

**Scottish
Thistle Awards
— find out
who won**



**The race for
Scotland's
tourism &
events Oscars**

The leading lights in Scotland's tourism industry

From chic lochside cabins to a hilltop castle — it's the Scottish Thistle Award winners. By Charles Pring

Sponsored by Johnstons of Elgin, the Scottish Thistle Awards are back to celebrate their 30th year. If you have anything to do with Scottish tourism or events, you'll know that these are the big ones. Celebrating innovation, sustainability and sheer shimmering excellence, the Scottish Thistle Awards recognise those businesses, events and individuals that go the extra mile to make Scotland the incredible destination it is. Nineteen awards are presented this year, spotlighting some outstanding work and championing the best of Scotland's world-famous hospitality. From a B&B on Islay and a cabin on Loch Fyne to a rising star of Scottish hospitality and a Borders pub, this supplement celebrates them all.

Glenegedale House, Islay Best B&B or guest house experience, sponsored by Abbey UK

You have to be pretty special to win a Scottish Thistle Award. Winning one twice, now that's elite. And that's exactly what Glenegedale House has done this year, picking up best B&B or guesthouse experience for a second time.

Graeme and Emma Clark's four-bedroom, five-star guesthouse is sophisticated and cosy. Antique furnishings lend elegance, while lashings of tweed in the bedrooms remind you that you're on a Hebridean island — though the sparse, windswept surroundings are a more obvious clue.

Halfway between Port Ellen and Bowmore, the guesthouse is a great base from which to explore Islay's distilleries, and any fan of the island's smoky whiskies will love Glenegedale's roaring peat fires. The food is local and seasonal, like local local, with sausages from the Islay butcher Alasdair Porter and eggs from the guesthouse's own hens, as well as scrumptious treats baked by Emma herself.

What the judges loved The integration with the community and the passion the owners have for the business. Visit glenegedalehouse.co.uk

Apex City Quay Hotel & Spa, Dundee Best hotel experience, sponsored by Fishers

Spend time at Apex City Quay Hotel & Spa in Dundee and you'll notice their "no request too great" approach.

Part of Dundee's waterfront development, Apex City Quay Hotel has had nearly £5 million in investment in recent years. A large chunk of that has been spent on its top-notch spa, with a ritzy steam room, a sauna and hot tub, massage rooms and treatments with a range of Espa products.

The rooms are spacious and chic, with floor-to-ceiling windows with views over Dundee City Quay. There's a well-equipped gym, and the Quayside Bar & Grill has a cool, contemporary

Where to find the winners

1 Best B&B or guest house experience
Glenegedale House, Islay

2 Best hotel experience
Apex City Quay Hotel & Spa, Dundee

3 Tourism & hospitality employer of the year
Camera Obscura & World of Illusions, Edinburgh

4 Best bar or pub
Cross Keys Inn, Ettrickbridge

5 Best outdoor or adventure experience
Nevis Range, nr Fort William

6 Best eating experience
The Globe Inn, Dumfries

7 Best self-catering or unique stay
Kabn, Loch Fyne

8 Best visitor attraction
The Scotch Whisky Experience, Edinburgh

9 Inclusive tourism award
Trimontium Museum, Melrose

10 Climate action award
Glasgow Science Centre

11 Celebrating thriving communities award
Friends of Dundonald Castle SCIO, nr Kilmarnock

vibe, with funky lighting filling the triple-height space, and acres of glass with quay views.

What the judges loved The commitment to staff training and team development, and the dedication to accessibility and community engagement. Visit apexhotels.co.uk

Camera Obscura & World of Illusions, Edinburgh Tourism & hospitality employer of the year

Established in 1853, Camera Obscura & World of Illusions is among Edinburgh's oldest visitor attractions, yet it is one of its most progressive when it comes to employment practices. They pride themselves on

their diverse workforce, and staff are regularly invited to share ideas and provide feedback. The training provided to employees and the opportunity they are given to contribute is second to none.

Camera Obscura is a great place to visit — the interactive exhibits, mind-bending illusions and sweeping views over Edinburgh from the rooftop terrace make for an entertaining family excursion. And you can hand in a CV while you're there.

What the judges loved The open dialogue with staff, who are encouraged to give honest feedback and are treated with respect. Visit camera-obscura.co.uk

The Cross Keys Inn, Ettrickbridge Best bar or pub, sponsored by SLTA

You might be inclined to take it easy if you'd just won a Scottish Thistle Award. Not so at the Cross Keys Inn in the Borders village of Ettrickbridge, which picks up best bar or pub for the second year running. It's a testament to their striving for excellence — and bloody good pints.

