

25 Hidden Gems of Edinburgh

That Most Tourists Never Find

Beyond the Royal Mile and Arthur's Seat lies an Edinburgh that most visitors never discover - hidden gardens, ancient closes, secret viewpoints, and stories woven into every cobblestone. This guide takes you to the places the locals treasure most.

A Free Guide from Locale Edinburgh

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Introduction

Edinburgh is one of the most visited cities in Europe, and for good reason. The Castle, the Royal Mile, and the views from Arthur's Seat draw millions every year. But the Edinburgh that locals love - the hidden closes, the quiet gardens, the pubs with centuries of stories - often goes completely unnoticed by visitors.

This guide is our love letter to the Edinburgh most tourists never see. These 25 places are all within easy reach of the city centre. Some are tucked behind unmarked doors. Others are simply overlooked because nobody thought to mention them. All of them are real, visitable, and unforgettable.

We have organised them by area so you can build them into your own walk. Whether you are visiting for the first time or have lived here for years, we hope this guide leads you somewhere new.

Happy exploring,
The Locale Edinburgh Team

Old Town & Royal Mile

1. Dunbar's Close Garden

Off the Royal Mile, Canongate

A meticulously restored 17th-century garden hidden behind an unmarked gate off the Canongate. Step through and you find yourself in a formal knot garden with clipped hedges, gravel paths, and herbs that would have grown here 350 years ago. Most people walk straight past the entrance without knowing it exists.

2. The Vennel

Grassmarket to Heriot Place

A narrow flight of steps climbing from the Grassmarket to Heriot Place, offering one of the most dramatic views of Edinburgh Castle you will find anywhere. The old Flodden Wall runs alongside. At the top, the castle towers above you framed between rooftops. Free, open, and almost never crowded.

3. Advocates Close

Off the Royal Mile, near St Giles'

One of Edinburgh's finest surviving medieval closes. The entrance is easy to miss, but the narrow passage descends steeply through centuries of architecture - from 17th-century tenements to a view of the Firth of Forth at the bottom. The name comes from the lawyers who once lived here.

4. Riddle's Court

Lawnmarket, Royal Mile

A beautifully restored Renaissance courtyard dating from the 1590s. King James VI attended a banquet here. Two painted ceilings survive from the original building. Today it hosts events and exhibitions, but the courtyard itself is open and free. Duck through the pend from the Lawnmarket to find it.

5. St Cuthbert's Churchyard

Lothian Road, below the Castle

In the shadow of Edinburgh Castle sits one of the city's oldest Christian sites, with a churchyard dating back centuries. Weathered headstones lean among mature trees, and the castle rock rises dramatically overhead. A pocket of quiet in the busiest part of the city.

New Town & Stockbridge

6. Circus Lane

Stockbridge

A cobbled mews lane curving behind Royal Circus, lined with converted coach houses and tumbling window boxes. In summer, wisteria and climbing roses soften the stone. It is one of the most photographed streets in Edinburgh - but most visitors to the city centre never walk far enough north to discover it.

7. St Bernard's Well

Water of Leith, Stockbridge

A miniature Greek temple built over a natural mineral spring on the banks of the Water of Leith. Designed by Alexander Nasmyth in 1789, with a statue of Hygieia inside. Reached by a short walk along the river from Stockbridge. Beautifully restored and occasionally opened for public visits.

8. Dean Village

Water of Leith, Dean

A former milling village tucked into a gorge of the Water of Leith, just minutes from Princes Street. Stone bridges, 19th-century granaries, and the rushing river below create a scene that feels rural despite being in the heart of Edinburgh. Follow the riverside path downstream towards Stockbridge.

9. The Scottish National Portrait Gallery

Queen Street

While the National Gallery on the Mound draws the crowds, its sister on Queen Street is often overlooked. The building itself is a masterpiece - a Gothic palace with a magnificent frieze of Scottish historical figures around the Great Hall. Entry is free and the collection spans centuries of Scottish life.

10. Ann Street

Stockbridge

Designed by the artist Henry Raeburn and named after his wife. Long front gardens - rare in Edinburgh - give it a village atmosphere. The Georgian houses date from the 1820s and are among the most sought-after addresses in the city. A quiet, beautiful street that rewards a short detour from the main Stockbridge shops.

Waterfront & Leith

11. Cramond Island

Cramond, west Edinburgh

A small tidal island in the Firth of Forth, accessible on foot at low tide via a concrete causeway built during the Second World War. Anti-submarine pylons still stand in the water. Check the tide tables before crossing - the causeway floods quickly. The views back towards Edinburgh are magnificent.

