

Edinburgh: the past is present

By Sean McLennan

One thing that Canada unfortunately lacks is a sense of a really long history. It's true that wandering around the older parts of Montreal and Toronto, you can see buildings that date back to Canada's early days, but the feeling you get in a city that has been around for more than a millennium is wholly different. For this sort of experience you need to make a hop across the Atlantic.

Edinburgh is such a city—the first historical reports of the area date back to the 6th century when a Northumbrian king built a fortress there. From the 11th century on, Edinburgh housed Scottish royalty and it became Scotland's capital at the end of the Middle Ages. Although such longevity is certainly not unique in Europe, Edinburgh is different. While the age of other cities is masked by modern growth, Edinburgh's is inescapable. It literally looms over the city—Edinburgh Castle sits atop an extinct volcano which, along with the Princes Street Gardens, marks the division between “Old Town” and “New Town.” You'll be hard pressed to find somewhere downtown where this ancient fortress isn't glaring down at you. Edinburgh is a modern thriving city to be sure,

but more than other places in the world, the old and new are juxtaposed on each to create an atmosphere entirely different from anywhere else.



EDINBURGH CASTLE

For Canadians of any background, it's almost a pilgrimage back to the “motherland” to visit Scotland, considering the huge impact our Scottish heritage has had on Canadian culture. (Of course, the same could be said of many other countries—apparently there are more Scots outside of Scotland than within its borders!) Aside from just the genetics of Scottish-Canadian descent, much of Canadian culture subtly draws on Scottish roots. For example, a lot of the music for which

Canadians are best known has a marked Celtic influence—even Calgary was named after a Scottish locale.

Edinburgh's cosmopolitan nature and its status as one of Europe's great cities makes it hard to believe it only has a population of about half a million. It draws such a diverse cross-section of people for a multitude of reasons, and the city has been forced to accommodate them all with a similarly diverse range of resources and facilities. As Scotland's capital, being poised right on the border of England makes it an important political and economic destination. The University of Edinburgh is world-renowned, drawing nearly 20,000 undergraduates alone has resulted in a significant international academic community being developed here.

The artistic community isn't passed over either: every August the city hosts the “Edinburgh International Festival,” one of the world's most important arts festivals (if you're hoping to attend, start making your arrangements around April). Of course, the population may also seem artificially inflated

by the constant stream of tourists of every variety—from the huge Japanese tour groups to the partying budget backpackers. Fortunately, despite the rampant tourism, Edinburgh never quite feels like a tourist trap.

Much of the joy of visiting Edinburgh is just in exploring on foot—there's no end to the hidden courtyards dating back centuries, delightful cafes, restaurants and quaint shops selling uniquely Scottish gifts. These are best discovered on your own (besides, I'm not sure I'd be able to find some of them again!). That being said, there are a few must-sees. The Castle is one—there are perhaps more spectacular castle interiors to be found in the UK, but you can't beat the views it affords.

Another is the Palace of Holyroodhouse and the Holyrood Abbey—the palace was expanded from a guesthouse that was attached to the original medieval abbey and has acted as a royal residence since the 16th century. It remains the Queen's official residence in Scotland, so access is pretty restricted, but a few apartments are open as well as the grounds and the abbey ruins. The abbey itself was founded in 1128.

A sloping ridge runs from Edinburgh Castle to the Palace of Holyroodhouse and

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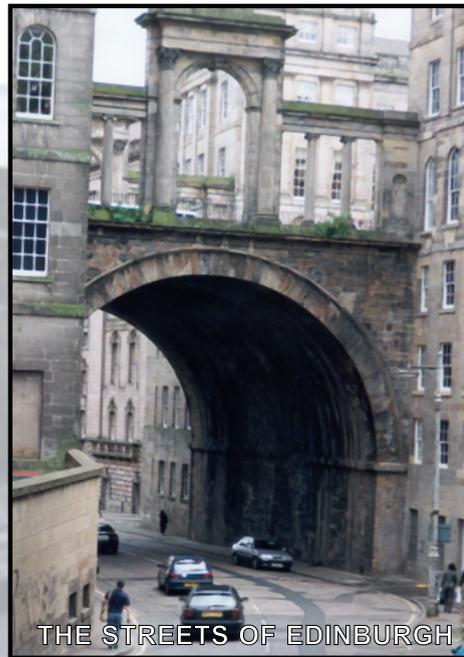
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following it is the “Royal Mile,” a most intriguing street. To be sure, it is crammed with shops and restaurants catering to the tourists making their way from one to the other but, despite that, the street is lined with fascinating buildings (some dating back to the 1400s!) and it retains its historic charm. With its multitude of side streets and tantalizing glimpses of Edinburgh’s other sights, one could spend days just exploring the Royal Mile.

