



Travel notes

Ballachulish Hotel,
Near Fort William,
Glencoe. PH49 4JY
01764 651842.
ballachulish-hotel.
co.uk

Rooms start from
£130 per night and
include breakfast and
use of the facilities.

Winter Sale: Book by
the end January and
get 25% off.

With views of Loch Linnhe, the Ballachulish Hotel is a good base for exploring and activities such as paddleboarding

served for supermarkets as well as souvenir shops, and there are lots of Americans and Scandinavians around. It feels great to have tourists again after lockdown. I hope it's not too soon to mention it, but the lack of masks and hand-wiping is welcome. People from all over the world are relaxing after the last couple of years of Covid restrictions. It feels like we are returning to normal.

As the sun is splitting the trees, we decide to check out the Silver Sands of Morar – located around a 50-minute drive from Fort William. Back on the winding roads, you really do need to have your wits about you, particularly as the scenery is among the most stunning I think I've seen; the hills roll so close to the roads, you could almost run your fingers through the long grass as you pass.

The beach is a wow – with caster sugar-soft sand and the

kind of crystal blue water you'd only expect in the Caribbean. Yet although I do love open water swimming, the water is cold so I decide just to admire from the beach.

Back in our home from home, we delight in our new first-floor room. It's a bigger more luxurious feeling space, and with no creaky pipes. We love it.

The location of the Ballachulish Hotel is stunning. In fact, the setting is much prettier than that of the Isles of Glencoe. Indeed, the scenery here is so Scottish, so rugged, this could be one of the best hotels in the Highlands.

Part of the Crieff Hydro Family of Hotels group, it's bound to get there in terms of losing the rougher edges. I'd go back there in a heartbeat.

MY FAVOURITE PLACE



ALLYSON SHAW, AUTHOR
THE WITCHES MEMORIAL, FORFAR

WHERE IS IT?

The Witches Memorial is in Forfar Loch Country Park. It's situated in a landscaped "cauldron" garden beside a hawthorn.

WHY DO YOU GO THERE?

For many years I've been visiting and writing about memorials and places in the landscape devoted to women persecuted as witches.

This memorial, erected by Mark and Marie Cashley, remains my favourite. It's a small cenotaph etched with "Forfar Witches – Just People" and a circle of dots, like the blueprint for a neolithic henge. Each mark represents a victim of the Forfar witch hunts. The shade of the hawthorn and the shimmering loch invite you to stay with the stone. Here, people killed by the state for an imagined crime are brought back into the fold of the community.

HOW OFTEN DO YOU GO?

Once a year I make a pilgrimage at one of the cross-quarter days between a solstice and an equinox – Imbolc in February or Samhain in October. They are liminal days, sometimes mentioned by women accused of witchcraft in their troubling confessions.

HOW DID YOU DISCOVER IT?

A friend from California was

visiting her dying mother in Forres and she went to the Witches Stone there. She poured whisky over it as an offering. I decided to carry on the tradition she had begun in Forres and find as many of these places as I could across Scotland, researching the lives the memorials represent. This obsession became the book *Ashes and Stones*. When I began writing, the Forfar monument was the most recent. But, since the book's completion,



new monuments have been created in Kirkwall, Fife, and Peebles.

WHAT'S YOUR FAVOURITE MEMORY?

One early spring day the stone was surrounded with snowdrops. I was sitting beside it and thinking of accused witches in Forfar, specifically Helen Guthrie and her daughter Joanet.

A little girl stopped and asked her mother what I was doing. Her mother said: "She's come to remember people who died." For a moment, we were united through time and space in

this place – the mother and daughter, Helen and Joanet, and me. It struck me this is the true purpose of a memorial, a place where we share our grief, outrage and compassion.

WHO DO YOU TAKE?

My partner who accompanies me on all my explorations.

WHAT DO YOU TAKE?

The memory of those who died, the fragments of their lives that I've written about, so I can envision them there by the loch in better times.

WHAT DO YOU LEAVE BEHIND?

People executed for witchcraft were denied funeral rites. I leave invented words of ceremony hoping this might help their souls to rest.

SUM IT UP IN FIVE WORDS.

Tenebrous. Liminal. Communal. Sheltered. Sanctified.

WHAT OTHER TRAVEL SPOT IS ON YOUR WISH LIST?

I've just begun researching accused witches in Shetland and Orkney. In the coming year, I'll explore the islands through the eyes of these women.

Ashes and Stones: A Scottish Journey in Search of Witches and Witness by Allyson Shaw (Sceptre, £18.99)

SUSAN SWARBRICK