

OVERALL

An extremely memorable, spiritual pilgrimage... travel companions, spiritual/tour/driving guides, wanderings, nature, sites, quiet time, devotionals, and much much more made this a very special experience. Kim's perspective and support made the decision to take this pilgrimage very easy. Additionally, I am incredibly grateful for my 10 Cinci-based travel companions, those who made the preparations for this pilgrimage, and the many people we met along the way, including our wonderful guides, Paul and Wendy, and special soul friend Rolf!

INTRODUCTION

Iona has been on my "bucket list" for many years, ever since my buddy Dean Shupe encouraged me to go in the early 2010s. After attending the Soul Gathering at Westwood First Presbyterian, it was clear that my traveling companions would be some quality folk. Knowing we'd have Rolf, Allison and other valued guides in Scotland, it made the decision to take this trip a relatively easy one.



Rolf sharing "Sounding from the Heart" at Westside Abbey - June 3, 2025

Day 1: Travel to Edinburgh



Enjoying a stroll through CVG... check out the announcement board – someone has a sense of humor 🌞🎵

Flights from Cincinnati to Philly and then Philly to Edinburgh were uneventful. Arrived at 6:30 AM in Edinburgh (immigration didn't even open until 7) so we had a full day ahead!

Took the tram from the airport to Leonardo Royal Hotel (nice to have a couple of sisters - one from The States and one living in Edinburgh - to chat with on the tram.) Stowed my bags at the hotel until we could check in. Then started the first day of Edinburgh wandering which included...



Made a quick return visit reminiscent of time here 6-7 years earlier listening to music with Don! Apparently Bobby Burns made it in here the last time he was in Edinburgh

Over the course of the day, also spent time taking lots of pictures around town, with stops at

- Scott Monument
- National Galleries of Scotland, including Celtic art exhibit
- Edinburgh Castle

Nice dinner with the group and then to bed.

Day 2: Exploring Edinburgh

Walking tour with Jillian Cooper, a Church of Scotland minister, through Greyfriars Kirk (naughty stool, National Covenant signed here) & Kirkyard (Harry Potter names) plus the Grassmarket Community (fabulous work they are doing with the community here!)

Then to New College

- communion with Rev. Peter Wood and seminary students. Peter's message included child-like God reference and origami dove (Trevor Dennis' book *Speaking of God*);
- followed by sandwich lunch and presentation by Dr. Alison Jack on Scottish poetry

St. Giles Cathedral visit with Diane and Noelle - really nice to appreciate this structure with the two of them! We stopped by John Knox's parking lot grave and then to the hotel

Short nap to refresh and then planned for the next wandering...

- completed the Royal Mile!
- then to the Rabbin Burns monument in the closed cemetery
- then up to Calton Hill for GREAT views and pictures on a windy early evening given Hurricane Amy aftermath weather
- then through town towards Scott Memorial taking some fun pictures of the horse statue
- back to hotel for quick refresh and then coordinated an 8 PM walk with all interested, starting in hotel lobby - Rich, Sparky and Noelle jumped in and we decided to do the Royal Mile at night, walking down towards the Palace where we came upon John - he joined us from there! Saw
 - Palace of Holyroodhouse
 - Scottish Parliament
 - Walked the full Royal Mile to Edinburgh Castle
 - Down the steps to White Hart Inn in the Grassmarket area where all 5 stepped in to experience the oldest pub in Edinburgh (1516)
 - John and I stayed for a pint and to hear Tom McEwan (bought his vinyl with his beautiful song, When I Lay Here With You)
 - then up the street to hear a Scottish band do a couple numbers before the end of their night
- Headed to bed

Edinburgh provided a magical two days with plenty of pictures [HERE](#)

Day 3: Exploring Kelpies, Water Wheel, Stirling Castle

Another excellent hotel breakfast buffet and then met up with our guide and driver, Paul. He was a gem! Along the way to Stirling we stopped at the following:

- Kelpies - Kim and I had been to the kelpies before and it was great to visit those old friends and get even a better perspective of the water transportation in this country, especially since Kim and I were recently in Marietta, OH enjoying the Muskingum river lock and dam systems
- Selkirk Wheel - what an engineering feat!
- Lunch at a place on Loch Lomond
- Many of us took a walk in the rain along a path by Loch Lomond - admired some colorful mushrooms and other flora and fauna

Then to Stirling Castle in a driving rain. That influenced the visit - stayed mostly indoors except when moving between buildings. Nice though since I paid more attention to the details of the home.

