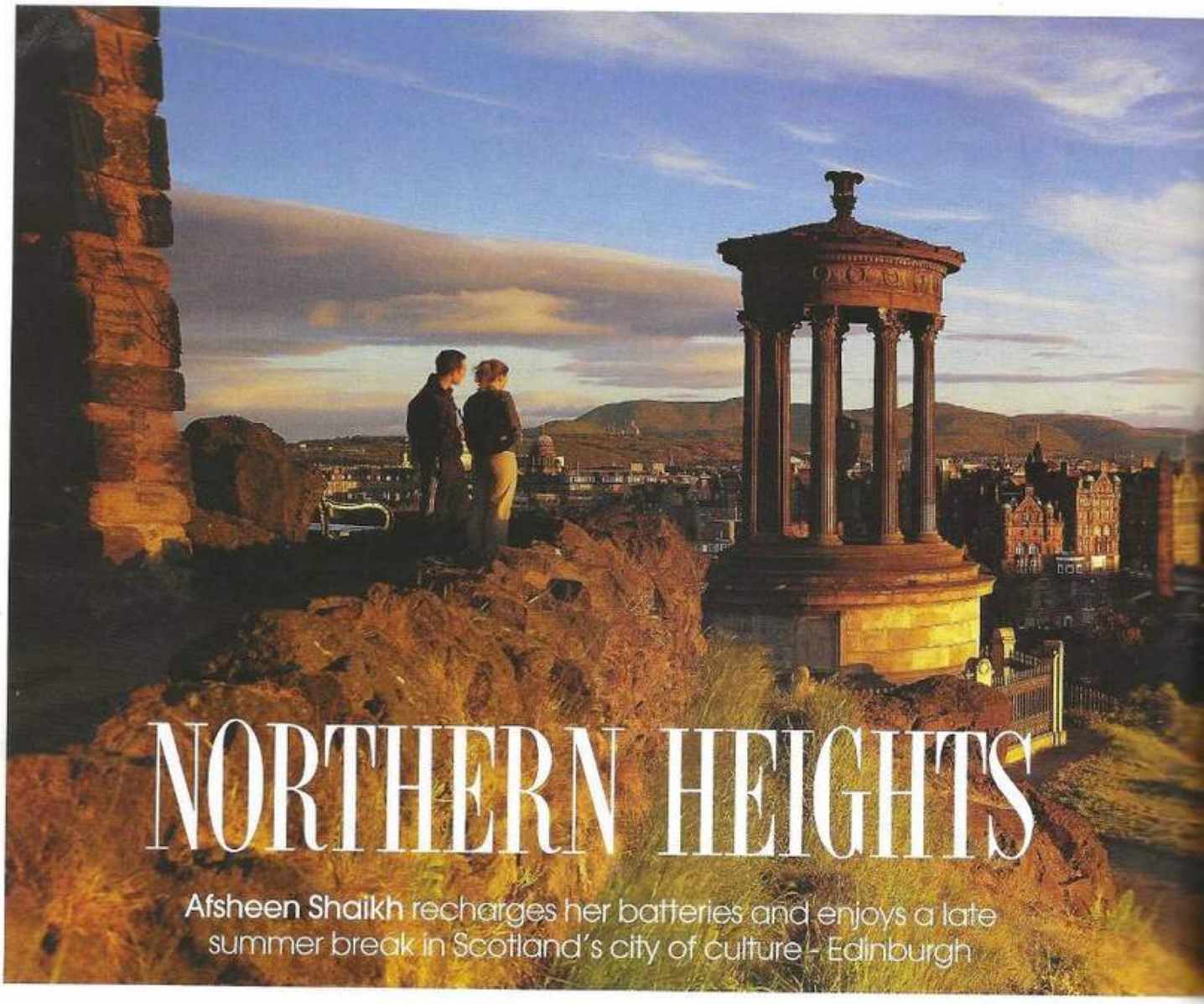


NORTHERN HEIGHTS

Afsheen Shaikh recharges her batteries and enjoys a late summer break in Scotland's city of culture - Edinburgh

There are few places in the world which come close to the unique beauty Edinburgh has to offer. A picturesque city with its rugged setting of rocky hills overlooking the sea, the Scottish capital is a walk through history into modern times fused with the thrill of it being a destination to visit all year round – and the sheer size of it means you can explore it easily by foot.

