

**Your guide  
to the Scottish  
Thistle Awards  
winners**

**Who won  
a Scottish  
tourism  
Oscar?**



# The stars of Scotland's tourism industry revealed

From idyllic glamping pods and luxury hotels, to a ten-day cultural festival — it's the Scottish Thistle award winners

## Best luxury experience

**Airhouses, Borders**  
Carol and Martin Houghton's self-catering idyll is dotted about their 350-acre organic cattle farm near Lauder. There is a big house, four lodges and two glamping pods, and while the decor itself isn't ultra luxurious, it's the sheer effort the Houghtons make that wins you over. They offer food delivery packages from local suppliers, and can organise spa treatments, e-biking, wild swimming, stargazing — and even take your kids to meet their farm animals.

Or just relax in your scrupulously clean private hot tub soaking up views of the Lammermuir Hills. This is a commendably ethical project with evident respect for the environment (they have electric charging points and the Houghtons are setting up a solar meadow that will cover about 30 per cent of the power for the lodges and farm).

**What the judges loved** The ample evidence of fair employment practices, engagement with the local community and evolving commitment to providing a luxury experience for all guests.

**Details** Two nights' self-catering from £350 in a glamping pod (sleeps 2), from £550 in a lodge (they sleep 2 to 6) and from £1,650 for the house (sleeps 10).  
airhouses.com

*This award was sponsored by The Macallan Estate.*

## Best B&B or guest house experience

**Nithbank Country Estate, Dumfries & Galloway**  
Proving that environmental practices and luxury comfort can live side by side, Melanie and John Allen founded this elegant guesthouse near Thornhill in 2019 with a commitment to responsible and sustainable ethics that won them their regional Climate Action award. This 1790 house is made with the same pink sandstone as the nearby Drumlanrig Castle.

There are only two suites, both with freestanding baths, high ceilings, original period features, antiques and expensive upholstery. Both have dreamy views: wooded grounds and hills from one, and a river and Nithsdale Valley from the other. Guests can make themselves at home across the entire 11-acre estate, including the formal gardens, ancient woodland glen and cascading ponds.

## Where to find the winners

**1. Best luxury experience**  
Airhouses, Oxton, Lauder

**2. Best B&B or guesthouse experience**  
Nithbank Country Estate, Thornhill

**3. Best bar or pub**  
Cross Keys Inn, Ettrickbridge

**4. Best business event**  
World Congress of Soil Science, SEC Glasgow

**5. Best eating experience**  
Edinbane Lodge, Edinbane

**6. Best hotel experience**  
Cromlix House, Dunblane

**7. Best outdoor or adventure experience plus climate action award**  
Wilderness Scotland, Aviemore

**8. Best self-catering accommodation experience**  
Arden Holiday Cottages, Dumfries

**9. Best visitor attraction**  
Burrell Collection, Glasgow

**10. Celebrating thriving communities**  
Rediscovering the Antonine Wall Project, West Dunbartonshire Council

**11. Inclusive tourism award**  
Glasgow Science Centre

**12. Innovation in tourism**  
Camera Obscura & The World of Illusions, Edinburgh

Making the most of locally sourced, seasonal produce, the Allens welcome you with warm homemade fruit scones; breakfast comes with their own homemade jams, muesli and granola. Nithbank was the first accommodation provider in Dumfries & Galloway to win VisitScotland's five-star Gold award.

