

If you want a memorable — and affordable — stalking experience, club together with some mates and head north, says **Victoria Brooks**, from the Scottish Country Sports Tourism Group

Highland stags on a budget

Nowhere on earth can match Scotland's unique blend of scenery, tradition and hospitality and nothing is quite like the experience of stalking red stags on a Scottish hillside. For some visitors, money is no object, but those on more modest incomes can enjoy the same thrill stalking a red stag in Scotland's breathtaking scenery without resorting to beans on toast for the rest of the year.

If you know where to look, you can stalk a red stag for as little as £300 and if you are canny about your travel and accommodation, you can enjoy the sporting experience of a lifetime

for less than a package holiday on a Mediterranean beach. Scotland ranks as one of the most accessible sporting destinations in the world with its excellent road, rail and air links — and for UK sportsmen and women it's all on our doorstep. No wonder fieldsports contribute well over £250million to Scotland's economy each year.

The best way to enjoy sport on a budget is to book a trip with a group of like-minded friends. You can share the driving and fuel costs, and stay in inexpensive self-catering accommodation such as a bothy.

Sporting agent Charles Brownlow, who is based in the Borders, says: "I have

around 150 estates and river beats on my books, and my best value stalking offer is a bothy for six people self-catering for a week at £2,250, or £375 per person. That includes three stags, and you can add extra stags at £350 + VAT each. Prices have risen steadily in recent years and stags usually start at £400-£450, but if you take a lodge as well, they can be as little as £300 + VAT. You sometimes hear of someone paying as little as £250 for a stag, but if you ask you discover they were friends of the owner staying in the big house."

Charles' sporting packages go up to £20,000 per week for visiting sportsmen, but his bread-and-butter is what he calls

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◀ “mates” holidays for younger clients. “Most of my clients are aged 25 to 35,” he says. “They’re at the age where they’ve started to earn a bit of money, but they don’t have a lot of spare cash. The ideal package for them is a lived-in Victorian lodge with 20-30,000 acres of stalking, a river and the opportunity to do a bit of walked-up grouse shooting.”

Affordable options

For those on limited budgets there are plenty of options. For example, Ardnamurchan estate is on a rocky peninsula that juts into the Atlantic just above the Isle of Mull, where sporting agent Niall Rowantree of West Highland Hunting offers “everything from the very top end all the way through to the affordable stalk for the man on a small budget”.

Niall charges per stag rather than by the day, and over the past four years his clients have had 100 per cent success. “When you’re booking stalking, it’s important to look out for any hidden



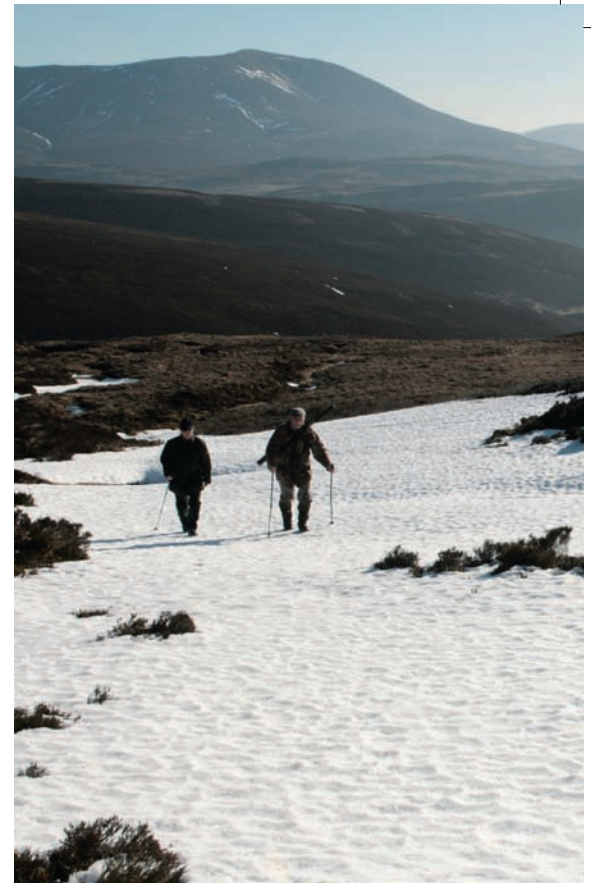
◀ The SCSTG website also includes grouse shooting holidays in its listings

costs,” he says. “A cheap day rate can add up if you take two days to shoot a stag, and then have to pay extra to have the stag’s head boiled and so on.”