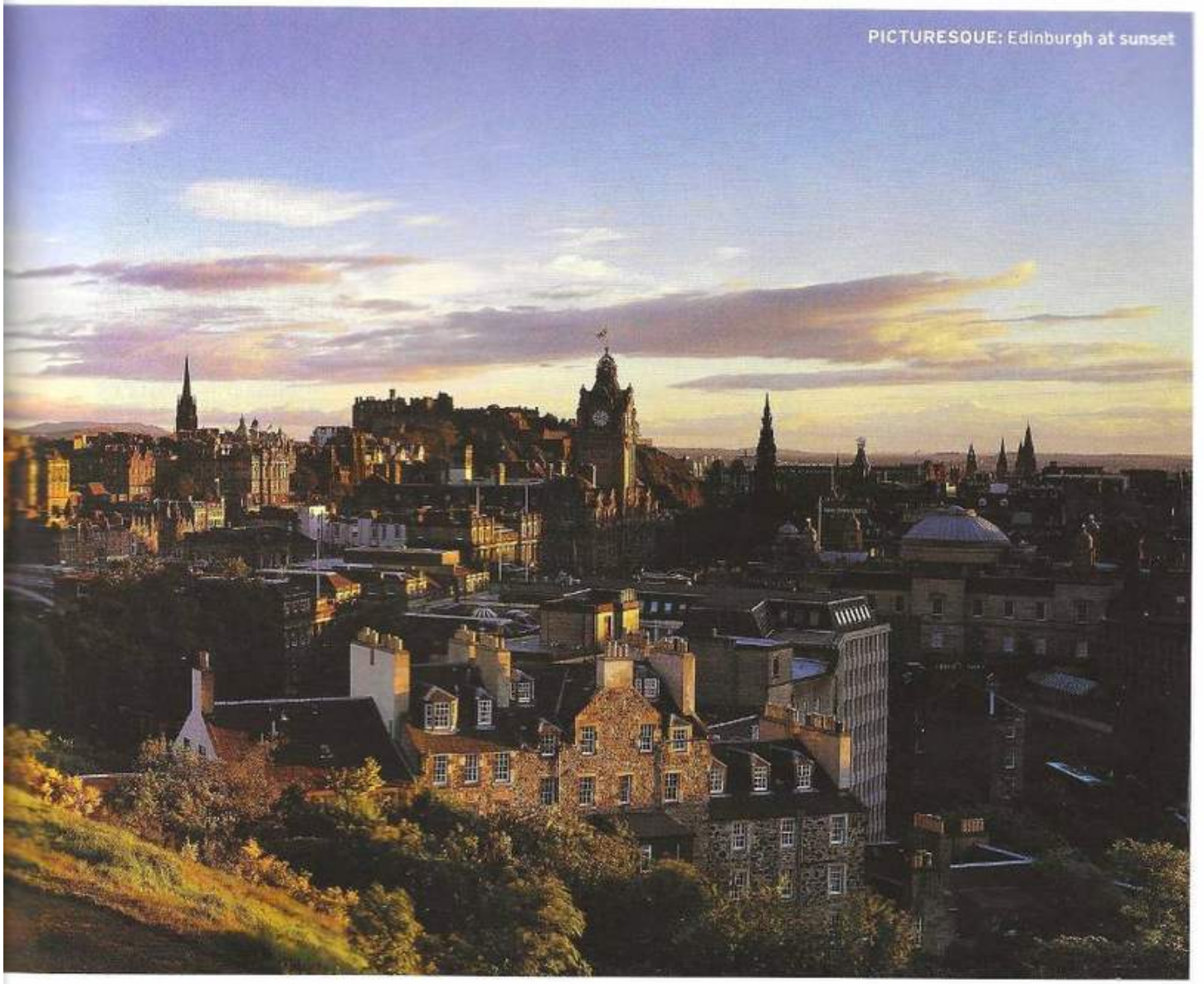
Edinburgh is the second largest city after Glasgow but is fast staking its claim as the coolest. Well known for its annual Edinburgh Festival in August, it's peak season as the city is awash with revellers and entertainers, attracting enough visitors as the population of the capital itself, which is almost half a million.

The most famous is the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, the largest performing arts festival in the world and one not to be missed should you be fortunate to find a room and a purse deep enough to contend with the hiked up prices. With the passion it has for its art and literature, philosophy and high culture, it is no surprise that Edinburgh is fondly referred to as 'the Athens of the North' and coupled with its medieval and Georgian architectural setting, the city is deeply enriched.