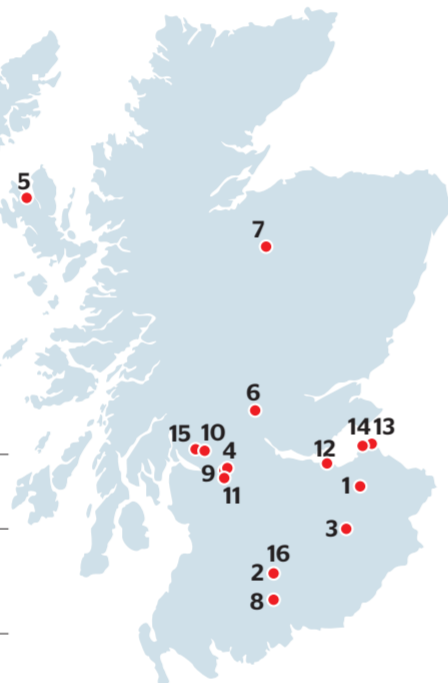
**What the judges loved** Nithbank's team were praised for "doing what they do well" and for their focus on local-first and responsible tourism.

**Details** B&B doubles from £220; nithbank.co.uk

*This award was sponsored by Abbey UK.*

## Best Bar or Pub

**The Cross Keys Inn, Borders**  
Ettrickbridge lost its local for six months after this 17th-century coaching inn near



**13. Outstanding cultural event or festival**  
Fringe by the Sea, North Berwick

**14. Outstanding sporting event**  
Genesis Scottish Open 2022, North Berwick

**15. Tourism & hospitality employer of the year**  
SEA Life Loch Lomond Aquarium

**16. Tourism individual of the year**  
Melanie Allen, Nithbank Country Estate, Thornhill

Selkirk closed down in 2022. Luckily for them, Rory Steel — who is the son of Lord (David) Steel and grew up opposite the pub — undertook a refurbishment with his wife, Vicki, and it reopened in February this year, just in time for villagers to come in and watch the Calcutta Cup rugby match between Scotland and England on the TV. The dog-friendly pub is now the village hub, drawing Borders folks with its weekly games nights, darts league and even a Donkey Kong machine.

Food is traditional and freshly made, with suppliers including Tweed Valley Venison. Over Langshaw Ice Cream and Ross Dougal fishmongers from Eyemouth. Three of



the seven bedrooms are dog-friendly.

**What the judges loved** The owners' active programme of engagement with the local community and suppliers, the minimising of food waste and the sound EDI (equality, diversity and inclusion) policy.

**Details** B&B doubles from £100; crosskeyinn@ettrickbridge.com  
*This award was sponsored by the Scottish Licensed Trade Association*

**Best Business Event**  
The World Congress of Soil Science, Glasgow

This category celebrates business events that act as catalysts for economic and

**Clockwise from main:**  
Nithbank Country Estate;  
The Cross Keys Inn in  
Ettrickbridge; Andy  
Murray and Kim Sears at  
their revamped Cromlix  
near Dunblane; Rowan  
lodge at Airhouses; and,  
inset, a next-level offering  
at Skye's Edinbane Lodge

social transformation. The World Congress of Soil Science, which involves industry-leading academics and practitioners sharing vital knowledge, takes place every four years, with participating countries taking turns to host. Last summer, for the first time since 1935, it was the British Society of Soil Science that welcomed experts from all over the world, and the organisation chose Glasgow's Scottish Events Campus (SEC) for the event.

Given the challenges presented by Covid, it was pretty impressive that the team attracted 1,600 in-person and 300 online delegates, but the event's success was about more than just numbers. What was crucial for the organisers was leaving a legacy of deeper understanding of soil and its effects on global ecology.

**What the judges loved** The many

examples of sustainable processes, innovation and engagement in an event that would have a positive impact on science, the public and the environment.  
*This award was sponsored by STV*

## Best Eating Experience

**Edinbane Lodge, Skye**  
Thanks to its heavenly natural larder and the ingenuity of some passionate chefs, Skye is increasingly a destination for those who care about carefully sourced and expertly prepared food. But the chef-patron Calum Montgomery is taking food to the next level at his fine-dining restaurant-with-rooms at the head of Loch Greshornish.

Frankly, he's worked miracles since buying this derelict 16th-century hunting lodge in 2017, reopening after a year-long

renovation as a 30-cover restaurant with six elegant bedrooms. Only the sixth Scottish restaurant to receive four AA rosettes, it also won restaurant of the year at this year's Scottish Excellence Awards.

