

**LOCH AND LOAD** According to A&F's own Christmas Field Guide (see page 43), a recent scientific study has determined that the Loch Ness Monster, that long-necked, multi-humped lake monster of Scottish lore, is as nonexistent as underwear under a Scotsman's kilt. Bullshite, said Sean T. Collins, A&F's resident expert on Nessie—or *Nessiteras rhombopteryx* to you unbelievers. He set out for the Loch's wooded shores to prove the scientists wrong. Here's his report.

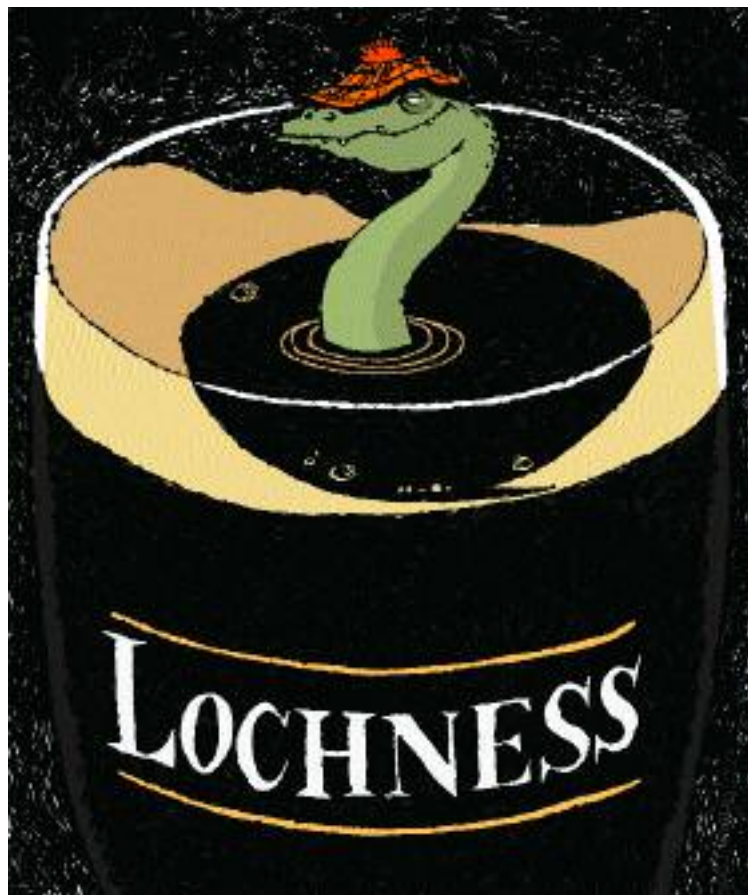
The surface is black as midnight, still and reflective as glass. Thick cream-colored foam buffets the edges. Something about its murky deeps makes the imagination fire, the eyes see things that otherwise could not, or should not, be seen. What mysteries lie at the bottom are impossible to determine, but one thing is certain: Many a man has descended foolhardily into its depths, never to return.

Okay, so we're talking about the Guinness I'm drinking, here in this café in the Scottish Highlands. But pretty much everything I just said could apply to the loch (that's Scottish for lake) that lies about 50 yards from where I'm sitting, arguably the most infamous body of water in Europe: Loch Ness. Ever since I was a wee laddie, I've been fascinated with the legend of the Loch, namely that somewhere beneath its surface swims a real-life Jurassic Park refugee known to the locals as Nessie. Armed with a digital camera, a field guide to cryptozoology (the study of Nessie, Bigfoot, Yeti and the like) and a very patient girlfriend, I've journeyed from the safety of the big city deep into *Braveheart* territory to do what many have tried but few have actually succeeded at doing: snap a picture of the Loch Ness Monster.

Scotland's biggest star this side of Sean Connery, Nessie made her first appearance in the record books way back in 565 A.D. Saint Columba took a break from converting the local Pict tribes to Christianity in order to pull a Men in Black on the beastie, zapping its scaly ass with the power of prayer after it threatened one of his monks. Throughout the intervening centuries, stories of the kelpie ("water-horse" in Scottish dialect) have trickled out of every body of water larger than a puddle throughout the hills of Scotland. But Nessie's the sea serpent with staying power, as nearly any Scotsman worth his salt will tell you.

The trip to track her down is not for the faint of heart. More specifically, it's not for idiots like me who have no conception of how freaking long the

train ride from Glasgow to the Loch takes. Following the overnight flight to Scotland from the States, this endless railway jaunt left me about as grumpy as the beastie must have been when old Saint Columba schooled it on behalf of the Lord. Fortunately, it's hard to stay grumpy in Scotland, where everyone—old people, TV presenters, elected officials, everyone—is drunk by 8pm. I think this has something to do with the fact that Scotland (along with England and Wales) is an island. At a certain point people simply run out of stuff to do and collectively go a little nuts, so you get things like Japanese television, Long Island's Billy Joel fixation and the four Scottish food groups: cream, beef, beer and whiskey.



Speaking of which, let me take a moment to sing the praises of the liquid that is to Scotland what oil is to the Middle East. You may think you've had "whiskey," here in America. You are wrong. Scottish whiskey (don't call it "Scotch" while in Scotland—it's redundant, duh) is the nectar of the gods, especially compared to the rotgut you've been mixing with grape juice at frat parties. Remember that scene in *The Shining* when Jack Nicholson drinks a mouthful of a certain American brand and holds it in his mouth like Scope? You can do this with Scottish whiskey and actually not turn into an axe-wielding Ed McMahon—quoting maniac.

