

# Europe

## Scotland: Tartan Treasures

By Joe Volz

Thoughts of Scotland may conjure up images of craggy coasts, crenellated castles, poet Robert Burns, bagpipes, and tartan plaids. Though its geography and monarchy are shared with Great Britain, Scotland is a country with a distinctive culture and a proud national identity.

Scotland offers a unique experience:

- The cuisine is first-rate and the baked goods famous—from thick, flat, crusty whole-grain rounds to thin, flat crunchy oatmeal "cakes."
- This is a hiker's heaven with a mountainous and diverse landscape dotted with lochs (lakes).
- Edinburgh is one of the most beautiful cities in Europe and also one of Europe's largest financial centers.
- The Museum of Childhood, in Edinburgh's Royal Mile, boasts of being the first museum of its kind and the world's noisiest.
- Prehistoric standing stones, stone tombs, and stone circles are evidence of a long and mysterious history.

### Tartan Plaids

Tartan is the worldwide symbol of Scotland. Tartan patterns are made with alternating bands of pre-dyed colored threads woven as both warp and weft at right angles to each other. Though its origins are obscure, by the late 17th century, tartans became associated with distinct clans. It was a sartorial coat of arms in the Highlands of Scotland, distinguishing friend from foe on the battle field. Those of Scottish ancestry are entitled to wear the clan tartan associated with your name and Scottish family heritage, or the appropriate district tartan. The good news for non-Scots is that there are universal tartans that can be worn by anyone.

### Edinburgh

Edinburgh is the capital of Scotland (Glasgow is larger and more urban). Edinburgh is dramatic old beauty, perched on a series of extinct volcanoes and rocky crags. The city (the seat of former Scottish kings and now home to the Scottish Parliament) is an eclectic mix of romance, historic, sophistication, and prosperity. You could spend days exploring it, but here are a few highlights:

### Edinburgh Castle

Edinburgh Castle sits atop Castle Rock, dominating the city skyline. It is Scotland's most famous landmark. The view from its curving ramparts is alone worth a visit. Inside the grand vaulted chambers are Scotland's national treasures, including the Stone of Destiny, known as the Stone of Scone (pronounced skoon). Monarchs of Scotland were traditionally crowned on this sandstone "pillow." It had been taken to England and incorporated into the Coronation Throne in Westminster Abbey, but was returned in 1996 on the condition that it be returned to the Abbey for subsequent coronations.

A stronghold has existed on this site since the 7th century. However, only the 12th century Chapel of St. Margaret's remains from Norman times. The King's Lodging, Great Hall, and Half Moon Battery are 15th and 16th century additions. Be ready for the One O'clock Gun, which can startle the unsuspecting. The gun is fired every day except Sunday to provide an accurate time check. There is a fee for admission to the Castle.

From the castle gates, a sharp ridge descends toward sea level along the Royal Mile; a cobbled street with ancient tenements called "lands" and narrow alleyways called "closes." Grassmarket, a favorite with tourists, students, and locals, is an historic square surrounded by eight- and nine-story buildings and noted for its antique shops, boutiques, pubs, and upscale restaurants

The new, dramatic Parliament building is in the Canongate, where most of the city's surviving medieval buildings are concentrated. Originally conceived by the late Catalan architect Enric Miralles (known for his work on the 1992 Barcelona Olympics), the building is controversial with its irregular curves and angles and tribute to native oak, flagstone, and dark slate.

Every August, the city is bursting at the seams with visitors for the Edinburgh International Festival and its attendant counter-festivals, including the Fringe-an irreverent street celebration.

Holyrood, also known as the Queen's Park, is the city's largest park, comprised of 650 acres with three lochs in the center of the city. Arthur's Seat, an area developed from pitted volcanic rock the size of a large living room, is a vantage point (only 822 feet high) with a commanding view. Holyrood is almost always open to the public.

## **The New Town**

The 200-year old northern part of Edinburgh is still called the New Town. It's the largest area of 18th century Georgian architecture in Europe, and merits a walking tour of its gracious squares and tree-lined crescents. It is largely residential.

The National Gallery of Scotland, is one of the finest galleries in Europe, with masterpieces by Tintoretto, Titian, Rembrandt, and the French Impressionists. A new underground center features a restaurant, gift shop, and an interactive touch screen gallery. Like most of the city's museums, admission is free.

## **The Country**

A country with a population of over five million people, Scotland is the size of Vermont and New Hampshire combined. It occupies the northern third of the island of Great Britain and is surrounded on three sides by the North Sea, the Atlantic Ocean, and the North Channel and Irish Sea. Apart from the mainland, Scotland has over 790 islands, most tiny and uninhabited. The Gulf Stream from the Atlantic warms the country, giving it much milder winters (but cooler, wetter summers) than areas on similar latitudes (Oslo or Moscow).

The major international gateway to Scotland is Glasgow Airport. Edinburgh Airport, seven miles south of the city, has limited transatlantic flights but offers connections to dozens of European cities, including London's Gatwick and Heathrow airports.

## **Whiskey, Golf, and Castles**

Scotland is known as the home of single-malt whisky. Distilleries throughout the country offer tours. St. Andrews, the hallowed home of golf, also welcomes visitors. Even non-golfers can enjoy the stunning scenery across the fairways of the Old Course and separate fact from fiction at the British Golf Museum. Several St. Andrews courses and many others in the region offer golf by the round or by the day.

An easy day trip from Edinburgh, Tantallon Castle is one of several medieval castle ruins in East Lothian, a farm and golfing district with inviting beaches and footpaths along the coast. The dramatic ruins of the 14th-century castle are high on a sheer promontory overlooking the Firth of Forth (firth is a long, narrow indentation of the seacoast). From the battlements atop hundred-foot cliffs, nature lovers may spot whales, dolphins, seals, or puffins in the cold water below. On the land side are weathered, red sandstone walls, moats and towers.

## **Getting Around**

Take care if you rent a car: Scots drive on the left side of the road and steering wheels are located on the right side in the car. Taking the train is a good alternative. First, ScotRail operates an extensive network of frequent, modern trains and an overnight sleeper service to London. It's not necessary to make reservations in advance (except on the Caledonian Sleeper to London). If you plan to travel extensively, investigate the Freedom of Scotland Pass or the BritRail Pass. These can be good deals, especially if you are traveling with a child. Children under five not occupying a reserved seat, travel free on all British trains.