The menu, which changes every six weeks in accordance with what's in season, makes the most of the finest ingredients provided by fishermen, crofters, growers and artisans who share Montgomery's ethos.

**What the judges loved** The unhurried dining experience (there's a no-turning-of-tables philosophy), multilingual staff, four-day working week allowing for better employee wellbeing, and the investment in sustainability with strong focus on local produce.  
**Details** B&B doubles from £249, dinner £125pp; edinbanelodge.com

'Scotland is the place to be and offers so much'

Malcolm Roughhead on his 2023 highlights and next year's must-sees

## How is tourism performing in Scotland?

It's been fantastic to see such a strong recovery of our international markets. This is especially vital while our domestic market adjusts to the challenges around rising costs.

As an industry — as demonstrated by the calibre of finalists and winners in this year's Scottish Thistle Awards — we are resilient and resolute in our ambition to grow in a responsible and sustainable way.

## How is VisitScotland supporting Scotland's tourism industry at this time?

We know that despite the economic challenges, people do still want to travel in whatever way they can. The challenge is converting that intention into bookings.

We're doing this by using our extensive marketing activity, often with partners, to promote regional and seasonal spread, inspiring visitors to enjoy Scotland on any budget.

## What has been the highlight of 2023 for you?

Without a doubt, the 2023 UCI Cycling World Championships. I'm a big sports fan and to have the world's biggest cycling event taking place on our doorsteps was incredible.

But it wasn't all about sport, we also had high-profile art exhibitions for Banksy and Grayson Perry, the Tall Ships in Shetland and, of course, the world-famous Edinburgh Festivals, all of which provided a welcome focus on Scotland and a boost to tourism.

## And finally, what's new and on your must-visit list for 2024?

Next year look out for the planned opening of Soho House in Glasgow, the Lost Shore Surf Resort on the outskirts of Edinburgh and the new Perth Museum. Scotland will once again take centre stage hosting the World Athletics Indoor Championships and it's another busy year for golf with five major events taking place across the country next summer. Scotland is the place to be.

*Malcolm Roughhead is chief executive of VisitScotland*





### Best Hotel Experience Cromlix, Perthshire

There was a time when this former Victorian manse outside Dunblane looked like any other Scottish country house hotel but, boy, those days are behind us. Bought in 2013 by Andy Murray (whose family have used it for many milestone events over the years), the hotel has been transformed by Murray's wife, Kim Sears. Although the 15 bedrooms have been stylishly modernised with botanical themes (with some gorgeously Instagrammable flourishes in the bathrooms), it's the public areas that are the most strikingly different, thanks to bold colours, works by modern artists including Damien Hirst and plush furnishings.

The 50-cover Glasshouse restaurant has been restyled but is still under Darin Campbell, formerly head chef at Andrew Fairlie at Gleneagles, who's designed a lighter, healthier menu. There's also a cool, contemporary bar, a drawing room (with several fireplaces), a billiards room with electric blue baize, a spa on its way — and even a chapel for weddings. Visitors can fish, and play croquet or tennis (though bear in mind Andy might be watching).

**What the judges loved** The personal manner in which each visitor is greeted, the innovative approach to providing dog-friendly accommodation and the focus on the younger generation for recruitment.

**Details** B&B doubles from £335; cromlix.com

*This award was sponsored by Fishers*

### Best Outdoor or Adventure Experience Wilderness Scotland, Aviemore

Scotland isn't short of outdoor adventure operators, but Wilderness Scotland is next level. Founded nearly 25 years ago by Paul Easto — he set up the company after gazing down from a mountain on Rum and thinking, "How cool would it be to moor up in a boat and go for a walk up a hill?" — the environmentally sensitive company offers an impressive range of activities from sea kayaking and sailing to mountain biking. Able to organise small-group trips or private itineraries, they also do specialist interest trips such as photography holidays and women-only tours.