His best stags, with upwards of 15 points, go for up to £3,500, but a typical Ardnamurchan red stag will cost around £650. That includes the head boiled and prepared, ready to take away with you 48 hours later. “You can shoot a stag for less elsewhere, but we provide our stags with feed and shelter over the winter and we only shoot mature stags,” he explains.

“It takes seven long and lonely winters to grow a decent stag; we need to recover that investment.”

Niall tailors his packages to suit individuals and groups — accommodation starts at £400 for a week in a self-catering cottage. For the experienced stalker, he offers self-guided stalking around areas of newly established woodland. You will need a minimum of DMQ Level 2, public liability insurance through membership



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of a shooting organisation, and the ability to follow a map. You must also be willing to sign a statement that you’re in good physical health, as you’ll be doing your own stalking and gralloching and dragging the carcass to a collection point. If you can tick all those boxes, the price is £80 per outing, plus £220 for each beast shot.

“For the absolute maximum bang for your buck, it’s got to be winter hindstalking,” says Niall. “You can have two guys go out with one guide for £350 a day. The guide will stalk you in, you can shoot up to four animals in the day and there’s an ATV to get the animals home. Plus it can count towards your DMQ Level 2 portfolio. That’s tremendous value for money, and if you want you can take your venison home butchered and packed.”

Niall makes his last point a plea from the heart: “Visitors don’t always realise how important their financial contribution is to Scottish communities. Taking part in Scottish fieldsports is the best way of supporting what you believe in, the wildness and the wildlife. In a recession especially, it’s important to us.”

It won’t be your primary reason for booking that Scottish stalking break, but parting with the money is easier when you know it is helping to keep the rural economy thriving. ■



Sporting holidays help pump money into the rural economy



Highland stalking offers top sport in unique and dramatic scenery

The Scottish Country Sports Tourism Group

The Scottish Country Sports Tourism Group (SCSTG) was set up in 2004 by the major Scottish country sports organisations, including the Association of Deer Management Groups, BASC, Scottish Land & Estates and the Association of Salmon Fishery Boards, and works in partnership with them alongside the official tourist board, VisitScotland, as well as Scottish Natural Heritage and Scottish Enterprise.



It keeps a comprehensive database of sporting providers and agents, along with fieldsports-friendly accommodation — an important consideration when you may be returning from a day on the hill with muddy boots, a soggy Labrador and a gun that needs to be cleaned and stored securely.

For example, at the time of going to press, Aberchlder estate at Invergarry is offering a package including accommodation for ten and shooting up to six red stags during the week, with stags priced at £450 + VAT each. The same estate is offering a Macnab Challenge package for £1,500, with the opportunity to catch a salmon, shoot a brace of grouse and a red stag in the space of 24 hours.

A similar opportunity is offered by the East Haugh House Hotel, near Pitlochry in Perthshire, for £1,320 + VAT per person. The hotel is run by fieldsports enthusiasts Lesley and Neil McGown, and offers red stag stalking during the season — from 1 July to 20 October — at prices from £490 per beast.

The SCSTG website (www.countrysportscotland.com) includes a comprehensive guide to the traditions and etiquette of Scottish fieldsports, details of the shooting seasons in Scotland and information for visitors bringing guns from abroad.

A special offers page, where estates that have had cancellations offer great last minute deals, is also well worth keeping an eye on, as are the listings for everything from ferreting to grouse shooting.



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