

Scenic Scottish Rail Journeys: Insights and Tips for Your Train Adventure

Train Travel in Scotland

Tracy: Thinking about seeing more of Scotland by train. In episode 145, I'm joined by Doug, who recently took some scenic rail journeys from Edinburgh, including one along the coast, Inverness via Aberdeen and Dundee, and a return planned on the Highland Main line through Aviemore, Pitlochry and Perth. And Total Storm changed his plans. Doug shares what went right, what went sideways and why train travel is one way to explore Scotland.

intro: Welcome to the UK Travel Planning podcast. Your host is the founder of the UK travel planning website, Tracy Collins. In this podcast, Tracey shares destination guides, travel tips and itinerary, ideas, as well as interviews with a variety of guests who share their knowledge and experience of UK travel to help you plan your perfect UK vacation. Join us as we explore the uk from cosmopolitan cities to quaint villages, from historic castles to beautiful islands, and from the picturesque countryside to seaside town.

Tracy: So, hi everyone and welcome to episode 145 of the UK Travel Planner podcast. Now, this week I thought I would chat to Doug about, some train travel that he took earlier this year in January and early February, when we were staying up in Scotland. Because we often get questions about train travel in Scotland, what it's like and also what to do sometimes if things don't necessarily work out as planned when you're taking any train travel. so this is to be a, a good episode to talk about because, to talk about those things and for Doug to share some tips about general train travel, really, if

things kind of go a little bit wrong, but also about his experience travelling by train in Scotland, and then to share some tips and ideas and thoughts about, about actually, well, his trip in general, but also about train travel in Scotland. So. Hi, Doug, good to have you back.

Tracy: Hello.

Doug travelled by train from Edinburgh to Inverness and back

Tracy: So let's start at the beginning. What inspired this particular trip by train from Edinburgh to Inverness and back?

Tracy: Well, easy answer to that one to start with is we have an article on our UK travel planning website about day trips from Edinburgh. I have one from Glasgow as well, but this because we're in Edinburgh, it seemed like a perfect opportunity to update, the post and to, just to see how the current services are running. And obviously me being me, never turn up an opportunity to travel by train.

Tracy: Exactly. So, you know, you chose the coastal route via Dundee and Aberdeen on the way up. Can you describe that journey for us and what stood out for you along the way? And actually why did you choose that journey, I've got to ask.

Tracy: Well, as you well know, I do like circular train journeys, so if possible if there's one direction to go from A to B, I always want to come back a different way. As long as, you know, time allows, the cost is realistic and you, you know, you have the opportunity.

Tracy: Yeah, absolutely. So. So you chose that particular coastal route. So we went via Dundee and Aberdeen on the way up. So describe that particular journey and you know, what stood out along the way?

Tracy: Well, what stood out is the beautiful scenery when you leave in Edinburgh to start with, you know, you can cross the, the rail bridge, which is fantastic in itself. But I wanted to stop off at two different places. One, I wanted to stop off at Lucas. Lucas, depending on your pronunciation. And that's the home of Saint Andrews, the home of golf.

Tracy: Yes.

Tracy: So we did that a couple of years back and I just want to double, double check that the services, the bus service from Lucas to St Andrews was just the same. So it was just a quick bus journey from some Lucas train station to St Andrews to the bus station. And yes, exactly the same. It's better to buy a return ticket.

Tracy: And we actually have got a short on YouTube which shows that journey from Edinburgh to Lucas and then on to St. Andrew. So if you listen to the podcast and you think, you know, actually we actually fancy that day trip. We know that's a very, very popular day trip from Edinburgh to, to go to see St Andrews. A lot of golf fans out there. so take a look at that short if you want to have a look and see what that, that train journey looks like. And it's actually very easy. It's a very easy trip.

Tracy: It's very easy. I should qualify. What I said that it's not a return bus ticket, it's a day sing, a day ticket.

Tracy: Right.

Tracy: Which works out cheap. It's only a few a couple of pounds cheaper, but it's nevertheless cheaper. So it was a quick journey to there. Then I jumped back on the train. The one of the reasons I split the journey as well was different train stop used throughout, which obviously I wanted to experience the different types of trains and the different classes of trains and the different cost of tickets, etc. Etc.

Tracy: Well that's always really useful because that means your knowledge is updated and then you can help people that are planning their trips up to date. Up to date.

