a rest. In the woodland, we see nuthatches and on the coast you can spot diving and wading birds, scoters, long-tailed ducks, red-necked grebe and many, many more. At the right time of year, you can spot 50 or 60 species in a few hours. The rarest bird we've had in the area was a bridled tern. We also run a 'goosewatch' night each year in the autumn, when spectators can see thousands of pink-footed geese coming in to roost - that's quite a sight!"

Having shaken the coastal sand from our shoes, it's back into the car for the hour-and-a-half drive to St. Fillans on Loch Earn, in Perthshire, for the mountain part of the trip.



Photograph: Abbie Marland

A Common Blue butterfly at the Aberlady Nature Reserve.



The SOC has 15 branches all over Scotland and aims to promote the study, enjoyment and conservation of wild birds.

Photograph: Mike Clark



Rob Mulholland's metal sculpture guards the head of the loch.

The Four Seasons Hotel stands at the head of Loch Earn, metres from the water.



Photograph: Four Seasons Hotel

FOUR SEASONS HOTEL

We're heading for the Four Seasons Hotel, a privately-owned hotel overlooking the head of the loch. Originally built in the early 1800s, the main house was extensively remodelled in the 1960s and 70s. Inside, there's a quirky, eclectic feel as the 1970s architecture sits side-by-side with Asian and Oriental pieces, modern art and contemporary and traditional furniture, all combining to give a warm, cosy and above all individual look.

The hotel's in a stunning location, and the windows of our large, well-appointed room at the front of the hotel give onto the sparkling stretch of water. The hotel has a small private section of beach for water access, and by the wooden jetty is a metal statue of a male figure, standing calf-deep in the cool water, by Scottish sculptor Rob Mulholland. The statue looks different from hour to hour as the light changes, striking reflections from the metal panels.



"Our visitors are mostly attracted by the accessible location - it's great for touring and exploring the towns such as Edinburgh and Glasgow. We've also got the National Park, and some great walking," says owner Andrew Low.

The hotel prides itself on being pet friendly, and Andrew has two dogs of his own, an unusual breed of German bird dog called Munsterlanders. On arrival, Monty is delighted to find a plate of dog biscuits, a welcome letter from house dogs Sham and Pagne and a comprehensive list of local walks. The hotel makes no accommodation charge for its canine guests, and offers a range of paid-for pet concierge services ranging from special meals to pet sitting services.



The Four Seasons Hotel.

Photograph: Mike Clark



The hotel has a choice of 12 bedrooms, including rooms with four poster beds.

Photograph: Four Seasons Hotel



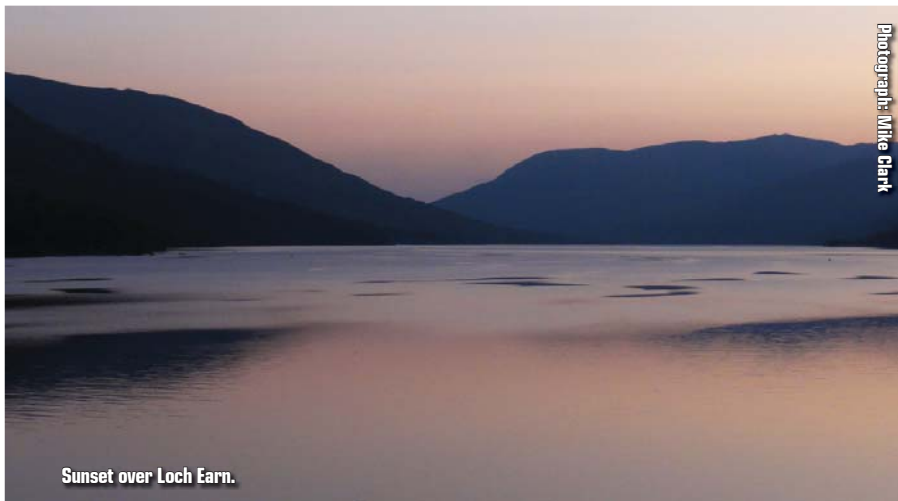
The Meall Reamhar restaurant and Tarken bistro serve fresh, contemporary food.


Photograph: Four Seasons Hotel



Sunset over Loch Earn.

Photograph: Mike Clark





High on the fells behind the hotel.

Tired from the journey and the unusually un-Scottish hot weather, we walk for a hour alongside the loch before taking our seats on the terrace outside the Tarken bistro, overlooking the water. The bistro and two-AA-rosette-starred restaurant serve contemporary Scottish food, and our dinner includes traditional-with-a-twist, such as black pudding and scallops with chilli sauce. (The starters are accompanied by a mini-menu for Monty, consisting of a bowl of the house water and a small platter of dog biscuits.) The vegetarian food is both delicious and imaginative, and includes a summer salad of mushrooms and hazelnut polenta and a lemon and thyme rosti with roasted vegetables.

The following morning, after a hearty Scottish-themed breakfast, we waver between taking a boat out onto the loch and climbing the fell behind the hotel. You can rent small motor boats and rowing boats from several locations from April to October for fishing trips and pleasure jaunts, but in the end we decide to climb the forestry road through Creag Gharbh for a view of the loch from above.

Small brightly coloured butterflies flutter above the heather as we pass, and the thick carpet of bracken gives off a rich, earthy scent. There are several peat-bottomed burns alongside the track, and Monty plunges enthusiastically into the clear water, bounding out again to shake the silvery droplets from his coat, soaking us from the knees down. It's so quiet you can hear the insects droning in the bracken, and below us the loch is spread out like a mirror.

After a lunch of sandwiches from the old-fashioned and appealing grocer's shop in St Fillans, it's time to hit the road home. With the sky a deep cornflower blue and the temperature in the high twenties, we decide to take the scenic route and head back along the edge of Loch Lomond and the Trossachs through the National Park. All around us the high hedges are thick with summer flowers, the sunlight strikes diamonds from the water of the loch and the hills behind us are purple with heather.

TAKE A TRIP TO SCOTLAND

Ducks hotel, Main Street, Aberlady, EH32 ORE.

Tel: **01875 870 682**.

Website: **ducks.co.uk**.

Prices, based on two people sharing, start at £120 for a double room including breakfast.

Four Seasons Hotel, St. Fillans, Perthshire, PH6 2NF Tel: **01764 685 333**.

Website: **thefourseasonshotel.co.uk**.

Prices, based on two people sharing, start at £122 for a double room including breakfast.

For more information about **bird watching** in the area, contact the **Scottish Ornithologists Society**, Waterston House, Aberlady, East Lothian, EH32 OPV.

Tel: **01875 871 330**.

Website **the-soc.org.uk**.

SCOTLAND IS BONNY INDEED

Photograph: Mike Clark