



LIVING IT UP

MANY PARTS OF SCOTLAND OFFER THE POTENTIAL FOR A FANTASTIC OUTDOOR LIFESTYLE BUT WHERE ARE THE VERY BEST PLACES IN WHICH TO LIVE, WORK AND PLAY? HERE'S OUR PICK OF SCOTLAND'S TOP FIVE ADVENTURE TOWNS

What makes a great adventure town? And what exactly does that mean anyway? The answer may well depend on what it is that you are into. It might be walking, mountain biking, climbing, paddling, skiing, great wildlife, or a little bit of everything. Scotland is blessed with plenty of towns that tick some or all of those boxes.

Ok, so it may not have the kind of mountain 'lifestyle' towns found in much larger countries; there is no Whistler, Chamonix or Queenstown – thank goodness, some might say. But what Scotland does have is an enormously varied landscape that sparks the imagination of anyone with a love of the outdoors. And there are plenty of small towns, often with particularly energetic, entrepreneurial individuals at their heart, that are committed to becoming every bit as attractive to live in as the landscape that surrounds them.

But our pick is not just about the opportunities for outdoor adventure close by. We have looked for balance and all-round quality of life, so have taken a number of other factors into account: whether a town is culturally vibrant, whether it has a sensible housing market, good schools and a strong local economy (albeit a relative term at the moment).

We whittled an initial shortlist of 12 towns (sorry, no cities in this one) down to just five using our own knowledge of each location, plus input from local businesses, tourism groups, our followers on Facebook, plus a few relevant statistics such as average house prices (based on sales during the last five years). Then of course there are the unquantifiables. Some places just have a good feel to them.

The results are not especially scientific, and perhaps do not hold too many surprises – at least not in the first two – but nonetheless champion some of Scotland's most fun and vibrant outdoorsy towns. Each one is very much alive, kicking and attracting new people from elsewhere. The locals may not always like it, but these towns are growing. And for good reason.



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Tempting towns (from top): Oban Bay by night; learning to ski, near Aviemore; enjoying the trails, Peebles



L **Aviemore, Cairngorms**
 Population: approx 2,500
 Average house price: £157,886

LIVING:

Scotland's only true 'resort' town, Aviemore is synonymous with outdoor enjoyment. And how could it not be? Surrounded by dense Caledonian forest and with front row views to the Cairngorm plateau, the natural riches of the area are plain to see. The fact that this lively place, already with excellent year-round facilities and attractions, now serves as the premier gateway to the Cairngorms National Park has seen Aviemore up its game even more, making it our pick as Scotland's top adventure town.

West-coasters will quibble saying Aviemore falls short because of its inland location, but with the Spey, watersports at Lochs Morlich and Insh, plus a host of other waterways to explore, the area is not exactly short on watery fun. However, it's the almost North American sense of space and often epic landscape that seals it for us; a rich interplay between river, loch, mountain, and – perhaps

best of all – the deep swathes of ancient forest.

National Park status has made a huge impact on the whole area, putting down a quality stamp and driving a greener, more sustainable approach to living and working. It's also increasingly business savvy. One of the first areas to recognise the power of a destination, local businesses now work together under the auspices of the Cairngorms Business Partnership to ensure a high quality experience throughout the National Park. The successful bid for and hosting of the prestigious Adventure Travel World Summit in 2010 signalled the area's intent to put itself on the world stage.

Aviemore itself has long benefited from the millions ploughed into it by Macdonald Hotels and the family-friendly popularity of Hilton Coylumbridge but it's the sheer variety, and quality, of accommodation providers, visitor attractions and activity providers all within 30 minutes' drive that ensure a year-round buzz.

Not surprisingly, it is a magnet for those looking to work in the outdoors or just enjoy an outdoor lifestyle. Already home to Glen-

more Lodge, the National Outdoor Training Centre, and highly-respected wildlife holiday company Speyside Wildlife, Aviemore has seen the arrival of a variety of new outdoor businesses (from back-country bushcraft to high ropes courses) and also seen leading adventure travel operator Wilderness Scotland relocate from Edinburgh.

