

Scottish
Thistle
Awards —
find out
who won

Slàinte mhath! Toasting the best in Scotland's tourism and events

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Scottish Thistle Awards

The Scottish Thistle Awards 2025: the winners

Claire Sawers celebrates the best of Scottish tourism and events, from a hilltop castle to a Scandi-style lochside cabin, in the hospitality industry Oscars

The great and good of Scottish hospitality gathered this week for the Scottish Thistle Awards, celebrating innovation, collaboration and sustainable practices. Want to know which B&B hosts go the extra 500 miles? Where to find wheelchair-friendly festivals or unforgettable meals? Read on — and book now before word gets out.

Best B&B or guesthouse experience
Ardorna, nr Oban
How does a B&B elevate itself to five-star status, you might wonder? Perhaps by letting guests choose a scent for their deluxe bedding from a menu of aromatherapy pillow mists. Or how about adding a salt station, featuring a pyramid rosemary flake to go on your fluffy scrambled eggs? That's what you'll get at this plush six-bedroom B&B ten miles north of Oban, where its owner, Karen Webster, has been nicknamed the Dame of Hospitality for consistently going above and beyond for visitors. Webster custom-built the modern eco-friendly B&B in 2010 and has been racking up awards ever since. Bedrooms look over Loch Cerran and have scatter cushions, handmade chocolates, Molton Brown toiletries and colour-changing wet rooms. An environmentally friendly approach means that hot water comes from a ground-source heat pump and Ardorna has two charging points for those doing the Highlands in an electric car. Just don't bring the kids — the one thing strictly verboten in this luxury retreat is children. **Details** B&B doubles from £160, ardorna.co.uk

Best hotel experience — sponsored by Fishers
Kildrumny Inn, nr Aboyne
This husband-and-wife team, David and Sophie Littlewood, cover all bases for an exceptional stay at this small hotel in rural Aberdeenshire, which has been a mainstay of Aboyne village life since 1828. The Littlewoods took over the lease in 2013 but things took a luxury turn when the millionaire American couple Chris and Camille Bently bought the Kildrumny Estate for £11 million in 2020 and began a major renovation of the inn. The hotel is ultra boutique with four king bedrooms featuring opulent wallpaper and rich velvet furnishings, marble chequerboard floor tiles and clawfoot bathe. It's a rich mix of Victorian period fittings and modern Scottish luxury. Meanwhile, the downstairs whisky

Where to find the winners

- 1 Best B&B or Guest House Experience: Ardorna
- 2 Best Hotel Experience: Kildrumny Inn
- 3 Best Self Catering or Unique Stay: Loch Ken Eco Bothies
- 4 Best Pub or Bar: Cross Keys Inn
- 5 Best Eating Experience: Ninth Wave Restaurant
- 6 Best Visitor Attraction: Highland Wildlife Park
- 7 Inclusion award: DF Concerts & Events - TRNSMT Festival
- 8 Climate Action Award: Edinburgh Zoo
- 9 Best Community Tourism and Events Initiative: Solsgirth Home Farm
- 10 Best Outdoor or Adventure Experience: Newton Farm Holidays & Tours
- 11 Outstanding Cultural Event or Festival: Edinburgh International Book Festival
- 12 Innovation Award: Trintum Museum
- 13 Best Business Award: The 36th International Papillomavirus Conference 2024
- 14 Outstanding Sporting Event: Tour of Britain
- 15 Best Luxury Experience: Knockhaam Lodge
- 16 Employer of the Year: The Torridon
- 17 Individual of the Year: Sheila Gilmore



snug and restaurant are featured in the Michelin Guide. Run by the chef patron David Littlewood and the head chef Alexandria Hay, the restaurant gives pub classics an upmarket spin: Kildrumny's hangers and mash use venison sausages from the Kildrumny Estate with creamy mash and confit onion. **Details** B&B doubles from £280, kildrumnyinn.co.uk

