

Episode 213: Inside a Rabbie's Small Group Tour of Scotland

Doug Collins in conversation with Graham, driver guide at Rabbie's Tours, Edinburgh

Doug talks to Graham, a Rabbie's driver guide based in Edinburgh, about what a small group tour of Scotland is really like, from the morning meet at Edinburgh bus station to Loch Ness, Glencoe and the multi day trips to Skye, plus practical advice for anyone nervous about booking a group tour.

DOUG

Hello, Graham. Welcome, and thank you for agreeing to come onto an episode of the UK Travel Planning Podcast.

GRAHAM

Thank you so much. It's been a while since I've seen you. How is everything going? You doing okay?

DOUG

Yeah, absolutely fantastic, mate. I still think back fondly of the time I spent on that tour with you. For our listeners, just introduce yourself and say a bit about who you are and what you do.

GRAHAM

My name's Graham. I'm a driver guide for Rabbie's, based in Edinburgh. My job is a mixture of driving, storytelling, and looking after guests like yourself when you come on our tour throughout the whole day. It's fantastic because it means I get to take people to some of the most beautiful places in Scotland and England, sharing history, local legends, and a few personal stories along the way.

For me, every tour is different because every group is different, and that's one of the things I most love about my job. Every day is a new day.

DOUG

I know what a laugh we had. We went to Northumberland and Alnwick Castle, and we said at the time it was just like a family day outing. Everybody had such a laugh. But I guess you get that reaction a lot, do you?

GRAHAM

We do, actually. Thanks for the compliment. We spent the whole day together, which was great, and what's even better, it was with a small group of people from all over the world. When we got there, we all started chatting and getting to know each other, and by the end of the day everybody was laughing, swapping travel tips and sometimes making plans to catch up again. It was lovely to see complete strangers become friends.

DOUG

We did, and we have kept in touch, so hello, Gianmarco. He's a great guy. I just remember when we got back it was all hugs and smiles, and the look on Tracy's face was just amazing.

So what is the secret formula? Don't give away too many company secrets, but there must be something about the Rabbie's way of touring that creates that feeling, that sense of togetherness during the day.

GRAHAM

I think it's a combination of the small group experience and the freedom we have as a driver guide to make the tour very personal. You're not just listening to a script through the microphone. We're discovering places together.

You can adapt to the group, point out hidden gems, stop at different places, take lots of pictures and share stories together, and that brings the whole tour to life. It feels much more relaxed and much more authentic.

DOUG

From your side, every tour is different. You might be going to the same location, but because the dynamics of the group are always changing, no two days are the same.

GRAHAM

Absolutely not. We do have a script that we tend to stick by, but that's one good thing about Rabbie's: we can go where other coaches can't go. Lots of different places, lots of stops, and it's great to have a few bonus stops in there. You just tell them we're going to do something different on the way. It's a great experience and a great job, and I absolutely love it.

DOUG

It's obvious that you enjoy your job. I'm going to embarrass you a little bit, Graham, because on that tour your personal character came out. I know you're one of many guides and I can only speak about the one I was on with you. You're so enthusiastic about your country, your experience and the stories that you tell, and it was just absolutely magical.

GRAHAM

I drive and the countryside is my office. Every tour guide with Rabbie's is so passionate, and we all come from different walks of life. I'm from a nursing background. It's amazing just to tell people a bit about Scotland. Some people have been here before, for others it's their first time, and it's so personal. I love it so much.

DOUG

Your passion came across. Let's go back to the start of the day. Where do people meet you, how does the morning kick off, and how does it work for you?

GRAHAM

We usually meet at our designated pickup, which is now Edinburgh bus station. I get a chance to say hello, get everybody checked in and make sure they're comfortable before we head off. I like to keep things relaxed from the very beginning. I introduce myself and do a wee safety check.

We talk about what's happening on the tour, and if they have any questions. It's a good opportunity to get to know each other, where they're from and why they've come to Scotland. It might be their first time here, or it could be a celebration, like the 50th wedding anniversary I had last week. I had a family in and I got a wee bottle of champagne for them, and they thought it was amazing. It's all those personal touches. Once you're on board the bus, that's when I start.

DOUG

Fantastic. And before you actually arrive at the bus station there's a meet and greet, a member of the Rabbie's staff who makes sure you're in the right place.

GRAHAM

There is. We have staff from the head office who come down and check people in. They're the first port of call. Then when I arrive on my bus I speak to the departure team and make sure everybody's there on time. If they're a wee bit late, that's fine, I'm happy enough to wait. Then I board them. We have a special system for checking in and boarding, and once they're on board, that's it, we're off. The check-in staff are fantastic.

DOUG

I'd agree with you there, because they're the first people you meet from Rabbie's face to face. I can only speak for the one who greeted us, and she was so lovely and friendly and engaging, and that sets the scene for the whole day.