The Cross Keys Inn, which closed for refurbishment in 2022, has fairly blossomed since Rory and Vicki Steel reopened it early last year. The 17th-century coaching inn draws in locals and visitors with its hearty fare and convivial vibes. It's traditional in all the right places but doesn't take itself

seriously: if you fancy a game of old-school *Donkey Kong*, it has you covered.

The addition of a beer garden and outdoor pizza oven has cemented its status as a brilliant watering hole. **What the judges loved** The continued development and efforts to attract an ever-wider range of visitors, as well as their joint efforts with the community to promote the area. Visit crosskeysinnettrickbridge.com

Nevis Range, nr Fort William Best outdoor or adventure experience

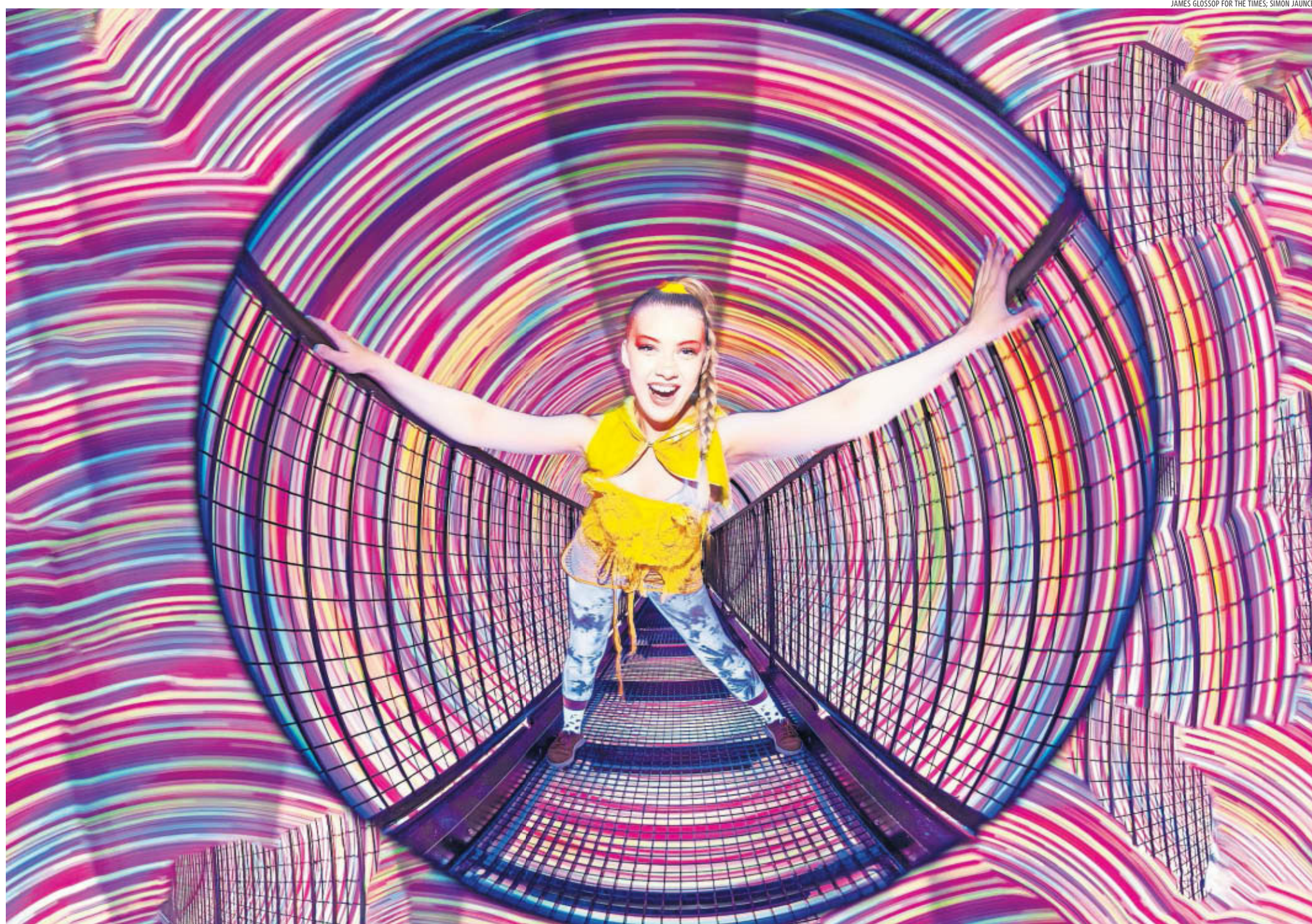
Scottish outdoor attractions that are as good in January as they are in July form a very exclusive club, and the Nevis Range Mountain Experience is certainly in it. It pulls in visitors all the year round with hiking, winter sports

Clockwise from main: the mirror maze at Camera Obscura & World of Illusions, Edinburgh; The Cross Keys Inn, Ettrickbridge; inside Glenegedale House, Islay; the bar at Apex City Quay Hotel, Dundee

(there are 33 ski routes) and mountain biking (35 miles of pisted cycling trails), left. The gondola, the only one of its kind in the UK, and 11 other lifts have a capacity of 9,600 people an hour, so queues are nae bother.

