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# Stirling

The perfect base for getting a broad view of Scotland

Richard Zahra

Stirling is Scotland's youngest city and yet, its roots as a royal stronghold and town go far back to the tenth century. Modern Stirling is often eclipsed by her elder sisters — Edinburgh, with its Military Tattoo, Royal Mile and International Festival; and Glasgow, with its Charles Rennie Mackintosh inheritance, industrial heritage and cosmopolitan glamour.

Scottish historian Craig Mair wrote that 'Stirling stands at the heart of Scotland, geographically and historically,' a strategic position that was quickly recognized by generations of Scottish kings and queens, who favored Stirling over other

royal residences. In our age of fast transport, the city's location seems to have somewhat lost its bite. Nonetheless, with a less-than-an-hour train trip connecting it to Edinburgh and Glasgow, and the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park just beyond its backdoor, Stirling is the ideal base for travelers who want a taste of both Highlands and Lowlands, the two distinct landscapes and cultures that have shaped the Scottish nation.

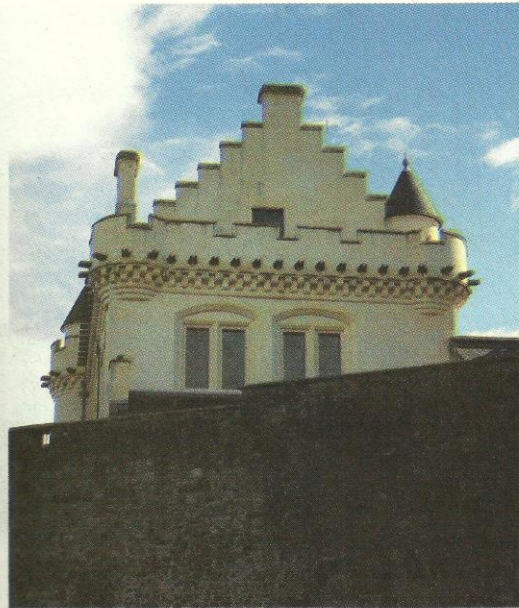
Stepping along the cobbled street that snakes up to the Castle feels like a trip to the past. Those same cobbles were trod upon by the stars of Scotland's historical pageant — William Wallace, Robert Bruce, Mary Queen of Scots, John Knox and Bonnie Prince Charlie, to name but a few. This is the Old Town, where most of the city's historical buildings are concentrated — the Tolbooth, an 18th and 19th century

administrative centre, courthouse and jail; the Old Town jail, a Victorian prison; Holy Rude church, one of the few churches to boast a King's coronation still to be in use; Argyll's Lodging, a flamboyant 17th century noble's townhouse.

At the pinnacle of the uphill slog, Stirling Castle awaits — once impregnable and menacing, now welcoming around 400 000 visitors a year. Perched on a volcanic crag, the Castle commands a sweeping view of the surrounding plain, where the River Forth meanders to enclose pockets of fertile land. Throughout its turbulent history, Stirling Castle has seen thousands of men slay each other beneath its walls, Kings and Queens being born and crowned in its bosom, hideous murders committed, and some of the weirdest characters that garnished Scottish history. In 1314, the English garrison occupying the castle was besieged by a Scottish army. The turn of events led to the battle of Bannockburn, the greatest Scottish victory in history, which paved the way for the forging of national identity. Today's castle buildings are the result of centuries of alterations, innovations and rebuilding programs. Historic Scotland, the organization that ably manages Scotland's historic sites, has overseen the restoration of the James IV's Great Hall. Standing out for its yellow outer paintwork in contrast to the drab, grey color of the other castle buildings, the Great Hall is the finest Renaissance building of its kind in Scotland.

Looking from the Castle terraces, you are confronted by the Tolkienesque Wallace Monument, soaring out of the wooded ridge known as Abbey Craig. In the background, the rocky folds of the Ochil Hills frame the scene. The Wallace Monument houses dioramas, models and presentations that illustrate the achievements of Scotland's national hero, William Wallace. The tower overlooks the site where Wallace won his great victory at Stirling Bridge. After visiting the monument, walk the path that runs along the edge of Abbey Craig to be rewarded with a picture-perfect snapshot of Stirling — the castle perched on its rocky outcrop overlooking the snaking Forth in its wide expanse of flatland, and the patchwork of modern housing. You will also make out Cambuskenneth Abbey enclosed by a loop of the river, where the first Scottish parliament was held in 1326. For history buffs, a visit to the Bannockburn Heritage Centre would make a perfect dessert. Part of the battlefield now hosts a peaceful housing area, with streets sporting evocative names like Archers' Avenue, Pike Road and Caltrop Place.

