

Royal Scotland

Being wined and dined during a private tour of Scotland's royal castles is a once in a lifetime opportunity, as **Daniel Attwood** discovers



Glamis Castle – the Queen Mother's childhood home, the setting for Macbeth and the birthplace of the Queen's sister Princess Margaret





A tour of Britain's royal castles should be very special – these castles, and the estates they dominate, are some of the most evocative and appealing destinations on these islands. Such decisive events have taken place – and still do – within their walls, that their existence is inextricably intertwined with our social and political history. They are Britain's history in bricks and mortar.

But a tour of these royal piles can be organised by any reasonably switched on motorhomer. Turn up at Windsor, Sandringham or Glamis and – odds on – you will have little trouble getting a tour of the royal rooms and be able to enjoy the wonderful gardens.

But the reality is that your tour could include a school party of reluctant teens or a group of Italian tourists gabbling in your ear, or both. And we've all been on those tours where the artefacts of real interest are tantalisingly placed just out of reach behind a rope.

So, when I was invited to a private tour of the sublime Glamis – the Queen Mother's childhood home – where the ropes would be removed and we would be allowed to inspect objects at our leisure during a private tour, my interest was sparked.

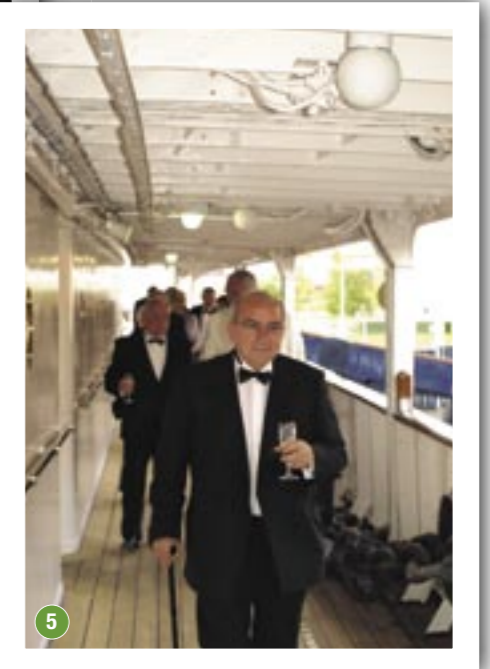
When I was told the tour would be followed by dinner at the castle – at the table where the royals, their lords and ladies and other key figures had dined using the cutlery they had used – I decided this was something I had to attend. One does not have to be a royalist to be intrigued by the history of the royal family.

Private tours – at a price

So, my mother and I set off for Angus on a very wet Saturday morning for a few days north of the border.

We were to join 16 other motorhomers for the last five days of the newest, most expensive and, according to the Bob Thornton from GB Privilege, the most prestigious tour he has ever organised. Of those 16, four were connected with the company. The others had paid up to £2,150 each for the 25-day tour, which took them from London and Windsor to Sandringham, York, the Scottish borders and up to Loch Ness, Culloden, reaching the Castle of Mey before heading back down to Glamis and Edinburgh.

The tour is lengthy and mileage high – over 1,800 miles in total although no more than 300 miles in one day – so fuel costs need to be



1 & 2 The highland games were an unexpected highlight of the tour
3 Guests enjoy a private pre-dinner tittle at Glamis 4 Holyroodhouse – the official residence in Scotland of Her Majesty The Queen – was built on the site of a former abbey 5 Formal dinner attire was an option, but allowed guests to fully appreciate the delights of dining on the royal yacht

factored into the cost of the tour, as do the meals that are not supplied. But, as Bob points out, of the 24 brochure tours he organises a year, this is one of the lower mileage trips – those to Turkey are much higher. His customers are clearly happy: "Many of our customers will do two or three tours a year and we seem to be getting more personal recommendations." Indeed, most of the couples on this tour have been with GB before.

Despite this being its first year, the company's royal tour will not continue in its present form. Balmoral Castle will be dropped as will the entire English part of the tour – for British customers anyway. "It will be called Royal Scotland," explains Bob. "We included London and Windsor for the US market, but now for British customers they will be able to just have the Scottish experience."

