

Edinburgh attractions top the list of places to see

The National Museum of Scotland (NMS) remained the nation's most popular attraction in 12th overall, ahead of Edinburgh Castle (14th) and National Galleries Scotland in 15th place.

The latest annual Association of Leading Visitor Attractions (ALVA) members' visitor figures show that visits to Scotland's most popular sites increased by 21% in 2023 compared 2022, ahead of the UK average (19%).

Scotland's most-visited free attraction, the NMS drew over 2 million visits (2,186,8411) – 11% up on 2022 and only 1% below the pre-pandemic 2019 figure.

Edinburgh Castle, the most popular paid-for attraction, witnessed a 41% increase to 1,904,723, while National Galleries of Scotland enjoyed a record-breaking year with 1,836,057 visitors (up 44%), thanks in part to its Grayson Perry exhibition.

Scotland's top ten alone drew nearly 12 million visits (11,967,989) – compared with 9,859,702 in 2022. The country also had six of the 30 most visited attractions in the UK, compared with five for the rest of the UK outside London.

Anne Lyden, Director General, National Galleries of Scotland, said: "2023 was an incredible year at the National Galleries of Scotland – we're elated that over 2.4 million people

visited our three Edinburgh sites.

“Not only does this illustrate visitor numbers continuing to return to pre-pandemic levels, but it was a record-breaking year at the National gallery with an amazing 1.8million visitors. From the largest exhibition by cultural icon Grayson Perry to the opening of our free-to-visit new Scottish galleries, there was something for everyone to enjoy.”

Scotland’s visitor attractions enjoyed a 21% increase in visits last year as many sites got back to pre-pandemic levels, according to new figures. Significant increases included the Gallery of Modern Art – up 60% to 510,936 visits, which the gallery attributed to the success of Banksy’s Cut and Run exhibition – and Glasgow Cathedral, which had a 79% increase in footfall to 457,541.

Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum (1,283,882), Riverside Museum in Glasgow (1,265,011), Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh (the most popular outdoor attraction with 1,041,391), National War Museum, Edinburgh (773,213); Edinburgh Zoo (618,719); Glenfinnan Monument (540,853); and Stirling Castle (517,299) made up Scotland’s top ten.

Bernard Donoghue, Director of ALVA, said: “Scotland is outperforming the rest of the UK, which we’ve found consistently for at least ten years.

“We are seeing strong, steady growth as part of the recovery post-covid and lockdown in Scotland and the recovery is spread really well across indoor and outdoor attractions.

“We are seeing really strong overseas visitors back into Scotland, particularly in the central belt but also up into the Highlands.”

ALVA’s members are the UK’s most popular, iconic and important museums, galleries, palaces, castles, cathedrals, zoos, historic houses, heritage sites, gardens and leisure

attractions.

The total number of visits to ALVA sites in the UK last year was 146.6million – 19% more than the previous year (123.6 million) but still 11% less than the 163.9 million visits in 2019.

Indoor attractions enjoyed a 23% increase, with outdoor attractions up 2%.

Top in the UK was the British Museum (5,820,860 visits) with a 42% increase on 2022 attributed in part to the success of the China's hidden century exhibition that ran from May to October.

The Natural History Museum (5,688,786, up 22%) The Crown Estate, Windsor Great Park (5,487,856, down 3%) Tate Modern (4,742,038, up 22%) and Southbank Centre (3,193,966, up 8%) made up the UK top five.

In the Coronation year, notable increases included Westminster Abbey, where visitor numbers rose by 49% and the number of worshippers increased to 1,587,866 (17th place) and Windsor Castle (1,374,607, up 66%), while Buckingham Palace welcomed 501,499 visitors, up 75%, during its summer opening from 14 July to 24 September.

Stirling Castle and Urquhart Castle attracted 24% more visitors year on year with Urquhart Castle welcoming 442,761 visitors.

Mr Donoghue said: "Following the Covid pandemic, 2022 was the first year of stability and last year was the first year of real growth. We are really optimistic that we are going in exactly the right direction.

"Every year it's really clear that Scotland punches above its weight, and always consistently reports some of the biggest growth in visitor numbers for any part of the UK.

“That’s partly down to consistent investment from government, local authorities and organisations themselves into the product, making sure there are good museums and galleries.

“My only note of caution is that you need to continually invest in the product in order for it to be attractive and for the Scottish tourism economy be as vibrant as it is.

“What you don’t want in a legitimate economic recession is any sense that we would go into a cultural recession, but that requires maintenance, investment and support from government.

“Visitor attractions have a halo effect so they are catalysts for the local economy. If they are not kept up and they are not maintained then the ripple effects are far wider than the attractions themselves.”

He added: “Whilst the extension of tax relief for museums, theatres and galleries was a very welcome announcement in the recent Budget, there was a missed opportunity to reintroduce tax free shopping for overseas visitors, which would have improved the UK’s international competitiveness, and reduce VAT for tourism and hospitality which would have helped businesses repair their balance sheets.”

Conservation charity the National Trust for Scotland said visits in 2023 had exceeded pre-pandemic levels, with numbers reaching 4.3 million, increasing from 4.01 million in 2019.



Edinburgh Tattoo – the Red Arrows 12/08/23 As part of the Edinburgh Tattoo the World famous Royal Air Force Aerobatic team, the Red Arrows, fly over Edinburgh Castle, Edinburgh, Credit: Ian Jacobs