



Travel

with Robin
McKelvie

www.robinmckelvie.com



Dornoch is a colourful wee gem on the coast

IT may claim to be the sunniest town in Scotland, but the Royal Burgh of Dornoch is no place for witches — the last recorded execution for witchcraft in Scotland took place here in 1722.

I took my young family north recently to check out how this sunny town with a dark past shapes up for a family holiday.

It's hard to imagine the locals chasing the woman, Janet Horne, down and publicly humiliating her before condemning her to death for being a witch. They also accused her daughter, but she managed to escape.

Today the charming sandstone buildings of Dornoch are graced with neat flowerbeds and it's a pleasure just strolling around this trim town.

Our base was ideal. Dornoch Castle Hotel (www.dornochcastlehotel.com) is a grand abode right in the centre. We reclined in a posh room with a four-poster bed and distant views of the Dornoch Firth.

Fuss

The hotel's restaurant is excellent too and we feasted on langoustines landed at Portsoy, Sutherland venison and Golspie smoked haddock. They made a fuss of my young daughter Tara, which always helps keep her going for three courses. The progressive owner also has big plans for more rooms, a new bistro and spa — so watch this space.

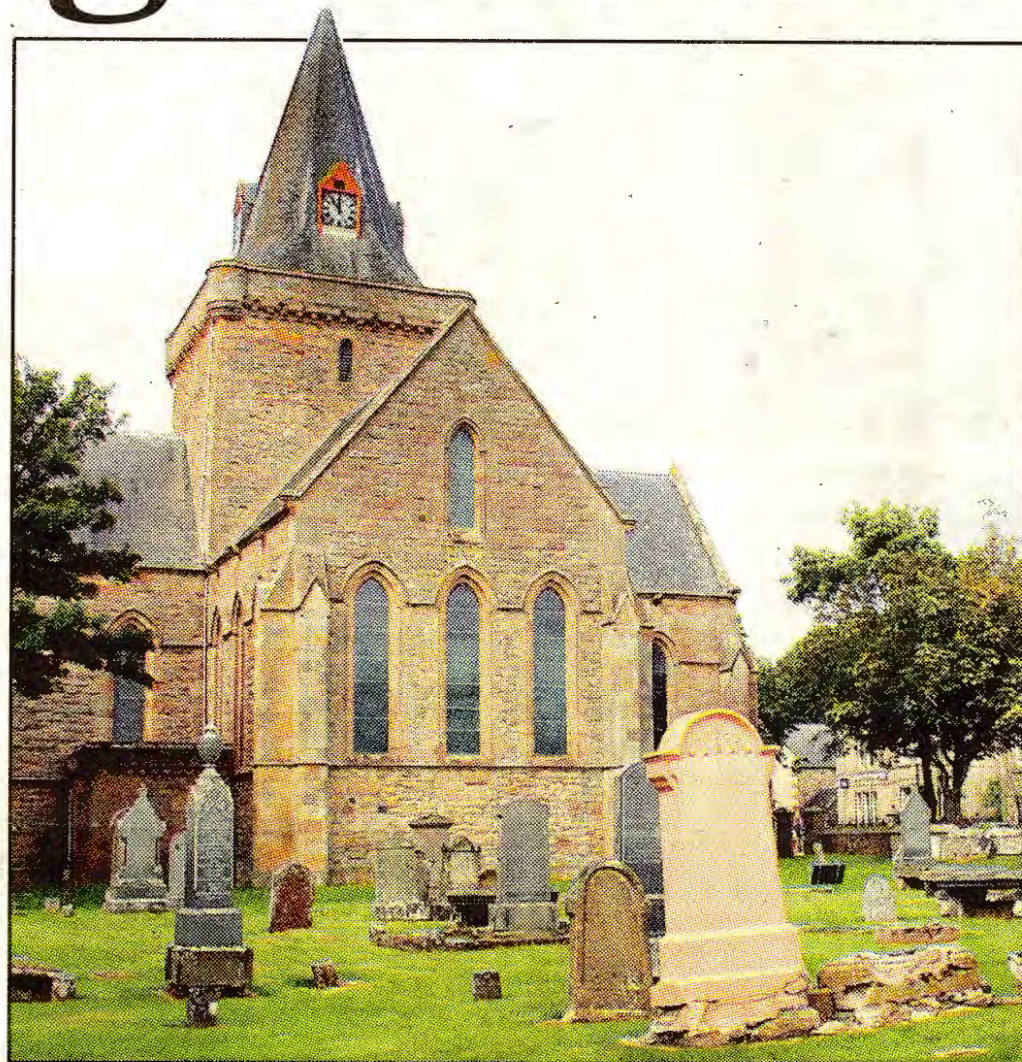
Just across the road is perhaps the most famous building in Dornoch. The grand cathedral casts an unmistakable presence.

It dates back as far as the 13th Century but hit the headlines more recently when Madonna and Guy Ritchie's son Rocco was baptised here in 2000.

Just behind the cathedral are a couple of nice wee cafes. The branch of Harry Gow is my pick as they offer the lovely Capaldi's ice cream, which is made in the Highlands.

The best place for lunch I reckon, though, is Luigi's (tel. 01862 810893). They do a great range of sandwiches and salads but also more interesting dishes like perfectly seared scallops and moules marinière. Tara loved their home-made tomato soup.

Dornoch may be a tourist town, but it also sports a wee butcher, some neat little shops and I loved the local



■ Dornoch Cathedral has a long history and a recent famous baptism.

supermarket, which features its own butcher as well as a baker.

We were also in town when the Farmers Market was on (www.dornochfarmersmarket.co.uk) so we tried jam from a local farm, bread baked in town and other goodies all sourced from Dornoch and the surrounding area.

