

Caledonian highlights in lowlands

All eyes are on Edinburgh today. But if you can tear yourself away from the rugby, it's a city that has a lot to offer, says **Conor Power**

I WAS always very hesitant about visiting Scotland. I think it was because I had this image of a stony cold wet miserable version of Ireland.

While Edinburgh does have a certain degree of stoniness and fridity in the middle of winter, miserable it most certainly is not. It's a vibrant, stunningly pretty and friendly kind of place that doesn't waste any time in whisking you along in its energy field.

The early-morning flight from Cork got us into the city centre just after 9am. We were tired but determined tourists and we got on one of the three open-top bus tours with commentary that bring you around the "Athens of the North". We took the one with the longest loop — the red one. It brought us to Scotland's top visitor attraction, the Royal Yacht Britannia.

Now permanently moored at the docks in Leith — just a few kilometres from the heart of Edinburgh — this was the official maritime transport of the British Royal Family from 1953 until 1997. A completely absorbing self-guided tour takes you all over the vessel that was a floating home-from-home for the Windsors and, I would say, one of the few ways that they had of getting away from it all as a family in total privacy. The interiors were very impressive, surprisingly toned down and devoid of bombast. Highlights included sitting on the command chair at the bridge, peeking into Elizabeth and Phillip's adjoining single rooms, the huge state dining room and the garage containing a Rolls Royce Phantom V.

Edinburgh has more than 4,500 listed buildings and one of the largest UNESCO world heritage urban areas in the world — covering the mediaeval Old Town and the Georgian New Town.

We were staying in the middle of one of them: The West End of the New Town on the north side of the city is a lot more genteel than most city northsides that I've been to in my time. It's street upon street,

mews upon mews and close upon close of perfectly preserved Georgian sandstone bliss. Even when you go a little bit further out again from the city centre, you still find plenty of architectural splendour. If anything, the widening streets and growing green areas make way for even larger splendid edifices.

Getting into the city centre was easy enough. We used the city public transport, consisting of a lot of bus lines and one tram line, with seemingly plenty of frequency throughout the day in this compact metropolis.

Waverly train station is the central fulcrum of the city — the point in Edinburgh around which everything rotates. It's the second largest train station in the United Kingdom. Local writer Robert Louis Stevenson liked to describe it in romantic terms as "the gateway from which the rest of the world opened up".

You're constantly finding the unexpected in Edinburgh. We are justifiably proud, for example, of the literary greats that Dublin alone produces. But did you know that Edinburgh has produced literally dozens of the writers of some of the most famous books and characters in the world? From the *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and*

Mr Hyde to Peter Pan and Sherlock Holmes, the tradition continues today with its most famous literary resident JK Rowling.

We crossed Waverly Bridge to the craggier, older side of Edinburgh. This is the side of the mediaeval Old Town, with its twisty warrens of cobbled streets, plunging staircases and ancient churches. Edinburgh Castle is here — perched on the highest point of the city, one of the seven extinct volcanoes upon which Edinburgh was built.

The castle is, in truth, more of a gathering of buildings from various eras that collectively form a stronghold that no invading army has ever managed to directly attack and enter. There's a curious mixture of things to see here. Possibly the most intriguing was the Crown Jewels (the second oldest set of royal crown jewels in Europe after the Hungarian one) and the Stone of Destiny. The latter item is a 150kg rough cut stone block that carries an almost Python-esque degree of bizarre significance. Claimed as spoils of war by Edward the 1st ("Longshanks") in 1296, it was famously returned to the Scottish capital 21 years ago, but only on the proviso that it be hauled back down to London for the next British coronation, where



it will be put under the coronation seat. Seriously.

There is a 30-minute guided tour that comes with your entrance ticket and after it has finished, it's worth checking out the aforementioned jewels, as well as admiring the amazing views that you get from here of the entire city, the captivating channel of the River Forth and the open sea beyond.

Running down from the castle is a series of cobbled streets joined end-to-end that are collectively known as The Royal Mile. This is a lively and touristy stretch but with good reason and it's a wonderful place to amble day or night. The shops towards the top end are decidedly glamorous and expensive (though still very attractive) but it's down at the lower reaches (particularly the Cockburn Street stretch just before Waverly Bridge) that you find the most unusual and individual shops that make this city a unique shopping experience.

There are plenty of very inviting olde-inn-style pubs here too, with Deacon Brodies being one of the best examples.