Many of us stayed in for dinner that night at our hotel - Stirling Highland Hotel. I had fish stew and a pint.

Lots of pictures [HERE](#).

Day 4 Day Trip to Inverness / Culloden / Clava Cairns

Wonderful day trip, guided by Paul. Started in Dunkeld and stopped at Flora Shedden's place Aran, for a coffee and sausage roll to go - incredibly good! Then to Carrbridge to see the scene of the World Porridge Competition that was going on right then (sadly, no tasting available since the competition was in the middle of a round.) Also got some good pictures of [Coffin \(or Packhorse\) Bridge](#) and made the purchase of dramholders for Cliff & Sam plus the handmade necklace for Kim. To Culloden for a quick tour of the battle field (closed due to storm damage.) To Clava Cairns for a stroll through these impressive "mound-like" cemetery areas. Then to Inverness for some charity store shopping with Rich, Elayna and Debbie - bought a couple hats, some pins, rain pants and various other items while wandering the stores in the area.

Paul was in a bit of a hurry while driving back towards Stirling and we then found out why...he got us to Dalwhinnie Distillery just before they closed up shop for the day! Had a delightful time with a whiskey and chocolates sampling!

Dinner at a local place with many of the group (and Spark/Nancy at a separate table in the picture) - had meat pie plus a pint;

Back to Stirling Highland Hotel

Pictures [HERE](#)

Day 5: Glencoe on the way to Oban

Paul shared the commentary on a variety of topics.

He made several stops for looking around the hilly Glencoe area.

A group of us stopped by Oban Distillery for a drink. Then the whole group went to a wonderful place for fish platter (shared with Debbie) - fabulous! Then listened to music down in the pub at our boutique hotel, Whiskey Vaults Oban

Day 6

CHANGE - DELAYED IONA VISIT BY A DAY DUE TO HURRICANE POWER OUTAGES SO STAYED IN OBAN

Had a fabulous time on a little pilgrimage photograph journey through Oban. In response to Becky's devotional question about taking in the good, it dawned on me that when composing a photograph, that is frequently when I am intentionally taking in the good of whatever is in the frame... Coupled with an excellent lovingkindness blessing time this morning, this has been a cherished day, in spite of the fact that we were hoping to already be on the island of Iona.

Found this "cell"/ cave to hang out in for a few moments



Also made my way to a couple churches, the WW I monument on the waterfront, the old/new lighthouse, Fingal's Dogstone, the castle (just the grounds - wanted to wander more than look in another castle), found the cell above and then to the Episcopal church with Columba influence (bought several trinkets here.) Then to Oban Fish & Chips - voted 3rd best fish & chips in the UK by National Geographic! Had the Fish Tea Special - mushy peas, tea, fish & chips and bread (enough fish to take some back in orange container.) Then a daytime visit to McCaig's Tower and walk down Jacob's Ladder.

Dinner at a local place and then walked back up to McCaig's with a group after dinner. Took the really cool green shadows picture up there - great idea by Sparky!

We are glad that the folks on Iona are safe after the hurricane, and that power has been restored as of today! Hoping to be on Iona tomorrow!

Pictures [HERE](#)

Day 7: Ferry to Mull and Iona

Up extremely early to assure we got on the early ferry from Oban to Mull. About a 45 minute trip and got some good pictures on the way.

Then on a bus - the driver's microphone wasn't working so it was nice I was up near the front. Heard about Mary MacDougal MacDonald - had 11 kids and wrote poetry in Gaelic. One of her poems was set to a traditional Scottish tune, later made famous by Cat Stevens - - Morning Has Broken. Pretty countryside and pictures on the way.

Then on the ferry for Iona. The 10 minute trip was picturesque and definitely could feel Dean Shupe's influence.

Got off the ferry and met Rich & Debbie's daughter McKenzie. Went to Columba Hotel and checked in before getting a quick group overview to the day. It was 10:30 and we weren't gathering for the Abbey tour until 2:30 so I purchased a map, talked to McKenzie and a woman at the Columba front desk - decided since it was a nice day to go to Port Ban which is a shell beach. FANTASTIC experience just wandering my way there, armed with some to-go soup purchased at the town restaurant.

10:30 AM - headed off for Dean Shupe-led walk. Dean wasn't with me in body, though he was definitely here in spirit! A "thin place", for sure.



