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Librarians Tour of Scotland

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BLAAAAAT! What th...? I fumble the alarm clock off, but the noise continues BLAAAAAT! If we were at home, I'd think the library was having a fire drill. But it's 4 a.m. in a University of Edinburgh dormitory, and BLAAAAAT! It is a fire alarm!

My roommate Jennifer and I pull blankets around our shoulders and head outside with all the teens who are here for a swim competition. A few teens obviously have not yet been to bed. One young man shivering in his boxers obviously had been deeply asleep.

Jennifer and I are not teenage swimmers. We are middle-aged librarians on a Librarians Tour to Scotland, led by Jane Pearlmutter, of the University of Wisconsin library school. For the next two weeks we visit traditional tourist sites, such as Edinburgh Castle and Rosslyn Chapel. But we also tour libraries, such as the modern Mitchell Library in Glasgow and Sir Walter Scott's personal collection in his home Abbotsford. Down a lane through a pasture where tree branches scrape the top of our bus, we find the lovely Innerpefferay Library, Scotland's first public library. In the 1600s when the library opened, this was the main road across Scotland. We gaze at early books and then at the librarian's new little daughter while his wife serves us tea and cookies.

But first, a few hours after that early fire alarm, triggered by a forbidden cigarette too close to a smoke detector, we tour the National Library of Scotland. In an elegant paneled room, scholars in mandatory white gloves examine rare books propped on special stands. We learn the process for requesting admission to this reading room and for requesting materials from the closed stacks. Then we are led down into the depths of the decidedly utilitarian closed stacks. Our guide is explaining that in order to make best use of the limited space, the books are organized by size, when BLAAAAAT! The guide is terribly polite and embarrassed, but we must evacuate the building due to a fire alarm. Visiting libraries, like all travel, can be full of surprises. That's why we go. 🌿



Jane Pearlmutter combines her passions for travel and librarianship by leading library tours abroad. It is probably too late to sign up for the Librarians Tour to Germany in 2011, but to receive information about future tours, you may contact her at:

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