Best self-catering or unique stay
Loch Ken Eco Bothies, nr Castle Douglas
A stay at these off-grid bothies ten miles north of Castle Douglas comes with the very tempting promise of your personal log-burning hot tub and kayak. Within the UNESCO Galloway and Southern Ayrshire Biosphere, right on the shores of Loch Ken, the four eco bothies each have their own unique style. The two-bed

Right: Best eating experience winner Ninth Wave restaurant

Other eco yurt would suit a couple on a romantic getaway, while the newly built Osprey sleeps eight and makes a great base for groups on wilderness walks. For more action-packed thrills, Galloway Activity Centre (lochken.co.uk) is right next door for sailing, windsurfing, kayaking, canoeing, fishing, mountain biking, archery, laser tag, a climbing wall and a zipwire. Sustainable tourism is taken seriously by the team here and the Thistle judges were impressed by their policy of sourcing local labour and materials where possible, recycling supplies, favouring green transport and training staff in how to be environmentally responsible. "The



sustainable and regenerative angle is really commendable," the judges raved. **Details** From £385 for two nights' self-catering for two adults and two children, lochkenecobothies.co.uk

Best pub or bar — sponsored by SLTA
Cross Keys Inn, Ettrickbridge
It's the third year in a row this superb Borders spot has scooped the award for best bar or pub. The Thistles judging panel, who praised the Ettrickbridge pub for being "clearly switched on to community-led events with their support of community initiatives". There are pizza nights, mother and baby groups, a Valentine's raffle and even a lambing wrap party — this is rural Scotland, after all, in a Borders village

seven miles outside Selkirk. The Cross Keys Inn closed its doors in 2022 — enter Rory and Vicki Steel, who revamped the pub turning it into the heart of village life, a much-loved spot for locals, families, cyclists, fishermen, walkers and their dogs. Other selling points are the freshly made bar meals, seven luxury bedrooms upstairs and a fine range of local beers and ales behind the bar. **Details** Dinner mains from £16, crosskeysinnettrickbridge.com

Best eating experience
Ninth Wave Restaurant, nr Fionnphort
Owned and operated by the chef Carla Lamont and her team, Ninth Wave is a destination restaurant tucked away on a wild and wonderfully isolated corner of the Ross of Mull. Originally from Canada, Lamont blends Asian and Pacific Northwest

influences with the very best of Scottish ingredients. She'll take lobster from the neighbouring village of Fionnphort, for example, and serve it with a green mango slaw, Cointreau dressing and lobster-stuffed courgette flowers in a tempura batter. Local island beef might be served with seasoning inspired by Mauritius, or Lamont might pull up herbs and edible flowers from The Braich Mhor croft to flavour desserts. That focus is a key part of the experience — Lamont is there for every course, giving background on ingredients and namechecking the local suppliers that are featured in the meal, as well as in their cocktails. Reducing food miles is one of Ninth Wave's priorities and judges praised their commitment to leaving a low-impact environmental footprint. **Details** Four-course lunch from £80, ninthwaverestaurant.co.uk

Clockwise from top: Best self-catering or unique stay winner Galloway Activity Centre; Loch Ken Eco Bothies; best hotel experience Kildrumny Inn; best pub Cross Keys Inn; best B&B or guesthouse experience Ardorna



The Cuckle Strand, Isle of Barra — one of Smith's favourite childhood spots

Barbara Smith: 'For me, this is the best place in the world'

The Thistle Awards leader on her family road trips and why celebrating Scotland's tourism matters more than ever

If you want to trace Barbara Smith's career path just follow the routes she took across Scotland on childhood holidays with the family. Long before she managed castles or ran whisky distilleries, the Scottish Thistle Awards' new chair was perched in the back of her family's tiny Austin A35, squeezed between her older brother and sister, surrounded by suitcases and setting off on yet another grand Scottish adventure. "Oh my goodness, we travelled everywhere," she says with a laugh. "My dad was from a croft in Ardgay in Sutherland so I learnt to fish in the river just outside his family croft when I was about six. My mum — she was a great lover of history — took us to every corner of Scotland, visiting castles and churches."

