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HIGHLAND ROVER

The crowds and fireworks will be absent from this year's Hogmanay celebrations, but there are other, more traditional ways to mark the biggest night on Scotland's calendar. **Richard Webber** takes the Land Rover Defender on a muckle road trip to uncover them

PHOTOGRAPHY MAX EDLESTON





The Defender's smothering air suspension forces Edinburgh's cobbles to capitulate

This whole Christmas caper really is still a novelty north of the border. It is, after all, only 49 years since it became a public holiday in Scotland. For centuries after the Reformation of 1560 cast Catholicism aside, the marking of Yule was frowned upon at best and illegal at worst as the austere Church of Scotland sought to stamp out 'popish superstition', 'filthy carols' and 'extraordinary drinking'.

It's no small irony, then, that the Kirk turned a blind eye to Hogmanay, with its pagan traditions, peculiar songs and ample refreshments that turned 31 December into Scotland's foremost annual festivity.

The blockbusting, commercialised modern-day celebration of 'Edinburgh's Hogmanay' is, of course, cancelled this year, so we're embarking on a road trip to discover some of the older, simpler ways in which we might welcome a new – and, fingers crossed, better – year.

We'll make three day-long loops from Edinburgh, including a pilgrimage to the birthplace of Robert Burns, whose Auld Lang Syne has become the global anthem for New Year. It's

arguably also Burns' most effective weapon in his crusade to preserve the Scots tongue – the expressive language inherent to Scottish culture, rooted in English but seasoned by Scandinavian, French and Flemish influences. We'll do our bit too, and, as did Burns, we've provided a glossary (see p43).

But what to drive? Well, like the ploughman poet himself, we need something that is as comfortable mixing with the city set as it is tramping the wilds that lie ahead. Step forward the new Land Rover Defender 110: reborn, reinvented and – so say our road testers – replete.

The Defender's gleaming LEDs cut through a shuggy Edinburgh morn as we get a first taste of its greatest leap: the serene ride. Having endured its predecessor over these same cobbles and potholes, it's almost good enough to tempt tears of relief.



Swinkle and burn: the Defender enjoys a dip, thanks to its generous 900mm wade depth

WEBBER'S FESTIVE DASH

Our 600-mile route took in three one-day loops from Edinburgh. The northern spur to Inshriach near Aviemore called for cruise control and patience but, in fairer weather, the return leg via Comrie would be fun and scenic. The westerly leg reached the Ayrshire coast via Glasgow, then came home over a great mix of roads via the Scottish Borders. Day three was just a short hop to salubrious East Lothian and nearby Newtonrange.



We point north to span Fife then Perthshire at a comfortable cruise, with just a hint of on-throttle drone from the 237bhp 2.0-litre diesel engine and muted buffeting for company. The mist cracks at Blair Atholl, leaching through the autumnal hillsides, then bright sunshine turns the windswept Cairngorms a glowing bronze.

After 115 easy miles, we peel off for a short B-road weemple an' wamble to our first stop at Inshriach Estate. We're here to collect some booze, which is one of three gifts presented when 'first-footing' – visiting your neighbours after the stroke of midnight at Hogmanay. But for reasons to emerge later, it's not whisky we're after but gin.

Set designer turned estate manager and distiller Walter

Micklethwait greets us with his well-used 1994 Defender. Before we're let loose on the estate, he wants to see how our young pretender handles the rough and has marked out a challenging little circuit over grassy drums and heuchs.

I inflate the Defender's air springs to off-road height, engage low range and switch on the Grass/Gravel/Snow terrain mode, then up we go. It's a worthy test, with ridges, gradients, lumps and bumps aplenty. The old guard needs guts and glory to conquer it, flinging clods of turf skyward as Micklethwait gies it lally, while our car's binary brain allows for quieter, steadier progress that barely wakes the worms.

A particular diagonal ridge needs two attempts: our locking differential-equipped rear axle →

“
The new Defender is as comfortable mixing with the city set as it is tramping the wilds
”



Inshriach Estate offered an unexpected mix of impromptu 'new Defender vs old' head-to-head and juniper harvesting for on-site gin production. Webber appears unconvinced



← shuffles sideways at first, but a different line and more throttle eases us over. The L-reg Landie then beaches in the same spot, so we electrically deploy the towbar for an impromptu rescue. Our D240 has 'only' 317lb ft but barely flinches at the task.