Tracy: And that's right. So I travelled from then Lucas to

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Tracy: Aberdeen. You go past through Dundee, got great views of the the viaduct and the the coastline on the coast. Beautiful. And then to Aberdeen, just about six minutes walk from the Station is the Maritime Museum, which I've never been in in Aberdeen. So it was a quick excursion straight to there, have a look around and back to the station.

Tracy: So what was it like, would you reckon?

Tracy: Yeah, it's a free museum. Also, it was good, but it's all about the local history and obviously the maritime history and also the whole section about the oil rigs out in the North Sea, which actually I know nothing about, but I know a little bit more now, so that was worth visiting.

Tracy: And then after that I went back.

Tracy: To Aberdeen station and jumped on the train to Inverness, which takes the coastal route all the way past Elgin. And you also stop off, you can actually, where you can catch the Whisky Trail train from there, which is worth doing. Speyside Whisky Trail.

Tracy: Okay, so let's think. So that trip from Edinburgh up to Inverness and you stopped off a couple of places along the way, how long did that take you?

Tracy: It took me just over six hours because you choose obviously the length of stays that you want to stop off at these places for, but the quickest you can do is about 4 hours, 40 minutes I believe. And that's one stop off at, Aberdeen.

Tracy: Okay, and so how many stop offs did you take? Two.

Tracy: Two.

Tracy: Two.

Tracy: Lucas and Aberdeen.

Weather warnings were saying there would be no trains running from ScotRail

Tracy: Okay, so you arrived at Inverness. So what was your planned return? So, yeah, jumping ahead.

Tracy: Yeah, I was planning on returning that day. I had all my times laid out etc, and I was originally going to stay, come back that day after a few hours back in Inverness. But even before I'd left Aberdeen, I thought I had a discussion with you. I was and said, you know what, I'm going to stop off in Inverness for the night and then I'll come back the following morning as well. Because it was the end of January, it was the middle of winter and there was snow around and we knew there was some rough weather coming, but I still set out anyway. but on leaving Aberdeen, that's when things went a little sideways.

Tracy: Okay, so what happened?

Tracy: So initially the, the announcement on the PA or the tunnel on the train said that there was bad weather heading in and there'd been weather warnings, for the entire east side of Scotland, actually was countrywide really. But specifically they were talking, it was a ScotRail train service, so they were passing on reports from Scotrail and there was going to be delays and cancellations. So obviously, as you can imagine, there's lots of people then wanted to talk to the train crew as regards ongoing journeys, plans, etc. Etc. But the train crew were absolutely incredible. I have to say, I'm always singing the praises of UK Railways, but the staff on board that train were phenomenal. They spent such a lot of time with everybody. Obviously, I've got a lot of rail experience. I was not pushing the point because I knew what I was doing, but the way that they were helping other people was incredibly helpful. And, so what they're saying was the weather warnings were saying there was going to be no trains running from ScotRail. In other words, no trains in Scotland past end of that day.

Tracy: Right. Okay. So we're still running that day.

Tracy: Yeah.

Tracy: But then they were going to finish at the end of that day. And I'll also just interject at this point that I was in Edinburgh and had kind of been watching this potential storm. And it was a big storm. This was a big storm that rolled through Scotland. so by this point, I think when we spoke, I had a fair inkling that you were not going to be able to make it back that day. Stay. so deciding to stay in Inverness. So did you. Had you booked the hotel? From the conversation before, you'd be already been told that the trains weren't gonna. Weren't coming back.

Tracy: Yes, because we'd, I decided I was going to just spend a bit more time in Inverness because I do like Inverness as well. So the whole idea was I was just going to stay near Inverness Station. It was the Black Vice Hotel, if you're listening, thank you. Great place. And so then the weather unfolded and so the plan was, I thought, well, I'm not going to maybe, get away tomorrow. So I thought, well, I'll stay an extra night just to give them a chance to sort things out. Because from our rail experience, knowing that things don't come back to normal straight away, it takes a bit of time because trains staff in the wrong place. They've got to make sure the line's clear and safe. So I know how long these things take.

Tracy: And obviously at this point, you didn't know past the fact that there were no trains at the end of that day how long this was. Actually. They hadn't made any announcement about how long they thought this was going to impact for, did they?

Tracy: No, that's right. They just had no trains that day. But past that point, there was no. They were not saying, well, you know, Tomorrow morning at 6 o'clock the trains will start running again. They didn't make that to stamen ties either. It's only my experience

knows that they don't sort these things out overnight very, very quickly. It does take a bit of time. So I was being a bit, over caution,

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Tracy: the fact that booking an extra night just in case this was going to take longer, and it was a decision that turned it out to be the, the right move, because by the time I did get to Inverness and I asked them for an extra night and they said, you are very lucky. It's only because I bought the one night before. They've had lots of people coming in the whole coach loads asking for rooms for the next couple of nights for this reason. So I was very, very lucky, actually.

