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Step Across a Loch Back in Time

By Brette Sember on July 3, 2013 at 7:22 pm

Our trip to Scotland was a homecoming for me. I'd waited my entire life to see the land of my ancestors. I had no idea how deeply I would be able to experience the past, however.

Visiting the Past

On a cool, overcast August day, we drove from our base in Inverness for miles through twisting and turning roads, over misty hills and around deeply colored lochs, to finally arrive at The Scottish Crannog Centre on Loch Tay, deep in the Highlands of Perthshire. It took us much longer to find than anticipated, but we were welcomed even as visiting hours were winding down. Unfamiliar to most U.S. visitors, the *crannog* was the type of timber dwelling built in the British Isles 2,500 years ago in the Iron Age. *Crannogs* were large homes built on stilts over a *loch*, essentially self-contained islands. They were built most often by driving piles into the *loch* bed, but were sometimes constructed by gradually creating an island out of rock. The *crannog* was meant to house an entire extended family over the placid waters of these deep and beautiful lakes, to provide shelter, protection, and easy access to natural resources. They were often the only home a family had and were easy to protect because of their isolation.



The Crannog Centre on Loch Tay



Approaching the crannog



The comfortable dwelling interior



Getting a feel for the lifestyle

Unexpected Comfort

We walked across a gangway to enter the dwelling. Some *crannogs* were accessible only by boat, while others had gangways that were easily removed to prevent entry. Because the *crannogs* were built high on stilts, they were virtually impossible to enter unless intruders had the foresight to bring a ladder and arrived with much stealth.

We entered the *crannog* to the sweet smell of hay. Hay was everywhere – flooring, insulation, feed for livestock (which were housed in pens) and as bedding. Sheep wool was also used as insulation and bedding, adding softness and deep padding. A fire pit in the center was vented through the thatched roof. We could smell the fires of events past, and imagined how the scent would permeate a home where a fire was always flickering.

Logs provided seating and our guide helped us envision a large family cooking, sleeping, fishing and interacting in the spacious round shelter. A loom and pottery brought the dwelling to life. Although the *crannog* is really one large room, it was divided into different

living areas with privacy and separation achieved through partitions, lofts and enclosed pens. It also has the benefit of providing a bathroom right over the water. The dwelling felt protected, warm and inviting in a way I could never have guessed a primitive dwelling could.

Travel was often accomplished by waterway, via carved log boats, during this time period, so a home on the water encouraged trade, intermarriage and fellowship. The *crannog* was perfectly positioned to benefit, yet protect its residents.

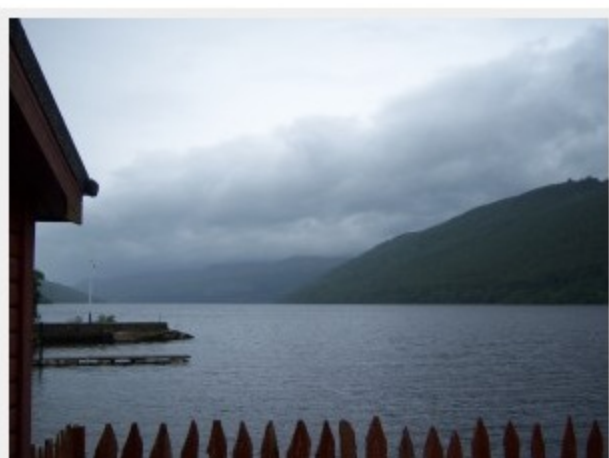
Exploring the Lifestyle

The Crannog Centre wasn't created from imagination; there are many submerged crannogs throughout Scotland and underwater archaeology has been able to reveal the details about this way of life. The history is represented in the indoor exhibition center, where artifacts and photographs depict the past. The museum not only welcomes visitors to the *crannog*, but also offers authentic Iron Age activities onshore. Try your hand at wood turning, bow drilling and grain grinding – activities my children enjoyed.

Dining and accommodations are nearby in the charming villages of Kenmore and Aberfeldy, or enjoy the comforts of a small city at Inverness. The Crannog Centre was an unexpected find in the Highlands (and a stark contrast to the commercialism of the Loch Ness museums we visited) and one that is certain to entice and educate you if you make the journey.



Iron Age activities challenge



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