We have optional All Terrain Progress Control – in effect an off-road cruise control – so I set a crawling speed and lift my feet

Over the course of 600 miles, our overall fuel economy of 27.3mpg wasn't far short of WLTP combined consumption figures of between 29.6 and 31.7mpg.

from the pedals. It's as impressive as it is uncanny, the car using myriad sensors to feel its way up, down and across while I focus on steering, keeping an eagle eye on front wheel placement using the door mirror-mounted cameras.

The electronics take a couple of bites at one particular mound, backing off and reformulating like one of those troubling Boston Dynamics robo-dogs.

Photographer Edleston says the engine sounds like I'm working the throttle myself. Spooky.

Quietly impressed, Micklethwait leads us on between the Blackface sheep that run about the braes of the 200-acre estate and past self-catering accommodations including a converted 1954 Commer truck.

We reach the banks of the River Spey and engage wading mode before taking a dip, sensors pinging like Red October against the rising waterline. Micklethwait's

live axles shoogle over the plump, round cobbles, but our independent suspension maintains comfort. We've almost twice the wading capability, at 900mm, so a deeper pool brings nothing more alarming than the soft swinkle of peaty water against the doors.

After we've paidl't in the burn, it's out, up and into a patch of ancient, prickly bushes that bear juniper, the essential gin botanical. After three years of ripening, the cones (not the berries) turn purple and come away willingly. Biting one, the →



Inshriach's Micklethwait (left) tries to explain the finer points of spirit distillation while Webber revels in the trouncing of his host's old Landie in the earlier off-road shootout





Comrie's Flambeaux celebrates Hogmanay - and the burning of witches

← familiar gin flavour bursts through and ambushes my tongue, where it camps until dinner.

We repair to Inshriach's remodelled chicken shed, now home to a shop, piano lounge, bar and distillery. Micklethwait explains how juniper, rosehip, Douglas fir and spring water, all sourced on site, are used to make Inshriach Gin in 43% and 'Navy Strength' 57% ABVs. We wait until later to weet oor thrapples with a right guid willie-waught. The aromatic, peppery potion goes down a treat.

The sun is long gone when we leave this eccentric, enchanting spot, submerging again into Scotch-broth fog. A trudge down the A9 becomes a crawling slog over what

should have been an entertaining stretch of the 'Heart 200' touring route through the Sma' Glen.

No matter; we soon reach the village of Comrie, where local office holders David Robertson and Hamish Reid enlighten us about a local Hogmanay ritual known as the Flambeaux. Its origins are unclear: both Celtic culture and immigrant French weavers are credited with its emergence in the 1800s.

In mid-November, 12 birch poles of 10ft 6in (the length of witch-burning stakes) are each wrapped in 20 or more hessian sacks, then steeped in paraffin until being lit at midnight on Hogmanay in the main square. Led by the Comrie Pipe Band, the Flambeaux are paraded around the village then launched off Dalginross Bridge into the inky River Earn in a

For £525, the optional ClearSight mirror gives a sharp, widescreen view rearwards when road grime and the full-size spare wheel encroach on the view out of the back window.



ROBERT BURNS
BIRTHPLACE MUSEUM

muckle flaucht of sparks. And thus bad spirits are banished – “or at least sent down river to Crieff”, adds Reid.

Most of the retreat to Edinburgh is on empty motorway. When we need extra shove, the engine strains against the 110's 2248kg mass, but there's enough power to rub along with, and the ride is genuinely limo-like. Like a Mercedes-Benz S-Class, the Defender has a three-metre wheelbase, air springs and adaptive dampers (plus bonus sidewall), so why not?

