

Romantic Edinburgh itinerary

<http://www.prestonfield.com/history.html>

For opulent surroundings and literary credentials, **Prestonfield House** is the ideal location for a romantic break for literature lovers.

The estate has passed through many hands over the centuries but of particular interest is that it was once owned by Walter Chepman, who brought the first printing press to Scotland from France and produced Scotland's first printed books, including John Lydgate's *The Complaint of the Black Knight*.

The estate was later acquired by the Dick family and during the time of Sir Alexander Dick was the venue for lavish dinner parties and gatherings for great Enlightenment thinkers and artists including Allan Ramsay, David Hume, Dr Samuel Johnson and James Boswell, and even Benjamin Franklin. Sir Alexander was also the first to introduce rhubarb to Scotland, hence the hotel's five star restaurant Rhubarb.

To get things off on a good foot, why not leave a little heartfelt poem on your partner's pillow, such as Robert Burns' 'My love is like a red, red rose'? You may substitute lass with lad, if required...

My love is like a red red rose

O my Luve's like a red, red rose,
That's newly sprung in June:
O my Luve's like the melodie,
That's sweetly play'd in tune.

As fair art thou, my bonie lass,
So deep in luve am I;
And I will luve thee still, my dear,
Till a' the seas gang dry.

Till a' the seas gang dry, my dear,
And the rocks melt wi' the sun;
And I will luve thee still, my dear,
While the sands o' life shall run.

And fare-thee-weel, my only Luve !
And fare-thee-weel, a while!
And I will come again, my Luve,
Tho' 'twere ten thousand mile!

Day one

Once you've acclimatised to the sumptuous surroundings, and can bear to leave behind the four poster bed and peacocks for a few hours, stroll along Pleasance and St Mary's Street to the Royal

Mile. Buried in **Canongate Kirkyard** is a lady who was of great interest to Scotland's premier poet and silver-tongued darling, Robert Burns. Agnes McLehose and Burns exchanged many letters under the pseudonyms Clarinda and Sylvander, although theirs seems to have been an intellectual relationship with Burns offering advice on Clarinda's own verses. One of Burns' most famous poems, 'Ae fond kiss', is dedicated to Clarinda and her iconic silhouette, with tumbling curls and lace ribbons, mark her resting place. This is of course an ideal opportunity to serenade your loved one with more heart-felt verse:

Ae fond kiss, and then we sever;
Ae fareweel, alas, for ever!
Deep in heart-wrung tears I'll pledge thee,
Warring sighs and groans I'll wage thee.
Who shall say that Fortune grieves him,
While the star of hope she leaves him?
Me, nae cheerful twinkle lights me;
Dark despair around benights me.

I'll ne'er blame my partial fancy,
Naething could resist my Nancy:
But to see her was to love her;
Love but her, and love for ever.
Had we never lov'd sae kindly,
Had we never lov'd sae blindly,
Never met-or never parted,
We had ne'er been broken-hearted.

Fare-thee-weel, thou first and fairest!
Fare-thee-weel, thou best and dearest!
Thine be ilka joy and treasure,
Peace, Enjoyment, Love and Pleasure!
Ae fond kiss, and then we sever!
Ae fareweel alas, for ever!
Deep in heart-wrung tears I'll pledge thee,
Warring sighs and groans I'll wage thee.

To return to the land of the living, head back onto the Mile and in the direction of Edinburgh Castle to **St Giles' Cathedral**. The cathedral has a splendid stained glass window dedicated to Burns so prepare to be dazzled by the jewel-like blues, greens, reds and yellows. You might want to explore the aisles too as there are more memorials to writers including Robert Louis Stevenson and Margaret Oliphant. You might also be interested to know that it's available for weddings.

There is also a memorial to James Dalrymple, also known as the 1st Viscount of Stair. Dalrymple was an eminent lawyer and statesman but this was not what interested the historical novelist Sir Walter Scott. Unfortunate events in the life of Dalrymple's daughter, Janet, were the inspiration for *The Bride of Lammermoor*. Janet was expected to make a "good" marriage to a wealthy family friend but unknown to her parents she was in love with another, penniless, man. Out of duty to her parents she married their preferred choice but that night in the bedchamber there were disastrous consequences...

