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TRAVEL: Scotland and Toronto

By Karen Jones

With spring finally here, travel destinations known for their winter chill are ushering in the warmth of the season. That said, Scotland is throwing a year-long “homecoming” party, while the nearby Canadian city of Toronto is celebrating an important anniversary. Though both have ties to Her Majesty the Queen of England, they offer two very distinct and enriching experiences.

Scotland



With “Homecoming Scotland 2009” in full swing, the bonnie banks of Loch Lomond have never been more welcoming. Inspired by the 250th anniversary of the birth of renowned poet Robert Burns (“Auld Lang Syne”), Scotland is hosting a series of events and celebrations to entice you across the pond, with or without your tartans.

Rich in tradition, history and Celtic culture, Scotland is a proud nation with something for everyone, be it castles, cities, links, lochs, lowlands, Highlands...or a wee dram o’ whiskey. Though the famous Scottish weather can be challenging in the winter months, particularly in the northern Highlands, spring and summer are a lovely time to visit.

Scotland’s vibrant capital, Edinburgh, is one of Europe’s most beautiful cities. A charming mix of medieval and Georgian architecture, the city is dominated by Edinburgh Castle, which has stood for over 800 years. It is where you can admire the Scottish crown jewels, roam the royal apartments, hear the ancient pipers calling to arms, visit the National War Museum of Scotland and much more.

Leaving the castle, you will travel down the city’s famous “Royal Mile,” which features an array of historic structures including the High Kirk (Church) of St. Giles, circa 1100, The Writer’s Museum, circa 1600, plus the eclectic and controversial design of the new

Scottish Parliament, which opened in 2004.

If you develop a thirst, drop into the Deacon Brodie pub. It was said that Robert Louis Stevenson based his classic chiller, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* on Brodie, the bar's namesake, who was a citizen by day and scoundrel by night.

The Palace of Holyroodhouse, at the end of the Royal Mile, is still used as a royal residence and was once home to Mary Queen of Scots. The controversial Catholic Queen was executed for treason in 1587 by England's Protestant Queen Elizabeth I, daughter of Henry VIII. Mary had the last laugh though, it was her son James who ruled after Elizabeth died without leaving an heir.

Edinburgh also offers all manner of trendy shops, pubs, restaurants and museums, but find time to visit the National Museum of Scotland. You can travel through The Kingdom of the Scots, and see the preserved version of the world's first cloned animal, Dolly the sheep. The museum has a chic rooftop restaurant called Tower, or you can go around the corner to Bobby's Bar, named for Blackfriar's Bobby, the little Victorian-era terrier who faithfully slept on his deceased masters nearby grave every night for 13 years. There are plenty of excellent golf courses, and the city is home to the Royal Yacht Britannica. For 44 years, the 412-foot yacht served the Royal family for transport, entertaining and more. It was decommissioned in 1997, but is perfectly preserved and now a museum. Tea anyone?

Edinburgh hosts many festivals, but "The Gathering 2009," set for July, hopes to attract the largest gathering of clans and families from around the world. The event promises plenty of pipers, pageantry, Highland games, dancers, food and drink. Be brave and try the haggis, the traditional dish of minced sheep organs, or maybe just the "neeps and tatties" (turnips and potatoes) that are served with it.

Speaking of drink, "May is Whiskey Month" is a month long ode to the national spirit, which will be celebrated nationwide. New this year is the "Inveraray Castle for Spirit of the West" event featuring the 16 distilleries of Scotland's fabled Whiskey Coast.

Only 47 miles from Edinburgh is Scotland's largest city, Glasgow. A different vibe from Edinburgh, Glasgow's roots are industrial, but its thriving arts and cultural scene make it a very inviting city. It is also a good jumping off point to visit Stirling Castle and the William Wallace memorial (from *Braveheart* fame) as well as Loch Lomond, which are an easy drive.

Also close by are the legendary Turnberry golf course, site of the 138th Open Championship in July, and Ayrshire, better known as Robert Burns country. The national poet resonates deeply here, and a visit to his cottage and museum in Alloway, a suburb of the lovely seaside town of Ayr, is worth the journey.

Accommodations in Scotland run the gamut from large hotels chains and small boutiques, such as the Channings Hotel in Edinburgh and Malmaison Glasgow, to charming seaside locales such as the Fairfield House Hotel in Ayr. There are plenty of cozy B&Bs and you can even stay in a castle. Everything you need to know about 2009 events and planning your trip can be found on visitscotland.com. Haste ye back!

Toronto



Nestled on the Canadian shore of Lake Ontario, Toronto is currently celebrating its 175th anniversary. It is a diverse and multi-cultural city where “The Queen reigns but she does not rule,” as some residents will tell you. Far too frosty for many visitors in the dead of winter, Toronto warms up considerably in the spring and summer.

Like New York City, Toronto is defined by its distinctive neighborhoods. Designer boutiques and first class accoutrements can be found in the Bloor-Yorkville district (similar to Madison Ave, Rodeo Drive, etc.) whereas the hustle and bustle of Chinatown serves a large Chinese population. Little Italy serves up “la dolce vita,” (the sweet life) while the bustling Danforth area is still referred to as Greektown. Toronto also has a vibrant gay community, which is centered in Church Street.

The CN Tower, located in the Entertainment District is the North America’s tallest free standing structure and the city’s most recognizable landmark. However, if you are afraid of heights, skip the ride up in the glass-floored elevators. Other structures of note are the newly redesigned Art Gallery of Toronto and the Royal Ontario Museum. Both offer visitors first class museum experiences. Casa Loma, built in the early 1900s by a prominent industrialist with a quirky fondness for medieval dwellings, is the city’s honorary castle, while the Distillery Historic District, circa 1832, was once the largest distillery in the British Empire. The cobblestone streets of this pedestrian-only area are now in the process of gentrification, with bistros, galleries and boutiques moving in.

During the warmer months, Toronto plays host to a number of fairs and festivals such as the Beaches International Jazz Festival in July and the Canadian National Exhibition in August, while everyone takes advantage of the city’s parks and lakefronts. High Park, the city’s largest, is perfect for cycling and picnics, and the charming Queen’s Park is city central and borders the University of Toronto. For beachfront forays, the Beaches Boardwalk makes for a nice seasonal stroll, or you can hop a ferry from the Queens Quay Harbourfront District to the lovely Toronto Islands. When you return, make sure you visit the Harbourfront Center, which hosts a number of music festivals.

Toronto offers plenty of entertainment choices to suit all tastes, from the Toronto Symphony Orchestra and the Rogers Centre (formally SkyDome), home to baseball’s Blue Jays, to the hot spots of Queens Street West. No visit to the city would be complete without touring the St. Lawrence Market in Victorian Old Town (home to the Carousel Bakery and its famous pea-meal bacon sandwich) and the Kensington Market near Chinatown. Offering a plethora of food and products from Asia, Latin America, Middle East, Europe and more, it’s a feast for the senses.

Getting around Toronto is not difficult, thanks to an excellent public transportation system that includes an easy-to-navigate subway system. Popular side trips from the city include the majestic Niagara Falls and the charming town of Niagara-on-the-Lake, in the heart of Ontario’s up-and-coming wine country. Accommodations vary from B&Bs and boutiques to large hotel chains; the Park Hyatt Toronto in Yorkville offers a rooftop

lounge with superb views of the city and a first class spa. For extensive information on Toronto and planning your trip visit SeeTorontoNow.com