Scones, Skills, Survival.

I am a fairly recent member of the SWI - or “The Rural”, as my mother and her friends fondly called it. To me, it was a mysterious organisation involving covered dishes, handwritten minutes and women who could produce a prize-winning Victoria sponge at five minutes’ notice.

Since joining, I have made a very special friend, formerly a National Chairperson of what was then the SWRI. She has travelled the length and breadth of Scotland, meeting members from every corner of the country, and she has been generous enough to share her wisdom with me - along with several cautionary tales.

This has proved invaluable, as I am spending part of this year travelling to near and far-flung Federations to present the Evelyn Baxter Scholarship course.

Her advice has been clear.

Firstly, diet before you go. SWI hospitality is not for the faint-hearted - or the tight-waisted. No sooner have you politely accepted one piece of home baking than another appears beside it. Refusal is futile. By the end of a visit, you may have sampled shortbread, scones, tablet and three varieties of traybake, all while insisting, “Oh, just a tiny piece, then.”

Secondly, never underestimate an SWI member. The quiet lady sitting in the corner may be an expert in dry-stane walling, international affairs, competitive jam-making and emergency zip replacement. She will also know precisely where you went wrong with your crochet.

Thirdly - and most importantly - if you are staying overnight with a member, always find out where the loo is before bedtime. There is nothing dignified about creeping through a strange house at 3 a.m., opening cupboards, meeting the cat and accidentally wandering into your hostess’s bedroom.

The SWI is friendship and fun served, of course, with tea and an entirely unnecessary second scone.

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