



Achmelvich Bay, a short drive north of Ullapool, Scotland, dazzles with white-sand beaches and cold turquoise waters that add a touch of the Caribbean to the Scottish Highlands.

CHRIS NORDEN/STAFF

Into the clouds

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Regaining our footing, the guide called out for votes. The six Brits expressed theirs, one by one. The chemist then turned to me and politely quipped through driving rain, "Now let's hear from our friends from the Colonies!"

In a low crouch and feeling just a tad overwhelmed at this point, I wordlessly deferred my turn to the only other American in the group, a rugby-playing Washington, D.C., appellate lawyer who, although an athletic and strapping fellow, was now hunched over to my right in a near ball. His argument was succinct, spoken through a slack and shivering jaw:

"Get down ... fastest way down ... take off wet clothes ... warm pub!"

A LAND OF MEMORIES

As a vacation destination, the Scottish Highlands is not for the faint of heart, nor for those who fear cold and wet. Its mercurial weather is legendary, and in the summertime, its drying bogs give rise to clouds of the feared Highland Midge, small biting gnats that travel in merciless packs and make our Lowcountry no-see-ums seem like Care Bears.

But for travelers with an eye for romance, beauty and a sense of adventure, the Scottish Highlands can reward with memories that cannot be collected anywhere else. For when Highland clouds clear away (and they do, eventually), they reveal a landscape that is quite possibly the most hauntingly beautiful of any on the face of this Earth.

Wild, windswept white-sand beaches with cold, Caribbean-turquoise waters enchant solitary visitors just miles from primeval stone landscapes of quartzite and sandstone, crashing waterfalls and silent glens.

Whitewashed fishing villages and crumbling castle ruins line deep Highland lochs. Scenic single-track roads urge exploration of endlessly rising and falling coastlines. Downy beds and warm pubs draw you in the evenings with their fresh salmon from cold Scottish rivers and ales and lagers from Scotland's finest breweries.

It is a landscape that just cries out to be explored on foot. But because a warm sunny day in Scotland can turn to driving rain or snow in a matter of minutes, it is wise if you are planning on doing any big hill walking to have a guide with you who is expertly acquainted with local terrain and hazards so you don't have to be. Which brings us back to our little group ...

"I've looked at clouds from both sides now
From up and down, and still somehow

It's clouds illusions I recall
I really don't know clouds at all"

— Joni Mitchell, "Both Sides Now"

Our guide shut off his favorite Joni Mitchell tape as he pulled our North-West Frontiers Walking Holidays transit van up to the base of the mountain du jour. Squinting through the drizzle at the cloud-shrouded heights of the legendary Liathach (Gaelic for



The ghostly ruins of Ardreck Castle, former stronghold of the MacLeods of Assynt, stand just north of Ullapool along the edge of Loch Assynt, Scotland.

CHRIS NORDEN/STAFF



The fishing village of Ullapool, Scotland, is the largest town and main tourist center for the North-West Highlands and the ferry port for departures to the Summer Isles and Isles of Lewis and Harris.

CHRIS NORDEN/STAFF

"The Gray One"), he stated his assessment of the conditions: "Grim. But not abysmal."

It was Day Five of our trip, and by this point, that had become a "good report." The only sun we had seen in all this time was a brief flash of it for a few minutes across a distant hillside. The

British members of the group — all experienced Scottish hill walkers — said they had never before experienced in the Highlands anything like the intensely wet, sodden conditions we had borne the past five days. The Highlands weather is noted for changeability, not for consistency.

stunned.

- Janet Jackson bared a breast for a split second during the Super Bowl halftime show. The moment became the "wardrobe malfunction" seen around the world.
- Shock jock Howard Stern, weary of being fined for his show, said he's moving to satellite radio. He claimed the government made him the fall guy for the Jackson incident.
- CNN's "Crossfire" and ABC's "The View" broadcast from the College of Charleston.
- Old school rhythm and blues ruled at Star 99.7-FM, which became the hottest new radio station in town.

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Hill walkers, led by Scottish Highlands expert guide Ben Lowe of North-West Frontiers Hiking Holidays (in camouflage jacket), begin the second day of their "Ridges of the North-West Highlands" tour in the Kintail Mountains high above Glen Shiel, Scotland.

CHRIS NORDEN/STAFF

But all was not lost — at least on my end. An injury I'd sustained early in the trip eventually required medical treatment, causing me to need to visit the hospital in Ullapool, Scotland, on my last full day, while the rest of the group went off to conquer one final summit. I was released from the hospital early in the afternoon to find that it had stopped raining. And the sun was shining. AND the owner of North-West Frontiers had pulled his car up to me on the street and was offering me a free two-hour driving tour around the area!

Over the next two hours, with sky, wind, clouds and light alive and ever-changing over the Highland landscape, I experienced the Scotland of dreams. HERE were the castle ruins and the fishing villages that I had read so much about. In front of me, flocks of Highland sheep were blocking the road, delighting me with their

bleating. And over there were the turquoise bays and sugarloaf mountains looking just like the hulls of massive upside-down ships! After returning to Ullapool, the evening's sunset indulged in every mood of the spectrum while blowing wind cool and fresh against my cheek.