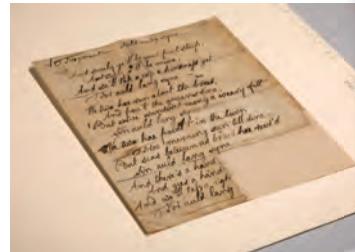
Morning brings another cruise, this time to Ayrshire and the Robert Burns Birthplace Museum in pretty Alloway. We meet learning manager Chris Waddell, who educates us on Burns and Auld Lang Syne, which Waddell calls “an ode →



“
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against the mass but there's
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”



A smooth touch is needed on B-roads



Burns' own copy of Auld Lang Syne



A DIFFERENT BALL GAME

The exertions of the Loony Dook (p42) are trifling compared with an ancient tradition from Kirkwall on Orkney, where buildings are boarded up in anticipation of the Kirkwall Ba'.

When the bell of St Magnus Cathedral strikes 1pm on 1 January, a 3lb cork-stuffed leather ba' (ball) is tossed from the old market cross into a crowd of hundreds. There are no team colours, but players are split into Uppies and Doonies, depending on historical family ties.

The goals are half a mile apart: for the Doonies, it's the waters of the harbour to the north, and for the Uppies it's a street corner where the town's southern gates once stood. For the most part, the game comprises one giant rolling scrum,

which can rove into tight lanes and dead ends. When players break away with the ball, however, there's a mass dash to catch them, and when this happens, spectators pause from screaming at the players to scramble from the firing line – sometimes successfully, sometimes not so.

The game is at least 300 years old, but its origin has been linked to a ninth-century Viking ruler who decapitated a Pict – an act that time and folklore has distorted into using the head as a football.

There are no rules and the length of the game isn't fixed, although it usually lasts well past sunset and into the evening. There are some certainties, though: injuries, scuffles and a final score of 1-0.





↳ to friendship and brotherhood; Scotland's great gift to the world".

Burns' version is the most famous, but it wasn't nearly the first. In 1568, the black death blighted Edinburgh and the city was in lockdown (plus ça change...). Poetry enthusiast George Bannatyne passed the time compiling his favourite works, among them Auld Kyndnes Forgett, which describes the somewhat more cynical sentiment that you're only popular when you're rich.

The poem was first written for two centuries before appearing in 1787

as a genial ballad in a compendium called the Scots Musical Museum. Among a cache of fascinating artefacts, Waddell shows us Burns' very own copy where, on the page opposite, the poet's handwriting reads: 'By much the best set of the words of this song is as follows. Should auld acquaintance be forgot...'

The rest is history. The association of Auld Lang Syne with New Year began not in Scotland, though, but in the US, when NBC Radio greeted 1929 with the song, played live by Guy Lombardo and His Royal

Canadians. It's also heard at closing time in Japanese supermarkets. A gift to the world indeed.

We visit the tiny thatched cottage of Burns's birth and the ancient Brig o' Doon, over which a blootert Tam o' Shanter rode for his life, then head east. A stint on a blowy M74 highlights the new Defender's ability to mask the impression of speed where its predecessor would only serve to exaggerate it.

A damp back road in picturesque Upper Tweeddale writhes between

rolling banks smothered with titian leaves. Lateral grip is plentiful, but tighter twists make the 110 feel tippy-toed for the first time, and hard braking is surprisingly difficult to modulate. There are no shift paddles, nor a Sport mode for the chassis, which would surely have strayed too far from the brief. I back off and composure is restored.

The second of our traditional first-footing favours is collected from Alex Dalgetty & Sons bakery in Galashiels. Black bun is a spiced slab of fermented currants sandwiched between shortcrust pastry, described by Robert Louis Stevenson as "a dense, black substance, inimical to life". It's not inimical to my empty belly, though – fair gustie, in fact.

Tracing the A7 back to Edinburgh, the road's dark and deserted sweepers offer a better place to explore the Defender's handling. Roll is sparing enough to comfortably carry good speed on the bends and there's a decent bit of feel to the sweetly weighted, responsive steering, while the eight-speed ZF 'box is smooth yet sleek. There's turbo lag if you seek it out, but a more →

The Defender has enough power and data sockets of various kinds to run an e-commerce start-up – and enough space in the boot to store its stock.