Wilderness Scotland now has more than 30 staff members based in its carbon-neutral Aviemore office, and uses the services of more than 100 guides. Its managers say they are committed to

providing customers with the most inspiring experiences of their lives, and that these are delivered responsibly and in a way that benefits the communities in which they operate.

**What the judges loved** The organisation's sustainability and inclusivity model, its impressive business growth and net promoter score (customer loyalty and satisfaction) and exceptional visitor experience.

**Details** wildernessscotland.com

### Best Self-Catering Accommodation Experience

Arden Holiday Cottage,  
Dumfries & Galloway

Authenticity and uniqueness are qualities all operations strive for — but Hester and Paul Binge have both in spades. Since they bought and refurbished this cottage near Dumfries in 2019 they've been offering guests a chance to switch off from the stresses of everyday life (and social media), and focus instead on relaxation, old-fashioned fun and even some — dare we say it? — more nerdy pursuits. Hester loves offering meditation and reiki, and organises art workshops.

One of Arden's more unusual offerings is a Geek Retreat package, which includes an escape room based on local folklore, six secret challenges (think funny little tasks that your fellow guests don't initially know about) and a murder mystery game. They also have more games in the house than you can shake a pick-up stick at.

Alternatively, you could just spend time with Saffy, the resident pony, and simply use this cosy house as a base for enjoying the exceptional landscape, bird-watching and stargazing opportunities of the south of Scotland.

**What the judges loved** The way the owners think outside the box and identify out-of-season experiences to enhance visitors' stays.

**Details** Three nights' self-catering from £290 (sleeps five).

### Best Visitor Attraction Burrell Collection, Glasgow

The 1983 opening of this vast treasure trove of objects collected by Sir William and Constance Burrell was an important moment in the regeneration of Glasgow as a cultural city. Already a significant



building, it reopened in March 2022 after a dramatic refurbishment and radical redesign, postponed slightly by Covid. The new look includes slick visitor facilities, innovative digital interpretations of the collection and an award-winning shop and restaurant.

The redesign has done a tip-top job of showing off the collection's

Chinese and Islamic art, medieval stained glass and tapestries, and paintings by old masters and Glasgow boys, as well as an impressive group of French impressionist works and the UK's second largest collection of Rodin sculptures.

Of the 600,000 visitors who arrived in the first year since the refurbishment, 55 per cent were from outside the Glasgow area.

**What the judges loved** The collection's transformation, the programming around inclusion, its fun and creative interpretation and storytelling, and its commitment to the visitor experience.

**Details** Free entry; burrellcollection.com  
*This award was sponsored by the Scottish Sun*

### Celebrating Thriving Communities Rediscovering the Antonine Wall Project, West Dunbartonshire Council

In 2008 the Antonine Wall joined Hadrian's Wall to become part of the Frontiers of the Roman Empire Heritage Site. Built in about AD142 by the Romans as a symbol of their authority, it stretches 37 miles across Scotland, from the Clyde to the Forth. Rediscovering the Antonine Wall Project's aim was to raise awareness of the World Heritage Site, particularly within communities in deprived areas who might normally be hard to reach. The five local authorities it runs through, along with Historic Environment Scotland, developed this partnership with the aim of helping people to understand their Roman heritage. Regeneration, placemaking and involving local communities played a large part in the work, which involved building five Roman-inspired play parks, replica distance stones, training guides and setting up an educational app and a touring exhibition.

**What the judges loved** The impressive levels of collaboration, and the evidence of how tourism can have a positive impact on communities.