January and February can have significant impacts on train travel due to weather

Tracy: So I think what's really important from this is to consider what tips that you would offer any of our listeners who may find themselves in this sort of situation. So this was a cancellation of the trains due to the weather. So I will say this was in January, February. So if you're planning ever to travel up to Scotland, January and February, you do have to really consider potential impacts of the train. And I know, I think even maybe 10 years ago we were planning to take the Caledonian Sleeper. And in fact, I think it was a West coast, Highland Line. The West Highland Line was, was hit by a massive storm. And, and so we couldn't actually take that, that we couldn't take that train. So there's always a potential in. You know, you've got to kind of have that in your plans if you plan to travel that far north at that time of year that this can impact. So what would you, what would your tips be for travellers who may find themselves in this situation?

Tracy: Well, the, the preparation beforehand is, while talking to the experts and knowing what are the recommended apps to put on your phone, which websites. And I'm not saying predict that there's going to be problems, but be prepared. I had an overnight bag with me, even though initially when I left that was not the plan. And as it happened, it turned out to be the right move. So, number one is make sure you have a phone that's working. That's. That's a really good point. most of the trains in the UK have WI fi, but, you know, you cannot count on. No, obviously, no, when you're moving along that, you know, you can lose a signal as well, which can be very frustrating if you're depending on it.

Tracy: I'm gonna say that we also have an article, if you're wondering about access on my file in the uk, we do have an article all about, Sims and esims. We tend to use air or esim. These days when we travel, I know that's what you have on your phone. You have it now. We're actually recording this in Spain and we have, we have E sims on our phone as well here. So it's important to ensure that you've got that connectivity.

Tracy: Yeah, it is very important to have connectivity. But I think knowing what apps to use, I use the National Rail Inquiries, Live Trains and Journey Planning App because I, My experience is that it's the most readily updated and accurate and that's number one. But also I think, particularly with train travel is have an idea in your head of the, the geography. I don't mean every single little station because that'll be over the top, but have an idea where you're running to, where your trains are going. Just to have a bit more of a route knowledge that if you have to. Which become more evident on the, on the journey back is if you have to slightly change your plans, you can't go from A to B, but you've got to go from A to C to D and then come back to B. Have a bit of an understanding of the route knowledge.

Tracy: But. Well, how would that go if you've got a, if you've got a train ticket. I know you're going to say depending on what sort of train ticket, but how can you get that flexibility?

Tracy: The best thing to do is to buy an anytime train ticket because if you, even if you haven't got an anytime train ticket, if you are impacted by weather and cancellations, that often will cover you on a different, different, route. but that's up to the, where you bought the ticket from and the operator at the time. But to give yourself that flexibility when you're buying tickets is to buy in anytime ticket. So that will cover you on any route between two points. So you're buying a ticket between A and B, and if there's two or three different routes to, between A and B, you can use any of them. Okay, whereas, whereas if you buy an advanced ticket that's on one route between those two points on that particular train.

Tracy: On that day, what happens if you plan to go A to B but you end up having to go to A to C to B because that's the only way to get from A to B because of some like, problems.

Tracy: That's the discussion you have with the train crews and the stations. And just to double check, because penalty fares are quite, quite steep.

You love the accommodation you stayed in in Inverness

Tracy: Okay, so you stayed in Inverness for two nights and you say you stayed. You love the accommodation you stayed in. So let's give them another shout out.

Tracy: I'll give another shout out to the Blackfriars Hotel in Inverness. I chose them because it was close to the Inverness train station. It's just out to the right. And the staff, Stephen and Abby, the, the the lady that worked there, absolutely phenomenal. They were

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Tracy: so lovely, so kind, so accommodating and flexible and they're just wonderful people to, to talk to really. And the food was nice as well. A great Scottish breakfast.

Tracy: Brilliant.

Scottish broadcaster managed to return to Edinburgh despite severe weather

Okay, so after a couple of days in Inverness and the storm kind of blew through, well, through Ireland and then through through Scotland. And I know because I was in Edinburgh and it caused the quite, you know, quite a lot of destruction in Edinburgh. And I actually couldn't go out for most of a day because it was, it was too dangerous actually to go out because it was so windy. so you did eventually return to Edinburgh. So how did you manage to do that? What was that journey like and how was the weather on your return?

