

Food, Drink and Getting Around

Restaurants and Watering Holes

Edinburgh has a wide variety of restaurants and watering holes, catering for most tastes and pockets. *Scotland The Best* by Peter Irvine is recommended reading when looking for restaurants, watering holes, B&Bs, and much else besides. In the following section I have limited the list to a modest number of establishments that linger in our memory, plus the occasional place that has been recommended by friends. There is the obvious danger that some places can disappear just as quickly as they popped up in the first place, but here goes...

Valvonna & Crolla

This establishment has rightly garnered many plaudits over the years and is frequented by many of Edinburgh's literati. Originally just a shop that was founded in 1934, Valvonna & Crolla is situated in Elm Row (Leith Walk), which makes it particularly handy for the Edinburgh Playhouse. The foundation of its success as a restaurant must be the astute marketing decision to build it at the rear of the shop that you have to walk through, although in truth it is probably the only sensible place where it could have been sited. The shop is one of those wonderful Italian delicatessens, filled from floor to ceiling with a dazzling array of yummy foodstuffs, most of which you impulsively want to purchase. On entering, the shop appears to be a long, relatively narrow corridor, which means that you have to pass all the goodies. It then widens out into a rectangular area where the wines can be found. Wines can be browsed and chosen to go with your meal (for the addition of a corkage charge). It was here that we first sampled what is now our favourite Italian Pinot Grigio. It is worth noting that Valvonna & Crolla have a web site, an online shop where goods can be purchased (<http://www.valvonacrolla.co.uk/>). Finally, the restaurant is entered up a couple of steps. By this point the diner is almost won over, even before getting to taste any food. The restaurant is a pleasant light, airy extension to the shop. The tables are quite close together to make maximum use of the space. During the Festival it is always full, creating such a good atmosphere that nobody minds the slightly cramped conditions. The food is prepared to order and can take a wee while; it is not the sort of place where the festival-goer can expect to grab the proverbial quick bite between shows. Allow at least an hour. It is worth the wait. The food is based on quality ingredients, as you would expect, and is cooked with empathy. There is more choice at lunchtime, the menu tending to be more limited in the evening when the emphasis is on serving customers that need to be away to an evening show. If you visit outside Festival time,

note that the restaurant is not open in the evening.

VinCaffé

Valvonna & Crolla has expanded, recently opening VinCaffé in Multrees Walk, close to Harvey Nichols. The modernity of the décor is in sharp contrast to the more mature setting in Elm Row. It is arguably aimed at a slightly younger clientele and business people, given that it is centrally located. The ground floor café and retail shop give way to a first floor restaurant where a long bar leads to an L-shaped seating area.

David Bann

Janet is a full-time vegetarian (eats fish but no meat) while I am part-time, well actually 90%+ of the time, but I still enjoy the occasional breakfast fry-up, usually when on holiday. We would both place David Bann among the top vegetarian restaurants that we have visited. This stylish establishment which opened in 2002 is situated in St. Marys Street, making it particularly handy for The Pleasance. It has claret and silver walls with modern furniture. The menu is imaginative, not the one-dimensional approach that many vegetarian outfits adopt. During this year's visit I remember a particularly tasty Walnut, Hazelnut and Mushroom Haggis, while Janet had two tartlets, one with mashed aubergine and mushroom in a white wine sauce and the other with mascarpone, blue cheese and asparagus. The staff are very approachable and the service is good. They do light snacks if you are in a rush between shows but beware that it is a popular place and queues can form at peak times during the Festival when bookings are not taken.

Fishers in The City

This predominantly fish restaurant in Thistle St was opened in 2001 to complement Fishers Bistro in Leith. The downstairs oval bar gives way to two dining areas, a mezzanine level that overlooks the bar, and a slightly larger room at the rear. There is

a wide selection of fish on the menu which is beautifully cooked. There are two deliveries of fresh fish per day. It is a bustling place with excellent service. On one occasion, a show that we attended had started late and it overran (both cardinal sins). This meant that the time available for our planned relaxing dinner was reduced from 90 to 35 minutes. While they were probably past their peak time, they did a sterling job in serving us a much appreciated, excellent two course meal within our limited available time.

Kalpna

This is an Indian Vegetarian restaurant that gets a reasonable write-up in the Good Food Guide. It is close to the Queens Hall, and relatively near the Pleasance, George Square and Southside Fringe venues. One of its main attractions is a modestly priced buffet lunch

Creelers

This is another fish restaurant which we like. It is situated in Hunter Square (just off the Royal Mile, near to the Tron). It is not possible to book at festival time.

Martin Wishart

This restaurant has one Michelin star and is the place to go for a special occasion. The only disadvantage for the festival punter is that it is situated in Leith, a couple of miles away from the majority of the venues. We have been there on several occasions, always at lunch time when they provide a basic three course meal for £22.50 (Mon-Fri only and this is the price at the end of 2008).

