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Another Scottish gift to the world

PERTHSHIRE

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OVER many centuries, Scotland has given numerous important gifts to the world. The television and telephone were both invented by Scots. So were the fax machine, refrigerator and steam engine locomotive. The MRI scanner, cash machine and speedometer. You guessed it - they, too, were invented by Scots. In the eyes of sports fans, however, one Scottish creation in particular stands head and shoulders above all the others: golf.

Not my words, but the opening sentences from *The Official Guide to Golf in Scotland: The Home of Golf*. The last year has been hugely important for Scotland in terms of its relationship with golf because, as hosts last month to the Ryder Cup, the opportunity was there to use the sport to promote the country to a huge worldwide audience. Just as Ireland did eight years ago when the Ryder Cup came to the K Club, Scotland set out to make the most of this exposure, estimated to be worth £40m in marketing terms.

Countries which host major sporting events like this do so for more than the prestige. It is

a massive financial undertaking so while the prestige is obviously nice, it's not enough. There has to be gains too. There has to be an opportunity to piggyback on the event to enhance the country's reputation as a tourist destination. It's difficult to quantify the real costs of staging a major sporting event like the Ryder Cup, and the likelihood is that there are no real gains in the short-term.

What a government will bet on - and what Scotland bet on - is that it will make enough of an impression to secure long-term gains. When the K Club staged the event in 2006, Michael Smurfit spent around €20m to host it. Asked recently if it was worth it, Smurfit said: "Absolutely. The response afterward in terms of green fees, hotel guests, general interest in the club was immense. We did very well and continue to do very well."

Ireland spent huge sums of money to stage the Ryder Cup but the view is that it has long since been repaid by the tourism boost. Scotland's model is similar. One club reported its visitor numbers last month were up 75 per cent on this time last year.

The Scottish countryside served as a beautiful backdrop to events at Gleneagles. Of course, the organisers got lucky, the weather over the few days of the tournament was incredible for the time of year, while for those who made the trip

the organisation on the ground was so good that it was a very positive experience for fans.

Another factor for the Scottish was that visitors mixed the golf experience, by combining playing some of the leading courses like St Andrews and Carnoustie with attending one or more days of the Ryder Cup, and also absorbing other elements of what the country has to offer.

For our trip, we managed to fit in two days at Gleneagles, along with some sightseeing and enjoying the rural Scottish landscape.

Never having been outside of either of the two main cities of Glasgow and Edinburgh before, I was keen to get a taste of the countryside so for this trip we stayed in the small picturesque village of Kenmore, at the mouth of Lough Tay, in Perthshire. This is a little treasure of a village, just a few miles from Aberfeldy, the home of – among other things – Dewar's whisky. The distillery and warehouse tour here is worth the effort, and Aberfeldy is a place of interest for those with an interest in crafts or antiques.

The central feature of Kenmore is Taymouth Castle, set in the valley, which you catch sight of for the first time as you wind your way down the narrow descent towards Kenmore. The tiny village, home to Scotland's oldest inn, The Kenmore Hotel, is located between two bridges and is a good spot to base yourself in to explore some of the many treats Perthshire has to offer.

Just a short walk from the village on the south side is the Scottish Crannog Centre, where we

passed an interesting couple of hours learning about these dwellings which are largely peculiar to Scotland and Ireland in particular. Crannogs are distinctive buildings, built on stilts in water as defensive homes 2,500 years ago. The centre has a replica Crannog on Loch Tay several metres from the shore which was painstakingly built over two years to give visitors a real feel for Iron Age loch-dwelling.

And just over the second bridge is Mains of Taymouth Country Estate and Golf Course, where we stayed for the duration of the trip. Mains of Taymouth is a high quality resort, offering a mix of luxury apartments, large family houses and cottages to stay in. There is also a restaurant and bar on site, while they also have a very good nine-hole golf course and offer pony trekking, walking and water-based activities.