Tracy: Well, that morning in Inverness there was no trains said heading out of Inverness before midday. So, But I kept checking, I kept checking the live trains on the national rail and I was also looking on, on the website and Scott rail site, their own site as well. And

then they seem to un. Cancel one or two services. Okay. So to give the line its proper name, it's the Highland Mainline and that runs literally straight down from Inverness and. But they said there was a train heading to Perth, so I thought, well, I'll jump on the one heading south. So I had no seat reservations at this point. It was every man for themselves. Luckily I did not have much luggage, but the train was freezing so it obviously bought it out from stock up there. And it was, I thought it was going to be very, very busy, but it wasn't. So. And there was snow lying around. As soon as we left Inverness, you start heading down through the Cairngorms and there was lots of snow around and it was icy cold. That beautiful scenery mine. As soon as the train warmed up, it was lovely to look at. So I eventually got down. We come through pit Lockery and beautiful, beautiful scenery. I was talking to the train cruiser, keeping everybody up to date with trains running from pit, Lockery from, from Perth. So I had a plan. Before I got there, I was keeping my eye on trains leaving Perth on live Trains app. and I knew which train I was going to catch. So the plan was I was going to head to Perth. I'd already Decided at this point I was going to have a quick look around Perth as well, because the Stone of Destiny is now from. I think it was March last year in 2024, is now returned to Scotland and in the new Perth Museum. So I went to see that. That's good. Now, the trains coming out of Perth, they said there was one running to Dundee, so I was gonna not be able to do the line. I was expecting to come straight back down to Edinburgh, so I went cross land and I went to Dundee with the. With the intention of going from Dundee back down to Edinburgh. That did not happen. At some point when I was on the train to Dundee, the trains out of Dundee have been cancelled. There was nothing heading down from Dundee to anywhere at this point. So I arrived into Dundee thinking, what am I going to do now? I might have to stay in Dundee for the night. And this is what happened. This is what we talked about earlier, is the fact that you've got to be flexible. You've got to think, what are your options at this moment in time? And I headed to the bus station thinking, I'll just have a look, see what buses are out. And yes, there

was a bus took turn two and a half hours, two hours, 20 minutes from Dundee bus station to Edinburgh.

Tracy: Perfect.

Tracy: And, when I arrived into Edinburgh, I thought I'd have a quick walk down to Waverley train station. And what I found out was there was no trains north out of Edinburgh for the foreseeable because of debris on the line.

Tracy: Right. And I guess that's a. That's sort of point to make as well, because even though the storm had passed through, it was still causing cancellations because of. There was debris, branches and all sorts of people on the train lines. Yeah, it was still windy.

Tracy: Was still very windy. And you can't run trains unless they've certified that the line is clear and safe to run services.

Tracy: Right.

Tracy: So, yes, it was, it was an interesting excursion, but with a footnote to all this, me being me. The following morning, what did I do? I had to head straight back from Edinburgh to Perth. I wanted to complete the journey by train while I'd started.

Tracy: So you did.

The Coastal and the Highland mainline are recommended routes from

Edinburgh to Inverness

So for anybody listening that are considering this, I'm going to ask you, Doug, would you. Would you recommend both of those routes? So the Coastal and the Highland mainline, considering this, is heading up to Inverness, so we're talking about kind of that eastern side of Scotland. We're not. Those are the routes we're talking about from Edinburgh. So we're kind of going north Here we're heading north.

Tracy: Yes. So if you think it's like a circular route, you come from Edinburgh, via Aberdeen, you take the coastal route, to Inverness, and then the, the Highland mainline is. It says it's the main line. It's the fastest service straight down the middle of Scotland back to Edinburgh or Glasgow.

Tracy: So if you were trying to get to Inverness quickly, which would be the route that you take?

Tracy: You

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Tracy: take the Highland mainline.

Tracy: And if you were considering which was the most scenic, which route would you take? Is that a hard question?

Tracy: That's. That's a hard question. Because if you get nice where they're going, the, Highland Main Line through the Cairngorms is beautiful, but I also like the sea views on

the, on the east side of Scotland.

Tracy: So I'm thinking that, that you can go up and back in one day doing that circular route, which was my original. Which is what your original plan was. If you want to go from Edinburgh up to Inverness, the fast route, because you get, say you arrived in Edinburgh, you've done a few days in Edinburgh and you want to get yourself up to Inverness, maybe you're picking up a tour in Inverness, maybe you just want to spend some time in Inverness. What's the quickest. What's the kind of quickest time to do that?

