

I LOVE

WINTER

Fly into Glasgow and head west to experience a winter wonderland of stunning views, incredible food and Scottish wilderness.



YOU KNOW A LOBSTER IS GOING TO BE FRESH WHEN IT'S DANGLING IN A WOODEN CAGE JUST BELOW THE WATER LINE, YARDS FROM THE END OF THE PIER. It's a short dash from there to the pot in the restaurant overlooking the bay.

Out on the western borders of Scotland's coastline, in the Argyll and Bute highlands, you'll experience dramatic landscapes, sumptuous seafood, lobsters and much more, straight from the Lochs that cut into the hills. The dramatic landscape is perfect for an indulgence of local seafood and the chance to revel in the Scottish winters.

"You won't get fresher than these", says John MacFadyen, an oyster aficionado and fisherman who, along with his son Alan,

tends his oyster beds in the Port of Ramsay off the island of Lismore. "We hand-grade our oysters," he explains. "Others use machinery that stresses them so they're not as good. Because oysters have become so popular there's a real danger of them being over harvested before they reach their prime. That's why they should be sourced carefully. That's what we do here." Supplying the famous Loch Fyne oyster bar and selected restaurants such as the Pierhouse with its pier lobster pots across from Lismore, ensures his catches are in high demand.

These unusually large lobsters are perfect examples of the vitality of the areas' Lochs. The combination of the changing weather, purity of the waters and the enthusiasm of the scores of local fisherman out for their catch make them unique. An

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From far left; fisherman John MacFadyen shucks open an oyster from the beds he attends in Port Ramsay; mouth-watering mussels tempt diners across the area.



evening's thermidore, kept just off the pier in its cage until ordered, will make your average lobster look like a langoustine.

As dusk descends, the atmosphere of the Scottish western highlands comes into its own. From the Pierhouse, up through Port Appin and further north along the east shore of Loch Fyne, the fading light throws glimpses of mist-strewn hills giving an eerie, captivating edge to the wilderness. The wintery smell of peat smoke and the cold ocean is never far away.

At the north of the loch, the oyster bar at Cairndow, famous for the alleged meeting of British Deputy Prime Minister, John Prescott and Chancellor Gordon Brown to plot the succession of Tony Blair, still retains its reputation for outstanding seafood. As well as the seafood, the restaurant's attraction also lies in the views southwards across the water, where the winter sun glimmers off the Loch and shadows the surrounding hillside. The Bradon Rost (kiln-roasted salmon) yields a strongly smoked flavour and pulls in the crowds. If they have shellfish soup of the day on the menu, nothing else will do.

The Loch Fyne area offers scores of activities; from exploring its fishing villages and castles to the southern shore's shipwrecks and sealife. These waters can be dived all year round, particularly during November and December, when the crowds of visitors have diminished. The sheltered landscape provides safe and surprisingly good underwater visibility.

On dry land, along the Argyll Forest towards the Kyles of Bute inlet, the hillsides are a sight for sore eyes. Ancient villages such as Stuckreoch, Conchra, and Ballochandrain are mesmerising and the autumnal and hourly changes in colour add to the atmosphere of the Bute peninsula. Considered one of the most beautiful areas of the country, it offers a snapshot of the variety and hence is nicknamed "Scotland in miniature".

Further south, the village of Tighnabruaich is famous for its shellfish (as virtually everywhere here is) and has been a port of

call for fishermen and sailors for centuries. Facing east towards the island of Bute, means the land is often shrouded in moody seasonal mists. For the more adventurous, there are some excellent climbing locations, just north of the village. Although for most, simply watching the sun set over the Kyles against the bracing winter air with a dram of highland malt is exciting enough. The An Lochan restaurant is the place to try something different, like samphire. A vegetable grown in salt-sprayed areas, it is often referred to as a "the poor man's asparagus" but is in fact a rich and tasty accompaniment to the hand-dived scallops. You can even meet the people who dived for them—Shonna, Arthur and Mary—or you could just peek at the picture of them on the back of the menu. Local produce reigns supreme at An Lochan, with farmers, cheesemakers and fisherman all part of the chain. Highland venison, Arran cheeses, fresh halibut, sea breams, mussels and langoustines that are prehistoric in size, will satisfy the largest appetites. Late nights here are enchanting—with peaceful, moonlit views to soothe the soul.

Eastwards, past Lochs Striven, Goil, Long and onto Loch Lomond, you'll pass through more stunning landscapes and ancient sites of battles with invaders and estates of the old Clans (a Gaelic word meaning family). Loch Lomond's borders saw much inter-clan feuding over land and cattle rights during the 17th century: the Buchanans, Macfarlanes, Colquhouns and Macgregors were constantly drawing blood. Indeed the heritage and traditions of these clans have framed much of the Loch and the surrounding area, which is now a regional wildlife park. Clan-fans should visit Glen Fruin ("Glen of the Weeping Pretty") the site of many violent clan battles, and Rob Roy's cave should satisfy any history-buffs.

It's worth pausing to soak up the air and the highland atmosphere and recharging with a final scallop before heading back to the urban bustle of Glasgow.

A Scottish Tour:

Loch Fyne Oyster Bar
(pictured below)
www.lochfyne.com
Tel. +44 (0)149 960 0236

Lismore Oyster Farm
Port Ramsey, Lismore
Tel. +44 (0)787 065 5889

Pierhouse restaurant
www.pierhousehotel.co.uk
Tel. +44 (0)163 173 0302

An Lochan restaurant, Tighnabruaich
www.royalhotel.org.uk
Tel. +44 (0)170 081 1239

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www.seescotlanddifferently.co.uk or Tel. +44 (0)870 760 6027*