A 26-bedroom hotel was added in 2023 and this year the Range hosted the UCI Mountain Bike World Series. All this has made the Nevis Range one of Scotland's top attractions: one that has scaled great heights and reached the summit of the UK tourism industry. A peak performer, you could say.

What the judges loved A strategic and professional company with brilliant staff recognition. Visit nevisrange.co.uk Continued on page 4



Surfers at the Lost Shore resort, a surfing school on the outskirts of Edinburgh

VisitScotland's chair on why the country is a hit with tourists

These awards help ensure Scotland remains a must-visit place, Stephen Leckie tells Jenny Froome

Stephen Leckie became the new chair of VisitScotland in April. As a long-time advocate for Scotland's tourism industry, he shares his thoughts on his new role and what he is looking forward to in the year ahead.

What has 2024 been like for tourism and events?

I think for a lot of businesses and regions, this year has been another mixed bag. While some are doing well, the cost of living and doing business is still posing a challenge for others, particularly those who rely on domestic tourism.

However, the clear success story for 2024 is our continued international recovery. Not only are we surpassing pre-pandemic levels but continue to outperform the rest of the UK. That's fantastic news for the industry and a testament to the hard work and commitment of everyone — from organisations such as VisitScotland right down to individual businesses. We've all played a part in that success.

How important is it to celebrate these successes?

Hugely important, and that's exactly why the Scottish Thistle Awards exist. It's important we recognise and reward excellence and innovation if we want to make sure Scotland is a must-visit, must-return destination.

A thriving visitor economy and tourism and events industry is a force for good. It creates jobs, stimulates investment, helps preserve culture and heritage and sustains

Stephen Leckie is a long-time champion of Scotland's tourism industry

communities across the country. This sparks a ripple effect that benefits a wider supply chain and a variety of other sectors. There's a common misconception that tourism is simply just about people enjoying holidays. Yes, that's a part of it, but in reality, it is a multibillion-pound industry and the second largest growth sector in the Scottish economy.

What are you looking forward to most in 2025?

In my role as chair of VisitScotland, one of the things I get the most out of is meeting the people who are at the forefront of the industry — the businesses and organisations who help make a trip to Scotland an unforgettable experience. It's important to hear first-hand what it's like for them, what the opportunities are, what challenges they face and for me to share more about the role VisitScotland can play to support them.

If I'm thinking about our visitors, then a few highlights include the new Lost Shore Surf Resort. I recently had the pleasure of visiting this world-class facility on the outskirts of Edinburgh which I'm sure will become a popular attraction. Next year will see the opening of the Inverness Castle Experience, which will showcase the special stories of the Highlands and I'm sure will be an unmissable draw for the city.

Another highlight will be the Tall Ships Races [above inset]. It's Europe's largest free family event, returning to Aberdeen after 28 years next July.

What's great about Scotland is that in every region, during every season, there are new things to discover and enjoy, making the country a destination of choice in 2025 and beyond.





The wood-burning stove and loch views in one of Kabn's two cabins in Loch Fyne

The Globe Inn, Dumfries Best eating experience

Scottish cuisine is finally starting to get international recognition. "About time", patrons and employees of the Globe Inn might say, more than 400 years after this institution opened its doors.

The Globe Inn is probably best known as a favourite haunt of Robert Burns. Nosed around the bedroom he slept in, or the room where he read newspapers to a fervent audience. The Burns stuff is fun but the food is the star of the show. Jonathan Brett, the head of cuisine, and Fraser Cameron, the head chef — protégés of Andrew Fairlie — apply European culinary precision to Scottish produce. The venison loin is sublime, but if it pains you to choose a single dish, the tasting menus are exceptional.

What the judges loved The manner in which the storytelling and the history dovetail with the eating experience.
Visit globeinndumfries.co.uk

Kabn, Loch Fyne

Best self-catering or unique stay

Luxury and eco-consciousness don't always go hand in hand, but Kabn shows it can be done. All but dipping a toe in Loch Fyne, this pair of off-grid one-bedroom cabins prove you can indulge without costing Mother Nature.

If you think that Scandinavians are more evolved, these are the cabins for you, with the pitch-perfect minimalism and exposed panelling making you feel part of the wooded surroundings. The cabins have massive windows and a wood-burning stove.

Wild swimming is on the menu: the cabins are more than 100m apart and have their own beach area, giving you a sense of privacy and space. It's a great place to disconnect from emails (hallelujah!) and reconnect with a fellow carbon-based life form.