Tourist honey-pot it may be, but Aviemore is also a 'real' place in which to live (albeit with many attractive villages nearby for those who find it a little too touristy). Aviemore will soon have a new primary school – not before time, say locals – while there are high schools in Granttown on Spey and Kingussie. Meanwhile, demand for housing is such that plans to build what will effectively be a whole new town (An Camas Mòr) on the Rothiemurchus Estate have now been granted outline planning permission.

It's well-connected too, with a mainline train station and the nearby A9 delivering commuters to Inverness (complete with international airport) in just 40 minutes. Oh, and the fact that the midges never seem as bad as further west doesn't hurt either.



PLAYING:

Take your pick – it's all here, with a breathtaking range of activities available within just a few minutes of Aviemore. Depending on the season, you can fish, cycle, paddle, sail, windsurf, run, ski, encounter rare wildlife, or throw yourself down a gorge dressed in neoprene if that's your thing. And then there are some quirky options – how about walking with reindeer, sled-dog racing, or cross-country skiing? Encouraged by recent hard winters, one ski shop in Glenmore has bought a cross country pisting machine and will offer pisted tracks through the forest this winter. And that's all before exploring the wider National Park and the arctic-alpine landscape of the Cairngorm plateau itself – a vast area of high ground above 900m that offers a lifetime of walking, climbing and ski touring.

DON'T MISS:

Fuel up with the best breakfasts in Scotland at the Mountain Cafe, Grampian Road; walking/cycling trails in Rothiemurchus Forest; paddling on the Spey; amazing wildlife.
www.visitcairngorms.com;
www.cairngorms.co.uk

Taking it all in (clockwise from opposite): a kilted skier surveys his Cairngorm playground; crowds enjoying the sun in Aviemore; Loch an Eilein in Rothiemurchus Forest



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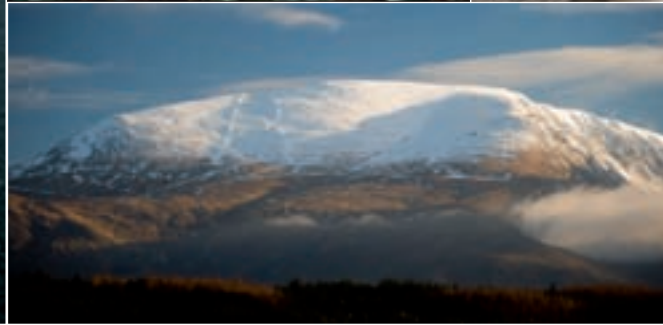
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EDINBURGH Cairngorms NATIONAL PARK



Living large (clockwise from far left): sailing on Loch Leven; monkeying around at Nevis Range; Fort William High Street hosts the start of the Tour de Ben Nevis; views to the ski slopes of Aonach Mor

2 Fort William, Lochaber

Population: approx 10,000
Average house price: £140,017

LIVING:

A still gritty working town with an unlikely combination of heavy industry and tourism, Fort William itself will probably never be a thing of beauty but boy can you play here. It's the winning combination of mountains and sea, plus easy access to a host of beaches, islands and hidden peninsulas rather than the town itself that makes Fort William such a hugely appealing place.

Once able to simply trade off its position at the foot of Ben Nevis, Fort William has really pushed on. It's now the hub of the self-styled Outdoor Capital of the UK – a highly successful rebranding of the area that has won over many visitors and all but the most sceptical of locals. At its centre is a growing, energetic group of people that 'get' it; done well, adventure and outdoor tourism brings benefits to the whole area.

