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Want to be a Scottish lord or lady?
Opportunity beckons at suburban festival,
where 'titles' will be sold



At the Scottish Festival & Highland Games in suburban Itasca this weekend, there's whiskey-tasting, haggis-hurling and men in kilts aplenty.

A wee bit more controversially, there is also a chance for festivalgoers to buy tiny pieces of a Scottish estate — and get what's being touted as an “official title” of lord or lady in the deal.

The land being sold by Highland Titles in plots as small as 1 square foot is in a nature reserve in the Scottish Highlands called Glencoe Wood. For the price — which typically starts around \$46 for the smallest plots, but those are being offered at the festival for \$40 — buyers not only become conservationists but receive a certificate of sale decreeing them a lord or lady.

Critics scoff at this as being misleading at best, as generally peerage titles are conferred by heredity or by the monarchy. And the British agency that regulates advertising upheld a complaint in 2015 that some of the company's ads were too ambiguous about the property's location, according to a BBC report.

But supporters say, don't get your royal britches in a bunch. They say it's just for fun, similar to buying a piece of the moon or having a star named after you — though in this case, one can actually visit the site.

"It's only a courtesy title," explained Lord Stephen Rossiter of Highland Titles. "It's not bestowed by the monarchy, and it's a bit of a novelty. The public understands they're not buying into regal heritage."

What buyers are getting is a souvenir plot of land reserved in their name in a nature preserve. Because the plots are too small to register, according to information on the Scottish Parliament website, "there is no true purchase involved as no title can be obtained." But it goes on to say: "The Registers of Scotland have no knowledge of any problems caused by them."

Highland Titles was created in 2006, Rossiter said, by Peter Bevis and his daughter Laura, who initially needed to raise funds to go to college.

Since then, they say, more than 100,000 people have bought into the plan. About a quarter of them are from the United States, with about half from Europe, and a chunk from Australia, many of whom are of Scottish descent, and others who support environmental conservation, Rossiter said.

While Highland Titles is a successful business, Rossiter estimated that some \$1.5 million has been invested in restoring the 250-acre reserve and in buying a second site nearby, with the land placed in a charitable trust.



Stephen Rossiter of Highland Titles sells tiny plots of land in Scotland at the Scottish festival in Itasca. Buyers get a novelty title of lord or lady. (Robert McCoppin / Chicago Tribune)

Restoration consists of planting native oak and birch trees, cutting down nonnative Sitka spruce, building walking paths and trying to attract native wildlife like red squirrels, osprey and Scottish wildcats, Rossiter said.

But tracking how the money is spent is difficult because Highland Titles does not issue public financial reports, he acknowledged.

The company also offers a phone app that lets customers keep track of how far they are from their plot, with a compass that homes in on the site as they approach. About 8,000 people a year make the trek to the reserve, about a two-hour-plus drive north of Glasgow.

Some of those attending the festival in Itasca who heard the Highland Titles sales pitch were quite taken with the idea and didn't take the title seriously.

"I've never been to Scotland, but I would love to be a lady of Scotland," said Peggy Kinst of Oak Brook. "I think it's a wonderful idea. ... They're using that to take care of the land."

Rossiter himself takes his title of Lord from the program as "a bit of fun."

It is unlikely one could put the title of lord or lady on their driver's license or passport without legally changing one's name, though Rossiter maintained some credit cards will let patrons get away with it.

Some holders of actual peerage titles have reportedly sold titles for large sums, but that's a different matter. Online sites such as FakeTitles.com, said to be run by the Earl of Bradford, have tried to warn buyers of "scams" run by "scoundrels" selling bogus titles.

Online reviews show many Highland Titles customers buy the plots as gifts. As one customer put it, "Perfect gift for the person who has everything and needs nothing!"

As might be said of a member of the royalty.

The Highland Games & Scottish festival takes place Friday and Saturday at Hamilton Lakes in Itasca.