Back then few families went abroad. Holidays were homegrown — Smith's ranged from Dornoch to Girvan, from Kirkcubright to Deeside — each trip a patch in a quilt of childhood memories. "One of my favourite holidays was to South Uist, North Uist, Benbecula and Barra," Smith recalls. "I'll never forget the turquoise sea, the silver sands, jumping waves on Barra — it's one of the most fabulous places in the world."

At the time she didn't realise it was shaping her future but now says the connection is clear. "It must have instilled something in me because what did I end up doing? Tourism!" she says. "I've been so lucky to manage one of Scotland's great castles and later the visitor centres for some of our most beautiful distilleries, often in the very places I'd visited as a child. My father was a great whisky lover so

it meant so much to me to work in some of the country's greatest distilleries."

Those early holidays did more than show her the country, they gave her a lifelong mission. "For me, it is the best place in the world. We've got everything here, whether it's a unique experience, a dram by the dam at Royal Lochnagar or just the beauty of the landscape itself. Anything a visitor wants, they can find in Scotland."

"Holidays in Scotland have transformed dramatically since I was a young girl. Back then, only around 20 per cent of hotel rooms had private bathrooms and heating was often an added extra. Today you can stay in luxurious secluded cabins with all the privacy you could wish for — even your own sauna. "It's an incredible honour to head up the Scottish Thistle Awards. They're a real year-long celebration of what is the best in Scottish tourism. You just need to see the faces of the people that win. People cry when they win these awards. It's usually a team effort and it can be a real morale booster to go back and celebrate with all the staff. What it means to people is absolutely fantastic. Businesses can use the Thistle Awards for their own PR, becoming ambassadors in their community and benchmarks for doing the right thing."

"Having served on the judging panel before, I can say it's a challenging but deeply rewarding experience. You gain a unique insight into the inner workings of Scotland's tourism and events businesses, and a real appreciation for the dedication and effort that goes into making them thrive. Narrowing the list down is never easy but it's incredibly inspiring. The passion, creativity and resilience across the industry shine through in every submission and it's a privilege to help celebrate the people and places that make Scotland a remarkable destination."

"It's been a remarkable journey for Smith from those holidays on the family croft to board member of VisitScotland and head of the Scottish Thistle Awards — although she's just as passionate about her country today as she was when potting about the Highlands and islands in that Austin A35. "What a country Scotland is," she says. "And what a lucky person I am."

By Jenny Froomie



New Thistle Awards chair Barbara Smith

Scottish Thistle Awards

Stay, spa, stride: why VisitScotland can't wait for next year

VisitScotland chief exec **Vicki Miller** charts the trends shaping Scottish travel — alongside cultural reopenings, new hotels and 2026's best events

As 2025 draws to a close, VisitScotland's chief executive, Vicki Miller, shares what to look forward to in Scotland.

What's new in 2026?

I'm really excited about the new Inverness Castle Experience, which will allow visitors into the castle for the very first time, as well as the £10 million redevelopment of the Calanais Standing Stones visitor centre. The revamped Paisley Museum is going to be fantastic too.

In hotels, Cromlix will unveil its new 80-cover restaurant in May, as well as a small fine-dining restaurant and wellness cottage; the old Ardgowan Hotel in St Andrews will reopen as the five-star Kithmore Hotel; and the Marcliffe in Aberdeen is getting a multimillion-pound upgrade, including a striking glass-domed dining space.

We've got the Commonwealth Games in Glasgow, gigs from some real big hitters, including My Chemical Romance, the Cure (Robert Smith, right) and Take That.

What's trending?