**Details** antoninewall.org

**Top left: the Burrell Collection has undergone a full refurbishment. Main: Wilderness Scotland offers a range of activities, including kayaking. Left: the Glasgow Science Centre has three floors of interactive exhibitions**

### Inclusive Tourism Award Glasgow Science Centre

Housed on the south side of the Clyde since 2001, the Glasgow Science Centre continues to impress with its three floors of interactive exhibitions — each designed to engage and inspire people of all ages, backgrounds and abilities. Among its specialist sections are BodyWorks, a hands-on exhibition revealing the mechanics of the human form, and Powering the Future, which looks at the demand for and supply of energy from a number of fascinating and entertaining angles. The new permanent exhibition, Idea No 59, is all about nurturing innovation and encouraging the next generation of problem solvers. The centre also houses an Imax cinema for educational and feature films, as well as Scotland's only full-motion flight simulators. Neurodiverse visitors are supported with autism-friendly hours, during which lights are softened and exhibit volumes reduced. The Glasgow Science Centre welcomes about 250,000 public visitors and 70,000 education visitors each year.

**What the judges loved** The holistic approach to providing an environment that made everyone feel included, the innovative use of technology and support for staff.

**Details** £14 adult, £11 child; glasgowsciencecentre.org  
*This award was sponsored by Historic Environment Scotland*

### Innovation in Tourism Camera Obscura & the World of Illusions, Edinburgh

This category celebrates businesses taking significant steps to improve and invest in the future of Scottish tourism, and the capital's oldest visitor attraction, established in 1853, has more than done that. From the rooftop terrace with panoramic views of the city, to the live demonstration of the Victorian camera obscura and state-of-the-art illusions, it's a fun and stimulating interactive experience for all ages.

Almost all of its 100-plus illusions and hands-on sensory exhibits are researched, designed, built and maintained in-house, and constant innovation has kept it a popular and vital part of the city's tourism offering. Its teams worked through lockdown to transform the spaces and create new products, and bucked the trend by reopening fully and remaining profitable (it welcomed more than 350,000 visitors last year).

**Detail** £20.95 adult, £15.95 child; camera-obscura.co.uk

# 'Receiving hospitality is good for the soul'

Lord Thurso speaks to **Ashley Davies** about where tourism is heading and the importance of a dram

Heading to Inverness after a meeting in Skye on an icy winter day a few years ago, Lord Thurso saw something he'll never forget.

"The sky was absolutely blue and the frost was hard. I remember driving past a herd of deer that were some way off the road. Their antlers had become frosted and it looked like a Christmas card," he recalls. "I stopped the car and just watched them, thinking about how magical this country is."

Reflecting on his soon-to-end eight-year tenure as chairman of VisitScotland (most people have two three-year terms in the role but his was extended due to the Covid pandemic) he has warm feelings about how much Scotland, so rich in variation, has to offer.

Speaking from the Sutherland home where he was born and still lives, the self-described "Caithness Loon" says: "One of the wonderful things about being up here at this time of year is you get blasted off the face of the planet if you stick your head outside, but if you wear the right clothes, come in after 4.30pm and it's dark and there's a roaring peat fire and you have a nice dram, a cup of tea and a good slice of cake it's actually a great pleasure to have those contrasts."

That secure feeling of being protected from the extremes has its roots in the Highland ethos of hospitality: that nobody should be left out in the elements. Thurso is a strong believer in the fact that giving and receiving hospitality is good for the soul, and that its power to enhance wellbeing cannot be understated.

"We all need to get away, even if it's going five miles down the road. It's lovely to be looked after by somebody else, even if that's simply being given the key to a well-run cottage in the country."

Thurso has long advocated that tourism is an economic activity "designed to get the maximum financial benefit for the minimum environmental and social disruption". Recently, greater emphasis

has rightly been put on the importance of sustainability in the industry.

This is very much reflected in the winners of this year's Scottish Thistle awards. "Responsible tourism is about making sure we do it in the best way we can, without harming the environment, and in keeping with what communities want," Thurso says. "It's about embracing the challenges and opportunities, going with the grain of nature."