There is so much to see and do in Perthshire it's best to make a plan for each day. On one afternoon, for example, we had a beautiful lunch at Fonab Castle in Pitlochry. This is where the highlands and lowlands meet. The restaurant's glass front affords stunning views of Loch Faskally and coffee afterwards on the terrace overlooking the loch in glorious sunshine is not something you might typically be able to do on the last day of September in the Scottish Central Highlands.

Just a short drive away, in Grandtully, is the Highland Chocolatier, the base of Iain Burnett, a legendary figure in the world of chocolate. Burnett supplies Michelin and five star restaurants, Claridges, and the British Royal family. While there we took a tour of this family-run business which proved a fascinating insight into how Burnett makes his truffles, pralines and other products, and we also sampled some of the treats

in the coffee shop.

The two biggest things going for this part of Scotland are the variety of activities available all year round which broaden its appeal as a destination, and its accessibility from Edinburgh's airport. Our base in Kenmore was less than 90 minutes by car.

As you travel about Perthshire, you are struck by its remarkable natural beauty, its rivers and glens, and lush forests. Around 13 per cent of the landscape is forested, and the county is home to the world's tallest hedge, and to Europe's oldest living tree. It really is a wonderful part of Scotland, and thanks to the Ryder Cup of all things, a lot more people know about it.

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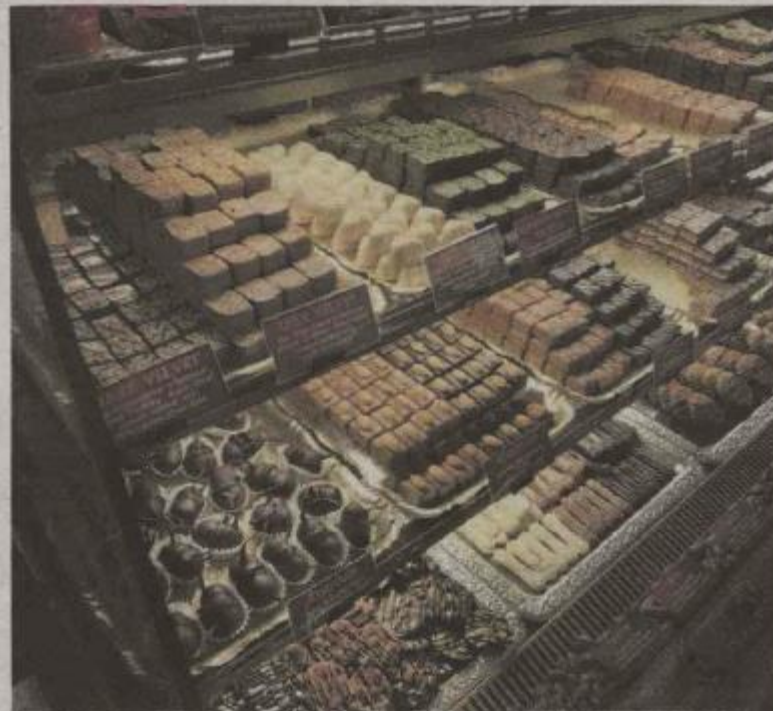
GETTING THERE



AER Lingus Regional operates flights to Scotland from Dublin, Cork and Shannon. The service is run by Stobart Air into Aberdeen, Edinburgh and Glasgow. Stobart Air, operates over 700 flights per week across 34 routes from 23 departure points throughout Ireland and the UK, as well as France, Belgium, Germany and Holland. Scotland is renowned for its historic links courses and British Open venues like the Old Course at St. Andrews, Royal Troon, Muirfield and Carnoustie, which never fail to inspire, amaze and challenge. See www.visitscotland.com/golf.



RUB OF THE GREEN: The Scottish countryside served as a beautiful backdrop to the Ryder Cup



MAGNIFICENT BACKDROP: Loch Tay in Autumn, left, provides a perfect holiday setting. The Mains of Taymouth Country Estate and Golf Course, top, offers a range of facilities. The Highland Chocolatier in Grandtully, above, supplies the British Royal family