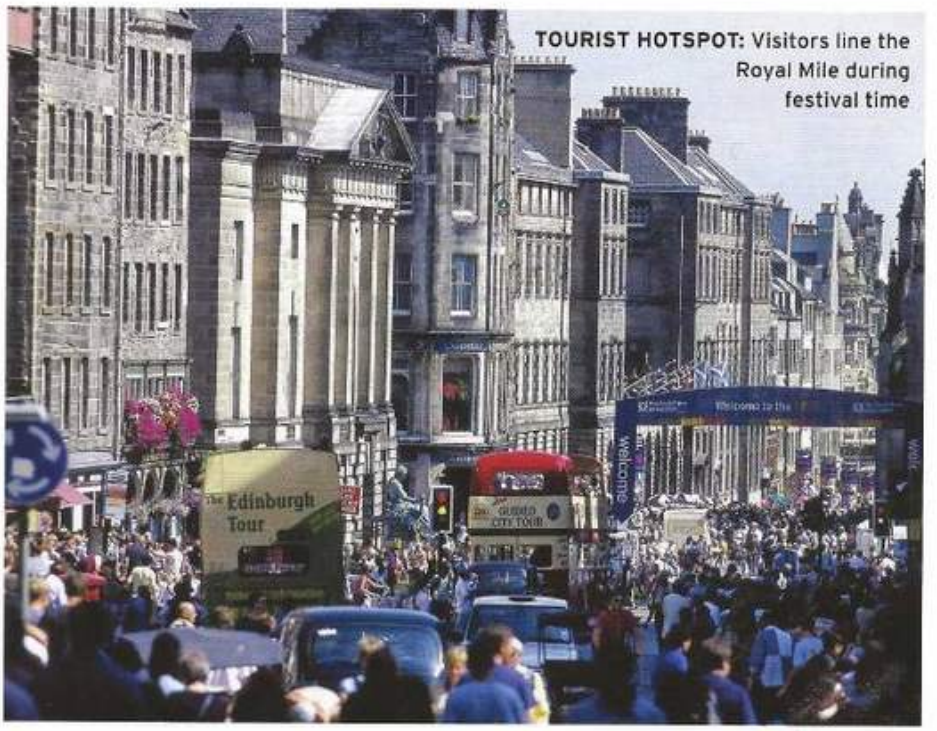
Fortunately during my visit, Edinburgh is seemingly less busy thus giving me a good opportunity to delve into the secrets of this buzzing cosmopolitan city. No more than 20 minutes from the airport to the city centre, Edinburgh is centrally divided into two parts, noticeably by the green stretch of Princes Street Gardens. On one side Edinburgh Castle dominates the skyline, perched atop an extinct volcanic crag otherwise known as Castle Rock. It's the second most visited tourist attraction and the best way to approach it is to take a walk along the cobbled streets of the Royal Mile, beginning from the foot of the road where the new Scottish parliament is situated, which is certainly a sight for sore eyes.

Designed by Enric Miralles and paid for from the taxes of the Scottish public, the controversial building (which could be mistaken for a contemporary looking office block) is very much loathed for going 10 times over the original budget of £40 million and the appearance is another debate in itself. It was opened by the Queen in October 2004 but it was supposed to have been finished in 2001. Admission is free but check online at www.scottish-parliament.uk for specific opening times.

A stone's throwaway is the Palace of Holyroodhouse situated at the bottom of the Royal Mile. Once home to Mary Queen



PICTURESQUE: Edinburgh at sunset



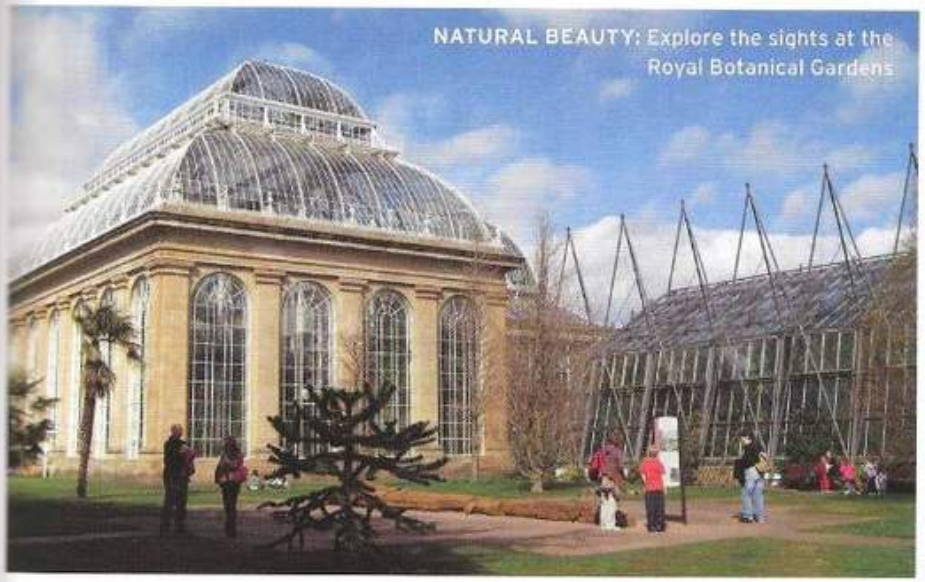
TOURIST HOTSPOT: Visitors line the Royal Mile during festival time