12. The Shore, Leith

Leith

The historic waterfront where the Water of Leith meets the sea. Old warehouses have become excellent restaurants and bars. The Royal Yacht Britannia is nearby, but The Shore itself - with its swing bridge, fishing boats, and 18th-century buildings - is the real draw. Leith has its own character, distinct from Edinburgh.

13. Portobello Beach

Portobello, east Edinburgh

Edinburgh's seaside - a long sandy beach with a promenade, independent cafes, and an outdoor swimming pool fed by the sea. On a clear day the views stretch across the Forth to Fife. Locals have known about Portobello for years, but most visitors never think to visit. Best on a summer evening.

14. Newhaven Harbour

Newhaven

A small working harbour between Leith and Granton, once home to Edinburgh's fishing fleet. The tiny harbour has a lighthouse, a fishmarket restaurant, and views across to Fife. Much quieter than Leith and with a genuine working-port atmosphere that has not been polished away.

15. Cramond Village

Cramond, west Edinburgh

A whitewashed village at the mouth of the River Almond, with Roman remains, a medieval church tower, and a row of pretty cottages along the waterfront. The Roman fort here dates to the 2nd century AD. From the shore, watch for seals basking on the rocks at low tide.

South Side & Beyond

16. Dr Neil's Garden

Duddingston, by Arthur's Seat

A hidden garden on the shore of Duddingston Loch, created over decades by two Edinburgh doctors. Winding paths lead through mature planting, across a small bridge, and to benches overlooking the loch. Arthur's Seat rises behind. Enter through the gate beside Duddingston Kirk - there is no sign, just a path.

17. The Sheep Heid Inn

Duddingston

Dating to 1360, this is one of the oldest surviving pubs in Scotland. Tucked at the foot of Arthur's Seat in the village of Duddingston, it has a working skittle alley - the oldest in Scotland. A pint here after climbing Arthur's Seat is an Edinburgh tradition that few visitors discover.

18. Blackford Hill

South Edinburgh

Everyone climbs Arthur's Seat, but Blackford Hill - a 20-minute walk south - offers equally stunning views with a fraction of the people. The Royal Observatory sits on the summit. On clear days, you can see from the Bass Rock to the Pentland Hills. The pond at the base attracts herons and kingfishers.

19. The Meadows Cherry Blossom Walk

The Meadows, South Edinburgh

In late April, the avenue of Japanese cherry trees along the north edge of The Meadows erupts into blossom. For about two weeks, a canopy of pink frames the path with Edinburgh Castle visible at the western end. A fleeting, beautiful Edinburgh moment that locals mark in their calendars.

20. Swanston Village

Foot of the Pentland Hills

A cluster of thatched-roof cottages at the base of the Pentland Hills, remarkably preserved. Robert Louis Stevenson spent childhood summers here. The village feels centuries removed from the city, though it is only three miles from Princes Street. A starting point for walks into the Pentlands.

Day Trips from Edinburgh

21. Inchcolm Island

Firth of Forth

Known as the 'Iona of the East', this island in the Firth of Forth is home to the best-preserved group of monastic buildings in Scotland. A short boat trip from South Queensferry, the island also has wartime defences and a colony of seals. The abbey dates to the 12th century and still has its painted ceiling.

22. Rosslyn Chapel

Roslin, 7 miles south

Built in 1446 and made famous by The Da Vinci Code, but far richer than any novel. Every surface is carved - over 100 Green Men, musical cubes that may encode a melody, and stone so intricate it took 40 years to complete. Small enough to absorb in an hour, detailed enough to reward a lifetime of study.

23. Jupiter Artland

Wilkieston, 10 miles west

A sculpture park set in the grounds of a Jacobean manor house. Works by Antony Gormley, Anish Kapoor, and Charles Jencks are placed throughout woodland, meadows, and specially designed landscape features. The Cells of Life - seven sculpted landforms by Jencks - are mesmerising. Open seasonally, May to September.

24. South Queensferry

9 miles west

A pretty harbour town sitting directly beneath the Forth Bridge. The red bridge towers impossibly overhead, dwarfing the medieval high street below. The Hawes Inn featured in Kidnapped by Robert Louis Stevenson. From here, take the boat to Inchcolm or simply admire three generations of bridge engineering from the shore.

25. The Pentland Hills

South of Edinburgh

A chain of hills rising to over 500 metres, just 6 miles from the city centre. The reservoirs, moorland, and quiet valleys feel remote, yet you can be back in Edinburgh for lunch. Castlelaw hill fort offers Iron Age remains and views to the Highlands on a clear day. The Red Moss nature reserve is home to rare bog plants.

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