Wellness tourism is booming. With busy, stressful lives, people want to escape — and Scotland is the perfect place to do that. Our forests, lochs and mountains are ideal for a spot of outdoor therapy; we have a fantastic array of spas and retreats, and an increasing number of wild saunas.

We're also seeing more people linking travel to their hobbies so



VisitScotland's Vicki Miller: "Scotland is the perfect place to escape to"

coming here to take part in things like cycling, Munro bagging and running. Set-jetting also continues to grow and what we expect is people mixing visiting locations with immersive experiences linked to the culture or themes of what they are seeing on screen.

You speak a lot about the "visitor economy". What is it — and why does it matter?

The visitor economy is the economic impact of people visiting a place. Everyone, whether they realise it or not, has benefited from the visitor economy. More than £11 billion is spent by visitors to Scotland each year — that's more than 5 per cent of our GDP.

Many of the things we enjoy in our daily lives link to tourism and events. One in 11 jobs in this country is related to tourism, which supports supply chains, attracts investment and sustains communities. Understanding it helps everyone to make the most of its potential, and more importantly, reap its benefits.

By Mark Floyd



Cromlix in Dunblane will unveil its new restaurants and wellness cottage



Best visitor attraction — sponsored by Jacobite Loch Ness Cruises

Highland Wildlife Park, Kingussie Within the rolling hills and ancient pine forests of the Cairngorms National Park visitors can encounter endangered species from mountain and tundra regions around the world, as well as creatures native to Scotland. Arctic foxes, reindeer, polar bears, bison, camels, yaks and snow leopards live here alongside red deer and wildcats.

Highland Wildlife Park first opened in 1972 and is run by Scotland's wildlife conservation charity, the Royal Zoological Society of Scotland (RZSS), which also runs Edinburgh Zoo. What made the Highland attraction outstanding to the judges was not only the collection of animals on display but also the engaging way conservation stories were told. Tourists and locals visiting the 260-acre safari park can drive themselves around or get a dedicated ranger to give them a tour. Visitors can also join the keepers and feed snacks to polar bears and tigers.

The Saving Wildcats project is a conservation centre at the park where wildcats are bred for release. Work began in 2022 on the multimillion-pound Wildlife Discovery Centre, which opened in August and is dedicated to protecting nature at risk from the biodiversity crisis.

Details Adults £20.85, children £15.65, highlandwildlifepark.co.uk

Inclusion award — sponsored by Accessible

DF Concerts & Events — TRNSMT Festival, Glasgow In 2017, just after announcements that T in the Park would not be going ahead, the line-up for the first TRNSMT festival was announced. Pulp, Belle and Sebastian, the Killers, Stereophonics and Franz Ferdinand have all played the 50,000-capacity festival on Glasgow Green in the years since, with emerging acts showcased on the King Tut's stage.

Thistle judges were impressed by the steps the festival has taken to widen accessibility for a range of groups, as well as plans to continue collaborations with a mix of charities, advocacy groups and communities.

DF's dedicated accessibility team undergo disability awareness training through the UK inclusivity charity Attitude Is Everything and take part

Above: the Saving Wildcats project at the Highland Wildlife Park, Kingussie

in EDI consultancies with charities including Gig Buddies, who support people with autism and learning difficulties.

Accessible viewing platforms, sensory spaces, companion ticket schemes, BSL-signed videos and Easy Read guides all showed commitment to removing as many barriers as possible for music-loving punters.

Details Prices TBC, trnsmtfest.com

Climate action award — sponsored by Historic Scotland

Edinburgh Zoo, Corstorphine Edinburgh Zoo's star-studded cast of beasts and critters is well known but it was its conservation and environmental policies that impressed the Thistle judges this year. Committed to net zero by 2040 the zoo, which has reduced its landfill contribution through composting and recycling, installed a large solar-power meadow in 2023, allowing it to transition away from fossil fuels.