Coffee Shops

If there is one area that Edinburgh is arguably deficient in, it is an outstanding coffee shop. As with most cities, it has more than its fair share of Starbucks outlets. However, there are a number of places where the coffee is acceptable and the surroundings are pleasant. They include: the Traverse Bar; Glass and Thompson (Hanover Street), Caffé Nero (Lothian Road), Caffé Nero which doubles as an Internet café (Rose St - at the back of the Assembly Rooms), and Costa Coffee at Waterstone's (George Street).

Traverse Bar-Café

To sample the atmosphere of the theatrical side of the Festival, a visit to the Traverse Bar is essential.

There you will find: Edinburgh folk who are Traverse regulars all the year round; actors having a drink or a bite to eat after their performances; a good smattering of actors who are not performing; plus directors, backstage people, critics and other members of the theatre fraternity. There is a real buzz about the place. It is a stylish, subterranean establishment which is one floor below the ground level box office. There is a long bar with a range of beers, arguably the continental bottled beers are the more interesting to beer aficionados. Food and non-alcoholic drinks are served, including reasonable coffee. The tide of activity continually waxes and wanes from mid-morning until late evening with peaks of humanity and increasingly animated conversation occurring in the periods immediately before and after a show. If you are standing, perhaps because all the seats are taken, beware of suddenly finding yourself unintentionally in the middle of a queue, as the entrances to the two performance areas are straight off the bar area.

Pleasance Courtyard

The Pleasance Fringe venue is blessed with a sizeable courtyard which provides a natural focus for its events. One side is given over to a very long bar while the rest of the space is scattered with tables, each with an umbrella to deal with the vagaries of the Edinburgh weather, be it sun or rain. It is extremely popular, not only with festival-goers, but also with locals and people who just happen to be passing. Once again, peaks of activity coincide with the start and end of shows although it is more pronounced than the Traverse for the simple reason that the Pleasance hosts many more performance spaces. It gets particularly busy in the evenings. It is an ideal watering hole where one can chat and compare notes with other festival-goers or simply watch the festival world go by.

The Assembly Rooms Bars

The Assembly Rooms does not have the luxury of space to house a watering hole area that the Pleasance enjoys. However, in recent years it has hit on the bright idea of using the covered front section of one of the two alleys that run from George Street down the sides of the building to Rose Street as a bar area, fencing it off with glass doors and surrounds. Although it is relatively modest in size, it is lively for most of the day. We find that is fine for a short pit stop but nothing longer. There is a bar on the first floor but it also restricted in size plus it is just outside the entrance

to the large Music Hall venue, so once again, beware where you stand.

The Café Royal

It seems somewhat strange that there are no public houses that date back beyond the nineteenth century. In contrast to London where some establishments date back to the late Middle Ages, in Edinburgh they appear to have their place in the sun for a time, only to disappear. Even today, the popularity of particular pubs seems to wax and wane. I am obviously referring to real pubs that sell good beer, not to the artificial theme pubs.

One pub that is well worth seeing, particularly from an architectural perspective, is the Café Royal in West Register Street, just off Princes Street. The draught beer is acceptable but not particularly noteworthy. Even if pubs are not your thing, the fact that it is also a fish restaurant and doubles as a Fringe venue during the Festival is reason enough to pay it a visit. We are fortunate in being able to see it thanks to the fact that it survived an application by Woolworths in 1969 to demolish it as part of their expansion plans.

Originally intended as a gas appliance and bathroom showroom, the building was developed in 1861, and it eventually became a hotel / bar in 1863. It underwent a number of renovations during the remainder of the 19th century. The main bar, known as the circle bar, consists of a large, airy room with a pleasant oval-shaped bar set in the middle with a slender ornate column at its centre. The major attraction of this room is a set of ceramic tile panels that adorn one of the walls, showing different inventors including Faraday, Franklin and Caxton. The original paintings by John Eyre were manufactured as tiles by Doulton and Co., and executed by Nunn and Sturgeon. The technique, known as Lambeth Faience, was launched in 1873 but the genre died out in 1910. These particular panels were shown at Edinburgh's International Exhibition at The Meadows in 1886, and they were subsequently purchased by an early licensee.

The Oyster Bar, a fish restaurant, is even more ornate. It includes a set of eight large stained glass windows that depict Victorian sportsmen which can also be seen from the street.

The Guildford Arms

This busy pub is adjacent to the Café Royal, being slightly further down West Register Street in the

direction of Princes St. It is noted for its ornate plasterwork. The ceiling, cornices and friezes are all impressive. It stocks a range of guest beers; we sampled Harviestoun's Bitter and Twisted on our last visit.