What the judges loved The personalised and comprehensive service, and their collaboration with other eco-friendly businesses.
Visit kabncompany.com

The Scotch Whisky Experience, Edinburgh

Best visitor attraction, sponsored by Jacobite Loch Ness Cruises

The Scotch Whisky Experience has been atop the Royal Mile since 1988 and inducts about 400,000 guests a year into the world of Scotch. The vast majority of those are visitors from

abroad, for whom the guided tour — available in 20 languages — is a big draw, but there's plenty on offer for even the most malt-steeped of Scots.

Explore the shimmering glass vaults of the Whisky Experience's special collection — 3,384 bottles originally collected by the Brazilian whisky aficionado Claive Vidiz and returned to Scotland by Diageo.

Recently about £3.5 million was invested in a new immersive exhibit in which "visitors are transported to a peaceful Highland glen" to learn about the origins of whisky. If anything, the Scotch Whisky Experience seems to be getting better with age. Isn't there a drink that does that? Stainthe mhath!

What the judges loved The passion for staff development, sustainability and constant development.
Visit scotchwhiskyexperience.co.uk

Trimontium Museum, Melrose Inclusive tourism award, sponsored by Historic Scotland

The only thing better than a Roman history museum is a fully accessible, entirely inclusive Roman history museum near the site of a large Roman fort. Step forward the Trimontium Museum in Melrose.

Trimontium is the largest Roman fort north of Hadrian's Wall, and the modern-day museum is of similar eminence — the only one in Scotland dedicated to Rome's Caledonian escapades. You might think of Romans and native Celts as being almost exclusively at odds, but both soldiers and locals called Trimontium home, and the museum explores these fascinating and complex relationships.

Much to the delight of younger visitors, it doesn't do any of that in a dry way. Instead you get interactive exhibits and hands-on history sessions in which kids are encouraged to get their grubby mitts on things for once. Plus there's a digitally reconstructed fort they can explore in an Oculus virtual reality headset.

What the judges loved The range of ways in which disabled visitors and staff are supported and welcomed.
Visit trimontium.co.uk

Glasgow Science Centre Climate action award, sponsored by LNER

What Scottish parent hasn't thanked their stars for the Science Centre



An interactive educational experience at Trimontium Museum in Melrose

during the long summer school holidays? Packed with three floors of exhibits, workshops and science shows, plus a planetarium and Imax cinema, it's a one-stop shop for ways to enthral the kids — but as this award attests, the ever-popular Pacific Quay attraction is also leading the way in the fight against climate change.

The list of climate initiatives it has running at any one time is vast, including educational and community programmes. Glasgow Science Centre teamed up with Scottish Power to create free lessons for pupils exploring climate change and also run a visitor centre at Whitelee wind farm. Efforts to rewild the science centre's exterior have appealed to human and apian visitors.

What the judges loved The extensive range of environmental measures adopted by staff, customers and the wider community.
Visit glasgowsciencecentre.org

Friends of Dundonald Castle SCIO, near Kilmarnock

Celebrating thriving communities award, sponsored by The Scottish Sun

Scotland has amazing historical ruins but few are lucky enough to have custodians like Friends of Dundonald Castle SCIO. Incorporated as a charity

in 2001, the group has been a faithful guardian of Dundonald Castle, keeping the South Ayrshire community at the heart of what they do.

Lording it over a foreverness of rolling green fields from its hilltop perch above Dundonald village, the 14th-century castle was once home to King Robert II, grandson of Robert the Bruce. It's widely described as a ruin but the marvellous barrel-vaulted ceilings are intact, and it is still in good enough nick to host weddings.

However, the visitor centre is where the community magic happens. Serving as a hub for volunteering, events and local engagement, it also hosts educational day trips and free community clubs, such as Crazy Castle Kids and the Ayrshire Young Archaeology Club.

What the judges loved Their strong vision for the future and support of the community.
Visit dundonaldcastle.org.uk

Loch Ness Hub & Travel, Drumnadrochit

Innovation in tourism, sponsored by Times Scotland
How to promote and grow Scottish tourism without ruining everything that makes the country so appealing?

The collection at the Scotch Whisky Experience includes a £27,500 bottle of Balvenie

“Visitors are transported to a peaceful Highland glen to learn about whisky's origins

It's a timely question, and one that requires innovative thinking. Cue Loch Ness Hub & Travel, a community benefit company in Drumnadrochit.

Sustainability is of course central to any forward-thinking discussion of Scottish tourism, as Loch Ness Hub & Travel is well aware. Led by Russell Fraser (he's 2024 tourism individual of the year, see page 6), the Hub puts eco-friendly travel front and centre. Good-quality ebikes capable of handling long cycles available to rent at reasonable prices? Yes please. How about a visitor centre with infectiously friendly and helpful staff who love to give you tips on where to go? The Hub offers exactly that — with well-kept loos too.