Screams from the couple's room led servants to find Janet wild and incomprehensible, clutching a bloody knife. Her husband lay dying in a pool of his own blood and Janet herself was dead within a month due to "insanity". It is not known what exactly happened but more than one explanation exists: first, Janet is said to have murdered him; second, her spurned lover was waiting for them in the chamber, murdered Janet's husband and taunted her to the point of insanity; and third, the devil himself is thought to be the culprit.

If you prefer to keep things sweet, lead your partner out of the cathedral and show them the Heart of Midlothian which is made up of pink cobblestones in the shape of a heart. It's probably best to skip over the plot details of Scott's novel of the same name, and that the heart marks the spot of the dank and dreadful Tollbooth Prison.

Instead, you can explain that the Luckenbooths, tenements housing the first permanent shops in Edinburgh, once stood north of St Giles. And Luckenbooth brooches, with their distinctive heart and crown shape are named after these 'locking booths' where they were sold in 19th century.

Frequently given as love tokens, women wore them at the neck of their shift to close the front opening, apparently: 'averting the evil eye and keeping away witches'. So, in the spirit of protecting your loved one from spirits, you might want to visit The Tappit Hen nearby.

Lunch

Back on the Mile, continue up to **Lady Stair's Close**, above the entrance is a plaque marking Burns' first stay in Edinburgh in 1786 when it was Baxter's Place. You can learn more about Burns, Scott and Stevenson in the **Writers' Museum**, a beautiful converted 17th century house containing personal objects belonging to the writers and first editions of their books. There is the stool Burns sat on while proofing his poems at William Smellie's printing house, his writing desk from his home in Dumfries, as well as letters, portraits and poems. Outside is **Makars' Court**, a living monument to Scotland's writers with quotations carved into the paving stones, from Robert Fergusson and James Boswell to Muriel Spark and Norman MacCaig.

Coffee break?

If you walk back down the Royal Mile, towards North Bridge, you might choose to explain to your partner about the distinctive names of the closes (alleyways) in Edinburgh through verse with the assistance of Stewart Conn:

CLOSE NAMES

Fishmarket Close and Fleshmarket Close,
preserved down the centuries, still
strike a chord; like Old Tolbooth Wynd
and the long gone Luckenbooth stalls,
their silver hearts intertwined; while
Hammerman's Entry summons
the bellows' roar, ring of iron on iron;
and Dunbar's Close, Cromwell's
Ironsides billeted after battle.

Sugarhouse Close and Bakehouse Close

boast their own past and function –
not quite Dippermouth and Porterhouse,
conjuring up images of New Orleans
cutting contests and tailgate trombones,
but suggestive of a distinctive music
resounding in the Royal Mile
throughout Scotland's history,
theirs a ground bass of a different kind;

now jaunty, the banners streaming,
now plucking the heartstrings
like the Blues, in the realisation
of things lost, the end of an auld sang.
As with the Blues too, a lingering
undertow of loss and deprivation:
the start of a new age – yet the city's
division into haves and have-nots
never more discordant than today.

If you go along North Bridge and turn right onto Waterloo Place you'll see the Governor's House at the top of **Calton Hill**. Take a stroll up the leaf-shaded steps to the summit and enjoy the spectacular view across the city. You might also be tempted scale the unfinished National Monument and take photos. You can rest on the grass for a while and then walk down the other side of the hill and take the winding path to the rather grand **Burns Monument** on Regent Road.

Modelled on classical Greek architecture, it demonstrates Edinburgh's efforts to style itself as the enlightened 'Athens of the North'. Burns attended salons in the homes of the wealthy Edinburgh elite and impressed them, the ladies included, with his eloquent poems. This monument originally held a statue of Burns holding a daisy and reciting his poem 'To a mountain daisy' but this has since been moved to the **National Portrait Gallery** on Queen Street. The garden around the monument is planted with Burns' favourite flowers.