Somehow, being slammed into the side of Carn Mor Dearg by 80 mph wind gusts six days ago just didn't really seem to matter all that much now. I had persisted through a week of strenuous Scottish hill walking, and Scotland had rewarded me with images that will stay with me for the rest of my life ... and lure me to return.

I recall one great moment when at the conclusion of our day on Liathach, as our guide was climbing into the van, he turned back to me for a moment, smiled mischievously and said:

"Hill walking. It's like having

fun. Only different!"

That's what I call an understatement.

IF YOU GO

North-West Frontiers Ltd., based in Ullapool, is the leading organizer of walking holidays and hiking vacations in Scotland's North-West Highlands.

In addition to their "strenuous grade" trips, they also offer a full variety of "moderate" and "intermediate grade" packages to the most scenic spots in the area. Offerings include special-interest trips focusing on photography and natural history.

Trips run with a minimum of four, maximum of eight walkers and include an expert guide; accommodations and breakfasts in comfortable hotels, guesthouses and B&Bs; and transport during your holiday (that very likely will be not quite so sodden as mine). The easygoing "moderate grade" trips also include all your dinners. www.nwfrontiers.com, (+44 1854 612628).

Getting there: Continental Airlines (800-231-0856) operates connecting flights from Charleston via Newark to Scotland's major cities, Glasgow and Edinburgh, and can arrange your connecting flight onward (with British Airways operated by Loganair) to Inverness, the Highlands' major transportation hub. North-West Frontiers will pick you up at the airport. Or if you're planning on exploring the Highlands on your own, you can rent a car through Hertz and Avis out of Inverness Airport.

Where to stay: If you opt for a self-made Highlands vacation instead of one of North-West Frontiers' packages, try basing yourself out of one of these lodgings:

- Riverside Hotel is modestly priced and just around the corner from the memorable views toward the Summer Isles across Lochbroom. Full Scottish breakfasts are included with your room. Riverside welcomes hill walkers and is an easy four-block stroll to Ullapool's harbor. \$35-\$48. www.riversideullapool.com, (+44) 1854 612 239.
- Glenfield Inn. More upscale, but further up the hill from the center of Ullapool, Glenfield's guests have free access during their stay to the excellent Lochbroom Leisure Centre (health club), where the sauna would be particularly comforting after a long day on the Scottish Hills. \$106-\$183. www.british-trust-hotels.com, (+44) 1854 612 314.
- Inver Lodge Hotel. Up the coast from Ullapool, in the quiet fishing village of Lochinver and close to stunning white-sand Achmelvich Bay, this new hotel offers modern luxuries and spectacular views toward the Western Isles. \$154-\$240. www.inverlodge.com, toll-free from the United States: (800) 860-5760.

For more information:

- www.escapetothedeed.com
- www.visithighlands.com/northern-scottish-highlands
- www.assynt.info

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'04 highlights

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- Aletha Smoak of Ravenel switched lives with an Arkansas mom for the ABC reality show "Wife Swap." The Arkansas mom was a tree-hugger horrified by Glenn Smoak's deer hunting. Mrs. Smoak couldn't stand the messiness of the Arkansans.
- Conway mortician Marvin Latimer became a reluctant house guest on "Big Brother 5" on CBS. Afterward, he said the experience was hardly brotherly.
- Sylvia Jefferies of Charleston made her debut as a pole dancer on the WB series "One Tree Hill."
- WCSC-TV sports anchor and newscaster Warren Peper lost his job of 30 years. His fans were

'The Real World' is headed to Texas for 16th season

BY DERRICK J. LANG
Associated Press

NEW YORK—Dude! MTV's "The Real World" is headed to Austin, Texas.

"We've been thinking about Austin for a long time," co-creator and executive producer Jon Murray told The Associated Press on Wednesday. "It's a great college town. It's a great music town. It's just a really young place. People go to college there and just don't want to leave."

The show brings together seven strangers between the ages of 18 and 24 to live in a swanky loft or

"Austin has a small-town feel, but it has a lot of things going for it in terms of diversity and entertainment that make it feel metropolitan."

Jon Murray

house and films them around the clock, at home and on the town.

The 16th season's seven cast members will start getting real in the Lone Star state early next year.

The 24 episodes will begin airing in June.

"Austin has a small-town feel, but it has a lot of things going for it in terms of diversity and entertainment that make it feel metropolitan," Murray said.

Murray wouldn't say where the house is, and he was tightlipped on the identities of the seven strangers, though he said his casting staff did "a bit of an outreach to people returning from Iraq."

"We always look for a diverse cast," Murray told the AP. "The idea of someone who was in Iraq, well, that would certainly meet that criteria. Ultimately, we

choose from people who apply."

Murray promised "The Real World" homestead in Austin would be just as unique and palatial as the pier in Seattle, the loft in New York, the mansion in New Orleans and the former bank in Philadelphia, the location of the latest season.

There will be a hot tub, some antiques and maybe even some neon or cowboy kitsch from local stores.

But don't expect a horse. "In the past 16 seasons, the cast haven't done a good job taking care of fish, so I don't know about a horse," said Murray.