And because it's community-owned, all profits are reinvested into local businesses and amenities. The Hub has achieved the ultimate: a brilliant facility for tourists but also a profitable and thriving concern for locals, with benefits shared among them. A true win-win — or a win-win-win, once you throw in a Scottish Thistle Award.

What the judges loved Innovative solutions that not only attract tourists but also significantly reduce environmental impact.
Visit lochnesstravel.com
Continued on page 6

'The Scottish people deserve recognition and celebration'

VisitScotland's new chief executive, Vicki Miller, tells **Charles Pring** why the Thistle Awards are so special



Vicki Miller became CEO in October

Here's a not-so-shocking secret: I'm a big fan of the Scottish Thistle Awards. You'd expect me to say that, given my job, but it gives me genuine pleasure being involved in an event that brings the whole industry together and recognises the hard work and dedication of those businesses and individuals going above and beyond to deliver excellence — of which we have many.

Of course, excellence can be measured by many metrics. There are the fundamentals, like razor-sharp organisation, brilliant people skills and exceptional customer service, which will never be anything less than essential and which any Scottish Thistle Award nominee has in spades. But more than ever, our judges are weighing inclusivity and sustainability as key components of the contribution that any operator makes to tourism in Scotland. It's not just those in the business of eco-tourism who should be thinking of such things: the responsibility lies with all of us to ensure Scotland remains a breathtaking, enriching and viable destination for generations to come.

VisitScotland has a big role to play in that, and a lot of the work we do involves helping organisations make positive steps in the direction of inclusive, sustainable, responsible tourism. There's a clear moral imperative for doing so — who could argue against the merits of less pollution and more inclusion? But what is becoming increasingly clear is the strong business case. More visitors are seeking inclusive and environmentally conscious experiences, which presents a wonderful opportunity for our sector.

For me 2024 has been a special year, having been appointed chief executive of VisitScotland. I joined the organisation in 2005, before which I'd been at the Dumfries and Galloway tourist board, but my involvement in Scottish tourism goes back further than that. Back, in fact, to blissful childhood holidays on the west coast. Growing up in Dumfries, nothing could beat a trip to Troon or Largs, and some of my happiest memories involved days out at the beach: building sandcastles, eating fish and chips wrapped in newspaper, sat on a bench by the sea. Naturally, no such trip was complete without a Nardini's ice cream, *insat*.

Since those early days I've seen some pretty big changes in the world of tourism and events. Digitisation has to be one of the biggest. When I started, people wouldn't book things in advance — they'd just show up at a B&B and see if the vacancy notice

was still on display. Food and drink is another: the quality of restaurants in Scotland, and the availability of high-quality, locally sourced produce, has improved so much, bringing international recognition with it.

But some things haven't changed. The sector is, and always has been, incredibly resilient. It's had to navigate a number of global crises — I've seen more than my fair share — and I'm always amazed

by the way the industry bounces back. Resilience like that requires adaptability and innovation (another key Thistle metric) and I'm heartened to see the way businesses in Scotland continue to grow and evolve, and respond to shifting consumer trends. One of those trends would certainly be the appetite for unique experiences, which I think Scotland is particularly well suited to provide. Whether it's staying on a farm, taking a guided foraging tour or being served a private dinner on a remote beach, it's great to see so many people thinking outside the box of ways to showcase the best of what Scotland has to offer, and it bodes very well.

Another unchanging feature of tourism in Scotland, and by far the most important, is the people who work and live here. In any of our visitor surveys there's one theme that comes up time and time again: it's the people they meet that make their trip so special. And that's not just hospitality workers — it's the taxi driver who picks them up from the station and gives them a completely different perspective on the city, or the person they ask for directions on the street who ends up recommending the best bar they went to all trip. These are the interactions that leave the longest impression.

If people are the greatest resource that any hospitality or travel business can have, then Scotland is absolutely blessed on that front — both by the people who work in the industry and the enthralling, welcoming individuals who populate our country. Businesses win Thistle Awards, but it's the people that drive those businesses, and it's the people who deserve our recognition and celebration, which is exactly what they will get. That's what's so great about the Thistles, and why I'm such a big fan.



Russell Fraser

Tourism individual of the year
Little wonder Loch Ness Hub & Travel won this year's innovation in tourism award with Russell Fraser at the helm. A leader in community tourism and a serial, dynamic entrepreneur, Fraser has transformed the community-owned venture into a model for sustainable and responsible tourism. Introducing baggage and people transfer to the Hub's list of services, Fraser has also added ebike hire, helping the centre to secure a Gold Green Tourism Award. **What the judges loved** Fraser's impact is not limited to the day job: he is genuinely an ambassador for tourism. The combination of innovation, a drive to succeed and a strong focus on sustainable tourism makes him a worthy winner.