Major industrial employers such as Rio Tinto Alcan, the expanding BSW Sawmill, Marine Harvest and others remain, but they are no longer the only players in town. Nevis Range Mountain Experience, for instance, sees 80 full-time employees in winter – ranging from ski instructors to engineers – while the outdoor activity sector, including what once might have been considered marginal

'lifestyle' businesses, offer more year-round employment than ever before. The area has also seen a steady influx of new people, businesses and ideas, with the launch of two new kayaking operations and one mountain bike guiding company in the past 12 months alone. Meanwhile the annual influx of winter guides says everything you need to know about the area's importance for climbing and mountaineering at this time of year.

Such focus on the area's outdoor riches is reflected in opportunities for youngsters. It's a wonderful place for kids to grow up – with many here because their parents moved to enjoy the outdoor lifestyle. And with the Outdoor Capital as its classroom, it is no coincidence that the University of the Highlands and Islands has based its new Adventure Tourism Management degree at Fort William's West Highland College. The course has attracted students from all over Scotland (and overseas), with many of this year's graduates staying locally, adding to the quality of a ready-made employment pool.

Like many small towns, Fort William has its economic problems; outdoor shops aside, the High Street is struggling (even with it being the end point of the West Highland Way), while too much of the town just *looks* down at heel. But, if you don't care much for Fort William itself, you can always 'commute'. Many do, preferring instead to live within vibrant outlying communities such as

Corpach, Banavie, Spean Bridge and Roy Bridge – many of which are within walking or cycling distance.

PLAYING:

Where to start? Within five minutes of the centre of Fort William, you can enjoy outstanding sea and river paddling, see impressive wildlife, climb the UK's highest mountain, test yourself on elite-level mountain bike trails, canoe, walk or cycle the Great Glen and sample some of the best diving in the country (plus learn at one of its top dive schools). Oh, and in winter, there is world-class climbing and a ski centre with some of the best off-piste skiing and boarding in Scotland. No surprise then that the area is well used by national outdoor training centres such as Glenmore Lodge and Plas y Brenin. (It's also probably just as well that Fort William's Belford Hospital is home to Europe's second largest mountain trauma unit.) Add to that a ridiculous number of fun to high-level events – including the UCI Mountain Bike World Cup – and it's possible to play outdoors, doing something different, most weekends of the year.

DON'T MISS

UCI Mountain Bike World Cup (June); skiing, boarding, zip-wiring and mountain biking at Nevis Range; paddling a captivating coastline.
www.outdoorcapital.co.uk



Port of plenty (clockwise from top): comings and goings in Oban Bay; Gyleen Castle, Kerrera; dolphin spotting; paddling on the River Etive

3 Oban, Argyll
 Population: **approx 8,500**
 Average house price: **£158,553**

LIVING:

Oban is often overlooked as an outdoor town, but it's hard to understand why given its gorgeous coastal location. Attractively laid out, with views over the nearby island of Kerrera to Mull and beyond, the town spills down from the hills into busy Oban Bay, its mix of grand houses overlooked by the town's famous landmark, the Colosseumesque McCaig's Tower.

Not surprisingly, this is a town that lives for the sea. Known as the 'Seafood Capital of Scotland', Oban retains a significant fishing fleet, the produce from which finds its way onto the tables of the many top-quality restaurants in the area. Some such as The Waterfront have expanded greatly in recent years, while newcomers such as Cuan Mor (which also has its own brewery) and The Waypoint Grill on Kerrera have only added to the area's gastronomic reputation.

Oban is also a sailing hot-spot, with yachties enjoying some of the best cruising grounds in Europe. However it is the town's position as gateway to the isles and main west coast hub for CalMac ferries that ensures a year-round

hustle and bustle. The sheer number of visitors, including shoppers from the isles, ensures that Oban boasts a fantastic mix of eateries, cafes, bars and shopping facilities for such a relatively small town.

And let's not forget, Oban is also a university town now that both Argyll College and the Scottish Association of Marine Sciences (SAMS) – itself one of the world's leading marine science institutes – have become academic partners of the newly created University of the Highlands and Islands. A prime mover behind Oban's Festival of the Sea, SAMS is an important employer in the area, although more jobs will be created on completion of a new European Marine Science Park to the north of Oban on the Dunstaffnage Peninsula.

