

Skye box ticked and well worth a visit

There was much to enjoy about the Skeabost Hotel on the Isle of Skye. The staff were exceptional with assistance and advice on where to visit, our small but stylish and comfortable room had a balcony with a great view over the shoreline of Loch Snizort, and the food was, in the main, quality.

The fish portion at breakfast could have been more generous and the fresh fruit selection was poor for a four-star hotel which is described by the owners, the Sonas Group, who have two other establishments on Skye, as being a "historic Scottish gem". That is a tad over generous.

We were left wanting more, particularly as the sister hotel run by the Sonas Group, the Duisdale House, on the Sleat Peninsula in the south of the island, was a finalist in the BBC Television series, Scotland's Greatest Escapes.

The location of the Skeabost, set in woods and near extensive parkland, adjacent to a river claimed to be one of the best for salmon on the island, was ideal for chilling. But...

The exterior of the white-painted mansion needs attention and some buildings along the driveway from the main road were scruffy, all taking away from the description of "gem".

Devotees of afternoon tea would love the location as it is served next to a roaring fire. Here the wood panelled walls added to the warm feeling but the next door restaurant was claimed to be stylish in the blurb.

Sorry, the wood panelling and old-fashioned storage cabinets were a throwback to the past and reminded me of my grandmother who kept her best china safely locked away from careless, young hands.

Certainly, the Skeabost offers an ideal base from which to travel around the north of Skye, and there are many places worth visiting. Just off the main road hidden in the hills above Uig is The Fairy Glen, a strange landscape created by a landslip.

There is no sign – we had to ask a postman – but we were not alone in the car park. I asked a local why there was not sign and his answer was simple: “This site can’t cope with too many people.” I get that as you approach this memorable piece of geology via a twisty, single-track road.

It had pot holes – many roads on Skye do – but it was nothing to what was to come as we took a left at the top of the hill above Uig. The drive is certainly scenic, but only for passengers. The driver is constantly having to negotiate the potholes. Stressful.

We were heading for The Storr, a mountain on the Trotternish peninsula facing the Sound of Rassay. It is arguably the most famous walk, and claimed to be the busiest attraction on the island. The car park was rammed, underlining its popularity.

The ascent is not for the faint-hearted or those who are not regular hill walkers. It is steep and we relied on those who made the trip to tell us that the view from the top on one of Scotland’s most iconic places was spectacular.

The Kilt Rock waterfall is a few miles further on and water

cascades down from land to sea. Here, you park and stride a few paces on level ground to the cliffside railing and peer over. That's more attuned to my level of fitness.

We turned south heading towards Edinbane Pottery and then to white-washed Stein, a crofting township on the north-east shore of Loch Bay, in the west of the Waternish peninsula.

There you find, much to our surprise, the Loch Bay, a Michelin Star restaurant where booking is essential. It is described as an unpretentious spot for local seafood such as hand-dived scallops and is run by a husband-and-wife team. No prices are listed on the menu.

We parked and walked along the shore. Nobody was around and there were only a few vehicles in the car park. However, my wife spotted life in the Stein Inn which just happens to be the oldest inn on Skye.

The blurb – consulted after we left – said: "This place is truly special." Whoever wrote that was 100 per cent correct. It was special and the food – whitebait with spicy mayo for me and a fabulous plate of duck cooked with peaches and raspberry for my partner – was total quality.

We also loved the ambience and we are not alone in eulogising about the establishment. Famed food writer, Nigella Lawson, also loved it, according to the website.

From there we motored to Portree, the capital and largest town on the island.

The Thomas Telford designed pier is framed by steep cliffs and dotted with brightly-painted homes and shops. Portree is around 200 years old and was created as a fishing village by the then Lord MacDonald.

It is said to be an ideal starting point for hiking in the nearby, rocky range of jagged rocky mountains known as the

Cullin Hills. It is also noted for fishing in nearby lochs or taking a boat trip to see whales, dolphins and seals.

There are some quirky shops, but few High Street brands apart from Boots, and the in-town Co-op is undergoing renovation. So, if you are self-catering, then the only option is the well-stocked Co-op supermarket on the outskirts of the town. It is open early until late.

There is a bus service on Skye but a car is preferable. Beware, every time we stopped we had to pay parking charges, not city rates I grant you, but charges are from 8am to 8pm.

MAIN PICTURE: By the shoreline in Portree. Other pictures are coloured houses in Portree and the Stein Inn plus Fairy Glen. All pictures by ***Nigel Duncan***