Dining the Scottish way

We arrived for our Scottish experience for what was to be one of the highlights of the tour – dinner at Glamis. The evening at this stunning royal castle surpassed our high expectations.

It was not simply the superb meal nor the unique setting, but rather the genuine enthusiasm and knowledge of the staff who entertained us that made it so special. They all had a passion for the castle, which was evident in everything they did. This genuine passion and the fact that we were dining in such a dramatic setting ensured this was to be one of my most memorable nights.

From the presenting of the haggis to the fine single malt whisky as the meal's finale, the dinner was exceptional and was made all the more special knowing everything from the cutlery to the glasses were original to the castle and would have used by far more respectable diners than a mere MMM editor.

A highland fling

The following day, unknown to the organisers and therefore not on the itinerary, the castle was hosting one of Scotland's major highland games. The weather, which had been at its worst, cleared to allow the sun to shine on the sportsman and women, the Scottish dancers, the bagpipe players and the formal Scottish bands, who all practiced and competed at the same time to produce a somewhat anarchic display.

The competitors, whether they were battling it out in the heavyweights' caber tossing or the under-10s' Scottish dancing, were clearly not in this for the money – prizes of under £10 were not uncommon. The lack of financial incentives and anything but the barest minimum of respect for health and safety laws did nothing to dampen the enthusiasm of the competitors. The highland games are clearly very, very serious affairs for those involved – and an entertaining spectacle for those not involved.

Rule Britannia

Then it was a couple of hours on to Edinburgh's immaculate Caravan Club site, from which we would be taken on a tour of the city and of Holyroodhouse – the official residence in Scotland of Her Majesty The Queen – again, not on the agenda but added by popular request.

The baroque palace of Holyrood and the crumbling former Abbey to which it is attached sits against the spectacular backdrop of Arthur's Seat, part of a mountain formation bordering this side of the city.

This palace was the former home of Mary, Queen of Scots and the headquarters of Bonnie Prince Charlie during the 1745 uprising. The palace's royal connection remain strong with the state apartments still regularly used by the Queen and other members of her family.

The tour of the palace is worth taking, if only for a view of the cosy bedroom used by Mary, Queen of Scots and a chance to walk among the evocative abbey ruins.

But the highlight of the stay in Edinburgh and possibly the entire tour was the final night, when the group dined on the royal yacht Britannia.

The dinner was sublime, the setting exceptional, the food exquisite and the atmosphere, enhanced by the wonderful sounds of a harp being played, made for a delightful evening. Dining in such a setting,

and enjoying pre-dinner drinks in a reception room frequented by both royalty and the great and good of the world's elite, revealed a side of royal life that one would never otherwise have appreciated.

The finale of the evening – and the tour – was the beating of the retreat played for us as we enjoyed post-dinner drinks on deck. A fitting end to a spectacular tour.

I thought the Royal Tour was expensive, but according to David and Margaret Patman, who have been on three GB Privilege tours of Scotland, these tours – escorted from start to finish (if you want) – provide value for money.

"If you price it all up individually you can't do it much cheaper, and you get the unique opportunities," they say. And because GB Privilege can provide those experiences, I would agree with David and Margaret that these tours do provide value for money.

"We love castles and stately houses," explains Margaret. "So it is great we can incorporate this into our holidays. The fact that we can stay at them and touch the antiques normally roped off is great. These tours open doors that are normally closed to us. That's why we love them." ■

Tour organiser

GB Privilege, 3 The Fields, Talconeston, Norfolk NR16 1DG
Tel: 01953-789661 • Web: www.gbprivilege.com

Holyroodhouse

Tickets can be bought at the door or pre-booked from: Ticket Sales and Information Office, The Official Residences of The Queen London SW1A 1AA
Tel: 0131-5565100 • Email: bookinginfo@royalcollection.org.uk
Web: www.royalcollection.org.uk

Glamis Castle

Tickets for public tours can be bought at the gate or pre-booked from:
Glamis Castle, Angus DD8 1RJ
Tel: 01307-840393 • Email: enquiries@glamis-castle.co.uk
Web: www.glamis-castle.co.uk