

Welcome to my Gilded Edinburgh



by Donald Anderson

More so than most capitals throughout the world Edinburgh is somewhat of a gilded gateway to its home nation. It's partly due to its stunning beauty, it's partly down to the city's reputation as an international culture hub, but it's also because Edinburgh is a small city in a small country.

Getting around what you want to see in Edinburgh is much easier than most capital cities and getting beyond the city into fantastic countryside is equally easy. Edinburgh Airport is the main point of arrival, from here the gothic grandeur of the city centre lies only a few minutes away by a variety of means. Getting to the city centre is easier than ever and Edinburgh now has some of the best links of any European city with shiny new trams, a superb shuttle bus service and arguably the best taxi service in Britain.

Once you've set yourself up in where ever it is you'll be staying and are out and about in the town it's good to have an idea about what you plan to see and how to make the most of Edinburgh's many treasures.

I'll start with the City of Edinburgh itself. This urban area is split into two zones, the Old Town and the New Town, the former of which contains many of the city's most significant landmarks. It is amongst the medieval spires and renaissance highrises that you'll find such treasures as the National Museum of Scotland, the John Knox House, Holyrood Palace and, most prominently of all, the magnificent Edinburgh Castle.

The National Museum is the city's most popular free

attraction, but there is also the Museum of Childhood, the Edinburgh Writers Museum, guided tours of the Scottish Parliament, and a huge array of shows during the Festival Fringe season when the city throngs with revellers enjoying what must be the greatest arts and entertainment show on Earth. For pure, simple pleasure, however, nothing quite beats a long walk around the ancient architecture and mystical, winding closes.

On foot sightseeing in Edinburgh's Old Town is great all year round and is at its finest when accompanied by an expert historian and storyteller. The best way to unlock the tales beneath the surface is book yourself on a Mercat walking tour. A Mercat tour is a never-to-be-forgotten experience wherein the often lurid (and true) tales of Edinburgh's infamous past come to light. Tales of murder and body snatching are brought to life alongside the stories of Edinburgh's famous historical figures. Descend into the sprawling sub-terrain Blair Street Vaults on a ghost tour or to hear the fascinating history of why they were created; learn about the story of the Royal Mile and Edinburgh Castle, and set out on a spooky night walk. Edinburgh's New Town is characterised by meticulously planned Georgian terrace streets and beautiful classical monuments.

The area's grid arrangement stands in striking contrast to the organic curves of the Old Town. It is where you will find many free to enter attractions such as the National Galleries of Scotland and the Scottish National Portrait Galleries. Be sure to shop in the fashion houses of Multrees Walk and George Street, where upmarket retail abounds, but take time to just soak up the atmosphere in an array of classy restaurants and bars. Edinburgh city centre is an amazing and easy place to explore on foot.

There are, however, a huge selection of open top sightseeing bus tours circulating throughout the veins of the capital. Most of them have their initial departure points at Waverley Bridge and St Andrew Square. From these locations they ferry

their passengers high and low, corner to corner. Most offer pre-recorded audio commentary and there's almost always a live English speaking guide on-board. All of them are hop-on hop-off allowing you explore deeper into some of Edinburgh's nooks and crannies in your own time.

It's a great experience in of itself, but it's also a great way to sample the city's many great places and attractions. The best part about the bus tours is that the scope of available routes reflect the ubiquitous nature of Edinburgh's borders.

The city centre is but one small (albeit significant) aspect of the Edinburgh sightseeing experience. Services such as the Edinburgh Heritage Tour make specific visits to outlying areas of natural beauty, including the Royal Botanical Gardens – one of my very favourite places and perhaps one of the country's best free attractions, and all the spots that have earned the praise of UNESCO .

The Majestic Tour leaves the inner city and heads north towards Leith, where you can take in the shoreline of the Firth of Forth and climb aboard Royal Yacht Britannia. There's even a City Sightseeing hop-on hop-off tour which includes a wonderful Horrible Histories commentary narrated by Terry Deary the famous author himself – great news if you're travelling with kids! Edinburgh's status as the 'gilded gateway' I mentioned previously extends far beyond the airport and [bus tours](#) of the immediate outlying districts.



So far I've focused on the 'gilded' aspect, the beauty and diversity of the inner city, but what epitomises the gateway? I'll start with something that provides a virtual passport to the rest of Scotland. A 3-5 day ['Historic Scotland Explorer Pass'](#) provides free access to 72 of Historic Scotland's cultural attractions. This incredible variety features

everything from the biggest and boldest to the oldest and most poignant.

A few particularly famous highlights are Edinburgh Castle itself, Linlithgow Palace, Stirling Castle and Urquhart Castle. You can buy passes online and they are redeemable at the Edinburgh Castle Historic Scotland Pass pick-up point. With knowledge that the explorer pass can act as your ticket around the country's best, what about tours that visit them? A highly recommended coach day tour operator based right in the centre of Edinburgh is Rabbies. Rabbies are long established tourism professionals who have been lighting the way for international visitors for years.

Their best loved day tours take small, close-knit groups on some wonderful explorations of the Scottish Highlands, Borders, and even Northern England. Landmarks aside a lot of the tours also incorporate such things as whisky tasting sessions, golf in the land where it was invented, loch cruises, light hiking portions and castle visits.

The scope of things to discover both in and outside Edinburgh is staggering, and only a few introductory examples have been listed here, more than enough for a good long weekend and even more. The yearly international festivals themselves can keep you occupied for many days. Edinburgh is a small and beautiful capital of a small and beautiful city, and there's something for everyone with superb world class attractions, wonderful historic streetscapes that gladden the eye or simply some of the most beautiful countryside in the world.

A gilded gateway to help you create some magical memories and treasured experiences in one of the loveliest places there is. I love it, and I'm sure you will too. Donald Anderson is a director at the PPS Group – the UK's largest independent public affairs company. Born and bred in Edinburgh, Donald served for many years as a Labour Councillor, on the board of VisitScotland and was leader of The City of Edinburgh Council

for many (it was actually 7.5 years!) years where he spearheaded the City's economic and tourism development at a time of great change and growth in Edinburgh and the Lothians.

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