Stirling's Old Town buildings cohabit comfortably with the modern structures of the bustling city centre. The shopping centre is a pedestrian zone, lined by all sorts of stores, where you can buy anything conceivable, from necessities to luxuries. What strikes is the absence of frenetic crowds. Time seems to

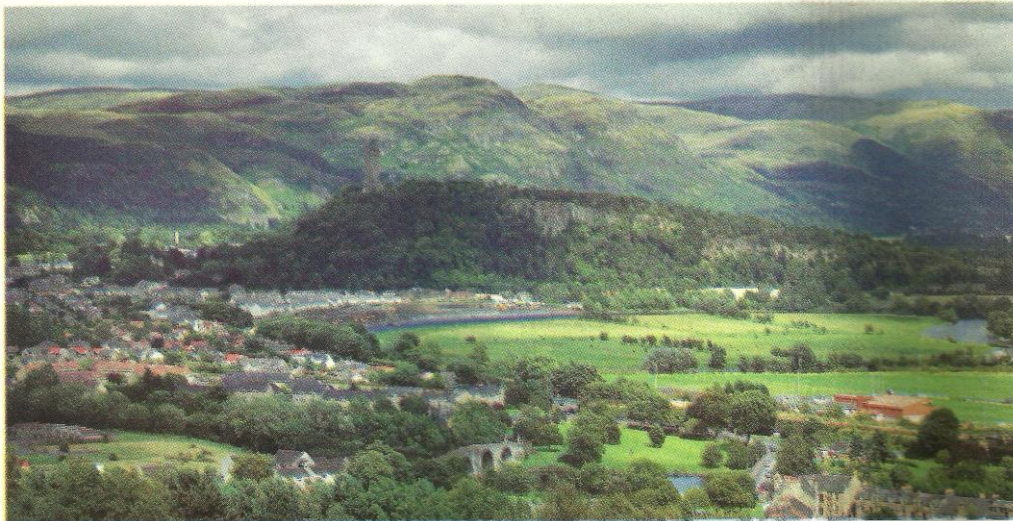


**Above:** James IV's Great Hall soaring out of the battlements of Stirling Castle

**Opposite:** The modern city centre — a pedestrian zone

tick a wee bit slower in Stirling, and people stop to greet each other while shopping. Pubs, cafés and restaurants range from traditional to modern and stylish. Stirling also boasts an active night life with young people thronging pubs and clubs even during winter weekends. The compact city centre is the ideal venue to spend an amusing night of club to pub hopping.

Just beyond Stirling's confines, the small town of Bridge of Allan hosts Highland Games every summer, now in their 158th edition. The Games are a jamboree of pipe bands, highland dancing, highland games competitions and a showcase for traditional Scottish food, such as smoked herring, and garments — mostly tartans! It is striking to see so many young people participate with enthusiasm alongside their elder peers in activities that celebrate their national heritage and reinforce their clan sense of belonging. Bridge of Allan also encompasses the internationally acclaimed Stirling University, whose landscaped grounds, part of Airthrey Castle estate, are worth a visit. Take a snack at the University canteen to get a feel of the multinational aspect of the student community. And if calories are of no concern to you while on holiday, make sure to drop in to the Allan Water Café, which was recommended by my friend and Stirling resident, Barbara Sinclair, as 'the best Fish and Chip shop in the area,' serving inch-thick slabs of fried haddock.



Wallace monument with the Ochil Hills as backdrop

Alexander Smith, a 19th century poet and travel writer aptly wrote that 'Stirling, like a huge brooch, clasps Highlands and Lowlands together.' The city lies on a boundary which is not just a geographical divide, but also a cultural one. The Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park was established in 2002 as the first national park of Scotland, and is a stone's throw away from Stirling. Indeed, the peaks of the Trossachs can be seen from the Castle battlements. The Trossachs, often referred to as the 'Highlands in miniature' are a collection of quaint lochs and glens, nestled amongst soaring peaks. Rob Roy McGregor, the Scottish answer to Robin Hood, was born and bred here.

The Trossachs are a walker's paradise, and Callander, just fourteen miles north-west of Stirling, is the ideal jumping board for excursions. Huddled in the shadow of mighty Ben Ledi, this chocolate box Highland village also hosts the Rob Roy Visitor Centre. The Trossachs still echo Sir Walter Scott's *Lady of the Lake*, whose widespread acclaim firmly put them on the tourist trail during the 19th century. Walks in the area can range from easy to arduous. For instance the walk around Glen Finglas reservoir enables visitors to explore the Woodland Trust's largest estate, and does not include high slopes. By contrast, climbing Ben A'an, a 460-metre peak is a harder slog, but will reward the perseverant rambler with dramatic views over Loch Katrine and Loch Achray that are out of proportion to its modest height.

The area around Stirling is dotted with sites that are worth a visit. Doune Castle, for instance, a few miles to the north of the city, is one of the best-preserved and least-modified late medieval strongholds. It was built for the infamous regent Robert Stewart, Duke of Albany. It is today a shrine for Monty Python fans, as it was a prominent location where the movie *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* was filmed.

The medieval ruins of Inchmahome priory crown an islet on the lake of Menteith, the only 'lake' in Scotland, which is just a short drive from Stirling. It is the perfect destination if you are intent of toning down the pace of your stay. A visit to the priory includes a scenic boat trip across the shimmering stretch of water, and combined with a picnic on the isolated islet, verges on divine. Lie beneath the ancient trees – alders, willows and oaks – to experience a taste of paradise, just like the monastic residents who once, long ago, worked and prayed there.

Stirling rewards the traveler with its over-generous share in Scottish history, stunning backdrop of hills and Highlands and its hospitable, friendly people. Compared to Edinburgh and Glasgow, it is less hectic, less costly and more visitor-friendly — the perfect host. Don't be misled if at first glance she appears unpretentious. If you look through her plain outer garb to unveil her hidden assets, you'll find her irresistible.



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