

Re-booting student life after two years of pandemic

How a song and dance helped Hanna connect with the University community after studying remotely.

I came to the University of Edinburgh in September 2020 so was in the first cohort to experience what it is like to start my studies under Covid conditions. Unlike many of my peers, I was lucky to have comparatively many in-person classes. Academically, things went well and I felt sufficiently supported – there was just nothing to do except for studying. But when stricter measurements forced me to study entirely online from my home in Germany in spring 2021, I felt very much detached from the student community.



So, going into my second year I was excited for all the opportunities that would come with being in Edinburgh again but jumping back (or rather, for the first time) into student life in Edinburgh was harder than I expected. After all, I had just spent a year and a half either being chained to my desk studying, or to my bed watching Netflix. Although not consciously, I still had the mentality of staying inside and

looking for activities that didn't involve too many other people.

I made sure to join as many societies as my schedule allowed, joined the committee of a society and assumed a job as student ambassador at the University to get fully involved, but something was still missing – I still didn't quite feel at home and part of this great student community. That changed when I attended the first showcase organised by one of my societies at the end of last semester. Being at a place where it's mostly students and seeing something solely student-led come to life was truly exhilarating. I finally felt part of something bigger – something I've recognised again at our second showcase and at two theatre performances by other societies.



Sure, going to pubs, bars and flat parties is a great way to meet more people but I have found that they couldn't give me what being part of or seeing student showcases and performances did. I suppose there is a huge accumulation of sheer talent at Edinburgh University, but that's not to say you have to have the talent yourself or be part of such societies – I for one could never participate in a theatre performance or a dance competition. And regarding theatre and such, we are of course fortunate. Edinburgh, as the venue for

the Fringe Festival, is the perfect place for student productions. However, I think it's the experience of what can happen when we all pull in the same direction and what we accomplish as a student community apart from the academics that really made me feel 'welcome'.

Now that restrictions are looser again and that people start to feel safe in a room with many others, it's time to revive real student life. Let's do that by going to performances by people you might not know but are connected to through University. Apart from honouring their/our hard work by going to these, nothing feels more inclusive. Plus, it is a great way to enjoy culture without breaking the bank.

“What's so great about living in Edinburgh?”

Good question. Luckily, Tristan [MA (Hons) Ancient and Medieval History] can help answer that.



The fortress on top of Castle Rock includes the 12th c. St Margaret's Chapel – the oldest building in the city.

In the 18th Century Edinburgh designated itself the 'Athens of the North', and wandering through the city centre it's not hard to see why. Okay, after twenty-something years in the Scottish capital I'm admittedly a little biased. But what isn't to love about studying a history degree in a city with a beautiful medieval Old Town, gardens set in an old loch and a castle built upon an extinct volcano?

A city that blends its rich history with its position as home of the largest arts festival in the world (yes, the world!) is something quite unique – there's nothing like wandering down the Royal Mile during the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in August. In fact, Edinburgh hosts a huge programme of events throughout the year: from the Book, Jazz and Blues, and Science Festivals, to the Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo. If live arts aren't your thing – although there's plenty to indulge in across the city's many theatre venues – you'll certainly find something to pique your interest.

One of my favourite aspects of the city is its fantastic selection of museums and galleries, the largest of which is the National Museum of Scotland located just minutes from the School of History, Classics and Archaeology. Its collections include the recently opened Ancient Egyptian and East Asian galleries as well as an extensive wing dedicated to Scotland's past. However, because the city itself is so rich with history, just wandering down the Royal Mile is an adventure in itself. Each 'close' – the Scots word for an alleyway – tells a story, of its former occupants or use, the most infamous being the underground Mary King's Close (**definitely** worth a visit!). A former lecturer once told me to always look up at buildings when wandering through the Old Town as you'll be amazed at what you learn from inscriptions and plaques.



Even in the middle of the city centre, there are lots of places for a quieter walk, including along the Water of Leith in picturesque Dean Village.

What I particularly love about the city is the amount of green space. The public Princes Street gardens, situated between the New and Old towns, are always bustling, as are the gorgeous Royal Botanical Gardens. However, you'll find some more secluded spaces if you know where to look, including a hidden gem at the bottom of Dunbar's Close – I'll let you discover that one for yourself! You're also never too far from the countryside and there are lots of scenic walks a short bus or train journey away.

Between its incredible art and literary festivals, heritage sites and beautiful parks – and that's before we discuss everything that the university itself has to offer – Edinburgh is a pretty fantastic city. To be a history student here is something really special, and whilst it might not boast the monumental buildings of the Athenian acropolis, the 'Athens of the North' isn't short of wonder.