Alex Dalgetty & Sons serves up black bun, a traditional confection akin to fruitcake in pastry; Defender's boot can swallow loads of it





Switchable Sand mode helps maintain momentum and allow for seaside fun and frolics

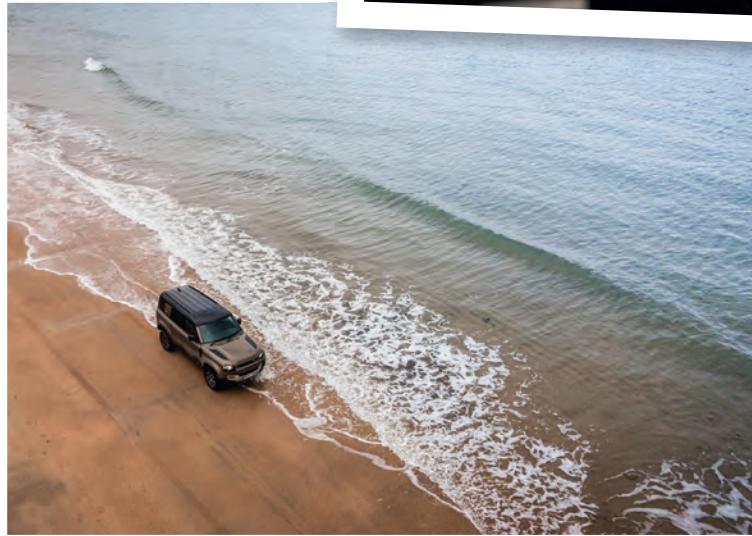
→ considered right foot works best; strong pull lives between 3000rpm and the 4500rpm upshift point.

Our final morning traverses the slittery farm roads of East Lothian to the seaside town of North Berwick for the most arresting of our Hogmanay customs. The Loony Dook (essentially 'nutties dip') is a relatively modern invention whereby fancy-dressed revellers across Scotland run into the sea on New Year's morning. The familiar pretence of washing away sin/evil/bad times applies, but really it's just hungover daftness.

We draw onto the beach at West Bay and engage Sand mode, a momentum-focused programme that keeps revs high and traction intervention low. The steering goes buttery as we roll through the soft surface, dodging sandcastles en route to the water's edge.

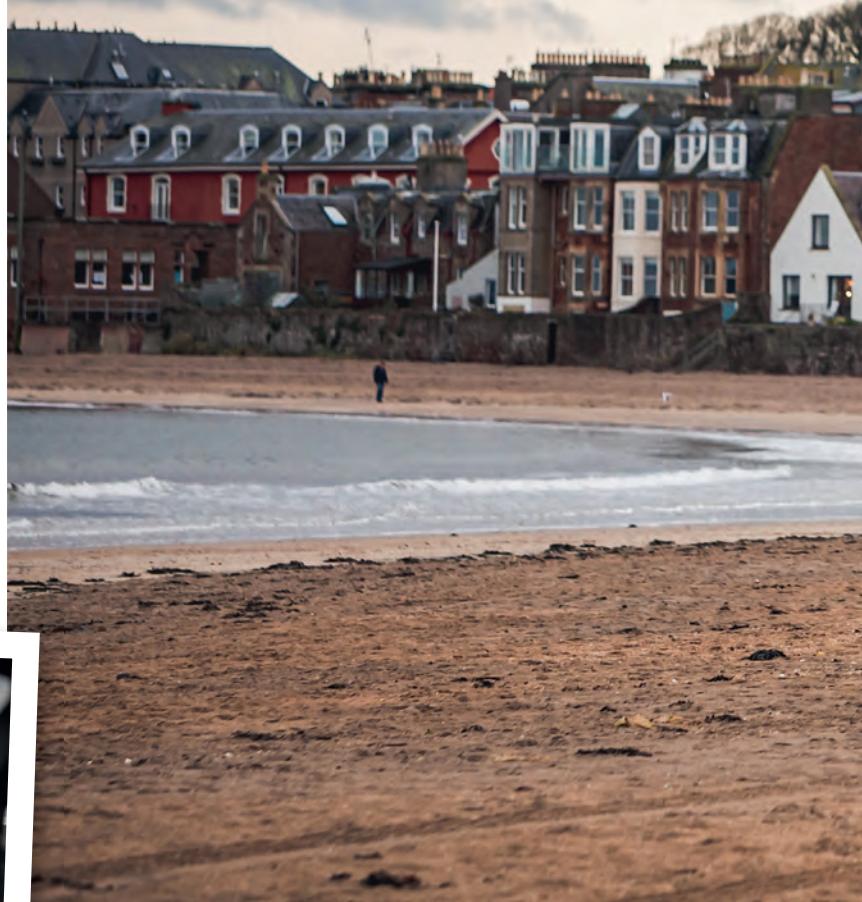
While lacking the spirit-infused glow of the loony dooker, I'm determined to have a proper dip rather than the brief, screaming splash more common to the event. Sea temperature is in single figures and I'm without a wetsuit, but local wild swimming coach Colin Campbell (scottishswimmer.com) has bestowed some advice: "Splash your face, arms and chest to make it more comfortable. Then go in bold."