ACNAP 2023 at the Edinburgh International Conference Centre
Best business event

In 2023 the Edinburgh International Conference Centre (EICC) welcomed 450 international delegates to the Association of Cardiovascular Nursing and Allied Professions (ACNAP) annual conference. The assembly brought together Europe's leading cardiovascular care professionals, who shared medical developments and engaged the public on heart-health issues.

A meeting of this magnitude requires a venerable venue and a tip-top team, which is what the EICC provided, collaborating closely with ACNAP.

Any conference that deploys dogs as "therapists" during breaks — as was the case at ACNAP 2023 — gets our seal of approval, although leaving a lasting positive legacy in public health is also laudable, if not as immediately adorable. **What the judges loved** The contribution to Scotland's cardiovascular nursing expertise, improving quality of life for people across the country. **Visit** eicc.co.uk

Wigtown Book Festival
Outstanding cultural event or festival, sponsored by STV

It has a population of barely more than 1,000, yet every year the wee Dumfries and Galloway community of Wigtown — Scotland's National Book Town, as it was officially designated in 1998 — welcomes about 13,000 visitors to a literary festival that continues to go from strength to strength.

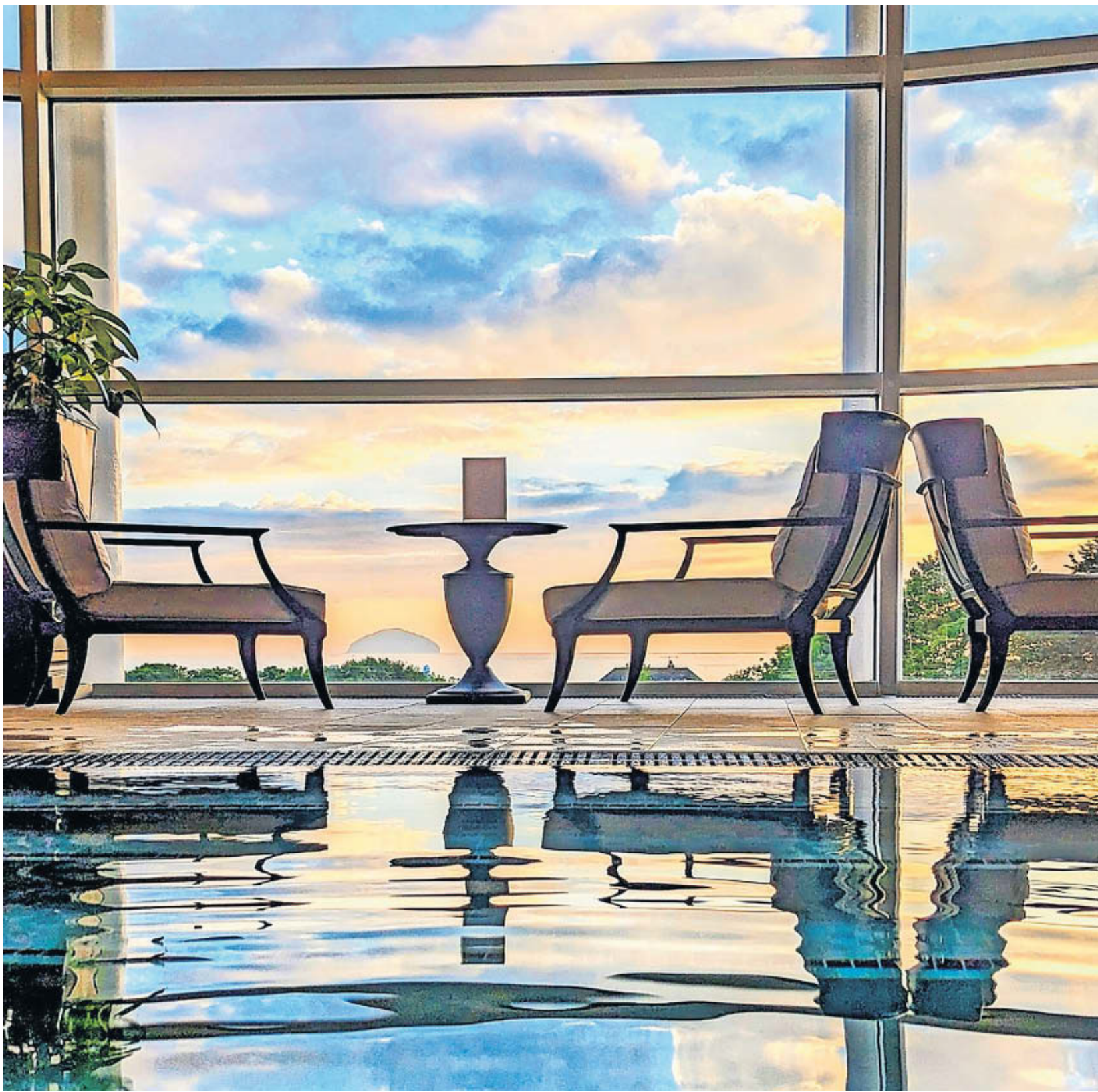
The ten-day event features more than 200 author talks, workshops and discussions that draw local and international crowds. This year was arguably its most impressive programme to date, with appearances from Alan Cumming, Irvine Welsh and Janey Godley, who died this month, as well as the introduction of a three-day foodie "festival within a festival". Intelligent chat and a proper good feed — what more could you ask for?

