

Scotland the Best

Pete Irvine's top picks of the best the region has to offer

YL SPECIAL FEATURE

The 12th edition of Scotland the Best, Pete Irvine's award-winning travel guide, is published this month.

"It's been a while and jings, it takes a while, but I have been up and down these lands again," said Pete.

"From my point of view, from the car, the restaurant table and the hilltop, Scotland is looking better than ever.

"I hope that this is evident from the 2,000+ entries – the shortlist from a hugely expanding long-list – in a book which, try as I might to be concise, just gets bigger."

Here Pete selects a few of his favourite places found in the north and north-east.

HOTELS

● **Marcliffe at Pitfodels, Pitfodels**

On the edge of town, a successful mix of intimate and spacious, the old (mansion house) and the newer wing are still personally run by the Spence family: Stewart Spence the consummate hotelier; his son Ross is head chef. Their many pics on the piano with the famous (both Margarets – the princess and Mrs Thatcher; and that other T, Donald Trump) attest to this hotel's enduring primacy. Excellent restaurant and breakfast in light conservatory with nice courtyard and terrace overlooking gardens. Spa facilities (no pool). Honeymoon suites are fab; there are many weddings and rollicking Aberdonian functions. This understated hotel caters for all and is unquestionably one of the best all-round hotels in Scotland. To wide concern and disappointment there was a wobble in 2014 when this grand old Deeside Duchess might have been unseated. Happily, there's no keeping those Spences out of the palace.

● **Raemoir House, Banchory**
Romantic, quirky country mansion with old-fashioned, very individual comfy rooms given contemporary details. Flowers, pictures, candles at night. The Ha' Hoose (from 1715) behind predates the hotel. Extensive grounds (helicopter pad). Owner Neil Rae is very



The immaculate Dunrobin Castle Gardens, Golspie

hands-on, with a great team; you will be looked after. From the kitchen uncomplicated, delicious dining (new chef since I was there). There's lots of public space to slouch in. Staff largely local and all friendly. This place has the perfect peace and quiet and is decidedly Deeside.

● **The Boat Inn, Aboyne**
Recent refit and big uplift of long-serving riverside inn, with comfy, contemporary, inexpensive rooms, and a great bar and food operation downstairs. Eileen and David Haywood and a good team have floated this boat and made it a Deeside destination for good gastropub food, including on Tue (pie night), Wed (fish) and Thu (local produce). They are known for their fish & chips. Same menu in bar and restaurant. There is simply nowhere else to eat of an eve; thankfully it's as good as it is.

● **Buchanan's, Banchory**
Adjacent to Woodend Barn arts centre (home to an eclectic, quality mix of music, theatre and film), the bistro in the barn is a contemporary, urbane, informed eatery on the edge of Banchory, the prospering heart of Royal Deeside. Val and Calum Buchanan have an enlightened grow-your-own approach (there are allotments out back) and this airy bistro demonstrates the best kind of rural re-creation. Their daily breads are fantastic. I could eat here every day (and would be so much healthier).

● **Marine Hotel, Stonehaven**
Popular local on a great harbour with seats outside and always a crowd. Six guest ales, big Belgian and wheat-beer selection, and their own brew – 6°N. Food till 9pm. Upstairs dining room overlooks the boat-bobbing bay. Same menu; local fish specials.

● **The Creel Inn, Catterline, nr Stonehaven**
Perching above the bay from where the lobsters come. And lots of other



The Cow Shed, Banchory has a light and easy-to-love menu



Drum Castle near Banchory has been the seat of the Irvines for 24 generations

seafood. Good wine; huge speciality beer selection. Cove itself has a haunting beauty. Catterline is Joan Eardley (notable artist) territory. It's also famous for this great atmospheric pub and its grub.

● **Café Cognito, St Swithin Street, Aberdeen**
Unlikely sharing of premises with a nail bar, where ladies have their nails done in a kind of pod at the side. Doesn't detract though from this buzzy, popular café from breakfast through lunch to supper. So busy it is that sometimes a tad cramped through the back (I say get rid of the nails). One of the few places you can get an actual Aberdeen buttery (you must try) for your brekkie (better than croissants).

● **The Tippling House, Belmont St, Aberdeen**
Through a door by an interesting window and down a few stairs in busy-with-riff-raff Belmont Street into a more calm and cool with itself world. More of a restaurant/cocktail bar than mere pubber here. Small plates and sharing platters, with imaginative combos. And great 'sliders' (burgers). Food served until one hour before bar closes so this is the place to eat late.

● **The Dolphin Café, Peterhead**
By the harbour, where the fish come from, so you don't get closer to the source than this. Serving the fishermen (from 5am), as well as us; it's a community thing. The cold North Sea outside (no, we wouldn't want to go there).

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clinical), with superior sakes, beers and wine list. And credible edibles.

● **Le Café Bohème, Windmill Brae, Aberdeen**
Authentic French bistro, atmos and food in an area that gets drunk at weekends. Here, all is calm with style and good service. Food proper French from chef John Pattillo, à la carte and plats du jour (especially seafood). Best place to eat by far in this part of the city centre.

FISH & CHIPS

● **The Bay, Stonehaven**
On the prom towards the open-air pool, just look for the queue almost always there. They really do come from miles away (and to Auntie Betty's ice-cream shop next door). All is cooked to order. You wait and walk on the front – perfect! The Bay wins many awards.

