

Walking Tour Edinburgh Old Town



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Short Walk in 'Old' Edinburgh

All of us at Scottish Tours hope that you will enjoy your stay in Edinburgh, Scotland's Capital City. In order to maximise the pleasure of your visit we have developed this short walking tour which you can experience at your own pace. The walk should take between 1 hour and 1½ hours, but of course you can take as long or as short a time as you wish.

The walk contains concise directions that will return you to your starting point on the Royal Mile, outside the Radisson SAS Hotel. Places of interest are highlighted together with a brief history. This walk can be undertaken by anybody who is reasonably fit, but remember, if you find any part tiring or too much to finish, taxis are readily available to return you to your accommodation and you can finish your walk another day.

We hope you will enjoy your short walk in the company of our silent guide and that you will have a pleasant stay in Edinburgh.

This short walk takes in some of the main points of interest within the Old Town of Edinburgh. The chosen route will give an insight into the unique charm and character of this historic area. All you need is a dash of curiosity and a twist of imagination!

From the Radisson SAS Hotel walk down High Street to World's End Close on the right.

1. WORLD'S END CLOSE - An intriguing name which derives from the fact that this used to be the last alleyway before leaving the Old Town of Edinburgh.

Note also the World's End Bar on the corner. Where the traffic lights are now, there once stood the Netherbow Port. This was one of the gateways that protected the city in time of war. It was demolished in 1764.

Cross the road and move uphill to John Knox's House which is on the right.

2. JOHN KNOX'S HOUSE - The great Scottish preacher and religious leader, John Knox, is believed to have lived here between 1561 and 1572. His rhetorical writing style and powerful pulpit deliveries earned him the description, 'the thundering Scot'. The house itself has a stone and timber frontage and dates from around 1490. Described as "architecturally curious" it is one of the most outstanding examples of a town house of this period.

Walk uphill a short distance to Paisley Close.

3. PAISLEY CLOSE - On the 24th of November in 1861 a 12 storey building on this site collapsed and as a result 35 people were killed. Rescuers had almost given up hope of finding any more survivors when they heard the faint cry of, "Heave awa' lads, I'm no deid yet". A young lad, Joseph McIvor, was pulled from the rubble and later he and his brave words were commemorated above the alley's entrance as you can see.

Continue uphill through the traffic lights (traffic permitting) to Fleshmarket Close.

4. FLESHMARKET CLOSE - In old Edinburgh most markets were held in the streets. Sometimes over-imaginative guesses are made about what the 'fleshmarket' could be. It was in fact the meat market.

Move up to Anchor Close.

5. ANCHOR CLOSE - This close is named after a tavern which stood here in the mid-eighteenth century. Walter Smellie, the Edinburgh printer, had a workshop in the alleyway around the same time. He is famous for printing the first 'Encyclopaedia Britannica' here in 1771 and later in 1787 Robert Burns' poetry.

Move up to the City Chambers. On the right through the archways.

6. CITY CHAMBERS - The statue in front of the building is of Alexander the Great and his horse Bucephalus. It was moved to this spot in 1917. Built between 1753 and 1761, the City Chambers building was originally intended to be an Exchange for the merchants of Edinburgh. It was not popular and was first used as a meeting place for the Town Council in 1811. It is the only 18th century public building in the Royal Mile. Inside the front door there is a list of all the Edinburgh Lord Provosts. Only one of them was ever assassinated: Adam Otterbourne in 1547.

Up through the next set of traffic lights, turn right into Wardrops Court, the hexagonal towered building to the left is Lady Stairs House.

7. LADY STAIRS HOUSE - Set in this beautiful courtyard, this house was originally constructed by Sir William Gray in 1622. It was restored by the Earl of Roseberry in 1897 and he gifted it to the city in 1907. It is now a literary museum dedicated to Sir Walter Scott, Robert Burns, and Robert Louis Stevenson. Robert Burns actually stayed in an alleyway called Baxters Close, that ran through here, when he was in Edinburgh in 1786.

Go up the steps, out to the street, turn right and the first building under the arches is Gladstones Land.

8. GLADSTONES LAND - Thomas Gledstones and his wife Bessie Cunninghame bought this property on the 20th December, 1617. They extended it 23ft. out into the street creating the present arcade, the sole survivor of this 17th century practice in Edinburgh. Gledstones was a merchant who traded in a variety of products including 'plumbdanies', which were prunes. The property now belongs to the National Trust of Scotland who decided in 1978 to restore the building, recreating its 17th century atmosphere

Move uphill until you reach the Castle Esplanade.

9. CASTLE ESPLANADE - Edinburgh began as a fortress city and it is only fitting that the Castle still dominates the skyline. The Esplanade, which was widened in 1816, was used as a parade ground for the soldiers garrisoned in the Castle. Before this, the area was covered by grassy slopes and was often used as an execution site. It was also a popular spot for young couples to go courting, although probably not on hanging days!

Now move downhill on the opposite side of the street, and stop at the front of the large church on the right hand side.

10. THE TOLBOOTH CHURCH - Completed in 1844 and designed by James Gillespie Graham and Augustus Pugin. It has an impressive octagonal gothic spire which is 73m high and is the tallest in Edinburgh. This building is now the home of the Edinburgh International Festival.

A busy corner, cross carefully and continue straight on looking for Brodie's Close on the right.

11. BRODIE'S CLOSE - So called because the famous Deacon Brodie had a family home here. He is said to have been the inspiration for Robert Louis Stevenson's, 'Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde'. This is because by day Deacon Brodie was highly respected, he was even on the Town Council, but at night he turned burglar and thief to feed his gambling habit and maintain a wild night life. When he was caught it caused a great scandal, and his daytime respectability could not save him. He was hanged on the 1st October, 1788.

Now cross the next road and the church in the open area in front of you is St. Giles.

12. ST GILES - There has been some sort of church on this site since A.D. 854, The oldest part of the present building are the central pillars which date back to 1120. The distinctive crown spire of 1495 is one of Edinburgh's best known landmarks and was once used as a prison. This was not popular with the parishioners because the prisoners in the tower seemed to derive great satisfaction from dropping pebbles on the church congregations below. It is also important to note that the Edinburgh Tollbooth, or prison, used to stand beside the church. It was demolished in 1817 but the centre of the building is still marked by the heart shape in the pavement just beside the road.

Walk down to the small octagonal tower behind St. Giles.

13. THE MERCAT CROSS - The mercat or market cross was the focal point of life in Old Town of Edinburgh. It was here that public announcements and Royal Proclamations were made. The 'Croce' is first mentioned in a charter of 1365 and used to stand in the middle of the street. The present Cross has parts of the original but was extensively rebuilt in 1885.

Walk downhill to the next church on the right hand side.

14. THE TRON KIRK - Founded in 1633, this church is named after the 'tron', or public weigh-beam, which was situated nearby. It is no longer in use. When it was excavated a late 16th century close was found, called Marlin's Wynd. It lies deep in the foundations of the building. Each year the Tron is the focal point for thousands of Edinburgh people who gather at midnight on the 31st December to celebrate 'Hogmanay' or the New Year. No doubt they are all joyous at the thought of spending another year in this wonderful city.

Cross the road and the Radisson SAS Hotel is ahead of you on the right.

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