

# What's in store at the National Museum of Scotland

✘ We have been waiting patiently for over 3 years during the refurbishment of the [National Museum of Scotland](#). Since the doors closed on one of the most fabulous attractions in Edinburgh, there have been almost no clues as to what was going on inside.

For some of us the noises and sights of construction on an industrial scale were a worry. What could be happening to our beloved museum? Excitement grew this year as we awaited the grand unveiling and reopening. We wondered how the architects and exhibition designers would approach this grand Victorian edifice and refurbish it to compliment the striking contemporary wing, would the fish ponds and the stuffed animals remain?

You will be glad to find, however, that the museum retains its spirit of inspiration and eclecticism. The glamour of the building has been restored and the new installations are refreshing and make it a joy to explore and learn. A slogan for the refurbished Museum is 'discover the world under one roof', and this is the best description of the wonder of the place.

At the start of the project, the Victorian portion of [The National Museum of Scotland](#) had remained relatively unchanged since the foundation stone was laid in 1861. However, small adaptations over decades had resulted in inappropriate additions being made to the architecture, taking away from the simple elegance of the building.

Furthermore some of the exhibits were up to 75 years old, and the growth of the museum's collection over these years meant that an extraordinary proportion of fascinating artifacts had


been placed in storage, with hardly any facility to rotate exhibits.

At the start of the project 1,400 visitors were consulted on what they would like to see in the new galleries. Research showed that only an intrepid 10% of visitors ever made it to the upper floors, the confusing layout of exhibition spaces and staircases meant that people often found themselves lost and frustrated. Architect Gareth Hoskins mentioned that even more worrying was the fact that the general public often seemed unsure if the museum was even a public building, as the exterior gave hardly any clues as to what was contained within. The contemporary wing of the museum became the main attraction and the rest was neglected.

Access was the main problem facing designers. The front  steps were a struggle for families with young children and once inside, the space was not immediately welcoming to visitors. The space also lacked dedicated areas for visitor services, and elements of this seemed out of place in the central courtyard. Designers wanted to make spaces that would be more user-friendly and they also wanted to find a way to allow the architecture to complement the exhibits.

The refurbishing of the museum gives the impression that space has been opened up and simplified. Impressively there is 50% more public space than before, increasing visitor circulation and ensuring a more satisfying experience. Visitors are given facilities to rest, observe and study more than they could before (and we have to mention the loos on the street level floor which are positively luxurious!)

Visitors now enter through a street-level reception area, a vaulted cellar previously used for storage which has been sensitively restored to create a stunning new-meets-old area of bare sandstone walls and sophisticated lighting. This area also holds the shop, visitor facilities and a brasserie that will serve locally-sourced, freshly-prepared products.


Stairs and glass lifts take visitors up to the famous Grand Gallery, now the location for Window on the World, a wow-factor 18m installation of over 800 objects and said to be the largest collection of its kind in the UK. 

On the first floor is the Balcony Cafe and the Infozone where you can explore objects in more detail on the computer system there.

[Ralph Appelbaum Associates](#), who have previously worked on many state of the art projects including the impressive [Museum of London](#), have created dramatic new exhibitions for visitors, using a broad range of design approaches to bring the collections to life.

The museum galleries, which one might have previously described as a curiosity shop of eccentric exhibits, have been given a sense of intellectual unity. Galleries are thematic, exploring different aspects of culture and life, with a focus on exploration and learning.

A staggering 80% of the exhibits now in the galleries are objects which have been brought out of storage, these exhibits are also to be rotated more frequently to use the wonderful assets Scotland possesses in more inventive ways. Another important element of the galleries are new artistic pieces which have been commissioned to decorate the spaces and create a dialogue with ancient artifacts. In the entranceway to the Artistic Legacies gallery you must look up to see the wonderful Willow Light designed by Lizzie Farey.

 The Discoveries gallery tells the story of remarkable Scots and their endeavours. Exhibits include Alexander Fleming's Nobel Prize Medal from 1945, the world's oldest surviving colour TV developed by John Logie Baird in 1937, a fossilised tree slice collected by John Muir from the Petrified Forest National Park in the U.S., and the Tay Leading Light designed to guide ships into the river Tay, designed by Thomas

Stevenson in 1866.



What unites these dramatic and unique objects is that they all tell Scottish stories. A wonderful feature of this Gallery is a 3 tonne Assyrian relief from the 9th Century BC, donated by chloroform pioneer Sir James Young Simpson, previously hidden by the museum shop.

An wonderful and unique feature of the revitalised museum is Imagine, a dedicated colourful space for families to explore with their children. There is also a Behind the Scenes section which will tell the story of the museum and a new Research Library.

The [Natural World](#) galleries tell the story of the earth and the development of life, combining an exploration of geology, astronomy and natural history. It contains some of the animals that the museum was known for but is less static than it was. Exhibitions are mobile and vivid, including spectacular suspended animals, cinematic experiences and interactive objects. There are further rooms dedicated to themes of Senses and Survival and which tell the story of extinction and evolution.

The stunning Restless Earth gallery include interactive exhibits, multimedia presentations and magnificent geological specimens and the Earth in Space gallery looks back in time and space.

The World Cultures Galleries explore themes such as landscape, domestic objects, performance art and ritual, including Facing the Sea, the only UK gallery dedicated to the cultures of the South Pacific.

Other galleries such as Looking East and Ancient Egypt have not been included in the main redevelopment but attention has been paid to refreshing the exhibitions and in some cases items have been put on display for the first time in many

years. A brand new gallery entitled Shaping our World explores technology of the past 200 years and Venture Planet is a dedicated space for children aged 5-8 to explore.

As it was before, the National Museum of Scotland is a wonderful, eclectic and fascinating collection that deserves to be celebrated.

The transformed National Museum of Scotland will open to the public on Friday 29 July 2011. On-street celebrations will begin at 9.15am, with doors opening to the public at 10am.

Schedule:

- 9am Chambers Street closes to traffic
- 9.15am Street entertainment begins, with animatronic T.rex dinosaur and dramatic Tidal Zone sea creatures, puppets on stilts
- 9.30am Band on steps, the Mugenkyo Taiko Drummers
- 9.50am Grant Stott, Radio Forth, invites local schoolgirl Bryony Hare (our lucky competition winner, aged 11) to open the doors, prompting a fanfare, the unfurling of banners and abseiling from the roof of the building.
- 10am Doors open, visitors enter.
- 10.05am Cabinet Secretary for Culture and External Affairs Fiona Hyslop will be on first floor of the Grand Gallery greeting the first visitors to the re-opened Museum.