of Scots (between 1561 to 1567) the present Queen still uses it when she's in Scotland for state occasions. When neither the Queen or a member of the Royal Family is in residence, the palace is open to the public with admission prices starting from £9.80.

The castle should really be reserved as your last stop as the panoramic views it offers from its walls is truly amazing and will sum up Edinburgh perfectly. Entry into the castle ranges from £10 - £12 but you will get more for your money if you purchase a ticket for one of the open-top tour buses which allows you access to the castle and the Royal Yacht Britannia (moored at Leith Harbour) as well as a city sightseeing tour of the top attractions for only £36.

Another place to visit is the grand Royal Botanic Gardens, set amongst seventy ▶

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NATURAL BEAUTY: Explore the sights at the Royal Botanical Gardens

lusciously landscaped acres. Entry to the gardens is free but there is a small charge for the glasshouses, which contain an array of tropical plants from around the world.

The other half of Edinburgh is beckoned by Princes Street, a pivotal area which during festival time, is impossible to move around in. It's the equivalent of Oxford Street, with shops and departmental stores lining the street. The streets that run off Princes Street are the ones to pay attention to particularly if you're after a bite to eat or want to indulge in the nightlife Edinburgh has to offer. Broughton Street is renowned for its bars, restaurants and cafes, and is also at the centre of Edinburgh's "pink triangle", where a number of gay bars and clubs reside.

There's no doubt the Scots are a proud nation from the great height the castle looks down upon the city to the glorious kilt (and yes, it's true a real Scotsman wears nothing underneath his!) but more surprisingly, there isn't a tacky souvenir in sight, and boy, did I hunt high and low for some saucy postcards of men in kilts. I did manage to skip past the shops on Princes Street but I caved into a gorgeous pure cashmere scarf made in Scotland as a personal reminder of this wondrous city.

One factor that is bound to throw you is the unpredictable Scottish weather. You need to be prepared for all eventualities as one minute you will be slipping on your hat and gloves, and the next you will be putting on your shades. When you visit Scotland, expect to experience all four seasons in one day but it's one of the quirks about the place and you can't help but be fond of it.

If you have the time to spare, it would be foolish not to cross the boundaries of Edinburgh to see some of the surrounding regions like the beaches and castles of the East Lothian region and Glasgow – Scotland's biggest city, a haven for shopaholics and Edinburgh's great rival. Only 55 miles from Edinburgh, Glasgow is easy to get to by train and takes about 50 minutes with cheap day fares available for around £9.

To come away from Edinburgh is merely a taste. After all it's an entirely different experience if you're here for the festivals or the Hogmanay street party on New Year's Eve but to really get a feel for the city, you can do no wrong by escaping here for a weekend. It's worth remembering also that Edinburgh is the second most popular destination in the UK after London. Surely that is captivating enough.

Getting there

By Rail

Edinburgh is easily accessible by rail.Great North Eastern Railway (GNER) offers a fast service with a journey time of just under 5 hours. Departs regularly from London's King's Cross station.

By Air

If you prefer to fly, there are many UK, European and international airlines that offer direct and connecting flights. It takes 1 hour from London with over 40 flights everyday from London airports as well as from Amsterdam, Paris, Munich and Zurich and New York.

En Route

Edinburgh offers great rail links to other major cities. York, Newcastle, Inverness and Aberdeen are all about 2 hours away by train, and Glasgow is just 50 minutes away on the First ScotRail shuttle service which leaves Waverley train station every 15 minutes.

AW TIP:

Edinburgh can be quite expensive, so plan your itinerary and budget before you go. Visit the tourist office to find out about deals. Log on to visitscotland.com



BREATHTAKING: Enjoy a drink while you take in the panoramic views from Edinburgh Castle

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