2:30 PM - Wendy leads a great tour of Iona Abbey

6:15 PM - Enjoyed dinner together at The Rookery

8 PM - Session with Rolf Biles, Iona Village Church.

9 PM - Attended the Evening Prayers at Iona Abbey

Pictures [HERE](#)

Day 8: Iona

Attended the morning prayer service @ Abbey.

Full Scottish B-fast at the Columba Hotel

South Iona pilgrimage with Wendy Lloyd: journeying to St. Columba's Bay after a quick visit to the Nunnery + visiting the Sheela na Gig on Iona.







Evening Prayers at Iona Abbey. The talk by a 20s/30s volunteer was about the importance of play.

Afterwards, without knowing the topic of the prayer talk, Debbie arranged game-playing so we enjoyed that before heading to bed. (I found that same volunteer the next day and told her about the synchronicity of her message and our after-devotions play...she was very appreciative)

Day 9:

Morning prayer service. Rich mentioned a hike to Dun I (highest point on Iona) so I joined the group for that - beautiful views of the area, including Brigid's Pool.

Dun I - highest point on Iona



Then headed off on my own for solo wandering, with Dean in my thoughts while journeying through the bogs and breas (hills) of Iona. The hermit's cell I did solo - the hike was a pleasant reminder of "swamp" experiences as a boy in BG!





Here's some of the group as we finished Evening Prayers at Iona Abbey



Day 10: Return to Mull

We took the ferry from Iona to Mull and got word from Dave that it appeared the Staffa Island boat was running. Sparky and I got tickets and enjoyed the time together at Fingal's Cave - spectacular! - and a bonus of grey seal pups viewings!





We also enjoyed conversation with the couple from England on the boat ride back - when I inquired about travel, heard from the wife about some FABULOUS travels they've made, including to Ethiopia for some communion experiences where the people travel for days to get there.

We got off the ferry and met Rich, John and Debbie near the variety store. Had a pint at Keel Row and then went to Achaban House in Fionnphort.

Catered meal was provided that evening - fantastic food! Headed down to Keel Row for music afterwards and it was a rag-tag music group (with the guitarist seeming to be a bit of a narcissist) but a lot of fun to watch/listen to the antics, especially a visitor who had some serious fiddle and vocal skills.

Day 11: Mull Pilgrimage

Morning trip down to Loch Pottie for substantial meditative time before wandering around the loch, including seeing the local WW I memorial and seeing Highlands Coos and grey heron.

At 10:30 we took a trip to a Woolery. After making purchases, we journeyed for a substantial hike along Mull to visit an ancient cave with these Christian / spiritual images. Hummed a song in there - - it was a very meaningful experience overall!



Then we went to an ancient churchyard to see the Sheela Na Gig.

6:30 PM - Dinner at Keel Row and it was very tasty - all our meals have been great or even better!

Day 12: Return to Edinburgh


We left at 7:30 AM with Wendy and John taking us to the ferry. Had an hour before the ScotRail train so wandered around Oban a bit more. Then two trains - Elayna seatmate on the first segment (longer trip) to Glasgow. Then on the second, much shorter train segment from Glasgow to Edinburgh with excellent conversation with Dave/Susan about our experiences and next steps. Arrived in Edinburgh around 5 with a little time to wander before a walk to a FABULOUS tapas place (<https://www.cafeandaluz.com/>) near Greyfriars sharing food around with the Jones duo - - white anchovies and Debbie's story associated with that made it a favorite dish



Day 13: Departure

Had an early breakfast at the hotel and then walked the ½ mile to the tram to Edinburgh Airport. Uneventful flight to London Heathrow with a long layover - talked with Kim, Mom and did some reading and YouTube watching.

Interested in more? ☺

- **Some haiku as part of devotional efforts - summaries with pictures [HERE](#)**
- **Highlights of pilgrimage from Steve's perspective (in about 30 pictures) [HERE](#)**
- **Highlight of pilgrimage from Steve's perspective in about 150 pictures [HERE](#)**
- **Some "Artist's Way" pictures [HERE](#)**
- **ALL pictures [HERE](#) (caution – about 2,000 in all)**
- **Pilgrimage Materials - Iona, Mull and more... - October 2025 online [HERE](#)**
- ** [How Lovely Is Thy Dwelling Place, with Organ | The Tabernacle Choir](#)**