Feeling refreshed—and full—after our night in Inverness, the city at the Loch's northern tip, we drove down the A82 on the western shore to the little village of Drumnadrochit. (Pretty much every little village in the Highlands sounds like the name of the place that big troll came from in *The Lord of the Rings*.) A chill crept through the air as we passed the lakeshore mansion once inhabited by Aleister Crowley, the 20th century's most prominent black magician, on the opposite shore. Crowley claimed to be able to raise the Monster from the depths at will. The mansion was subsequently inhabited by Led Zeppelin's Jimmy Page, who with the help of groupies was known to raise an entirely different kind of monster. It's also where Zep's monster drummer, John Bonham, drank himself to death. Like I said—islands, man.

## AFTER 20 YEARS AS AN AMATEUR MONSTER HUNTER, I'VE FINALLY GOT MY SHOT AT IMMORTALITY

Drumnadrochit, we had been warned, was a gaudy tourist trap. Compared with New York City, however, the place was an unspoiled Highland paradise. Actually, Drum was lovely no matter how you slice it. Charming shops and friendly locals dot its main crossroads, at which two competing Nessie museums—one calling itself "The Original," the other "The Official"—compete for the tourist dollar (pound, euro, yen, etc.). My special lady and I checked into a quaint country-house hotel a few miles up the road, then wandered off to see what we could see.

We hiked along the Loch to visit the ruins of Castle Urquhart, the premier monster-sighting hotspot, after dinner that night. The sun was setting, the birds were chirping, the loch's gorgeous waters stretched into the distance, there was no one else in sight, yadda yadda yadda.... You're all pretty bright, so I'm sure I don't need to draw you a picture. Suffice it to say that it took a while for us to begin walking back.

At this point it's important to note that Scotland is way, way up north. During summer, this means that it stays bright as day until almost 11pm, which makes it deliciously easy to lose track of time during the evening. Unfortunately, you're also out in the country, which means that nothing's open, including the doors to your country-house hotel, past nine. When my lady friend and I arrived at our place of lodging, we quickly realized a speedy retreat to the comfort of the four-poster in our room was not in the cards, not unless we scaled the walls and broke in through the window. We ended up swallowing our pride and yelling up to the staff quarters' windows, rousing the hotel's friendly German waiter (!), who shuffled down in his PJs and unlocked the hotel doors in fairly short order. At that point we resolved not to go exploring past 9pm for the duration of our stay in Scotland—at least not outside the bedroom.

The next day we decided to pay a visit to the Official Loch Ness Monster Exhibition, seeing as how, of the two museums in town, this one had apparently gone through the trouble of obtaining authorization from the Loch Ness Monster herself. An almost-life-size replica of a plesiosaur (the long-necked, flippered, aquatic dinosaur that many believe makes the Loch its home) sat in the pond outside, and dinos dotted the tons of merchandise inside the museum's gift shop, so we figured the exhibition would make a strong case for saurian shenanigans in the nearby waters. Instead, we were treated to a lengthy debunking of virtually every Nessie sighting known to man, followed by an argument that the only legit sightings were, in all likelihood, of wayward sturgeons that swam in from the sea, got trapped in the lake and confused the hell out of the local boatsmen and tourists, who concocted a sea serpent from sightings of nothing more than a really big fish. I don't know about you, but I think there's something

awfully depressing about having your childhood daydreams destroyed by a tourist attraction that's ostensibly designed specifically to profit from said childhood daydreams.

Which leads me to this café, where I'm sipping a beer and contemplating my next, climactic move in my quest for Nessie: a boat ride on the Loch itself. I finish my drink (they're a lot less elusive than the Monster in these parts, I assure you), hop in a van and ride down to the dock, where a crusty captain, with a glint in his eye that shows he's seen it all twice, escorts us aboard. A quick rundown of the Loch—23 miles long, 1 mile across at its widest, average depth of 450 feet, underwater visibility less than a foot due to massive quantities of peat-bog muck washed down into the water from the hills—and we were on our way. "This is it," I think. "After 20 years as an amateur monster hunter, I've finally got my shot at immortality. I can get a picture of a natural wonder so spectacular it'll put the bodies of the models in this magazine to shame."

We glide across the Loch's still surface, a Guinness wake trailing off behind us. My eyes scan from shore to shore, looking for a set of humps and a long serpentine neck—the telltale signs of Nessie. Eventually the boat pulls to a stop, beneath the shadow of Castle Urquhart. "Damn," I think, "this place is a lot creepier when you're looking up at it from a little dinghy that's the only thing separating you from a monster-ridden watery grave." The captain informs us that we're currently floating above the single deepest point in the whole Loch—a sheer drop-off from the clifflike walls above that plummets 750 feet below the surface. "The walls are riddled with caves, totally hidden from view," he intones somberly. "This is the beastie's favorite haunt." My lady friend clutches my arm. I peer through the camera lens.

We wait. And we watch. And then we pull away and get back to the shore and eat and drink and enjoy our four-poster once again.

That's right—my chance at cryptozoological fame and fortune evaporated like fog on the moors. No wayward sturgeons, no water-horses and certainly no latter-day dinosaurs reared their ugly heads during our visit to the Loch. But I think I learned quite a bit during the excursion. I learned of the value of myth, the ephemerality of legend, the beauty of the Highlands, the delights of Scottish cuisine, the mystery-solving power of science. And I learned that any time you spend some quality time with your significant other at the ruins of a medieval castle, you'd better make sure to bring the key to your hotel.

*Illustration by Bill Brown.*