Given its location, reasonable connections with the rest of Scotland (a scenic two-and-a-half hour drive from the Central Belt), good educational and medical facilities (including a hospital), it's no surprise that Oban remains a very desirable place in which to live. The housing market is as stable as anywhere in Scotland, particularly at the higher end of the market. A smart new development at Ganavan Sands has all but sold out, while there are a host of smaller, outlying settlements to choose from for those who seek

their own corner of coastal heaven.

PLAYING:

Oban has perhaps been slower than others to embrace outdoor tourism, but the area is hardly lacking when it comes to options – particularly for those who love the water. In addition to sailing, the surrounding coastline offers some of the best sea kayaking in Scotland – with the chance to encounter the area's outstanding marine life – while there is top river paddling on the Orchy and Awe (also a venue for white water racing), plus open canoeing on Lochs Etive and Awe. The diving is also excellent. On land, there is great hill walking, usually with extensive sea views thrown in for your efforts, while the area is also becoming increasingly popular with cyclists, with long stretches of the Sustans route from Oban to Fort William now complete. Oh, and did we mention the islands? Hop on a ferry and the outdoor playground gets a whole lot bigger still.

DON'T MISS

Tucking into locally-caught seafood; exploring the nearby Slate Islands and Corryvreckan whirlpool; island hopping. www.oban.org.uk



4 **Peebles, Scottish Borders**
 Population: approx 9,800
 Average house price: £223,439

LIVING:

Ok, so it's this magazine's home town, but the inclusion of Peebles is no mere editorial bias. The town whose moniker is 'Peebles for Pleasure', is on a roll. Buzzing even. Just ask the 250,000-plus mountain bikers that come here to enjoy the trail centres at nearby Glentress and Innerleithen each year.

With its picturesque combination of hills, river – the Tweed runs right through it – and an abundance of spacious parks, this is a town that sits perfectly within the surrounding landscape rather than dominating it. With the woollen mills that once drove the local economy now all but gone, it is tourism that holds sway today. A steady stream of mountain bikers, anglers, golfers and walkers ensure that this is a year-round destination, rather than just a summer honeypot. All are encouraged to stay longer and explore the wider area by the Tweed Valley Tourist Consortium – an initiative that has given local businesses a voice and the area much more of a national identity.

Meanwhile, locals are being helped to work towards a more self-sustaining Tweeddale by Tweedgreen, an extremely active voluntary group that promotes greater use of local produce, sustainable transport initiatives and local energy generation.

Culturally, a town and area that has strong links with the likes of John Buchan and Sir Walter Scott seems more alive than ever. The Eastgate Theatre provides a steady stream of entertainment, while a year peppered with festivals – from jazz to forest, arts, food and mountain biking (Tweedlove) – culminates in the annual Beltane Festival, a slightly



Jump to it (clockwise from top): a mountain biker at Glentress; Beltane Festival procession; Tweed Valley ospreys; Peebles in autumn colours



first International Chutney Festival (One World, One Chutney) at nearby Neidpath Castle. Now that's culture.

Throw in excellent schools, a lively high street dominated by independent shops, good eateries, a steady influx of new businesses (including an excellent deli, and an award-winning chocolate and pastry school), plus easy commuting to Edinburgh and it is clear just why Peebles is proving so popular.

PLAYING:

This once rather genteel town has been transformed by one particular activity: mountain biking. The wider Tweed Valley is now a world-class destination for the sport, some-

bonkers (to newcomers anyway) week-long celebration of local legend that includes an impressive Riding of the Marches. This year even saw the

thing recognised by the Forestry Commission when it invested £9 million in its new Peel Centre at Glentress (a trail centre which is now the second most-visited attraction in Scotland, after Edinburgh Castle). Nearby Innerleithen – a downhiller's dream – could even soon have a Nevis Range-style mountain bike uplift if ambitious plans go ahead. Local businesses have responded with a range of new bike shops and accommodation tailored specifically to the needs of visiting riders. But Peebles is not just about knobby tyres. It also has an active hill running and road cycling scene (the town has hosted stage one of the Tour of Britain for the past two years), fantastic walking in the many nearby forests and surrounding hills and, of course, some of the world's very best salmon fishing.