Find more walks around Edinburgh at the Visit Scotland site.

You can see a map of green spaces within Edinburgh on the Edinburgh Outdoors website.

Summer in Edinburgh: What can I do?

Many students stay in Edinburgh over the summer break – why wouldn't you? – but what do they do all day? Student Ambassador Tess has some suggestions.

Find yourself in Edinburgh for the summer? Have no fear! It's not uncommon for students to stay up in Edinburgh as the sun starts to peek through all the clouds around May. However, you

may be a bit stuck or unsure of what you can fill your days with. Here are a few suggestions of what you could do over the summer in Edinburgh and Scotland in general.

Road trip to the Highlands or Bus Tours



Tobermory on the island of Mull.

Road trips are a fun way of exploring the different national parks and the Highlands in Scotland, especially if you're interested in hiking and camping. There are loads of campsites and affordable hostels along the way. You can also customise your trip to hit all the major spots, like Loch Ness, Loch Lomond, the Isle of Mull, the Isle of Skye and the Cairngorms. You could even drive up as far as John O'Groats, which is the northernmost point of the British Isles. If you're not super sure about where you should go, there are pre-planned routes like the West Coast 500. The possibilities are endless; all you really need is a good group of friends, a few experienced

drivers and a map!

If you're not super comfortable with driving or you don't have a designated driver friend, there is also the option of hopping on a bus tour. There are loads that take you to places like Skye, or to the crannog on Loch Tay, or to a number of other locations across Scotland. These tend to be cheaper than a road trip, as you don't need to hire a vehicle, however your schedule isn't as flexible. These are great for day trips and weekend breaks, which may be better suited for people with summer internships or jobs.

Beaches

I know it seems a bit surreal to suggest going to beach in Scotland, but you'd be surprised with how beautiful and sunny Scottish beaches can be. I suggest checking out places like North Berwick, which is a quick train or bus rides away, or even going to Portobello beach here in Edinburgh. The water can be a bit cold but when the sun's out, it's actually a great way to get some vitamin D. There are loads of nice waterside restaurants as well as decent fish and chips shops to get a takeaway. If it's a particularly sunny day, I suggest you jump on the bus or your bike and get down to Portobello via Arthur's Seat!

Bookstores

This one seems a little bit weird, but if you're like me and really love the smell of new books, there are loads of bookstores to check out in Edinburgh. Places like Topping and Co. in Leith are multiple stories with a vast number of titles to peruse; you can even get a cup of tea and read a book at Topping! Other great bookstores include Portobello Bookstore (you could hit the books and the beach in the same day), Lighthouse Books, Armchair Books, Golden Hare Books and Tills Bookstore. They often have really interesting editions of

books, as well as some signed copies! Edinburgh was the world's first UNESCO City of Literature so you're sure to find a bookshop to your taste.

The Seven Hills of Edinburgh

It's no secret that Edinburgh has often tried to model itself after Classical models. Calton Hill, which hosts the National Monument of Scotland – sometimes called 'Scotland's Folly' or 'Edinburgh's Disgrace' – is a prime example of how many of its inhabitants deemed the city as the 'Athens of the North'. This is not where the Classical resonances end. The Seven Hills of Edinburgh draw parallels with the Seven Hills of Rome



Designed by William Playfair the National Monument of Scotland was intended to be another Parthenon to commemorate Scottish soldiers killed in the Napoleonic wars but construction was halted in 1829 due to lack of

and are a fantastic way of getting to know the city. Many

people do all seven in one day, but I think there's no shame in spacing it out if you're not a keen hiker. If you do want to try it out, the hills are: Calton Hill, Castle Rock, Corstorphine Hill, Craiglockhart Hill, Blackford Hill, Arthur's Seat and Braid Hill. There are loads of guides to follow; make sure you bring ample water supplies and lots of snacks! I speak from experience.

Museums

On top of the National Museum of Scotland, which is the home of the first cloned sheep, there are a number of museums littered across Edinburgh. If you're interested in music and musical history, you could check out St Cecilia's Hall. Run by the University's Centre for Research Collections, this museum has a wide array of interesting instruments in their exhibits. For any fans of Zelda, there are a large number of ocarinas you can admire. Other interesting museums to check out are the National Portrait Gallery at Princes Street, Surgeons Hall, the Museum of Edinburgh, the Writer's Museum and the Scottish National Gallery.