From Regent Road it's a short walk back to Waterloo Place and Howie's Restaurant. Their upmarket Scottish cuisine is made using the freshest locally-sourced produce – just looking at the options on the dessert menu is likely to get your heart racing.

Day two

Arthur's Seat, an extinct volcano and the atmospheric setting for many Scottish novels, is right on your doorstep at Prestonfield. You have two possible routes: from Holyrood Park Road (a turn-off from Dalkeith Road) you can either walk in the direction of the city centre, taking the Queen's Drive to the Radical Road that snakes around the hill. Or take the Duddingston Low Road to the peaceful and historic village of Duddingston.

If you take the first, you will be following in the footsteps of Dex and Em from David Nicholls' novel *One Day*, as depicted by Anne Hathaway and Jim Sturgess in Lone Scherfig's film. Make sure to take a picnic and after a refreshing hike, unpack the champagne and strawberries and enjoy the scenery.

The ruins of St Anthony's Chapel are particularly picturesque and if you have any titbits leftover you can feed them to the Queen's swans in Dunsapie Loch. And again, Stuart Conn is the man for a poetic moment:

FROM ARTHUR'S SEAT

North-east the Firth, a bracelet
merging with mist; south-west
the Pentlands, sharply defined. Directly
opposite, the castle. A sudden gust
makes me lose my footing. Gulls slip past,
eyeing us disdainfully.
On lower ground, we find respite.

Strange to contemplate this spot,
gouged cleanly out,
as going back millions of years;
its saucer fire and ice, volcanic
rock shaped by glaciers,
where now cameras click
and lovers stroll in pairs.

Such thoughts cannot be further
from the minds of those golfers
on the fairway below, heads down
and eyes on the ball, oblivious
to the shadows
furtively closing in,
the imminence of rain.

Tempting, watching us
loaf here, to deduce
the same; whereas
it is often when happiest,
we are most conscious
of darkness. See, it sweeps
towards us, the rim of an eclipse.

Duddingston Loch and bird sanctuary also offers beauty, tranquillity and, of course, rare wild birds. Robert Louis Stevenson is known to have skated on the frozen loch as a young boy and Sir Henry Raeburn was inspired to paint Reverend Robert Walker Skating on Duddingston Loch, one of the most iconic pieces in the Scottish national collection.

There is also 'Bonnie Prince Charlie House' where the dashing Jacobite rebel held a Council of War before the Battle of Prestonpans in 1745. This was sadly before he met the heroine Flora MacDonald who helped him escape Benbecula dressed as one of her maids in 1746. You might be tempted to take a walk through the Scotch mist and explore this quaint village (don't worry, it doesn't disappear like Brigadoon), or you might prefer to keep snug in Scotland's oldest pub. The Sheep's Heid Inn

dates back to the 14th century and the blazing fire, fine ales and even finer victuals make for a hearty pub lunch.

Once you've finished savouring this retreat only a short distance from the thick of literary city, you might want to walk or pick up a bus or taxi to Edinburgh's 'Soho' – West Port. Lined with second-hand bookshops (and slightly less salubrious establishments), you can lose hours here. There's Main Point Books, Cabaret, Edinburgh Books and Peter Bell Books, to name a handful. Whether you seek the antiquarian or the nearly new, you're bound to find an appealing purchase. And to treat your sweetheart to something equally sweet, there's Lovecrumbs – choose from their bureau or armoire of fancies, from salted caramel brownies to Florentines and delicately flavoured sponges – and enjoy with tea, coffee and pleasurable company.

Later, theatre or dinner may be on the cards, you can choose from the Kings, the Lyceum and the Traverse – Scotland's new writing theatre. There's also the Usher Hall, a stunning concert venue and **plenty of restaurants to choose from.**

Or if you'd prefer the chance to cuddle up in front of the silver screen, there are two independent cinemas, the Cameo and the Filmhouse. Either way, you can't fail to find a diverting and edifying way to spend the evening before taking a strolling back arm-in-arm with Stevenson's words in mind: "There are no stars so lovely as *Edinburgh street-lamps.*"