Well, how about fireworks and pipe bands and a closing-night ceilidh? That's the beauty of the Wigtown Book Festival — a worldly gathering that retains the unbeatable atmosphere of a small-town Scottish hoolie. **What the judges loved** It is clearly very community-led but appeals to people from across the globe, and has a strong focus on sustainability. **Visit** wigtownbookfestival.com

World Athletics Indoor Championships, Glasgow
Outstanding sporting event

The 2024 World Athletics Indoor Championships were held at Glasgow's Emirates Arena — the first time the event has been hosted in Scotland. The games were not only a sporting triumph but an organisational one, with 586 competitors from 128 nations, and more than 22,000 ticketed spectators from across the globe descending on Glasgow for three days of elite competition.

Logistics on this scale don't happen by accident, with Glasgow Life, Glasgow city council and UK Athletics



Clockwise from above: the spa at Trump Turnberry, with views of Ailsa Craig; this year's World Athletics Indoor Championships took place at Glasgow's Emirates Arena;

Former housekeeper cleans up at the Thistle Awards

Hannah Cochrane entered hospitality at 16. She has climbed the ranks and is our rising star. **By Charles Pring**

The inaugural Rising Star award is sponsored by HIT Scotland. It goes to Hannah Cochrane, who became the sales and business development manager for the Scottish Event Campus this year. Cochrane is still only 30, but reading her CV you'd think she'd been in hospitality for decades. From housekeeping and bartending to wedding planning and regional management, she has done it all. That's one of the benefits of starting young, as Cochrane did, cleaning bedrooms at Mar Hall Golf & Spa Resort in her native

Bishopton from the age of 16. It was an "eye-opening" experience, she says. "I remember thinking, 'Wow, this industry is crazy — but in all the best ways.' I loved it. I was officially bitten by the hospitality bug."

Cochrane made the move to Glasgow, working her way up the ladder in a number of hotels. An events role at House for an Art Lover led to Cochrane becoming its wedding co-ordinator, planning hundreds of ceremonies in her three years in the job.

A two-year spell as the regional business development manager at the restaurant chain Chaophraya was followed by a similar role

at Dakota Hotels, where Cochrane developed an interest in sustainability practices, leading the group's "green team" to a prestigious Green Tourism gold award.

Two years as Glasgow ambassador at the Society for Incentive Travel Excellence then led to her present position: promoting Glasgow and the SEC to potential clients on the world stage. For someone as proud of her home town as Cochrane is, it's a very straightforward pitch.

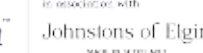


Hannah Cochrane

"Honestly, Glasgow sells itself," she says.

While Cochrane's rise through the industry has been impressive, it is her efforts to give back to the sector that make her such a worthy winner. As hotels and restaurants stuttered following the pandemic, Cochrane launched *Pure Buzzin'*, a podcast spotlighting the good work going on in Glasgow's hospitality scene. She also started a networking event, Now That's What I Call Networking, which holds quarterly meet-ups and has raised £20,000 and counting for Beatson Cancer Charity.

Grateful for the opportunities that the industry has afforded her, Cochrane now dedicates herself to mentoring newcomers and promoting the sector, speaking in primary schools and universities. As if that isn't enough, she also has a residency at Bluedog in Glasgow: catch her singing Etta James and Otis Redding songs any Wednesday or Thursday.



Ghost-tour company leader wins our highest accolade

Kat Brogan has transformed Edinburgh's Mercat Tours into a model of ethical tourism — and now she's won a Silver Thistle. **By Sarah Grimes**

She oversees tours that delve into the dark, ghostly and mysterious past of Auld Reekie but now it's Kat Brogan who's making history.

The dynamic force behind Edinburgh's Mercat Tours, Brogan is the most recent recipient of the Silver Thistle Award, recognising individuals who are pivotal in helping Scotland's tourism and events industry be the best it can be. It's the Scottish Thistle Awards' highest accolade.

What is as scarily impressive as the ghostly visits offered by Mercat Tours to Edinburgh's underground vaults is that Brogan has made an indelible mark in less than a decade, taking over the family business in 2015 from its founder: her father, Des Brogan.