So tell us about the bus itself, because it's not one of these big 50-odd seaters. What is it?

GRAHAM

That's one good thing about Rabbie's. We don't use big 50 seater buses. Ours hold 16 people, and it's a very modern bus rather than a big coach, so it gives the whole experience a more personal feel. Everyone has a great view out of the window. It's easy to chat to your family, your friends, or the new people on board.

We can reach places larger coaches can't go. It feels more like a road trip with a small group of friends and family, and that's what appealed to me when I first joined.

DOUG

So that tapped into your own requirements for an employer, because they tap into that more private, personal experience.

GRAHAM

Spot on. I've driven 50 seater buses before with a different tour company, and you don't get around to speak to anybody. With Rabbie's, at the end of the tour you know people quite well, their background, their jobs, why they're here in Scotland, what they're going to do afterwards. It's a nice family group environment rather than a large 50 seater bus.

DOUG

So what's the maximum number of people on the bus?

GRAHAM

The maximum is 16 people. Sometimes we put on more buses depending on demand. On a Loch Ness tour, which is one of the favourites, we may have seven buses going out on the same tour. It's just so popular, and everyone enjoys the smaller sized bus. It becomes more intimate, more of a family environment, and friendlier.

Our tours are deliberately kept small, and that makes a huge difference. You don't feel like a face in a crowd or just a number. It's a more relaxed pace, and it gives us the flexibility, where possible, to spend longer at some stops than a big coach can.

DOUG

The personal experience from a guest's point of view, being on board, it's easier to engage with others in a small group than it is in a big coach load. And for somebody very shy like me, it's like the school experience. It's easier to ask a question in a small group than it is in a big coach load of people, where if you're towards the back you haven't got a chance of being heard.

GRAHAM

No, not at all.

DOUG

Once you're out on the road and you're in your element, driving along, how do you mix the storytelling, the scenery and the stops? You're concentrating on the road, you're going to all these places and you have this passion for what you do. How do you balance it all?

GRAHAM

Part of our role is that you've got to multitask. You've got the responsibility of the passengers, but also other road users, and you've got to keep an eye on the road and abide by all the speed restrictions. Once we set off, the journey itself becomes part of the experience. It's not just me, the whole Rabbie's driver team brings the landscape to life with stories, and we let the scenery speak for itself.

DOUG

Fair point. In Scotland, there's plenty of that.

GRAHAM

It's a very green, forested country. You can say anything about Scotland at all. It's absolutely brilliant.

DOUG

How much time do people get at each stop? Do they have time to explore, eat and wander around?

GRAHAM

Part of the tour script builds in plenty of free time for people to enjoy each location, whether that's wandering through a village, taking photos, visiting an attraction, or sitting down for lunch. Some come back on the bus early and we sit and have a good old natter about what they've seen, what they want to do, and whether they enjoyed it.

Sometimes we gauge the stops. If it's just a photo stop it might be five or 10 minutes, but depending on how busy it is you might add a few more minutes so they get the full appreciation. The Highlands and Islands are very busy. It's not just Rabbie's, there are hundreds of other tour companies there as well. So if it is busy, we say, "Take a few extra minutes, sit down, relax, take some pictures, then come back on board."

DOUG

I can imagine all the Rabbie's tours are the same, but the timings on the one we went on were absolutely perfect, including toilet stops. You've done it more than once, so you know exactly what to expect. You've got to have that degree of flexibility as well.

So let's talk about the passengers. Where do your passengers come from, and what kind of mix do you generally get on a typical tour?

GRAHAM

Rabbie's welcomes everyone from all over the world, so every tour is an interesting mix of nationalities and backgrounds. That's one of the things that makes the experience more enjoyable for us drivers too. A few days ago I had a family of 10 on board from the US. They all met at the same place, got the plane over, and it was their second time. They'd been recommended by family who'd been on a Rabbie's tour before, so they all came back.

Rabbie's doesn't just do the Highlands in Scotland. We also do England and Ireland, and we're an international company. Everybody loves Scotland. We love Scotland.

DOUG

If anybody listening doesn't know much about Rabbie's, have a look at their website and you'll see all the different locations across the UK that Rabbie's operate out of. We can definitely recommend them.

Tell me about the mix of people you have. Are they couples, solo travellers? You mentioned a group of 10. Are they older travellers, or first-time visitors to the UK?

GRAHAM

It's a real mix of people of all ages. We have couples, and a lot more solo travellers coming on their own, male and female. We have lots of groups, families who come on to have a big family celebration and do it by coming on a Rabbie's tour, and young kids too. We also cater for people with any sort of disability.

There are those who've come for the first time, those who come again and again, and even those who are here to research their family background because they have a Scottish connection. As long as they enjoy the experience and discover new places, anybody will fit right in on a Rabbie's tour.