If you want to know more about the town the place to head is to Historylinks (www.historylinks.org.uk).

Heritage

This interesting little oasis covers that infamous witch, the local regiments and clans and on to the stories behind the famous local golf course. It also boasts three short films and a heritage trail you can follow that stretches off around town.

On the main street is Jail Dornoch (www.jail-dornoch.com). This is not a tourist attraction, more a department store housed in the remarkable old jail building that has also served as a barracks.

There's no admission fee. The owners have made the most of the space and it now sells the work of many Scottish artists and craftspeople and is the sort of place where it's actually a pleasure to shop for souvenirs in — a nice change

Factfile

- The *Lonely Planet* guide to Scotland has a section on Dornoch.
- For more information on Dornoch see www.visitscotland.com

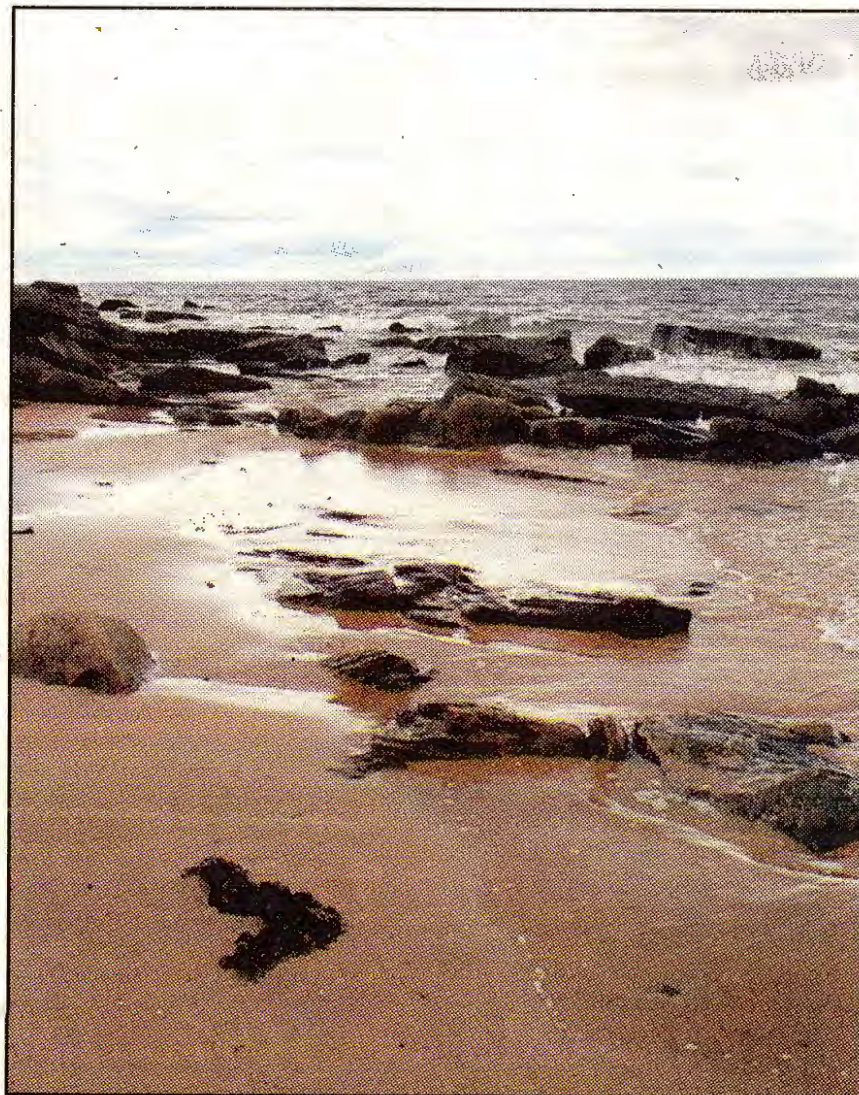
from the tartan tat you get in some shops in Scotland.

Golfers should not miss a round on Royal Dornoch itself. It is one of Scotland's most famous courses, and rightly so, as it's a real challenge and scenic too. If you aren't a fan of golf it's still worth heading down across the course on Golf Road as it leads to the town's equally impressive sweeping sandy beach.

Tara enjoyed paddling and building sandcastles. I got up early the next day to hike north along the sands to Embo further up the coast, which is a great walk if you're feeling energetic.

It may swirl in some pretty gruesome old tales, but the Royal Burgh of Dornoch these days is a wee gem for a family holiday.

With plenty to see and do in a charming town that's close to lovely coastal scenery we are already keen to go back, especially with so much sunshine around, something we all dream about at this time of year.



■ The coastline is impressive.



■ Dornoch Castle Hotel.



■ Tara playing on Dornoch Beach.

Hotel of the week

SUN INN — This recently revamped inn on the outskirts of Edinburgh is a perfect escape for a post-Christmas break. The rooms upstairs are full of character and the best, The Suite, is worth paying the extra for as it boasts a bespoke copper bathtub and Egyptian cotton linen. Downstairs the open plan bar and bistro areas work really well. Staff are super friendly and the cooking is excellent, drawing on Borders lamb and Scottish seafood to conjure up one of those menus you could eat almost everything from. Doubles £80, suite £150. Lothianbridge, Dalkeith. Tel. 0131 663 2456. www.thesuninnesbank.co.uk

Flight of the week

THERE ARE some great fares for January out to Dublin from Glasgow with Aer Lingus. Snap one up and you can soon be enjoying a city legendary for its craic, the atmosphere of fun and revelry that buzzes through its famous bars. This is also a great city of music, culture and literature with sights such as Trinity College, which is slap bang in the centre. Rolling hills and charming coastal villages lie just outside Dublin making the Irish capital ideal for a few days away. Return fares from £45.76. www.aerlingus.com