

Discover the Gems: Walking Edinburgh's Royal Mile

Appreciate Edinburgh by strolling around aimlessly; a popular, justified pastime. A stage for a romantic opera, few parts feel modern; the countryside and sea are wonderfully close. The wind carries at times the distinctive, sweet smell of malt from breweries. With the delightful spread of recognisable landmarks, losing bearings is impossible.

The brooding crags of Edinburgh's Castle Rock, an ancient volcano resting on a hilltop crowned by the iconic castle draws millions annually, especially the Military Tattoo.



Robert the Bruce and William Wallace guard the gateway above the inscription – 'Nemo Me Impune Lacessit' (No one "cuts" me with impunity); the royal apartments, winding stairs, ramparts and views are outstanding. The National War Memorial by Robert Lorimer, in the Hall of Honours lists 150,000 war heroes. St. Margaret's Chapel, oldest in Scotland (1130), restored for Margaret's 900th death anniversary (1993) retains unaltered interiors. The 15thC Palace has the Honours of Scotland – the nation's jewels – the crown, with gold of Robert Bruce's 14thC coronet, the sceptre, dazzling globe, the intricately carved sword presented by Pope Julius II and the Stone of Destiny solemnizing kings since the 9thC. Crammed with armour, the 16thC hammer-beamed roof of James IV's Great Hall used for parliamentary ceremonial meetings has vaults restored as 18thC prisons with graffiti etched by prisoners. A charming garden has a pet cemetery where companions of castle officers rest. In the Mill's Mount Battery the One o'clock gun is fired daily to an ear-splitting signal. Marvel at Mons Meg, a giant 15thC siege gun which burst after firing James VII's birthday salute (1681).

When ice sheets moved, they dumped debris behind the volcanic plug of Castle Rock leaving the lengthy 'crag and tail', a distinctive, gently sloping ridge defining Edinburgh's growth. Its finest, oldest and most famous street – the Royal Mile (1 mile, 107 yards with history etched in stone), from the castle's esplanade onto Holyroodhouse echoing Reformation, Stuart struggle and loss of Scottish independence. Quirky, colourful, baronial – this cobble-stoned, processional route linking the Castle, Parliament and Palace sports a festive atmosphere with tourists, performers and shops selling tartan souvenirs, patterned kilts, jumpers, socks, etc. The medieval spire of St. Giles Kirk (patron saint of cripples, lepers and nursing mothers), Scotland's first parish church (1140) in the heart of Old Town has Edinburgh's

oldest coat of arms featuring St Giles' deer hind and tombs of leaders of religious wars. The Thistle Chapel built for the Knights of the Most Ancient and the Most Noble Order of the Thistle by James III (15thC) has elaborate Gothic stalls, armoury and stained-glass windows.



John Knox House, the oldest surviving tenement has external staircases, overhanging upper floors, crow-stepped gables and labyrinthine interiors. Gladstone's Land with mellow decorations on beamed ceilings show tall stone buildings utilising space and preventing fires. Writers' Museum in Lady Stair's House celebrates Walter Scott, Robert L. Stevenson and Robert Burns. Tron Kirk's magnificent steeple destroyed by fire (1820s) was popular with the fashionable gentry ('Maiden Market') and traditionally ushered the New Year. The 16thC cobbled surfaces of Marlin's Wynd has cellars, staircases, alleys and drains.

Real Mary King's Close, the spooky subterranean labyrinth reflects 17thC life with ancient smelling, dusty rooms. The imposing Georgian City Chambers where merchants met near Mercat Cross, a 15thC ornamental capital near Fishmarket Close which symbolized medieval Edinburgh's trading privileges and witnessed important weddings, hangings and proclamations. The Parliament had a spectacular procession in its Last Riding (1707). With hammer-beam ceilings, Danish oak beams, decorative corbels, a remodelled front with Alexander Mylne's Justice and Mercy, portraits of powerful lawyers, it now serves the Court of Session.

The oldest lead statue (1685) in Britain of Charles II ('Two-faced Charlie' for the face attached back of his armour) atop a charger is here. The National Covenant signed in Greyfriars Kirk (1638) affirmed the church's independence. In its reputedly haunted precincts rest Allan Ramsey, William Adam and Skye terrier Bobby who guarded his master's grave. The Museum of Edinburgh displays history on the National Covenant, One o'clock gun and Bobby's collar and bowl.

The Scotch Whisky Experience upholds the history and romance of the national drink from barley to bottle. Meet the Master Blender, visit the Whisky Appreciation Society, enjoy a 'whisky barrel ride' or taste from 300 whiskies. The Outlook Tower and Camera Obscura using lenses throws live images on screen coupled with captivating stories. At Canongate Tolbooth – erstwhile collection point, council house, courtroom and jail; spitting supposedly bring good luck! Cobblestone heart-shaped stones marks the Heart of Midlothian immortalised by Scott. The People's Story highlights ordinary people's life. The Canongate Kirk's Dutch gable explains trade with Low Countries. Here economist Adam Smith, Lord Drummond rest.

Edinburgh's tallest spire (72 m), the Tolbooth Kirk (Highland Kirk) designed by James Graham and Augustus Pugin held Gaelic services for the Highland congregation. In Deacon Brodie's House lived the respectable councillor, a criminal by night inspiring *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. The once derelict district at Royal Mile's end has transformed to a thriving 'Holyrood Project' with *Our Dynamic Earth*, an interactive tour spanning 4500 million years of geological history. The new Scottish Parliament (2004), a controversial, ill-fated architectural project surpassing budget and time avoids pomposity.



The Palace of Holyroodhouse with fountains, battered stonework towers and conical turrets were built by James V (1535). Here Queen Mary lived (1561–1567). Her Apartments were extended to create a 17thC royal palace. In the bed chamber with a low painted ceilings and secret staircase with Lord Darnley's bedroom, her secretary-lover David Rizzio was stabbed. The Great Staircase has baroque plaster ceilings, exquisitely carved foliage and angels. Queen Victoria's dining room and Throne Room are modest. The Queen's Gallery showcases portraits of monarchs commissioned by Charles II for painter Jacob de Witt. Named from the fragment of the True Cross (rood in Scots) brought by St. Margaret, the Holyrood Abbey founded by David I (1128) has burial vaults of Kings David II, James II and James V. Holyrood Park's shaggy brown flanks of Arthur's Seat (251m) carved by ice sheets from deeply eroded stumps of a volcano erupting 350 million years ago dominates Edinburgh's skyline with remarkable views of the Forth Bridges and hills. The 650 acre grounds have crags, moorlands and lochs. Below the long, curving sweep of Salisbury Crag's solidified lava on sandstone is the Radical Road built on Scott's suggestion for employing unemployed weavers. Explore the rocks, intrusions and craters with an illustrated *Discovering Edinburgh's Volcano*. To digest the history and geology, sit over a drink in the Royal Mile or Old Town.

By Ilika Chakravarty

Academy of Business Management, Tourism and Research, Bangalore, India

63, Ferry Street, Horseshoe Close, London, E14 3DT, U.K.

ilika.chakravarty@gmail.com

Date: 2014-05-26

Article link:

<http://www.tourism-review.com/travel-tourism-magazine-edinburgh-discover-the-gems-and-the-royal-mile-article2413>