

Alba

Going underground: close encounters, Royal Mile style

Beneath Edinburgh's busiest street is a hidden network of passageways that lay forgotten for nearly a century after the Great Fire of 1824.

James Reinhardt enters the drinking dungeon

I have visited many watering holes in Edinburgh before, but none like this. "Welcome to our drinking dungeon," says the very unusual barman of this hidden bunker buried deep below the Royal Mile. It's not even 9.30am yet.

The "drinking dungeon" is part of the Lost Close, an eerie basement space discovered in 2019 during renovations of John's Coffee House and Tavern, formerly Auld Reekie's courthouse and jail.

Made up of a network of alleyways, cellars and passages buried by rubble from the Great Fire of Edinburgh in 1824, the close had been untouched for nearly two centuries. Hidden away in a spooky chamber that once housed the courthouse's furnace, the drinking dungeon is now a place where visitors on many tours of the close stop to sip gin, whisky and beer.

Fortunately for my liver at this early hour, the tour I'm on does not involve booze, only coffee. Telling the "tale of coffee's journey to Edinburgh", the 1-hour-and-35-minute caper kicks off at John's Coffee House and Tavern, then descends into a low, vaulted space used as a bomb shelter in the Second World War, where I'm served a milky Americano.

The air down here is cooler, damper, heavier, with the whisper of folk waiting for the all-clear still faintly echoing around the soot-darkened walls. We may only be a few metres below the bustle of the Royal Mile, but this feels less like a tour and more like slipping through a crack in time.

Spread across one of the shelter's walls is a print of a vast map of Edinburgh created by a Dutch visitor before the Great Fire. It sets the tone for an experience that feels more like an extreme episode of Antiques Roadshow than a regular tourist jaunt.

In the next room we find a remarkable Victorian engine, used to regulate the temperature of the police chambers upstairs. It is the second-oldest surviving Crossley four-stroke engine in the world — the oldest is in the Henry Ford museum in Michigan — and raises the question, how on earth did they get it in here?

Moving through the close is a claustrophobic experience, involving much crouching in hobbit-sized corridors. Claustrophobes probably need not apply. My guide, Josh, says they keep the close like this to make the experience as "authentic" as possible. I know what he means — though my back doesn't hugely appreciate the decision.

The drinking dungeon itself is essentially a cosy, U-shaped sofa in a dingy cobbled tunnel beside a stack of rubble that makes it feel like you're sitting in a live archaeological dig. It would be perfect for a late-night whisky session while you play



Dungeons & Dragons, as someone did for six straight hours, having hired the bar out for their 50th birthday party.

After visiting the Lost Close, the tour diverts to the Real Mary King's Close, guided by people dressed as characters who once walked the old town — and occasionally meeting some of its ghosts, including the spirit of the plague victim Annie and a gruesome sickly dog (apparently). One of the rooms is piled high with dolls, after a Japanese psychic visited in the 1990s and encountered Annie — she reportedly tugged her trouser leg, eek — looking for her favourite



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Troup Head

Perched on the north Aberdeenshire coast, RSPB Troup Head is the only gannet colony on the Scottish mainland. First recorded breeding here in the mid-1980s, the gannet population has since flourished to more than 4,000 pairs. Great views can be enjoyed from the clifftop path, where these magnificent but constantly bickering birds can be seen at close quarters.

Fowlsheugh

Fowlsheugh embodies nature's wild soul — the noise of the swirling seabirds will leave you in awe. Thousands of razorbills, guillemots and kittiwakes nest here, a few miles south of Stonehaven. Watch for fulmars riding the updrafts effortlessly. Be warned: these birds possess a notorious defence mechanism: projectile-vomiting foul-smelling stomach oil if you get too close.



EMILIE LUMINEAU, THE REAL MARY KING'S CLOSE



The tour visits the Lost Close and its drinking dungeon, above, and creepy rooms in Real Mary King's Close, left

doll. The psychic bought one and left it for the girl and scores of visitors have since followed suit.

So then, worth doing? One hundred per cent yes if Annie ends up tugging your trouser leg, but £40 is a lot to spend for a milky, lukewarm Americano and a slightly achy back. However, this is so much more than just a sneak peek below the Royal Mile. It's a sneak peek back in time. So little is known about what Edinburgh looked like before the fire — and here you get a glimpse of it. "There hasn't been a day I haven't learnt something," Josh says.

Perhaps the best time to explore the Lost Close is during the summer, when it opens as a public whisky bar, offering a place to escape the Fringe-flyer distributors for no entry fee.

I for one will be going back. Not to play Dungeons & Dragons, not even for another cup of coffee, but to experience the close as it's meant to be experienced: with a peaty swig of whisky in the drinking dungeon.

James Reinhardt was a guest of the Real Mary King's Close (realmarykingsclose.com). The Coffee & Closes tour costs £40 per person

Sumburgh Head

At the southern tip of the Shetland Islands, Sumburgh Head offers a clifftop paradise where endearing puffins (known locally as tammie norries) steal the show. It is worth carefully scanning the sea around Sumburgh Head with binoculars as orcas regularly patrol these waters on the hunt for seals and pods are frequently spotted close to shore.