The solar meadow, which was switched on last year, led to a 22 per cent drop in the zoo's electricity use from the grid in the first year. A programme of outreach events helps the public to learn about the enormous challenges facing wildlife. Through their on-site visits and courses, people can discover how species can be saved from extinction through conservation science, animal care, education and everyday changes in our daily lives and communities.

Details Adults £25, children £15.90, edinburghzoo.org.uk

Best community tourism and events initiative — sponsored by The Scottish Sun

Solsgirth Home Farm, nr Dollar Until 2019 Solsgirth Farm was a 360-acre dairy farm in shadow of the Ochills. Enter Jan Dixon, a vet, and Leigh Grainger, a veterinary nurse. Rebranding the estate Solsgirth Home Farm, the passionate pair now educate the wider community on what farming truly involves. They've teamed up with Duke of Edinburgh groups, preschool classes, Scouts clubs and agriculture colleges for educational tours, and host creative workshops on traditional crafts such as willow weaving and spoon carving.

For the full working farm experience guests can book out the 1722 farmhouse, which sleeps ten, or the smaller Butler's Flat for a self-

Above: Best outdoor or adventure experience winner Newton Farm holiday and tours



Inclusion award winner DF Concerts & Events — TRNSMT Festival, Glasgow, which continues to widen accessibility

catering holiday, with the option of nipping out to meet pigs, cattle and sheep as well as more exotic residents such as emus, llamas and South American reba birds.

Solsgirth also runs farmers' markets every second weekend, which sell street food, local handcrafted ornaments, fruit juice grown in the farm's orchards and small batch gin. It's little wonder the judges gave it the nod, praising how skilfully the team runs a diverse business while also prioritising green initiatives and restorative farming.

Details From £446.57 for two nights' self-catering for two, farm tours £20.14, children £11, under-5s free, solsgirthhomefarm.co.uk

Best outdoor or adventure experience, sponsored by GetYourGuide

Newton Farm holiday and tours, nr Dundee Is the thing that's been missing from your previous holidays a cuddle with a goat? Then get yourself down to Newton of Forthingham Farm, ten miles north of Dundee, which offers a long, aww-some list of agriturismo experiences, from bottle-feeding

lambs and walking with alpacas to grooming a Highland cow or petting a miniature donkey. It's a wholesome bucolic dream come true.

The hosts Graeme and Louise Nicoll really care about bringing their family farm in Angus to life. They offer tours of their 550 acres by Land Rover, workshops for photography lovers and curated birthday visits. They had been running a farm with on-site B&B and self-catering but calculated that Graeme was probably earning about £2 an hour. A desire to diversify — and raise his wages — saw them pivot into farm tours with a personal touch in 2017. Inclusivity is baked into the farm's approach, with autism-friendly tours available, as well as an accessible toilet, ear defenders, sensory toys and a mobility walker for those with impaired movement.

Details Farm tour from £10 adult, children £5, under-2s free, newtonfarmholidays.co.uk

Outstanding cultural event or festival — sponsored by STV

Edinburgh International Book Festival What began in 1983 in a tent in

Charlotte Square with 120 authors has grown considerably in size, now with almost 700 book-adjacent, brain-nourishing events each year. The Edinburgh Futures Institute became the festival's new permanent home in 2024, after a few years along the road at the Edinburgh College of Art.

Thistle judges described 2024 as an exceptional year for the festival, what with its shiny new venue in the old Royal Infirmary building, plus the new director Jenny Niven taking the reins after running book festivals in China and Australia. Margaret Atwood, Amy Lipton, Fern Brady, RF Kuang, Salman Rushdie, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Maggie O'Farrell, Ta-Nehisi Coates and Nicola Sturgeon were among an illustrious list of authors on the bold programme for her inaugural year.

The panel praised the festival for continuing to deliver on its reputation as a world-renowned cultural happening and were impressed with its outreach programme for school children, young carers, LGBT groups, writers' groups, mental health groups and prisons.