Back across the bridge on the New Town side, the pubs are equally inviting, with a more Victorian feel to the establishments,

many of which have ornately panelled tall ceilings and high-backed comfy snugs. It's a case of stumble about and take your pick but the one that stood out for me was Café Royal — possibly the ultimate marriage of French brasserie and Scottish pub. Here, they do one of the finest haggis-neeps-and-tatties (or, in English, haggis with turnip and potato) that I've ever had.

Haggis quickly became a staple part of my diet while in Edinburgh. It's possibly the ultimate comfort food and is to be found everywhere. It's slightly spicy, thoroughly satisfying and filling. You also get to taste a wee dram of Scotch whisky in there too. Hoots mon! That's the stuff you need to combat the stony cold Caledonian winter night.

■ Aer Lingus Regional operate flights between Cork and Edinburgh daily, increasing to nine times a week during peak summer schedule. Lead-in fares start from €24.99 one way including taxes and charges. For more information, visit www.aerlingus.com.

■ We stayed at the Chester Residence; 9 Rothesay Pl, Edinburgh EH3 7SL (Tel +44 131 226 2075, www.chester-residence.com).



View from the Calton Hill to Edinburgh city, Scotland.



Locals and tourists strolling along Cockburn Street in Edinburgh's Old Town on a cloudy winter day; Cockburn Street is a picturesque street created as a serpentine link from the Royal Mile to Waverley Station in 1856; below, the Chester residence in the Georgian New Town (with lounge interior opposite below) and Conor Power in the esplanade of Edinburgh Castle.



Quality serviced apartments with a copious continental breakfast in a very quiet residential area, with great local restaurants/pubs just around the corner.
 ■ Lothian Buses run the local buses and tram services. See www.lothian-buses.co.uk for details. The daily scratch tickets at £4 (€4.70) are a handy option for roaming the city freely.
 ■ For the best shopping, Princes Street is hard to beat for the contemporary big-brand shopping. The Old

Town is where to go for something a bit different, quirky and crafty.
 ■ The Scottish National Art Gallery (on The Mound, between Princes Street and The Old Town www.nationalgalleries.org) has a very impressive collection of works by Scottish and European artists. The Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art is 2km away from here, where they're currently showing a superb exhibition by the late Joan Eardley that runs until May 21.
 ■ Finally, check out the Grassmarket

area for another a down-to-earth Bohemian vibe in the shadow of Edinburgh Castle.
 ■ The Edinburgh Dungeon (www.thedungeons.com) is a highly entertaining and sporadically terrifying underground tour involving visceral performances by actors playing historical characters, taking you through some of the city's most ghoulish stories, all complimented by 21st-century technology and special effects.

TRAVEL DIGEST

Playa Blanca

Holidaymakers all over the west of Ireland have the opportunity to sunbathe on white sands at Playa Blanca, get a bird's eye view from Cesar Manrique's Mirador del Rio and marvel at the otherworldly volcanic landscape in Timanfaya National Park directly from Shannon this summer. Deals are available from €479 with Falcon at www.falcon.ie.

California dreamin'

Insight Vacation offer the best of the Californian coast along with stays in San Francisco and Los Angeles in a nine-day inclusive tour departing on June 9. It costs €2,699 and takes in the rugged beauty of the Californian coast and grandeur of Yosemite National Park. Information is available from Insight Vacations at Travel House, 27 Merrion Square, Dublin 2., 01 7753803.

Discover more

The Crystal Summer discovery package combines excursions with a lakes and mountains holiday, including flights, transfers and accommodation. Book before February 13 for May and June and there are €75 discounts. One good example is a stay at a four-star apartment in Peschiere, Italy, for two adults and two kids from €1974. Call 01 4331080, visit crystalsummer.ie or contact any local travel agent.

Go walking

Abbey Travel offers a walking tour in Spain's third highest mountain range, the Picos de Europa, from upwards of €955. Its terrain, tranquillity, and inaccessibility make the Picos a walker's paradise. Abbey also has a taste of Cuba for eight days with prices starting at €1265. For those and other offers, Vietnam for instance, from Abbey, contact 01 8047153 or visit www.abbeytravel.ie.

Magical Maldives

Tropical Sky has deals throughout the year and targets particular times when hotels offer discounts. The company now says it can save up to €590 for those keen on a break in the Maldives. Stays are in the four-star Centara Ras Fushi Resort and Spa and departures from Dublin anytime between May 1 and June 30. The cost at this adult-only resort comes in from €2359 per person, all-inclusive. Visit tropicalsky.ie or call 01 664 9999.

Barry Coughlan