The Fringe

Last, but certainly not least, is the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. This is just one of several festivals which take place in Edinburgh during the summer but it's been the birthplace of productions like *Fleabag* and the musical *Six*. It's a fantastic way to spend your summer immersed in the arts during August and consists of both paid and free shows. It is an 'unjuried' festival, which means there is no selection committee when it comes to what productions run during the month, which makes for some very interesting performances. These are often not limited to just black box spaces and theatres, there are over three hundred performance spaces and many outdoor pieces as well. On top of the huge variety of

shows put on every day, the food stalls are unbelievably good! The Fringe is definitely the highlight of a summer in Edinburgh.

No matter what you choose – and there's plenty of choice – your summer in Edinburgh is sure to fly by!

Summer in the city

The rules and regs of summer in Edinburgh by Student Ambassador Ruby.

I've always argued that Edinburgh is a city designed for 'bad' weather. The Old Town looks even more Gothic in the gloom, and no student's Instagram would be complete without a photo of Arthur's Seat surrounded by atmospheric sea mist called 'haar'. However, I'm also an advocate for staying in Edinburgh over the summer months so I've always chosen to take a summer job here, rather than head back to my family home, once exams are finished.

Over the past 3 years I think I've made every summer mistake possible, from getting sunburnt on the Meadows to promising myself I'll still revise if I go and sit outside. Some of these mistakes could be avoided with a bit more common sense, admittedly, but others you can only learn to avoid through trial and error. To give you a head start, I've decided to compile some of my hard-earned wisdom into some dos and don'ts. Enjoy!



The Meadows in bloom.

DO make the most of every sunny day

Summer in Edinburgh seems to always begin just as you're having to revise for exams or work to a deadline. "That's okay", you tell yourself, gazing wistfully out of the library window, "I'll work hard today and then I'll enjoy the sun at the weekend." Sensible, right? WRONG. What you'll quickly realise during your first summer in Edinburgh is that sunny days are glorious, but fleeting. The second the sun comes out you need to make the most of it, as it won't be there long!

DON'T burn the grass on the Meadows!

The Meadows is a large public park, located behind the University's Main Library. During the summer months it becomes the city's shared back garden and the epicentre of most students' social lives. Trying (and failing) to grill sausages over a disposable barbeque is a Meadows rite of passage and on a sunny day you'll see plenty of others doing the same. However, just as essential to this ritual as ketchup or hotdog buns are bricks to prop up your barbeque. Edinburgh residents

are very fond of the Meadows and, therefore, very protective of it. A single blade of singed grass is enough to get you dirty looks ...

DO head outside of town



Sun, sea and sand at Dunbar.

By the time it gets to your first summer, you'll be feeling settled in Edinburgh. You'll have your preferred floor of the Main Library, a favourite coffee shop, and a fierce loyalty to a particular late-night chip shop. You'll be feeling more confident and at home, and exploration will probably have taken a back seat in favour of studying.

However, summer is the perfect time to recapture that spirit of adventure you had in Welcome Week! With no more deadlines to hold you back, consider heading outside of the city centre. Portobello Beach is just a bus ride away and has a wonderfully retro amusement arcade to enjoy if the weather starts to turn. Alternatively, Dunbar has stunning views and is easy to reach on the train.

DON'T try to get anywhere in a rush ...

It is often said that the city's population doubles in August thanks to tourism. Whether this is true or not, it certainly *feels* true as previously quiet streets become bustling. Not only is there more people, the crowds also move slowly. Whilst you've had weeks to admire Edinburgh, everyone else wants to stop and take photos every few steps. Unfortunately, I've never found a way to get around this problem – you just have to relax and add an extra half hour onto every journey time.

MAYBE get involved in the Fringe?

I finish on a controversial one here – the Fringe seems to divide opinions. If you haven't heard of it, the Edinburgh Festival Fringe is an arts festival which lasts for almost the entirety of August. There are thousands of shows and practically every spare room in Edinburgh becomes a temporary performance space. Fringe-haters complain about the crowds and the cost of a pint of beer being hiked, whilst Fringe-lovers can be found rushing from show to show and taking every flyer they are offered on the street.

I fall somewhere between the two. Yes, the Fringe is expensive but it's very easy for students to find part-time work. And, whilst the hours can be long and unsociable, working the Fringe is a great way to meet new people. The city does become very busy, but there's also the chance you'll spot a celebrity. Give it a go – it's right on your doorstep – then make up your own mind.