Details edbookfest.co.uk

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Innovation Award – sponsored by The Times Scotland

Trinonium Museum, Melrose
Trinonium was the largest Roman fort and settlement north of Hadrian's Wall. This museum takes visitors back in time for a fascinating glimpse of Iron Age life and the impact of the Roman invasion.

It's archaeology heaven with brooches, weapons and bits of actual fort all on display, but tech fans aren't forgotten either. Trinonium has an immersive VR headset experience that runs four times a day. Younger kids can enjoy treasure hunts and craft sessions, while school groups can handle ancient artefacts and take a guided tour of the fort site.

What stood out to the judges was Trinonium's modern and creative approach to bringing history to life. This wasn't a dry story frozen in time; instead they found a community-led museum using technology to allow a fascinating glimpse into an ancient fort. Visitors' comments also showed how much they loved the VR element, helping Trinonium bag this year's top spot for innovation.

Details Adults £8.38, children £4.19, trinonium.co.uk

Best business event award

The 36th International Papillomavirus Conference 2024, ECG

Last November the 36th International Papillomavirus Conference took place over four days at the Edinburgh International Conference Centre, drawing more than 1,600 delegates from across the globe. The theme was "equitable, evidence-based approaches to HPV disease", with experts in the fields of public health, clinical research and science working collaboratively towards eliminating the diseases associated with HPV, which can lead to cancers of the mouth, throat, genitals and cervix.

The Thistle judges were impressed not just by the conference's positive impact on Edinburgh's economy but also by its social impact on the country as a whole. They commended a citywide campaign on HPV Awareness that brought real benefits to the health of citizens across Scotland, noting that in one school an uptake of the vaccine jumped from 40 to 60 per cent following the campaign. It was proof of an immediate win for the campaign and of the lasting impact the gathering will have on Scotland.

Details 2024.ipvconference.org

Outstanding sporting event

Tour of Britain – Scottish Borders

The judges were impressed with the smart way a world-class sporting competition shows a spotlight on Scotland's scenery. The Tour of Britain is the UK's biggest professional bike race, running over six days. In 2024 the opening leg kicked off in the Scottish Borders.

The opening stage was a whopping 113-mile rollercoaster loop from Kelso via Coldstream, Melrose, Jedburgh and St Boswells. The race followed the rivers Tweed and Teviot, taking in climbs up to Scott's View, the Eildon Hills and Dunton Hill, finishing with cobbled streets back in Kelso.

Keen to have a go but don't quite have the lungs and thighs? The 35-mile Four Abbays loop via Kelso, Melrose, Jedburgh and Dryburgh includes some key ascents from the Tour of Britain — minus that pro peloton breathing down your neck (scotlandstartshere.com/tours/4-abbays).

Details britishcycling.org.uk/toursofbritain

Best luxury experience

Knockinaam Lodge, nr Portpatrick

A finalist in the 2024 Thistle Awards, a few things impressed the judges enough to make sure Knockinaam



Lodge in Dumfries and Galloway didn't miss out on the award for best luxury experience this time around. Firstly, staff attentiveness, where bespoke experiences were created for guests at the five-star luxury boutique hotel, a former shooting lodge.

The hotel has teamed up with local businesses to offer tailor-made packages, including falconry experiences, gourmet weekends and in-room massages.

Judges liked how committed the Knockinaam team is to reducing food miles: see for example the kitchen garden, where chef Tony Pierce can forage ingredients every day. Pierce has been in charge of the cooking for almost three decades now and Knockinaam holds three AA Rosettes for Culinary Excellence.

