

What price HERITAGE?



Royal Mile (above) and Hogmany revellers on Princes Street



With festivals of science and the arts reminding us so visibly, recently and regularly, Edinburgh mines its cultural seams more than most destination cities. However, as **Richard Emerson** reminds us in his uniquely laconic style, it was not always so. From his vantage point as Chief Inspector of Historic Buildings, for Historic Scotland, Richard affords us an expert guided tour of Edinburgh's heritage and future prospects, even though his views are as personal as his irony. Just how important, he asks, is cultural heritage in determining visitor choices?

Edinburgh's Old and New Towns were inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1995, a fact which is thought by tourism professionals in Scotland to be of little significance in determining visitor choices. The city is visited by around 2.7 million tourists every year. A tourist is here defined as an overnight visitor. In 1998, 1.6 million visitors came from the United Kingdom, and 1.2 million from overseas. This should be compared to 1991, when the UK tourist figure was 1.4 million but the international number was 0.8 million. The greatest growth has therefore been in overseas visitors. The absence of any explosion in visitor numbers post 1995, however, may suggest that the additional accolade of World Heritage status has indeed had little effect on a market already fully persuaded of the city's and Scotland's cultural heritage.

For we know why tourists come: 83 per cent of visitors say they chose Scotland because of our history, and they certainly visit our historic buildings in enormous numbers. But most of all they spend time in our historic towns and cities. It is understandable, therefore, that Scotland's cities have for the last 10 years identified tourism as a powerful tool for economic regeneration.

The Old Town of Edinburgh, with its Castle and Royal Palace, is what the tourists come to enjoy. Between the two is the Royal Mile, where the tourists spend most of their time. Two thirds of all tourists that come to Scotland will visit the Royal Mile. Some 70 per cent of tourists in Edinburgh visit the Royal Mile, compared to 56 per cent visiting the Castle and 32 per cent visiting the Royal Palace at Holyrood.

Some more statistics might be of interest. Each year 1.3 million people visit the Castle, which belongs to Historic Scotland. This is the single biggest tourist attraction in the city and, with 300 other properties, Historic Scotland is the single largest visitor attraction business in the country. Visitors to the Castle bring in £9 million. The total tourist spend in the city region generates over £1.82 billion, though interestingly only 12 per cent of the total retail spend in the city centre. Between 1991 and 1998, the real value of spend by overseas visitors rose by 80 per cent, but UK visitor spend rose only marginally.

The early tourists

Tourism is not new to Edinburgh. It has its roots in the late eighteenth century, when the Romantic Movement was fuelled by the Tales of Ossian, partly fake and partly based on genuine folklore. These stories of the mythical Scottish king Fingal, as told by his son, Ossian, swept Europe. Probably for the first time in its history, Scotland was famous, and a visitor destination. Even Napoleon, the French Emperor who always carried a copy of Ossian with him, wished to visit and marshalled armies of invasion; a painting of the dream of Ossian, by Ingres, was commissioned for his bedroom ceiling.

The first guide books to Scotland date from this period. Like most they are written by foreigners for their fellow countrymen. These English writers largely ignored the history of a country with which they had twice recently been at war, saving their enthusiasm for the wild country beyond the cities, peopled in their imagination by mythical figures from antiquity.

Only in the late 1820s did the image change, largely prompted by the work of the poet and novelist, Sir Walter Scott. For Scott brought the romance of recent Scottish history to the cities, and particularly to Edinburgh. For him and for his readers, Edinburgh was the stage, and its buildings the backdrop, to stories of love, chivalry, betrayal and revenge. The Scotland that Scott described was irresistible and drew visitors in their hundreds of thousands, not only from England, but from all over Europe and America. Edinburgh was to capitalise on the image he had created for the city for nearly 100 years.

Both Scott's romantic evocation of Edinburgh, and the Edinburgh he knew, were lively, democratic and colourful; the streets were alive with people. There were street markets and street theatre.

However, by the late nineteenth century, selling anything in the streets required a licence and was effectively limited to newspapers. Ball games were forbidden in parks. The desire for respectability and order that characterised a country and a city that increasingly saw itself as puritanical and stern, led to a city centre that was virtually without street life, an austere, black place.

This moment, when tourism had virtually ceased, was captured in *The Making of Classical Edinburgh*, a book of 1967. Written this time by an Edinburgh citizen for a readership of his fellow inhabitants, it was illustrated with magnificent photographs. These portray the city as wet, dark, empty and magnificent.

