

# A snap decision that proved to be a real life-changer

**T**HIS month marks 20 years since I first set foot on Scottish soil. In early 2001, I was sitting in an audience of arts and media people at the University of Toronto and had no idea attending a film lecture would have such a huge impact on my life.

During his presentation, screenwriter Murray Watts made passing mention of a mysterious place in the far north of Scotland called Freswick Castle. He invited anyone who was interested to come and visit. I looked over at my friends and we immediately exchanged an excited glance. Was he really inviting us to a castle in Scotland?

I was at a crossroads in my life and looking for the next step forward. I couldn't get the idea of this castle out of my mind and as the months passed the idea grew stronger.

One day, it came up in conversation with a friend and he said: "Why don't you go?"



## Northern Drift

by Monique Sliedrecht



*I grabbed all my bags and ran across the airport in a wild flurry. Exhausted by the whole process I soon fell asleep in my seat only to wake a few hours later to the steward's: 'Welcome to Glasgow!'*

"I'd love to but I can't afford the ticket," I replied.

My friend smiled and said that, as it happened, his mother worked for Air Canada. She had a few tickets to give away but had to get rid of them quickly. I was stunned. A few days later he handed me a ticket and said: "It's yours."

All I needed to do was go over to the airport ready for a flight to Glasgow and wait until my name was called. The cost? Airport tax, which at the time was about \$25 Canadian.

In the next couple of weeks, I told my incredulous family and friends I was suddenly going to Scotland, without any clear plan. "I'll just do a few paintings," I said.

On October 26, 2001 I made my way to Toronto



A rainbow over Freswick Castle.

Airport. I remember thinking to myself: "This is crazy. I don't even know where I am going. If my name is not called for this flight, I won't go." But 10 minutes before the plane was set to depart, I heard over the loudspeaker: "Monique Sliedrecht!!" I grabbed all my bags, and ran across the airport in a wild flurry. It was too late to turn back. Exhausted by the whole process I soon fell asleep in my seat, only to wake up a few hours later to the steward's: "Welcome to Glasgow!"

From the airport I made my way to Queen Street Station, hopped on a train and took it to the end of the line: Wick.

By this time it was dark and I had no concept of my surroundings. When I got to the end of the line, I was warmly greeted by a man in a black suit who I vaguely recognised as the screenwriter. We drove off into the windy night.

I was taken to the imposing castle lounge in the castle where a roaring fire was burning. There were various guests staying at the time and one of them asked: "Do you have any idea where you are?" He then opened the window and called me over to listen. The sound of waves crashing against the shore reached my ears. I was amazed at how close to the sea we were! I was blasted by the

wild winds of Caithness and it was invigorating.

In my jet-lagged state, it was all so surreal. At midnight I went to sleep by the fire in one of the cottages, as it was the only space left, and I slept like a baby until noon the next day.

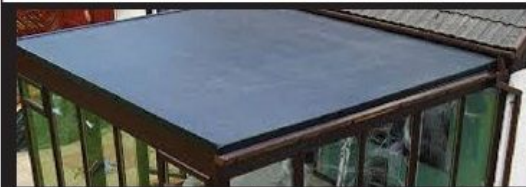
On waking I looked out to a view of the castle for the first time, and a rainbow that stretched over the sea. In the coming days I saw so many rainbows and amazing cloudscapes. I was captivated by the far north, and it is hardly surprising that my plan to stay for six weeks turned into six months... which turned into six years, and the rest is history.

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