



Concerning *Fairies*

Text and photos by Dr Tina Tan, Editorial Board Member

“THE ISLE of Skye has three places where there is *absolute* evidence of fairies,” declared the B&B owner, Kate. She eyed me when I smirked. “And it is said a fairy dies any time someone says they don’t believe in them.”

After a brief awkward pause, she proceeded to tell us about the best places to see in Skye, which included the aforementioned three fairy spots.

Earlier that day, my husband and I had driven our rented car, an Audi A1 Turbo diesel (manual, of course), through Scotland, and past the Skye Bridge onto the famous island. We went northward to the filming location of the movie *Prometheus* – the Old Man of Storr.

TripAdvisor had informed us that it was a hike of an hour and 15 minutes to the top of the rugged Storr and back. I attribute our endeavour, which took twice that, to my rather “relaxed” fitness level. After much huffing and puffing, we huddled under the Old Man (a rocky protrusion 48 metres tall) to avoid being blown off by the howling wind. Before us was a bird’s eye view of the hills surrounding the Sound of Raasay. To our backs was a group of daredevil rock climbers

scrambling up the steeper peaks, looking like they were going to spend the night up in the crags.

Our invigorating hike was followed by an exciting excursion to the west coast of Skye. That took us through single-lane roads, where the locals drive with an expertise honed by years of hugging the curves, zipping through the straights, and waiting at passing places for oncoming traffic. As we approached the coast, we were greeted by a magnificent vista of murky green cliffs jutting into the ocean as the sun set in the distant west. And that brought us to Kate’s B&B, Tullochard House, which was situated along a country road of farms, with sheep and highland cows as our neighbours.

Looking for fairies

Bright and early the next morning, after Kate’s “Intro to Fairies 101”, we hopped into our car and headed for Neist Point, the westernmost point of the Isle of Skye. We savoured a stunning panorama of the Atlantic Ocean, placid and shimmering, illuminated by the brilliant sun overhead.



Otherworldly beauty of the Quiraing

Then, we set out to find our first fairy spot, the Fairy Bridge, several miles from the town of Dunvegan. Legend has it that a fairy fell in love with a Scottish chieftain but had to return to fairyland. She bade him farewell at this bridge and gave him a flag with magical powers. Rather unromantically, the bridge turned out to be an understated short pass of several metres that fords a small stream; and said magical flag (according to Wikipedia photos) no more than a tattered piece of silk kept at Dunvegan Castle.

We then decided to head to our next fairy spot – the Fairy Glen, in north Skye, near the town of Uig. There were no signs to indicate this enchanting area, which was hidden in a valley. We cruised along the single-lane road, past the foot of a mountain. Then, at the next turn, we emerged to see a few conical grassy hills dotted with sheep. Kate had described the Fairy Glen as a miniature “mountain range within a mountain range, with its own loch, and surely that has to be proof that fairies exist”!

The Fairy Glen did not disappoint – a succession of lushly green, knobby knolls, each no more than several stories high, nestled in out-of-sight perfection from prying tourists (except us). We scrambled up as many of the hills as we could to take in the sights, avoiding sheep and their natural fertiliser along the way. I'd like to think that if fairies weren't living there, then perhaps hobbits were. There was even a babbling brook somewhere within the glen, which added to the quaint atmosphere.

Our next stop was the Quiraing, a huge landslip along northeast Skye. Part of the Trotternish Ridge, it is a spectacular hiking spot, with notable natural attractions such as the Needle, the Table, and the Prison (who comes

up with these names anyway?). Due to time constraints (or perhaps my lack of mountain goat-like scrabbling abilities), we weren't able to complete the entire three-hour trail. At a certain point, we had to cross a deep and slippery crevasse, and clamber along a scree formation (the loose rocks were my undoing) – but we managed to reach high enough to enjoy a spectacular bird's-eye view of the area. Somehow, I had a sense that the surrounding landscape had remained unchanged since the time of the dinosaurs, and at any moment, I would feel the earth tremble from the roars and footsteps of the mighty lizards.

With much anticipation, we searched for the last fairy spot, the Fairy Pools. This series of waterfalls is located at the foot of the Black Cuillin, a rocky mountain range formed by ancient volcanic activity in the south of Skye. Yet, none of the travel guides had mentioned that the valley we found ourselves in would look *exactly* like Helm's Deep, the fortress depicted in *The Two Towers* movie. I trudged through the muddy 2.4-kilometre path, pretending I was a pilgrim looking for the King of Rohan, and I could imagine the fortress with its nearly impenetrable walls. In reality, though, my husband and I had changed into our wetsuits and were about to embark on the highlight of our journey in Skye – swimming!

Swimming is allowed in the Fairy Pools, but only for those willing to brave the icy waters. We couldn't pass up this challenge, especially since we had lugged our wetsuits all the way from Singapore. We arrived at the first waterfall, but wanted one that was less turbulent. A short trek further upstream led us to a series of inviting turquoise pools. I must say that even though I waddled into the water waist-deep, I had to be pushed in to take that first (and only) chilly and



- Shore Line
 - Possible Walks
 - Roads
 - Suggested Route
- Villages**
- Points of natural interest
 - Craft workshops
 - Tourist Attractions
 - Activities
 - Places to eat

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Clockwise, from top left
 Taking a chilly dip in the Fairy Pools
 The imposing Old Man of Storr
 Trail up the Storr

exhilarating dive. We were the only people daring (some say foolhardy) enough to swim that day; a couple of European hikers even took photos of us (nay, my husband) frolicking in the mountain water.

Our day concluded with a fiery sunset. The clouds had rolled in from the west and laid a thick blanket of grey fog over the entire island. But just beyond two mountain peaks, where the sky somehow stayed clear, was an orange ball of flame, its brilliant rays bursting through like giant arrows of lava. Remember the ending of *The Return of the King* when the volcano exploded? That's what I was reminded of.

The fog that night was an omen of the weather. On our final morning in Skye, we were greeted by temperatures below ten degrees Celsius (in late summer!) and heavy rain. But it didn't matter since we had already been blessed by two days of sunshine. That was one of the notable things about our time in Skye. The isle is located off the northwestern coast of Scotland, and due to the influence of the Atlantic Ocean and Gulf Stream, the weather is often foggy and dreary. However, we experienced what the locals call an Indian summer, which you can see from our rather amateurish photos.

Anyone planning a trip to Scotland should give the Isle of Skye a visit. Drive through the highlands and get a whiff of the ocean (unless it's raining, in which case, you'll just be peppered by fat drops of water). Bring along hiking boots, wetsuit, a vivid imagination and a sense of adventure.

The Isle is a delightful cross between *The Lost World* and *The Lord of the Rings*, and fans of the latter will recognise what the title of this article is paying tribute to (as if the other references weren't enough!). I can't help but think that Tolkien, who was English, must have visited Skye before he wrote his books.

Some readers might be disappointed to note that I saw not a single fairy (nor hobbit) at any of these places. I'll be sure to look for them next time – they're probably really shy and unaccustomed to Singaporeans. ■



Tina travelled to the British Isles to take an exam. She found time to go fairy-hunting but couldn't find any. She did see a lot of YES and NO signs pertaining to the Scottish referendum. Unfortunately, because of the NO vote, she is unable to declare that she went to Scotland before it became an independent country. However, it remains an amazing place to visit.