

You will have noticed that I regularly refer to Tourism as a great source of income and employment to the Highlands of Scotland. We all recognise the attractions of Pitlochry, Aviemore, Fort George, Culloden, Inverness and Glenurquart Castle on Loch Ness. We may have visited the honey traps of Fort Augustus and Drumnadrochit. However there are three less visited venues that I enjoy and which are free. For the dreitch days when the icy rain comes horizontal off the Cromarty Firth, I cannot think of a better place to visit than Dingwall Mart and the Drovers Exhibition. Open 8.30am to 4.30pm, Monday to Friday, you can't miss it for the fantastic bronze sculpture that sits on the hill as you approach Dingwall from the A9 by the Mart. This is a detailed and interactive display with modern and old films to explain the ways of the Drovers. The display boards take you through the history of Scottish black cattle (Highland Cattle) in an educated and informative way. Great for children and the not so young. The Mart also has a fantastic little café that produced home cooked local produce and the best cakes for miles. Although on the first floor, I believe there is a lift in the far corner for disabled. As well as that there is a viewing gallery over the sales ring and for those that have not visited a mart before, there are plenty of people around who will be pleased to explain what is going on. Not all days have sales so if you wish to see the mart in all its glory it would pay to check the Dingwall Mart site first. <http://www.dingwallmart.co.uk/HLHS/hlhsindex.htm>

Second suggestion is the perhaps mis-named "Highland Folk Museum" at Newtonmore. Originally spread over two sites at Kingussie and Newtonmore, financial cutbacks within the Highland Council Museum's budget resulted in the Kingussie site being mothballed, although arrangements can be made to visit it as a group. Last time I was there it seemed a bit overgrown and un-loved. Newtonmore however is a marvellous living museum with the Township away to the east and the Steading to the west. A post office is usually manned with a great choice of sweets from the jar that will bring a smile of pleasant recollection to those of us of more advanced years. Essentially you will walk through the ages from the smoky reality of a peat house, to the schoolhouse that some may well remember. There is a café on site and a shop. Parking and entrance is free but donations are accepted and an important part of keeping this facility open. I understand that this year the community will be taking a greater part in the Centre which will be a positive move. Best visited on a good day the views to the Cairngorms are simply majestic. <http://www.highlandfolk.com/> There is no charge for entrance or parking but donations are appreciated. Not far away are the Ruthven Barracks which are worth a visit to reflect on the pivotal part that they have played in Highland History. You will often find Ruaridh Ormiston's Highland cattle gazing there. Ruaridh runs a tekking centre at Newtonmore Riding Centre. <http://www.newtonmoreridingcentre.com/> That may cost you a penny or two but the experience of riding Highland Ponies in the landscape that God designed them for is something that will remain with your youngsters for a lifetime. Ruaridh will shortly be seen on TV with Griff Rys Jones in a film about droving. Apparently the out-takes were something else.

Third suggestion is Glen Affric. Leave Beauly on the Cannich Road and presently you are in another world. In the little hamlet of Struy you can take a right turn up to Strathfarrar. You will need a key from the keepers cottage unless you are walking or cycling. There is a limit on cars allowed so be prepared to be disappointed. If all else fails you can drown your sorrows at the Struy Inn. Carrying on the main road you will come to Cannich which has three cafes/restaurant. Bog Cotton Café by the campsite is fun and the Slaters Arms are both recommended. Haven't to the one by the Glen Affric Hotel for a while but it was fine last time I was there. In Cannich you can take a right turn after the bridge and drive up through Glen Cannich to the Mullardoch Dam. Hydro was supposed to rebuild

the road beside the dam but in the later construction of hydro some things were conveniently forgotten. Out of site, out of mind. However the scenery is worth the trip. Then on the main road to Fasnakyle, where you can fork left to Tomich with it's lovely little hotel, on to the spectacular water fall at Plodda Falls and eventually the trekking centre at Courgie. Straight on takes you into Glen Affric itself with Dog falls, the Lochs, Mountains and Scots Pine forests that make the area so very special. At the moment there are no parking charges, although it is rumoured that Forestry Commission Scotland have plans to impose them to recover some of the costs that they have incurred recently in refurbishing the car parks, loos and tracks. For walkers, a good map and the world is your oyster, for cyclists a range of tracks that will satisfy even the most ambitious and for the climber/hill walker a range of Munros stand before you. For the traveller and the honeymooner, probably one of the finest parts of Scotland to just stand and enjoy the natural environment. For the photographer and naturalist, this is nirvana. This is the route of the Highland Cross race, possibly one of the most demanding amateur events in the UK. <http://www.glenaffric.org/index.html>

So there you are, three idealic but different parts of the Highlands which will take you away from the bulk of the Tourist Trail but lead you to an understanding of the Highland not bettered by any guidebook.