The rise of heritage and culture

The tourists that did come to Edinburgh came in the late summer, attracted by two innovations of the 1940s. The Edinburgh Tattoo, a military display in front of the Castle, was a backward-looking celebration of Scotland's military traditions. As the Army has become very much smaller, the Tattoo has become very much bigger and more international, now drawing huge crowds on summer evenings.

At the same time, the Edinburgh International Festival of Music and Drama was started with the more forward-looking ambition of repairing the damage done to the cultural life of Europe by the Second World War. This too has grown to become one of the largest such festivals in the world.

In the late 1960s, at the time when those dark, wet photographs were taken, a new festival grew up on the edge of the International



The Royal Palace at Holyrood



Edinburgh Tattoo



Festival. Called the Fringe, for this reason, it is now larger than its parent, young people from all over the world putting on plays, street theatre, dance and comedy shows.

As the pattern of international tourism has changed - to shorter holidays, taken more often - and the focus has moved from the beaches to the cities, all historic cities have found themselves in competition.

Competition, of course, does not encourage diversity, it reduces differences by eliminating those things which are seen to discourage the consumer and copying from competitors those things which attract the consumer. So all cars look much the same and soon all cities may look much the same, too.

Festivals are a case in point. In the Protestant north of Europe we have very few traditional Festivals, only one in Scotland, at New Year. This was not until recently a tourist attraction. Held at the coldest, darkest time of the year, it has been a marketing triumph to make this an extraordinarily popular international tourist entertainment, but it is, of course, a response to New Orleans' Mardi Gras or Rio's Carnival.

Other festivals, nine in total, have followed: Christmas, not celebrated outside the home in Scotland until recently, is a new Festival; as is Beltane. This is a wholly new, or at least revived, pagan festival on 1 May, when near-naked, red-painted young people and old hippies dance around a hill-top fire to celebrate the coming of summer. And there are others: the Book, Film, Television, Science and the Jazz Festivals, whilst the city flirts with the Tall Ships and the Festival of the Sea.

Tourism and economic renewal

Edinburgh has looked to its competition: it has stone-cleaned its buildings in emulation of Paris, created little squares like Barcelona and, encouraged by the example of Copenhagen, whose climate is even worse than ours, moved cafes out on to the streets.

Some of the intentions and consequences of this focus on tourism over the last decade are well documented. In 1989, the Government agencies responsible for employment, for housing and for the heritage - Historic Scotland - together with the City Council commissioned the *Edinburgh Tourism Review*. This review set out the strategic objectives for the Old Town, which were the creation of:

- a historic area of outstanding quality;
- a world-class tourist destination;

- a sustainable residential neighbourhood;
- a vibrant local economy, with
- a healthy balance between users.

The obstacles to achieving these aims, identified in 1989, were:

- As a tourist destination, Edinburgh suffered from excessive seasonality - most activity was focused in the third quarter of the year.
- It lacked sufficient tourism infrastructure - there were only 49 hotel beds in the Old Town.
- It did not give enough importance to marketing, management or training.
- It did not have enough attractions that appealed to family and business markets.
- Large numbers of shop and business premises were unused or empty - 95 in 1990.

One of the most significant outcomes of the review was the decision to build a conference centre in the city, just to the west of the Old Town. At the same time, coincidentally, the city and Government were converting an old bingo hall in the Old Town into the Festival Theatre, capable of staging opera and ballet at international level, as well as pop bands and musicals.

Finally, it is important to point out that, whilst the Castle was expected to remain the leading visitor attraction, the Old Town itself was to be a primary attraction, which both tourists and Edinburgh people should find memorable to visit and pleasant to spend time in.

Ten years later, progress has been reviewed. The existing visitor attractions have been upgraded. New attractions such as the Festival Theatre, the City Arts Centre, the Museum of Scotland and Dynamic Earth (an interactive natural history exhibition), have been built, whilst the National Galleries have expanded with new Surrealist Galleries and improved exhibition facilities.

The pedestrian environment has been improved, though traffic remains a problem.

Hotels, particularly in the budget sector, have been developed, with more than 700 beds in the Old Town compared with 49 a decade ago.

The number of overseas tourists has risen from 750,000 in 1989 to 1.2 million in 1995, second only to London in the UK. At 7.5 per cent, this annual growth is fractionally greater than the 7 per cent growth in worldwide tourism over the same period.

The attempt to lengthen and diversify the tourist season has seen growth in other quarters but no reduction in the crowded festival period. However, people with the means and flexibility to travel outside the holiday season are more valuable in terms of the level and type of their expenditure and the lower strain they put on the city's resources. Such people tend to travel independently, take multiple holidays, have higher disposable incomes and have an interest in heritage. Increasing Edinburgh's share of this market therefore continues to be a priority.