DOUG

That's great. You've got me hooked. If all the guides are like you, anybody's going to have a fantastic experience, trust me.

That enthusiasm you show, I keep mentioning it because it came through, and because of your own personal experience before you came to Rabbie's, you are incredibly good at engaging people from different countries. You're really good at engaging, and you're patient with people who are asking questions. I heard you with our group: there's no such thing as a daft question.

GRAHAM

Thank you so much. As I say, all our drivers come from different backgrounds, and it's not just the drivers and the vehicle, it's the whole team up at the head office. It's the operations team, and even the cleaning staff who help make sure our buses are clean and ready. It's a whole group environment. It's teamwork.

DOUG

I remember you saying to me on the tour how great Rabbie's are, top to bottom, at supporting the drivers, and that it's all about the passenger experience.

GRAHAM

It is. Every part of our management team have been a driver. We build on their experience, and they've been in our shoes. From the operations team to the supervisors and even the managers, they've all been a driver guide. So it's good to have their knowledge, their background and their enthusiasm. It's a great family environment and a good family company.

DOUG

I mentioned school trips before. For someone who's a little bit nervous about a group tour, worried that it might end up like a school trip, what would you tell them? What would your message be?

GRAHAM

If anybody is nervous, on their own or going for the first time, once they get on board I say, "Don't worry about it." Our tours are small, relaxed and informal. There's no pressure to stick with the group every minute. You have free time to explore on your own, and our guides create a friendly atmosphere without making it overly structured.

We tend to know who's on their own, and sometimes a language barrier can be an issue, but we get around that. We sit with them and say, "It's going to be fine. You'll enjoy the tour. If you have any questions, just let us know." Often on the tour it's, "Graham, what about this? What about that?" It's very relaxed, very informal, not strict or rigid, and that's how our tours should be.

Sometimes, if someone's very nervous and there's a spare seat, I say, "Come and sit next to me. We'll have a good old natter on the way to our next stop." That's a good way of breaking the ice, just like where you sat on the jump seat next to me.

DOUG

I have to bring that point up, because I can get motion sickness in a car or on a bus, and yes, I did sit up front. You were really kind and really understanding, as was everybody else on board. I'm grateful for that. It's that engagement you had with everybody on board which really shone through the whole day, so I can really appreciate everything you're saying because I've had first-hand experience.

Let's talk about the tours themselves. You're based out of Edinburgh. What are the big ones that people book from there?

GRAHAM

The Highlands and Loch Ness tours are always incredibly popular. They're often booked out months, even a year in advance. We normally have about seven buses that go up to Loch Ness and every single bus is full. People want to come to Scotland, they want to see the Highlands, and they especially want to see the Highland coos, the Highland cows.

I was on a Loch Ness tour yesterday and as soon as they came on board it was, "Graham, are there Highland cows on this trip?" I said, "No, but we might do a wee special stop for you." They were delighted. They were a family of four, and that was the first thing he asked. They managed to get a picture and feed them, and that just made their day. The tour was fantastic too, but that's what they were there for. They'd never seen Highland cows before in their lifetime.

So Loch Ness and the Highlands, and especially Skye, are very popular tours. All the tours are busy, from the one we were on, to the whisky tours and up to St Andrews. Everybody has had a good experience and a good recommendation from Rabbie's, and they all want to come on our tours.

DOUG

And the returning customers, that's the real measure for any company. So let's talk about multi-day tours. What sort of multi-day tours are there out of Edinburgh?

GRAHAM

Rabbie's is really good for multi-day tours. We offer a wide range, from a two day escape to longer journeys exploring places like the Isle of Skye. We do a two day Loch Ness tour as well, which is very popular. There are four and five day tours too.

On those tours it's the same guide the whole way, with all their knowledge and information, and we're able to pre-book accommodation, which the head office team does. We have multiple stops at all these different locations.

The multi-day tours are a sellout. They're so popular because people get to know each other on board the bus more closely. It's more friendly, and at the end of it they stay friends, they keep in touch with some of the driver guides, and they get to know people from all over the world. Especially Skye, definitely go and do the multi-day Skye tour. Even the two day Loch Ness tour, brilliant, I definitely recommend it.

DOUG

I'm going to have to come back, aren't I?

GRAHAM

Come back. Absolutely.

DOUG

So let's talk about Graham's favourites. You must have a personal favourite tour.

GRAHAM

That's a hard question. I don't do multi-day tours at the moment because I'm quite new to Rabbie's, so I only do single day tours. I do love the Loch Ness tour, because we put so much into it and there are so many stops we can make, starting at Callander at the bottom of the Hillfoots. We make a good song and dance about it: "Right, we're almost at the Hillfoots, we're going to count down from three, two, one," and then we all run in so everyone gets a picture at the bakery.

Then it's up towards Glencoe.