One of the reasons he's so pleased with Wilderness Scotland's success in these awards is how explicit the company is about its measurement of carbon use. "Our research shows that consumers, if given a low-carbon option, will pick it every time." It doesn't have to be what he describes as a "hair shirt" experience either; there are so many ways in which the industry can "green the product", from their energy-sourcing decisions to how they offer a slower form of tourism that doesn't involve "one-night stands" all the way around Scotland.

That's not to say people should always have to remain in one place during their leisure time, and he's met many businesses that owe their existence to the football delivered, for example, by the North Coast 500, an initiative that has also allowed members of crofting communities in his area to take on part-time jobs to supplement their primary interests.

Looking to the future, achieving net zero is not the only challenge, or indeed opportunity, says the man who has spent pretty much his entire career in the industry — alongside 15 years in politics. Building on the success of the Rural Tourism Infrastructure Fund will enable more areas to create, for example, loos and car parks to support an increase in visitors.

Convincing people that tourism is a fun and viable career is another significant challenge, and part of that will involve employers rethinking their structure of the working week to allow a reasonable work-life balance for staff. "Nobody minds working hard, providing they also get time to enjoy themselves," he says.

Thurso has clearly relished his time at VisitScotland, visiting parts of the country, such as the Outer Hebrides, that he'd never seen before and watching parts of the industry — the whisky tourism sector in particular — evolve and adapt.



Lord Thurso: "It's lovely to be looked after by somebody else"

**What the judges loved** Responsiveness to customer feedback, innovative approaches to reaching new audiences and a commitment to adapt to constant change while engaging with the local community and promoting sustainability.

### Outstanding Cultural Event or Festival

Fringe by the Sea, East Lothian

Against some stiff competition, this prize goes to North Berwick's not-for-profit multi-arts festival, a glorious riot of cultural treats from author talks to chef masterclasses, live music and silent discos, street performers and comedy. One of the ambitions behind last year's event was helping the country to recover from the pandemic, and these guys really nailed it. Over the course of the ten-day August festival, organisers put on more than 200 events (a blend of free and ticketed), attracting almost 60,000 visitors and generating in excess of £6.5 million for the local area. The accessibility and diversity of performances and events meant there was something for pretty much every age group and interest: big-name international performers and household names at last year's event included Sister Sledge, Dara Ó Briain, Dylan Moran and Travis.

**What the judges loved** How much this festival is an integrated part of the local community, its commitment to responsible tourism and its status as a living-wage employer.

**Details** Next event Aug 2-11; fringebythesea.com

### Outstanding Sporting Event

The Genesis Scottish Open 2022, East Lothian

You could measure the success of the 2022 event in terms of crowd numbers: 68,000 fans came to North Berwick to watch the 40th edition of the Scottish Open, which was won by the American golfer Xander Schauffele. However, it's what the tournament did for the area that really impressed the judges.

The tournament donated £200,000 to six local charities, including East Lothian Foodbank, Leuchie House and the Pennypit Trust. Organisers also set up clinics with young golfers across the county and worked with Ocean Tee and the Marine Conservation Society to clean up the beach below the course.

One of the most prestigious events on the European Tour with a prize fund of more than £7 million, the tournament has been staged at the Renaissance Club since 2019. Designed by the illustrious course architect Tom Doak, it has dramatic cliff-top views to Fidra lighthouse in the Firth of Forth.

**What the judges loved** The organisers achieved record attendances, excellent global broadcast coverage and boosted awareness of Scotland as the home of golf. They also recognised the efforts made in regard to responsible tourism and local engagement.