New challenges

One disappointment revealed by the review was that Edinburgh is not attracting a high rate of repeat visits despite surveys that show very high levels of visitor satisfaction. No fewer than 54 per cent of

all visitors in 1998, excluding those who live in Scotland, were visiting for the first time. A close rival, Dublin, has a much more successful record of repeat visits, without some of the natural and architectural advantages of Edinburgh. It has, however, a reputation for a relaxed and friendly population, which contrasts with Edinburgh's more reserved public face. Perhaps Edinburgh people need training in relaxation and friendliness.

The healthy balance between the needs of the tourist and those of the citizen has not been entirely successful, particularly at peak times in the tourist season. In Edinburgh there are frequent complaints, from tourists and residents alike, of congestion and overcrowding. Some parts of the city centre are crowded with people, with pavement artists and living statues, musicians - especially men playing the bagpipes - ghost tours and girls offering hair-braiding. Other spaces, quite nearby, remain empty and unwelcoming.

We could learn much from Copenhagen in the management of public space: there are pedestrian shopping streets and squares with cafes for young families, squares with restaurants for businessmen and squares with bars for the young. Crowded popular places attract the young but they exclude mothers with small children, the old and the infirm. Musicians playing loudly all day, too close to each other, spoil rather than improve the atmosphere and make working or living in nearby buildings unpleasant.

In Copenhagen, musicians may not play without a permit, in business areas they must not play before 4.00pm and in residential areas they must stop by 7.00pm. The places where they may play are spaced out so you can only hear one musician at a time. This level of control is unseen but necessary.

Whilst there have been obvious benefits to the city's economy, there have been rivals. Glasgow, which saw off Edinburgh in its successful bid to be European City of Architecture and Design 1999, is reportedly doing better in the short break market. Investment at Stirling, including Historic Scotland's dramatic reworking of the Castle as a visitor destination, has yielded a return in increased visitor numbers. This is paralleled at Castle Urquhart on Loch Ness, where the monster continues to determine visitor itineraries. Both these build on Edinburgh as a gateway, but, even close to the city, traditional heritage attractions, such as the baroque Palace of Hopetoun House, have struggled to attract visitors, as has the excellent Scottish Mining Museum.

Further off the beaten track, from Edinburgh to Inverness and Loch Ness, the Scottish Maritime Museum, at Irvine, is one of many heritage attractions created in the 1980s, to have found itself in difficulties, and continuing local authority commitment to other such joint ventures cannot be relied upon. Meanwhile, the National Trust for Scotland is going through well-publicised economic trauma and is questioning its traditional role in the presentation of country houses.

This, then, is where we are now. What will happen next?

A cultured future

One significant change is that the public realm, that is maintenance, the improving and paving of streets and squares of our city and town centres, is back on the agenda. For like tourists, businesses have choices as to where they locate their national or international offices. The way our streets and squares look sends out a powerful

signal about the confidence and competence of our cities.

However, running counter to the view that cities are trendy places to live, and economically and socially lively, is the widespread perception that they are dangerous; ill-lit at night, and, in parts, scary even by day. It is too easy to convince yourself that down every alleyway there are drunks and drug dealers. Of course in some cases this is true; we all know where not to go in our own cities if we are old, young, or young and female but the tourist has an exaggerated sense of fear.

The perception of crime, and crime itself, is diminished by spending money on these streets, particularly if, as in Edinburgh, many of them lead to interesting buildings or important visitor attractions.

A more significant and as yet ill-documented recent change has resulted from the cheap flights revolution. The aftermath of September 11th and the consequences of the Foot and Mouth epidemic in cattle, which had a severe but geographically limited effect in Scotland, were widely expected to impact disastrously upon tourism figures. However we saw a surprising rise in the number of visitors to Edinburgh. The availability of flights from Dublin - as low as £1 each way in October and November 2001 - led to a significant increase in visitor numbers at the end of the year, increasing by a quarter over the same period in the previous year. How the continuing availability of such flights will impact upon the city is difficult to anticipate.

Meanwhile, as I write, the pound is sinking against the euro, which Historic Scotland now accepts in its properties.

How will all this spin out, and what has been the impact of the last decade's effect?

The city's buildings are probably now in a better state of repair than they have been for a century; land and property values are high and there is near full employment. But tourism has changed the city, perhaps forever. The once black buildings are now stone-cleaned, the once empty streets are crowded, and, exposed to European ideas for the first time in half a century, and in a more relaxed and sophisticated city, even Edinburgh people now sit outside in cafes.