On the east end of Princes street—which is the main thoroughfare through downtown—stands Calton Hill, another excellent perch for panoramic views of the city. Calton Hill is also home to various monuments and the City Observatory. At 100m high, it provides one of the best vantage points to take in Edinburgh in its entirety from the Firth of Forth (the body of water bordering Edinburgh to the north) to Arthur’s Seat—the craggy 251-meter mountain summit that is Edinburgh’s most imposing landmark (and an excellent hike).

Accommodations in Edinburgh are not hard to find in any economic range, although during the peak seasons—especially during the International Fringe Festival—you’re best to make arrangements ahead. Of course, as with any city in the Europe, “budget” may not carry quite the same meaning as it does in

Canada. At the cheapest backpacker’s hostel, you can expect to pay around \$20-\$25 a head for a bunk in a ten-person room with shared washroom facilities. And you can also expect not to sleep much—that’s definitely the 20-something party scene. It’s great if that’s your cup of tea, but you may want to look at



THE STREETS OF EDINBURGH

something like a B&B a little further out in the suburbs which would likely run for more like \$40/person. This is an especially good choice if you’ve rented a car—parking is extremely

limited downtown and can cost as much as or more than your accommodation. I wouldn’t even recommend driving—let alone parking—downtown if you can avoid it: it takes about two hours with a map and a good sense of direction to navigate the one-way streets, the “bus only streets,” and detours from the edge of downtown to your destination.

You’ll be able to find any cuisine that your tastebuds desire, but before you leave Scotland you have to make a trip to a chip shop. They’re all over and tend to be small and dingy. Your cholesterol levels will shoot up just breathing the air inside. But they are an integral part of Scottish culture—here you can get absolutely anything you can imagine battered and deep-fried. If you can’t bring yourself to eat a haggis at least have a deep-fried Mars Bar (it’s about the texture, *not* the extra fat!) or a slice of deep-fried pizza. It’s no wonder that Scotland has the highest rate of heart disease in Europe... but one night out isn’t going to damage you irreparably.

In a place as diverse as Edinburgh, there’s bound to be a bustling gay community. And there is. It’s not quite Manchester (setting for the British *Queer As Folk*) and there really isn’t an analog of Canal Street or a gay village to speak of. The gay and gay friendly hang-outs are widely distributed, which perhaps reflects the generally accepting and tolerant feeling one has on the streets of

Edinburgh. The “scene” is somewhat subdued as well—it seems centered more on cafes, bookshops and cozy bars than giant, manic gay nightclubs (although, there *are* some of those too). Overall, it’s much more down-to-earth, friendly, and welcoming.

Probably the best place to start accessing Edinburgh’s community is Broughton Street, on the north-east end of New Town where there is a clustering of gay establishments, including the Edinburgh Lesbian Gay and Bisexual Centre. Look out for *Scots Gay*—Scotland’s free GLBT magazine which has rather comprehensive listings for all of Scotland.

It’s hard to overstate Edinburgh’s appeal: it’s a city with history, character and flare—big enough to have it all and small enough to retain its charm and friendliness. Just be sure to devote some significant time there because you’ll be kicking yourself if you’ve only allotted one day.

Sean McLennan has a degree in Linguistics from the University of Calgary and he’s currently working towards a PhD in Linguistics and Cognitive Science at Indiana University. In between research, classes, and teaching, he does Web-design, writes for a Japanese English-learning magazine, and is active in a local GLBT education group.

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