



THE LOVE SCOTLAND GUIDE N. 003

Tartan

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Contrary to what many souvenir shops suggest, there is no ancient "clan tartan" system stretching back to the mists of Highland history. The idea that each family has always owned a specific named sett was largely codified in the 19th century, much of it popularised around King George IV's 1822 visit to Edinburgh. That does not make tartan less real or less Scottish - it simply means the story is more interesting than the tea-towel version. This is Guide 003 in The Love Scotland Guide series.

What Tartan Actually Is

Tartan is a pattern, not a fabric. The correct name for a specific tartan design is a sett - the repeating sequence of coloured stripes and their widths. Because the same sequence of threads runs in both the warp (lengthwise) and weft (crosswise) directions and is woven in a twill, the colours cross to produce blended, diagonal blocks: where blue crosses green you get a third shade, and so on. Reproduce the thread count and

colour order and you have reproduced the tartan, regardless of whether it is woven in wool, printed on cotton, or rendered on a screen.

A related word, plaid, causes endless confusion. In North America "plaid" is used loosely to mean any tartan-like check. In Scotland a plaid is a garment - a large length of cloth worn over the shoulder, as in the belted plaid that predates the modern tailored kilt. For centuries, the colours in a length of cloth reflected what dyes were locally available and what a particular weaver produced, not a fixed badge of family identity.

After the 1745 Jacobite rising, the Dress Act of 1746 banned Highland dress, including tartan, for ordinary men outside the army. The ban ran until 1782. When it lifted, tartan re-emerged transformed - increasingly romanticised, commercialised, and organised into the named clan setts we recognise today, a process accelerated by that 1822 royal visit and by Queen Victoria's later love of Balmoral.

How Tartan Is Made

Traditional tartan is woven as a 2/2 twill, meaning each weft thread passes over two warp threads and under two, shifting by one each row to create the characteristic diagonal weave. The weaver follows a thread count - for example "B24 K4 R2 K24" - which lists each colour by its abbreviation and the number of threads. That single line of code is effectively the tartan's DNA, and it is what registries record rather than a picture.

Since 2009 the official record has been the Scottish Register of Tartans, maintained by National Records of Scotland. Anyone can design and register a new tartan, which is why there are registered setts for corporations, districts, universities, countries and events, not only clans. Colour variations such as "ancient," "modern," "weathered" and "hunting" refer to dye palettes - "ancient" using lighter shades meant to suggest older vegetable dyes - applied to the same underlying sett.

Wearing It Today

There is no law dictating who may wear which tartan. If you have a Scottish surname you are welcome to wear its associated tartan, but you are equally free to choose one you simply like, or a district tartan tied to a place rather than a family. Universal or "generic" tartans such as Black Watch, Royal Stewart and the Flower of Scotland sett are worn widely without any clan claim at all.

If you want a genuine article rather than a printed imitation, look for cloth woven from wool in a twill, ideally by an established Scottish mill. A hand-tailored kilt uses several metres of cloth pleated to the sett or to the stripe, and the difference between that and a sewn-down printed version is immediately obvious in the drape.

Myths Worth Retiring

Myth: Every clan has always had its own ancient tartan. Most named clan tartans date from the late 18th and 19th centuries. Before that, tartan reflected regional weavers and available dyes, not fixed family ownership.

Myth: You are only allowed to wear "your" tartan. There is no rule or law restricting this. Anyone may wear most tartans; only a handful, such as certain royal and regimental setts, carry conventions about permission.

Myth: Tartan and plaid are the same thing. Tartan is the patterned cloth; a plaid, in Scottish usage, is a garment made from a length of it. The North American habit of calling any check "plaid" is a later, separate usage.

Frequently Asked Questions

Can I wear tartan if I'm not Scottish?

Yes. There is no restriction on wearing tartan by nationality. Many people choose a district tartan, a universal sett like Black Watch, or simply a design they like. If you want a family connection, you can look up whether your surname has an associated tartan in the Scottish Register of Tartans.

What is the difference between "ancient" and "modern" tartan?

They are the same sett in different colour palettes. "Modern" uses deeper, darker shades produced by chemical dyes, while "ancient" uses lighter tones meant to evoke older vegetable-based dyeing. "Weathered" or "muted" versions imitate cloth faded by age and exposure.

How do I find out if my family has a tartan?

Search your surname or clan name in the Scottish Register of Tartans, the official database held by National Records of Scotland. Bear in mind that many surnames link to a clan through historical associations, so you may find a tartan under a clan name rather than your exact spelling.