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THINGS TO DO AND PLACES TO VISIT

● **Dunrobin Castle Gardens, Golspie**
The Versailles-inspired gardens that sit below the opulent Highland chateau of the Dukes of Sutherland. Terraced, parterred and immaculate, they stretch to the sea. 30 gardeners once tended them, now there are four but little has changed since they impressed a more exclusive clientele.

● **Crathes Castle nr Banchory**
One of the most interesting tower houses surrounded by terrific topiary and walled gardens of inspired design and tranquillity (though you're unlikely to have any part of it to yourself). Keen gardeners will be in their scented heaven. The Golden Garden (after Gertrude Jekyll) works particularly well and there's a wild garden beyond the old wall that many

people miss. A very House & Garden experience, though in summer it's stuffed with people as well as plants.

● **Drum Castle (the Irvine Ancestral Home), nr Banchory**
Please forgive this, the longest entry in this section. For 24 generations this has been the seat of the Irvines. My ain folk. Four times I've signed the visitor book and each time have wandered through the accumulated history hopeful of identifying with something. Gifted to one William De Irwin by Robert the Bruce, it combines the original keep (the oldest intact tower house in Scotland), a Jacobean mansion and Victorian expansionism. Hugh Irvine, the family 'artist', whose extravagant self-portrait as the Angel Gabriel raised eyebrows in 1810, does seem like my kind of chap; at least more interesting than most of my soldiering forebears. Give me a window seat in that library. Grounds have an exceptional walled rose garden (Easter-Oct 11am-4.15pm). Jul/Aug: Seven days 11am-4pm (last admission), Mar-Jun: Thu-Mon, winter Sat/Sun. Tower can be climbed for great views. Some pleasant walks from the car park. New gallery space showing (until Mar 2017) excellent contemporary art from Aberdeen Art Gallery.

● **Moray Coast**
Many great beaches along coast from Spey Bay to Fraserburgh, notably Cullen and Lossiemouth (town beaches), and New Aberdour and Rosehearty, both quieter places for walks and picnics. Two of the great secret beaches on this coast are: Sunnyside near Sandend where you walk past the incredible ruins of Findlater Castle on the cliff top (how did they build it? A place, on its grassed-over roof, for a picnic) and down to a cove which on my sunny day was simply perfect. Signed (Findlater) from A98. Take a left from Sandend 16km W of Banff, follow road for 2km. Park in the farmyard. Walk from here past

devecote, 1km to cliff, then left from the ruin viewpoint. Cullykhan Bay E of Gardenstown signed from the coast road (200m to small car park). A small beach but great littoral for beach scrambling and full of surprises).

● **Lunan Bay, nr Montrose**
A deep red crescent beach under a wide northern sky. The But 'n' Ben in Auchmithie, is an excellent place to start or finish and good approach (from south), although Gordon's restaurant at Inverkeilor is closer. You can climb up to the Red Castle. Lunan is often deserted. The Lunan Bay Diner is at the car park – it's OK. 100m to the beach. St Cyrus north of Montrose (a nature reserve) also a lovely littoral to wander.

● **Finzean Farm Shop & Tearoom, Deeside**
On the south side of the river on B976 between Banchory and Aboyne on the Farquharson family's Finzean estate. Kate and Catriona's foodie haven, a showcase for local suppliers, in glorious open countryside with views to the hills from the terrace. Local and carefully sourced produce beautifully presented fresh and frozen. Meat and game from the estate. Cool cookbooks. Hot dishes till 3pm. Cakes that don't rely on cream, and the mother-in-law's Victoria sponge. Book first.

● **Hammerton Store, Aberdeen**
On road west to Deeside somewhere in a suburb. Susan Watson's love affair with Aberdeen and life. Not only a deli, more a superior provider where essentials include art, travelling rugs, cool pottery, cookery books and mine. Susan properly selects and sources everything. Provenance is not an idle gesture – she goes to Gigha and brings back the halibut. Tables outside where you can snack and reflect how nice it would be to have a place like this in your neighbourhood. There are a lot of artisan gins in that cabinet to get through.

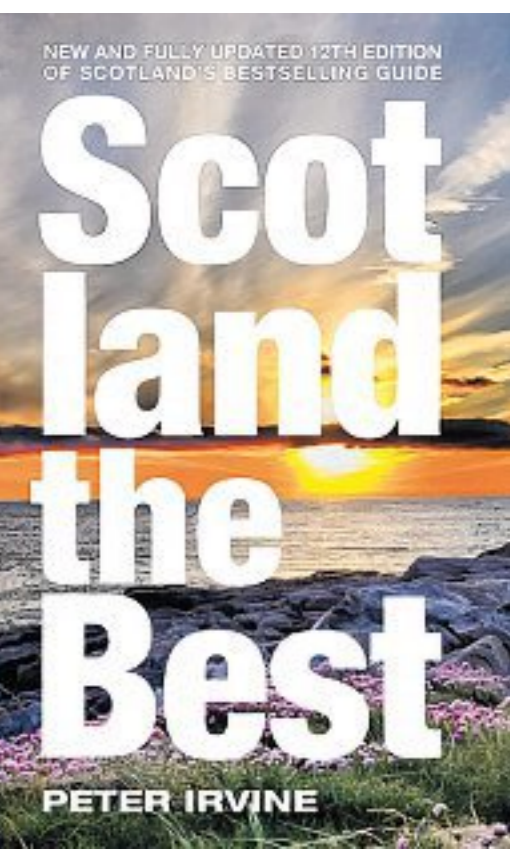
● **Scotland the Best is published by Collins and is priced at £15.99.**

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