But the word 'comfort' escapes my vocabulary when I dive in, because the water is – and I can't stress this enough – cold. Bing o' buttons cold. A few strokes later, shock becomes euphoria and I spend a happy 10 minutes in the drink. Upon exiting, I'm so cold I feel hot – but elated. Campbell had warned about this: "You'll be buzzing, but you need to avoid 'after-drop', when your core



Defender offers cosy relief after a not-quite skinny dip in North Berwick's chilled waters

“The steering goes buttery as we dodge sandcastles en route to the water's edge”



temperature keeps falling. Get dressed and get warm straight away." With the heating on, rear seats flattened and privacy glass, our Defender's boot lends the perfect refuge in which to follow his advice.

Our final first-footing gift is more practical than the others: coal. A 40-minute skitter leads to the National Mining Museum Scotland at Lady Victoria Colliery in Newtongrange. Opened in 1895, the mine's 1644ft shaft was once Scotland's deepest. The pit is backfilled now, but the sprawling red-brick buildings survive, as does the hulking headframe beneath which miners and coal were shuttled to and from the depths.

We learn about the rise, boom and fall of Scotland's mining industry, which once employed 143,000 souls

and produced 42 million tonnes per year. Burning coal at home may be an indulgence these days, but gifting a lump of the stuff was once symbolic of its vital importance. Let's hope a jerry can of petrol doesn't become an equally antiquated offering too soon.

With Lady Victoria coal in hand, it's a short hop back into central Edinburgh. It's hard to imagine a defter car of these dimensions; the Defender's quadrate form is easily threaded through the Old Town's lanes. We climb the Royal Mile and emerge upon the city's summit at Edinburgh Castle.

The castle is usually the epicentre of Edinburgh's Hogmanay, but it won't be much busier come 31 December than it is tonight. It's deserted; only the scuff of tappin-lifts and the distant chime of tram

GLOSSARY

Bing - stack
 Bloonert - drunk
 Brae - hill
 Burn - stream
 Drum - hillock
 Fair - quite
 Fichert ower - fiddled with
 Flaucht - flash
 Gie it laldy - do something aggressively
 Gustie - tasty
 Heuch - ravine
 Muckle - big
 Paidle - paddle
 Right guid willie-waught - a big swig
 Saft - soft
 Sclaff - slap
 Shoogle - shake
 Shuggie - foggy
 Skilter - scamper
 Sleekit - smooth
 Slittery - sloppy
 Swinkle - splash
 Swith - quick
 Tappin-lift - halyard
 Weemple
 an' wamble - twist and turn
 Weet your thrapple - have a drink



belts from Princes Street break the silence. Not for long, mind, because Edleston requested that I kit up and bring my bagpipes, so I strike up, fumble an A-note and crank out Auld Lang Syne to an audience of one.

In this formal setting, the car's road-trip patina makes it seem even more rugged. That I've driven it both in wellies and brogues this week illustrates the Defender's extraordinary completeness.

The final tradition on our journey is to ignite a juniper branch we smuggled from Inshriach. Its piney smoke is supposed to figuratively clear the air before the turn of the year. Whichever side of the border you call home, that's surely a sentiment we can all tak a cup o' kindness for this Hogmanay. **A**



Lady Victoria Colliery is a poignant symbol of waning fossil fuel reliance; diesel-powered Defender has a few years in it yet, we hope