Handa Island

Incoming! One can almost sense the tension in the air when a great skua sweeps low over the cliffs of Handa Island, a Scottish Wildlife Trust reserve off the Sutherland coast. Skuas are sea pirates, relentlessly harassing other birds until they drop their catch, which is then stolen. Guillemots and razorbills also crowd the island's towering sandstone cliffs.

Isle of May

Guarding the entrance to the Firth of Forth, the island can be reached by boat from Anstruther or North Berwick. It's a haven for guillemots, razorbills, kittiwakes, shags, puffins, eiders and Arctic terns. In spring and autumn, the island is a magnet for migrating songbirds, many of them rare. **A Scottish Wildlife Odyssey by Keith Broomfield (Tippermuir £9.99) is out now**



CARLOS NORLEN

An e-foil is part surfboard, part futuristic hoverboard. Get it right and you'll glide along two feet above the water

Riding high — how I (very nearly) learnt to surf the air

Lucy Holden heads to Turkey to try out the shiniest toy in the watersports world, the notoriously tricky e-foil

I'm on a levitating surfboard whizzing through the Mediterranean when Kyle, the Helensburgh boy in charge of my first e-foiling session, spots a giant turtle. "Where?" I shout, before total wipeout.

I have come to Cook's Club Adakoy, an adults-only resort on Turkey's Lycian Coast. These calm, raki-clear waters are fast establishing themselves as a haven for watersports — with temperatures above 20C even in April and flights from Edinburgh and Glasgow going straight to Dalaman.

Here, about a half-hour drive from Marmaris on the upmarket, pine-forested Adakoy peninsula, the activity-holiday specialists Neilson teamed up with the resort in 2025 to offer an array of enticing watersports.

I start with their star attraction: e-foiling. With e-foils themselves costing about £10,000, they're the It thing for playboy yacht owners and watersports influencers.

So what's e-foiling all about, you ask. Well, imagine if a surfboard had a baby with Marty McFly's hoverboard in *Back to the Future* — that's an e-foil. Essentially a board with a long stem on its bottom, it has two electric-powered wings at the end of the stem that sit below the surface of the water. You don't surf on the water, you soar 2ft above it, in eerie, motorised serenity. That's the theory anyway.

In practice, it's hellishly difficult to master: standing up requires the balance of a tightrope walker. Time and time again I fall in — not unwelcome, given that I am here in August and the temperature is a sweltering 40C. In the end I just kneel on the board, powering myself across the bay using the handheld wireless remote control. I'm not saying I look good, but for one or two moments when it feels as if I'm floating, it's hard to think where I'd rather be. "It's like nothing else you'll ever experience," says Neilson's activities manager, Sam Shaw. No argument from me.



Cook's Club Adakoy is an adults-only resort with a big watersports offering

Less tricky but equally brilliant is sea-scooting. Also new to Cook's Club (and a lot of the world full stop), sea scooters are like mini torpedoes with handlebars, letting you cruise about underwater, exploring the sub-aqua world like a lazy mermaid. And because you're not thrashing about in the water, any fish you meet seem remarkably unfazed.

Motorised watersports are not the only game in town at Neilson's new beach club. Paddleboarders wobble across the bay, catamarans glint in the sun, swimmers get open-water swimming lessons from instructors. One afternoon, I go kayaking and encounter a giant turtle — I actually see it this time without falling in — its huge shiny shell bobbing on the surface as we sit in breathless exhilaration, trying not to splash our paddles and scare it away.

The resort itself is a five-star hotel that describes its style as "boho-chic"

and it isn't wrong. Adakoy means "island village" in Turkish, and the resort really does have a laid-back, low-rise village vibe, sitting on its own private beach within a national park.

Pretty footpaths meander through lush, fragrant gardens. Within wine glass-grasping reach of the impressive pool is an open-sided, horseshoe bar that offers an excellent opportunity to watch watersport wipeouts if you prefer dry land.

There are e-bikes and padel, volleyball and Pilates, as well as yoga and a spa where you can be bathed like a baby in a traditional Turkish hammam, scrubbed to within an inch of your life in a foam party for one that ends with a soothing honey rub — great for sunned skin.

The Cook's Club restaurant operates like a miniature food hall, with a handful of culinary teams offering daily-changing menus of classic pides (flatbread with mince) and kebabs, as well as surprisingly decent pizza and sushi. Turkish olive oil tastes wonderfully green and I regret forgetting to bring some home. Eventually I make it to Marmaris, a 20-minute water-taxi ride costing less than a tenner. For a few slightly addled hours I wander around its busy bars and bustling pavement cafés, but my heart isn't in it. It's back at the resort, where the only neon is the Mediterranean at dusk. Who needs party shoes when you can have an e-foil and take in the world from 2ft above it?



Need to know

Lucy Holden was a guest of Neilson (neilson.co.uk). Seven nights at Neilson x Cook's Club Adakoy costs from £1,108pp, half-board, including some activities and all transfers and flights from Edinburgh to Dalaman. Fly to Dalaman from Edinburgh and Glasgow with easyJet, Jet2 and Tui from about £180 return.