History buffs may also enjoy that former British prime minister Winston Churchill and US president Dwight D Eisenhower are rumoured to have had a clandestine strategy meeting here in 1944 to plan the D-Day landings. The Churchill Suite is where Churchill stayed and is one of Knockinaam's largest rooms (there are ten suites in all), featuring a seating area around the original fireplace and views over the garden, the Irish Sea and a private cove below. **Details** Dinner, B&B doubles from £470, knockinaamlodge.com



Rising star winner
Hugh Mackay

Thinker, piper, soldier, storyteller, rising star

After playing at the Tattoo, the Queen's funeral and King's coronation, **Hugh Mackay** now brings the Highlands to life

It has been quite a journey for the winner of this year's Rising Star award, sponsored by HIT Scotland. Two years ago Hugh Mackay was serving in the Highlanders, 4th Battalion — now he's a walking tour guide in the Highlands.

Mackay is no ordinary guide. An accomplished piper — he was

the lone piper at the Edinburgh Military Tattoo in 2022 and 2023, and played at the Queen's funeral and the King's coronation — Mackay treats guests to stirring performances on the pipes, adding an unforgettable element to his tours. He also curates playlists for guests, themed on the regions visited. His Highland Experience Tours offer a deep, personal connection to Scotland's landscapes and stories.

Judges were particularly impressed by Mackay's people-first approach and emotional intelligence, as well as his ability to think critically about the wider

impact of his work on visitors and local communities. They noted how Mackay adds value for local businesses through spend in restaurants, cafes and shops. And all of this comes after one year in the tourism industry.

Another thing that stood out for the judges was Mackay's passion for mental health advocacy and community engagement. And he ensures that every guest feels welcomed, valued and inspired. His story is one of transformation and purpose: his work makes a meaningful difference in the lives of visitors and colleagues alike.

From soldier to storyteller, Mackay's journey has come full circle — once serving the Highlands, now sharing them. His mix of music, empathy and entrepreneurial flair has struck a chord with visitors and locals, proving that tourism at its best isn't just about seeing Scotland but feeling it. If this is the future of Scottish hospitality, it's in good hands.
Jenny Froome

Employer of the year

The Torridon, Torridon

The UK's most northerly five-star hotel, The Torridon is surrounded by rugged Munros and glistering lochs. Hotel guests come here to indulge in gourmet cuisine and rare malt whiskies, or book the Boathouse for some luxurious self-catering with knockout views.

The Torridon's owners, Dan and Robaie Rose-Bristow, were commended by the Thistle judges for how they look after their staff. Before moving to Torridon in 1999 the couple worked in the corporate world. Dan was a City bond trader and Robaie was a corporate event organiser. More than 60 staff live on site in the remote boutique Highland resort, where the nearest supermarket is almost an hour away on foot, so bikes are provided for staff. A number of strong staffing initiatives came to the judges' attention, including opportunities to do exchanges with other hotels across the UK and one fifth of the team being promoted in the last year.

When staff had issues, the judges felt that feedback via a staff engagement portal was not just taken seriously but acted upon promptly. **Details** B&B doubles from £462, thetorridon.com

Individual of the year

Sheila Gilmore, VisitArran, Isle of Arran

Born and bred on Arran, Sheila Gilmore is the driving force behind much of the success that Arran's tourism has enjoyed of late. Her leadership was instrumental in securing Unesco Global Geopark status for Arran earlier this year, an ambition that reflects her love for the island's natural and cultural heritage and her determination to show the island off to the rest of the world.

As chief executive of VisitArran, Gilmore's influence spans from grassroots initiatives to national policy. She is a passionate advocate for sustainable and community-led tourism. What impressed the judges was Gilmore's ability to operate at every level — hosting international buyers, representing island interests in national forums and tidying up the leaflets on the island's ferries. She firmly believes that what benefits residents will ultimately enhance the visitor experience too — and it's at the heart of everything she does. Gilmore's energy, collaborative spirit, and unwavering dedication to Arran's people and place comes from her personal ties to the island and made her a standout winner.