DOUG

Glencoe is one of the most picturesque, most photographed places, I would say, in the whole of the world.

GRAHAM

Perhaps the whole of the world. Glencoe is amazing. Then all the way up to Loch Ness, and we make a good story about the creature as well, with some funny stories. We always say, "If you ever see the Loch Ness monster, National Geographic will pay you two million pounds," so everybody's eyes are on the water.

We also love Harry Potter, so going down to Alnwick Castle is amazing. I say to them, "You've got to try the broomstick training. Let me know how you get on." To this day we still have people who do that on our tour.

All the tours we do are fantastic because we put so much of our own personality into them, and so much information. I've actually been told on many occasions, "Graham, you talk too much." But we don't just talk. We also put music in the background that ties in with all of our stops on all of our tours. So it's not just talking, it's the music in the background and general knowledge as well.

DOUG

I'm going to harp back to the tour I came on. You find that right balance of talk, but you actually give other people a chance to talk about themselves as well, which was really engaging. I thought that was an interesting point.

GRAHAM

That makes it a much more personal, intimate tour. It's not just about me talking, because I can talk for Scotland, I can talk nonstop. But it's good to hear their backgrounds and their knowledge, because some people know things that I don't know. I'm not perfect. I don't have a brain full of knowledge about the whole of Scotland, but other people do, and it's good that they engage. It's, "Do you know about this, Graham?" "Oh, I didn't know that. Tell me more." Everybody feeds off everybody else on board our tours.

DOUG

You mentioned those stops. Across all the tours you do, is there one particular stop, or a view, or a reaction, that you never get tired of no matter how many times you stop there?

GRAHAM

It has to be the lochs in Scotland. We've got over 32,000 lochs in Scotland. When I'm on a tour I say to people, "How many lochs do we have in Scotland?" Some people say one. Higher. Two. Higher, come on. And I say, "In Scotland we have over 32,000 lochs, and every loch is different. It's unique. It's got its own personality."

We make a stop at the Hillfoots going into the Highlands, at Loch Lubnaig, on the Loch Ness tour. You get right onto the waterfront and you can actually touch the water. It doesn't matter if it's a dreich, miserable day, pouring with rain, or beautiful sunshine. It changes the dynamics of the loch. Every single loch is fantastic. I could stand there for ages and just look at the water all day.

DOUG

Just to wrap things up, are there any tips you can offer for anybody who has doubts but is considering a Rabbie's tour? What would you say to them?

GRAHAM

Come with an open mind, 100%, and be prepared for all kinds of weather. Down in the Central Belt or the Lowlands the weather can be so different to the Highlands and up to the islands. Some of the best moments are the unexpected ones. Enjoy the journey, enjoy the destination, and just get involved and engage.

DOUG

What should people bring with them on the day? And we're talking across seasons here.

GRAHAM

Comfortable shoes are a must, and a waterproof jacket, definitely. Your phone and your camera. What I say to people is that they'll be taking so many photographs that if their battery dies, Rabbie's has charging points on pretty much all of the buses so they can charge their phone. I also take extra battery power banks with me, so if anything happens I can say, "I've got two battery packs, you can charge your phone." I guarantee your phone battery will die from taking so many pictures.

Our weather changes dramatically from Edinburgh all the way up to the Highlands and Islands. So comfortable shoes, a warm jacket, your phone and lots of layers, because it does get warm as well. At least you can take layers off, rather than wearing one big thick jumper. Go with the season, go with the flow.

DOUG

What's the one tip you'd share with anyone booking their very first Rabbie's tour?

GRAHAM

I would say choose the tour that genuinely excites you, rather than trying to fit everything into one day. Pick the tour you want to go on. You want to see the lochs, you want to see the Highland cows. Scotland will always give you a reason to come back, and that does happen. We've had people come back many times because they haven't seen everything they wanted to see. So choose the tour you want to get the most out of, and we'll do our best to make you feel at home and welcome.

DOUG

I'd go again tomorrow without question, and the day after that. So where do people find Rabbie's Tours?

GRAHAM

Rabbie's has their own website, so you can browse all of our day trips and multi-day tours, check availability and book online. You'll find plenty of inspiration there, whether you're visiting Scotland for the first time, returning, or exploring somewhere new. You also get to meet some of our guides, because their pictures are on the website, so you get to know a wee bit about our backgrounds. Definitely go and explore the website. It's the best way to book your tour.

DOUG

And if you're on a tour, you will not be disappointed, I can tell you that. Graham, it's been absolutely fantastic. It's just like talking to a mate. Thank you so much for coming on.

GRAHAM

I can't wait to catch up with you again. When you do come back to Edinburgh, you know where I am. You're more than welcome to come up, meet the family, and get back on the tour again. You and Tracy are more than welcome.

DOUG

Bless you. Thank you very much.