Tracy: It's a. It's a few hours. It's. It's much less.

Tracy: Right?

Tracy: It's much less. It depends which service you catch. obviously changing a per. But, yeah, it is considerably quicker.

What would be your key tips for anyone considering rail travel in Scotland

Tracy: Okay, so now, what would be your key tips for anyone considering rail travel in Scotland, especially when travelling between cities like Edinburgh and Inverness? and also I think probably considering time of year is probably something you're also going to cover. But I think what would be the key tips for anybody planning their sort of train journeys?

Tracy: What I would recommend is having the most flexible train ticket you possibly can,

and that's the anytime train ticket, which will give you that little bit of flexibility if things do go potentially awry. I will add a little footnote to all of that, is that don't assume in summer months that there is no delays and things don't happen. There is different array of potential issues on train lines, so. But I would always keep the flexible train ticket as you most possibly can. Yes, it is more expensive, but it can save you money in the long term.

Tracy: Okay, now what about if I decide, obviously we're talking about day trips here, but if people are kind of doing it, that they're moving destinations, there's enough Kind of luggage storage on those trains is absolutely okay.

Tracy: yeah, there's no problem. Yes, I was travelling light up on the, on this occasion but we have travelled with luggage on the both of these routes. yeah, there's plenty there but it's the same rules apply, is to try not to take any luggage on board that you're not able to lift. Keep it as light as possible, keep your personal items, your valuable items with you in a separate small bag and take, make sure you have some refreshments, especially drinks and don't count on them being provided.

Tracy: Yeah, perfect.

What are your top recommendations for train day trips from Edinburgh

So if someone had a few days based in Edinburgh, what are your top recommendations for train day trips?

Tracy: Well, we've covered this before, I believe in a podcast episode number 73.

Tracy: Yeah. So if you want to figure out or want to hear about the best day trips from Edinburgh by train, we've got an entire podcast episode about that which will not only talk about the trains that actually Doug's talked about this episode, but we'll talk about some other train trips that you can take from Edinburgh. Cuz there are quite a few different destinations that you can choose from.

Tracy: Yeah, most definitely. There's, there's plenty of options there and we've covered them all on the website as well.

Tracy: Yeah. So we've got articles about train travel, we've got the podcast about train travel, we've got a lot of articles about travelling around Edinburgh, whether it's by train or actually if you want to do it by car. So I would definitely take a look at articles and obviously we've got some podcasts as well about Edinburgh, visiting Edinburgh, things to do in Edinburgh, tips, for visiting Edinburgh, day trips from Edinburgh by train or if you want to just do them by tours or by car.

Tracy: Yeah. And equally from Glasgow, we've also covered similar itineraries and recommendations from Glasgow.

Tracy: And from Inverness.

Tracy: And from Inverness, yes.

Have as flexible a train ticket as you possibly can, Doug says

Tracy: So I'm going to ask the final question because this is the question I always ask at the end of every episode and you've probably kind of covered it, but I just want to go over this again. What would be your one tip for someone planning a train trip in Scotland?

Tracy: Have as flexible train ticket as you possibly can.

Tracy: Perfect. So thanks Doug for sharing both the highs and the lows. Well, not really lows for the unexpected challenges of the Scottish train adventure.

Tracy: Not a problem. I thoroughly enjoyed it. You've got to be flexible and I had a great time.

Tracy: Brilliant. Now if you're planning to explore the UK by train. Don't forget to check out our UK train travel eBook, which Doug wrote. I did free resources and more over@uktravelplanet.com any questions, Leave us a voice message via Speak Pipe. It's been brilliant. We've had some, great questions come through and it's been so lovely because we can respond verbally to you and send you a message back. So if you've got any questions about train travel in Scotland or train travel in the uk, get back to us via, the Speak Pipe link. you have to just make sure that you leave your name and email so that we can respond to you, but then we'll be able to get back to you straight away. That link to the Speak Pipe is in the show notes to this episode, but as always, I think that just leaves us to stay until next week.

Tracy: Doug Happy UK Travel Planning.

Tracy: Thank you for joining us on this episode

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Tracy: of the Global Travel Planning Podcast. For more details and links to everything we discussed today, check out the show notes [@globaltravelplanning.com](mailto:globaltravelplanning.com) Remember, if you enjoyed the show, please consider leaving us a review on your favourite podcast app, because your feedback helps us reach more travel enthusiasts just like you. Anyway, that leaves me to say, as always, happy Global Travel Planning.

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