DON'T MISS:

The Scandinavian-influenced restaurant at Kailzie Gardens; Beltane Festival (July); Traquair House (and brewery); Dawyck Botanic Garden. www.visittweedvalley.co.uk



Wet and wild (clockwise from left): Highland Perthshire has some of the best whitewater rafting in Scotland; Pitlochry's picturesque main street; bungee jumping from the Garry Bridge

5 Pitlochry, Perthshire
 Population: approx 2,500
 Average house price: £228,574

LIVING:

Whisper it gently, but there is a quiet revolution going on in one of the Highlands' most traditional towns. Pitlochry is as popular now as in Queen Victoria's day, although there is rather more to it than when the monarch first stayed at nearby Blair Castle and proclaimed herself most pleased with the attractive setting and clean mountain air.

Today, Pitlochry punches well above its weight with the outstanding Festival Theatre a major draw for visitors and locals alike, while the town's gracious Victorian architecture houses a variety of excellent restaurants, pubs (including a micro-brewery at the Moulin Inn) and an increasingly high-quality range of independent shops.

Active community engagement and a can-do attitude locally has resulted in a variety of events – Enchanted Forest, Winter Words Festival and New Year's Day Street Party among them – that add a vibrancy to the town and surrounding area that extends well beyond the usual tourist season.

No surprise then that the town is growing rapidly, with several sites earmarked for a range of housing and additional develop-

ment. With its accessible location just off the main A9 trunk road and with rail services south to Perth and the Central Belt and north to Inverness, the town continues to attract its fair share of city workers (and families) looking for a less frenetic home life.

And while Pitlochry still sees plenty of coach parties, its facilities, gorgeous setting – home to some of the best autumn colours this side of New England – and growing number of outdoor-oriented businesses mean that it is also now increasingly drawing a younger, more active crowd who use it as an ideal base for exploring wider Highland Perthshire.

Walkers are well catered for by Pitlochry's landmark hill, Ben Vrackie, as well as a network of way-marked trails alongside the River Tummel, Loch Faskally (complete with salmon ladder and viewing), and numerous wooded gorges, including the lovely Pass of Killiecrankie. Cycling, too, is a big deal, with Pitlochry well known among those who compete in the annual Etape Caledonia, the UK's only closed road timed cycle event open to the ordinary cyclist.

With so much to do on the doorstep – and that's before mentioning the history, castles, distilleries and assortment of other local interests – this is an area that offers an enviable quality of life.

PLAYING:

'Extreme' is not the first word you expect to be associated with Pitlochry, but those who like to get the adrenaline pumping can now add bungee-jumping – off the Garry Bridge in the nearby Killiecrankie gorge – to the range of eye-popping adventures available from the many activity providers in and around Pitlochry, Aberfeldy, Kinloch Rannoch and Dunkeld. Those into less risky pursuits will find Highland Perthshire a wonderful place for enjoying the outdoors, be it on foot, by bike or paddle. Escape Route on Atholl Road is a mine of information about local routes and trails. Further afield, Glen Lyon, Glen Tilt and Loch Tay are all within a 30-minute drive, while skiers and boarders can reach Glenshee in under an hour.

DON'T MISS:

Dinner at the Port-na-Craig Inn followed by a show at the Festival Theatre; climbing Ben Vrackie is almost compulsory.

www.pitlochry.org;
www.highlandperthshire.org ■

For readers' thoughts on Scotland's best adventure towns, see the lively discussion, www.facebook.com/scotland.outdoors.mag