



THE LOVE SCOTLAND GUIDE N. 007

The Ceilidh (Music & Dance)

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The word ceilidh comes from the Old Gaelic cèilidh, meaning simply "a visit" - originally a night of storytelling, song and gossip by the fireside, with no dancing involved at all. The dancing we now associate with the word arrived later, and the key figure at any modern ceilidh is not a dancer but the caller, who shouts the steps before each dance so that a room full of strangers can get it mostly right. This is Guide 007 in The Love Scotland Guide series.

What a Ceilidh Actually Is

A ceilidh (pronounced "KAY-lee") is a social gathering built around traditional Scottish music and group dancing. The dances are done in sets - couples in lines, circles, or squares - and almost always involve swapping partners, linking arms and spinning, which is why nobody is expected to arrive knowing the steps. A caller walks the room through each figure before the band strikes up, so the whole point is participation

rather than performance.

The music is led by fiddle and accordion, usually backed by a drum kit, keyboard and sometimes bagpipes, played in driving reels, jigs and marches. Organisations such as Hands Up for Trad and the Gaelic arts charity [Fèisean nan Gàidheal](#) work to keep this living tradition passing between generations rather than freezing it as a museum piece.

The Dances You'll Meet

A handful of dances turn up at nearly every event. The Gay Gordons is usually first because it is the simplest - a couple walking forward and back around the room. The Dashing White Sergeant puts you in groups of three facing another three; Strip the Willow (also called the Orcadian version) sends couples spinning down a long line; and the Eightsome Reel, danced in a square of four couples, is the ambitious one that tends to come after a drink or two.

Many of these figures are shared with Scottish country dancing, the more formal cousin codified by the Royal Scottish Country Dance Society, founded in Glasgow in 1923. A ceilidh is the relaxed end of that same family: same steps, far less precision expected.

Where to Find One

Ceilidhs run year-round across Scotland, from village halls to weddings to dedicated club nights. In Glasgow, [Sloans](#) - the city's oldest bar and restaurant - has hosted a long-running weekly ceilidh in its upstairs ballroom. Festivals are another reliable route: [Celtic Connections](#), held in Glasgow each January, programmes ceilidh nights alongside hundreds of concerts of traditional and folk music.

If you are visiting and want to plan around one, [VisitScotland](#) lists events and venues region by region. Weddings and Hogmanay celebrations are also near-guaranteed opportunities, as a ceilidh band is a standard booking for both.

How to Survive Your First One

The etiquette is forgiving. You do not need a partner to arrive - people pair up on the floor, and it is entirely normal to ask a stranger to dance. Comfortable shoes matter more than formal dress, because you will be spinning on a wooden floor for hours. Listen to the caller, keep a loose grip when you swing so nobody gets flung off, and accept that the first run-through of any dance will be chaos; that is part of the fun, not a failure.

Myths Worth Retiring

Myth: A ceilidh is a dance. Fact: the word originally meant a social visit of music, song and storytelling. Dancing became central only later, and in parts of the Highlands and Islands a cèilidh can still mean a house gathering with barely a dance step in sight.

Myth: You have to know the steps beforehand. Fact: the caller exists precisely so you don't. Walk-throughs

before each dance are standard, and newcomers are expected and welcomed.

Myth: It's the same thing as Scottish country dancing. Fact: they overlap heavily, but country dancing is the more technical, codified discipline, while a ceilidh is the informal, anyone-can-join social version.

Frequently Asked Questions

How do you pronounce "ceilidh"?

It is said "KAY-lee," with the stress on the first syllable. The spelling looks daunting because it is Gaelic rather than English, but the sound is straightforward once you've heard it once.

Do I need a partner to go?

No. Many of the dances rotate partners anyway, and it is completely ordinary to turn up alone or with a group of friends and pair off on the floor as each dance begins.

What should I wear?

Comfortable clothes you can move and sweat in, plus shoes with a bit of grip but not heavy soles. Formal wear and kilts appear at weddings and Hogmanay, but for a regular ceilidh nobody expects a costume - practicality on the dance floor matters far more.

Official websites mentioned

Fèisean nan Gàidheal: feisean.org

Sloans: sloansglasgow.com

Celtic Connections: celticconnections.com

VisitScotland: visitscotland.com