**Details** The next Genesis Scottish Open is on July 11-14, 2024 (europeanour.com)

### Tourism & Hospitality Employer of the Year

Sea Life Loch Lomond, West Dunbartonshire

On the shores of Scotland's largest loch (by surface area), Sea Life Loch Lomond is so much more than just an aquarium. Seven interactive themed zones make for fun close-up encounters with wildlife while helping to educate people of all ages about creatures that live in or near the water. As well as being able to find out more about the life within Scotland's deepest lochs, visitors can meet the centre's three otters, put their hands into rock pools to investigate the life teeming

Clockwise from main image: Fringe by the Sea, Camera Obscura, Sea Life Loch Lomond and Xander Schauffele after winning the Genesis Scottish Open



## Who's leading the way on climate action?

The Climate Action Award, sponsored by The Times, celebrates organisations on their journey to net zero

### National winner

**Wilderness Scotland, Aviemore** Also scooping the award for Best Outdoor or Adventure Experience, the Aviemore-based tour operator was a founding signatory of the Glasgow Declaration ahead of Cop26, and measures the carbon footprint of its entire operation.

That's no mean feat given it had to analyse 160 itineraries, including more than 300 accommodation providers, 57 different types of activities and 30 types of transport. Its detailed findings help it to pinpoint the areas where it can further improve. wildernessscotland.com



Melanie Allen, co-founder of Nithbank Country Estate

### Regional winners

**Cairngorm Bothies and Lodges, Aberdeenshire**

The woodland retreat on the outskirts of Logie Coldstone comprises 12 bothies (wooden dwellings, really). They're properly off-grid, powered

entirely by renewable energy and with water supplied from a natural reservoir. When it comes to marketing, the managers target those who live nearby in a bid to minimise the carbon footprint associated with their journey. cairngormbothies.co.uk

**East Lothian Cottages, Haddington, East Lothian**

These two self-catering cottages put sustainability at the heart of their operation, and the steps they've taken in recent years are as thorough as they are impressive. As well as installing clever insulation, smart meters and natural drying facilities, they have also switched all tools to electric and favour lime mortar over cement in building works. The owners recently gained a Green Tourism gold award. eastlothiancottages.co.uk

**Nithbank Country House, Thornhill, Dumfries & Galloway**

This year's Best B&B or Guest House Experience winner has seriously impressive green credentials too. In the

five years since its launch, it has received VisitScotland's five-star gold grading award, Biosphere Certification and Green Tourism gold award for sustainability. Its many efforts include championing homegrown, local, sustainable and responsible practices, both within the organisation and the supply chain, and sharing best-practice ideas wherever possible.

**Glasgow Life: Tourism and Conventions**

Glasgow Life is the charity that runs the city's public museums, libraries, sports facilities and other key cultural venues. In 2016 Glasgow became the first UK city to join the Global Destination Sustainability Index of responsible tourism and events cities and since then has consistently featured in the top ten global rankings (at present it's at number eight). Being on this index requires Glasgow Life to measure and report on everything from carbon emissions to levels of solid waste going to landfill. glasgowlife.org.uk



within, check out the only cownose rays in Scotland and marvel at the colourful swimmers in the tropical aquarium. The staff also organise boat trips on the loch. This award highlights and celebrates employers who demonstrate how tourism, hospitality and events can be an exciting and inspiring career path for the next generation.

**Details** £17 adult, £14 child; visitsealife.com/loch-lomond

**What the judges loved** The work experience opportunities, engagement with local communities and a strong and supportive culture for staff.

### Tourism Individual of the Year

Melanie Allen

Melanie Allen embodies the qualities that will stand sustainable tourism in good stead. She's an energetic, influential figure who advocates tourism as a force for good through regenerative, community-led responsible practices and is considered an impressive

ambassador for living in a way that supports people and nature. Not only is Allen the owner of Nithbank Country House — which has really punched above its weight in this year's Scottish Thistle Awards — she is also Chair of the Galloway and Southern Ayrshire Unesco Biosphere and works with the Association of Scotland's Self-Caterers, the South of Scotland Destination Alliance and Scottish Community

Tourism. Allen makes a point of sourcing ethical, organic, local and natural products wherever possible, is a keen advocate for more women in leadership roles in the industry. She is working hard to make her region one of the most accessible destinations in Scotland.