Below: a replica of the Neweast helmet discovered at the site of a Roman fort in Neweast on display at Trinonium Museum



Left: The world-class sporting competition the Tour of Britain. Above: The best luxury experience winner Knockinaam Lodge. Below: The Torridon won the employer of the year award



Marina Huggett wins Silver Thistle

The highest honour goes to a woman who has changed the fabric of Scottish tourism — setting a benchmark for its future

After spending a lifetime helping others shine, it's time for Marina Huggett to step into the spotlight. A constant champion for Scottish tourism, Huggett has been named the 2025 recipient of the Silver Thistle Award, the highest honour at awards. It's a fitting tribute to a woman whose influence has quietly shaped the fabric of Scottish tourism.

Huggett's journey began not in boardrooms but in the bustle of housekeeping and waitressing jobs while she was at school. That early introduction to hospitality forged a deep-rooted commitment to service, standards and the people behind the scenes. Today she's one of the most respected voices in the industry, an innovator, mentor and ambassador whose work has elevated businesses, communities and national strategy.

Though Huggett is based in the Highlands, the impact of her work is felt across Scotland. For more than 18 years she has served as a judge and founding director of the Highlands & Islands Thistle Awards, championing fairness and excellence. She has helped shape the national tourism strategy through her eight years on the board of the Scottish Tourism Alliance and supported destination development as vice-chair of Visit Inverness Loch Ness.

As a trustee of Hospitality Industry Trust (HIT) Scotland, Huggett has nurtured future talent through scholarships and mentoring, and was among the first in Scotland to deliver WorldHot customer service training, setting a new benchmark for the sector. She is also a fellow of the Institute of Hospitality and is a member of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, further solidifying her role as a sculptor of the tourism industry's backbone.

But Huggett's legacy goes beyond the moulding of Scottish tourism's workforce and into its transformation. Under her leadership Achnagairn Estate (perfect-manors.com), near Inverness, has become a globally recognised luxury events venue, drawing international visitors to the Highlands and showcasing Scotland as a world-class destination. Through her consultancy firm, Tourism Excellence Consultancy, she has supported hundreds of small businesses to improve quality, resilience and leadership.

Her expertise has been recognised in the TV world too. As head judge on Scotland's Greatest Escapes Huggett has helped bring the country's tourism story to life on screen, while her repeated inclusion in the Top 100 Women in Tourism and recognition at the Scottish Women's awards are testament to how highly regarded she is within the industry.

What also makes Huggett stand out is her unwavering belief in responsible tourism. She has embedded sustainability into estate management, championed inclusivity through HIT Scotland



Marina Huggett takes the Thistle Awards' top prize for her tourism work

and worked to ensure tourism benefits local communities. At Achnagairn she has created experiences that celebrate Highland heritage while making sure they can be enjoyed by people from anywhere in the world.

Her innovations have helped the sector evolve and include hybrid judging processes after Covid and new approaches in leadership development that blend HR and hospitality expertise. She has been ahead of the curve, advocating for quality assurance and experienced tourism long before it became mainstream.

"Marina's contribution to Scottish tourism is not just impressive, it's indispensable," says Barbara Smith, the chair of the Scottish Thistle Awards. "She's helped form the values we now associate with modern Scottish tourism: fairness, excellence and a deep respect for status and place."

Smith adds: "Marina's dedication to excellence is matched by her ability to spark collaboration across the industry. She is a pillar of our sector whose efforts continue to contribute to the flourishing of the visitor economy."

And she's not slowing down. Huggett continues to serve on panels, boards and initiatives that influence the future of the industry. Her work mirrors the priorities of Scotland Outlook 2030, developing passionate people, supporting thriving places and creating memorable experiences.

In honouring Marina Huggett with the Silver Thistle Award, the industry celebrates not just a career but a legacy. She's a quiet powerhouse whose vision and dedication have helped make Scottish tourism what it is today — and is shaping what it can be tomorrow.
By Mark Floyd

“Huggett is a pillar of our sector who continues to help the visitor economy flourish”

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



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