In that time Brogan has written a new chapter for the award-winning walking-tour company. It has become one of Scotland's leading and most progressive tourism businesses. Brogan's leadership is credited as the driving force for shaping the organisation into a model of ethical tourism, aligning its operations with the values of inclusivity, environmental sustainability and community support.

Mercat Tours now proudly stands as the first UK visitor attraction to win B Corp accreditation, which is awarded to companies who meet high standards of social and environmental performance. Under Brogan's stewardship, Mercat has

“The values of the company come from Kat's own values about people and place

also earned accolades as a living wage employer, prioritising job security and year-round stability for its team — a rarity in seasonal tourism.

The Silver Thistle Award is given annually to an individual whose efforts have shaped and elevated the industry. "This award celebrates an individual who not only excels but inspires," says Steven Walker, chair of the Scottish Thistle Awards industry panel. "Kat Brogan's contributions have been pivotal in setting a new standard



Kat Brogan's leadership is defined by inclusivity and sustainability

of excellence for Scotland's tourism sector. She has moulded Mercat Tours in her image, and the values of the company very much come from Kat's own values about people and place."

Brogan's influence extends beyond her many accomplishments with Mercat Tours. Her leadership roles across the industry reflect a steadfast commitment to fair wages and accessibility in tourism. As co-chair of the Edinburgh Living Wage Action Group and a member of the Scottish government's Tourism and Hospitality Industry Leadership Group, she works to enhance labour standards and make tourism a viable, year-round profession.

Leading by example, her influence, both local and national, has encouraged other tourism businesses to adopt practices that offer stability and support for employees.

Brogan's innovations at Mercat Tours have also transformed how tourism supports Edinburgh's communities, demonstrating that it can be a force for positive change and community building.

With the Our Stories, Your City initiative, Mercat offers free tours for members of the Grassmarket Community Project and local pupils, funded by visitor donations. The initiative enriches the lives of residents in Edinburgh while connecting them to the heritage of their city.

In striving to make Scottish tourism accessible to all, Brogan welcomes visitors of diverse backgrounds, needs and interests. Her focus on inclusivity has led Mercat Tours to become disability-aware, offer dementia-awareness training, and support age-diverse and multicultural hiring practices. Furthermore, she's reduced group tour sizes, ensuring each visitor enjoys an immersive, meaningful experience.

Meanwhile, Brogan's commitment to sustainability is evident in Mercat's environmental credentials, from monitoring energy usage to offering tours that showcase Edinburgh's historical sites responsibly.

"Kat's tireless advocacy for fair labour practices and her focus on inclusivity and sustainability are an inspiration," Walker says. "She is also a selfless and passionate advocate for Scottish tourism, going way above and beyond the call of duty in her service to the industry she clearly loves."



GLASGOW LIFE: COLIN HATTERSLEY



the authors Coinneach MacLeod and Peter MacQueen at Wigtown Book Festival

joining forces to form a shipshape organising committee. It is another item on the city's ever-growing CV of international sporting events, alongside last year's UCI Cycling World Championships, following on from the 2014 Commonwealth Games and the 2019 European Athletics Indoor Championships. The 2026 Commonwealth Games will be held in Glasgow. **What the judges loved** The commitment to sustainable event management, and the strong partnership approach. **Visit** worldathletics.org

Trump Turnberry, Ayrshire
Best luxury experience, sponsored by The Macallan Estate
Plenty has been said about the owner, but you cannot deny he has some damn fine golf resorts — none finer than Trump Turnberry.



Purchased by Trump in 2014, the five-star resort has 198 pristine rooms and a number of self-catering options among its 800 dune-backed acres about

15 miles south of Ayr. A shamelessly lavish baroque fountain added out front hints at the decor inside (Ivanka Trump handpicked the outrageously ornate chandeliers) and a piper in full regimental garb heralds dinner.

Dripping with golfing pedigree, Turnberry, below, has hosted the Open Championship four times, including the legendary "Duel in the Sun" between Tom Watson and Jack Nicklaus in 1977.

Golf not your thing? The resort offers falconry, clay pigeon shooting, off-roading and horse riding. Culzean castle is only a ten-minute drive up the coast. The pièce de résistance? The ISHGA spa, with a 65ft heated infinity pool from which you can gaze across the waves to Ailsa Craig and Arran, as well as a sauna, steam room and 12 treatment rooms. **What the judges loved** The incredible service standards and exclusive partnerships with local brands and services, enhancing the guest experience with authentic Scottish elements. **Visit** turnberry.co.uk



Mercat operates tours of the vaults beneath the Old Town in Edinburgh

THANK YOU

The Scottish Thistle Awards would like to say a special thank you to our sponsors

Johnstons of Elgin
MADE IN SCOTLAND



Celebrating
Scotland's tourism
& events industry

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30
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