**What the judges**

**loved** The positive effect that Allen has had on the visitor experience through her business, as well as at a regional and national level, and her commitment to quality and sustainability. This award was sponsored by HIT Scotland

# Champions of responsible tourism

The Silver Thistle Award winners are David and Wilma Finlay, early adopters of agritourism and creators of a much-loved ice cream shop



Wilma and David Finlay, of Rainton Farm in Dumfries and Galloway, are the first couple to take home the Silver Thistle award. Inset: a Cream o' Galloway ice-cream sundae, the ice-cream business was launched in 1994

People speak of others being ahead in their field, but when it comes to David and Wilma Finlay, it could be quite literally the case. Synonymous in the agricultural sector for their pioneering techniques in ethical farming, the couple were early adopters of agritourism — where working farms create visitor experiences on the land — with their ice-cream business Cream o' Galloway.

So, it'll be no surprise that the husband-and-wife team are the recipients of the Silver Thistle Award. They became the first couple to take home the award, joining a prestigious list of those who have made an outstanding contribution to Scottish tourism.

David and Wilma are partners in Rainton Farm, near Gatehouse of Fleet, in Dumfries and Galloway. The dairy farm has been in the Finlay family name since the 1920s, but it was in the 1990s, under the stewardship of the couple, that the farm moved to a more regenerative, natural approach to farming, to its ultimate success.

Gone were fertiliser, herbicides and pesticides — a traditional staple of high-input farming — to be replaced by organic pasture grazing. More than 25 years of organic farming techniques has resulted in their soils locking-in five tonnes of carbon per hectare — far more carbon than they produce.

It has since become home to the Ethical Dairy, the first farm in Europe to successfully implement cow and calf dairy farming at a commercially viable scale, and for more than ten years has produced artisan cheeses that have graced the menus of restaurants across the country.

However, it was 1994, at the

Royal Highland Show — that extravaganza of traders, livestock competitors and visitors — that they launched the product that would make their name: Cream o' Galloway ice cream.

With that, the idea of a tourism offshoot to their farming trade wouldn't be far away. They took agritourism to another level — tractor rides and cattle feeding, this wasn't. The couple opened the Cream o' Galloway visitor attraction, which included a shop, nature trails and an adventure park for little, and big, kids, earning a five-star grading from VisitScotland.

Sadly, the pandemic put paid to the adventure park, but the visitor centre remains and focuses on hand-on events and experiences, such as ice-cream-making workshops, where visitors can experience the same delight that the Finlays did when making their organic ice cream.

The Finlays have been leaders in responsible tourism — far before the term existed — ensuring their business benefits the surrounding community. Through community renewable-energy trials, local employment and sharing their knowledge in sustainability.

The chairman of the Scottish Thistle Awards industry panel, Steven Walker, describes the pair as "true ambassadors" for tourism who

have put Dumfries and Galloway in the spotlight. He says: "Throughout their career they have championed ideas and innovation to ensure the positive impacts of their business are felt for years to come."

The Finlays retired from Cream o' Galloway in September this year after selling the ice-cream business, which has since reopened under new ownership. They are considered champions of not only responsible tourism but their own community. It is clear, Gatehouse of Fleet and Galloway are significantly better — and better known — because of their contributions. Lord

Thurso, the chairman of VisitScotland, says: "Congratulations to Wilma and David Finlay on receiving this year's Silver Thistle Award. This is a well-deserved award that recognises the outstanding contribution they have made to tourism in Scotland."

"Described as pioneers in their industry, they have demonstrated the principles of responsible tourism throughout their career and continue to inspire and encourage others to follow in their footsteps. They have not only made a huge impact on their local community in Dumfries and Galloway, but their pioneering work has had a lasting effect on farming, agritourism and responsible tourism in Scotland as a whole."



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