The Oxford Bar

Situated in Young Street, which runs parallel to, and on the north side of, George Street, The Oxford Bar is a small, no frills establishment frequented by the locals. Arguably, its chief claim to fame is that it is a favourite watering hole of Ian Rankin's Inspector Rebus character. The bar is extremely small, almost akin to a shop-front, but there is a reasonable-sized room on the right. The limited space undoubtedly gives the place atmosphere. Belhaven 80 shilling and Caledonian Deuchars IPA are complemented by a guest beer.

The Cumberland Bar

This hostelry is slightly off the tourist beaten track, situated at the east end of Cumberland St in the New Town, just off Drummond Place, and hence it is mostly frequented by locals and office workers. It has a long, relatively narrow thoroughfare from front to back which houses the bar, with several large rooms leading off it. The walls are half wood-panelled with examples of old cigarette, soap and beer adverts. It invariably has a good selection of well-kept beers. Unlike many other Edinburgh hostelries it does not limit itself to Scottish beers; we were pleasantly surprised to sample a fine Timothy Taylor's Landlord on one visit.

The Bow Bar

This small establishment in West Bow (right on the tourist beaten track) gets a mention in most of the guides. Once again its modest size lends it atmosphere, arguably its main attraction. It is noted for its selection of single malt whiskies.

Getting Around

The vast majority of the festival venues are situated in, or close to, the city centre. If you are moderately fit and healthy, it is perfectly feasible to walk everywhere. If not, Edinburgh has an excellent bus service. The key thing to understand, which travel guides hardly ever mention, is that Edinburgh is not a flat place. The main obstacle is the volcanic rock that the castle and the Old Town were built on. The rest of this section is primarily aimed at those individuals who are new to

Edinburgh and may wish to circumvent the worst of the hills. It is best if you have a street map at hand when reading what follows. There is a [useful map](#) on the Tourist Publications web site. If the image appears fuzzy on the screen position the pointer in the bottom right-hand corner of the map where an "enlarge to regular size" button will appear - click it.

Arguably the hardest part is getting from the New Town to the Old Town. The most popular route is across Waverley Bridge and up Cockburn Street. However, Cockburn Street is quite steep and may be quite tiring if you are not particularly fit. Similarly, on the south side of the Old Town coming up from Cowgate, streets such as Blair Street and Blackfriars Street are also steep. Alternative routes that can avoid the worst of the steep climbs include:

to avoid Cockburn Street, turn left at the end of Waverley Bridge into Market Street, pass under North Bridge and then take the right fork (Jeffrey Street). This is relatively flat and brings you out at the junction of High Street and Canongate. This is useful for getting to the Pleasance - continue across the junction, down St. Marys Street and into the Pleasance (the road is called the Pleasance as well as the venue itself which is 100 yards or so up on the left-hand side), or if you want to get to Cowgate.

Alternatively, the North Bridge can be used; there is a moderate though noticeable incline from the New Town up to the Old Town side.

A third alternative is going up the Mound, which is quite a moderate hill initially until it gets to the junction with Market Street where it starts to get steeper, albeit only for a shortish distance, possibly 100 metres or so until the junction with the Lawnmarket is reached.

Another route is to go around the western side of the rock. This is a long way round unless you are

coming from that direction, but if you are planning ahead you could aim to go to the Traverse, Usher Hall or Royal Lyceum (which are all on the western side of the rock) and then continue round to the southern side which brings you into the GrassMarket and hence on to Cowgate or up Candlemaker Row. This is also a relatively flat route.

The layout of the Old Town can be slightly confusing to newcomers. This is mainly due to the two bridges: South Bridge and George IV Bridge. They move south from the Royal Mile, high over Cowgate (the base of the southern side of the rock) to the higher ground which is to the south of Cowgate. None of this is readily apparent if you are looking at a street map. The confusion stems from the fact that they are not obviously bridges. There are buildings on either side of each bridge with many storeys under the level of the bridge. In fact, the bridges just look like ordinary roads. Consequently, it is easy to think that it is possible to turn left off South Bridge into Cowgate - wrong; we fell foul of this on our first visit and almost missed the start of a show. The other hill that should be mentioned is north of George Street in the New Town. There is a long steep hill that goes down to Stockbridge. While there are only a couple of venues out here, you may be staying somewhere in this locale.

Apart from the hills, the other impediment to getting around is people. Edinburgh is a busy place in August and there are plenty of tourists and shoppers milling around, all deliberately trying to stop you from reaching the next venue on time. It does not take too long to discover which the busier streets are. As a starter for 10, try to avoid, or at least minimise, walking along The Royal Mile and Princes Street.

If you want a nerdish estimate of how long it may take to get between venues, there is a simple [spreadsheet](#) on my web pages.