

# sealed with a KISS



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Edinburgh's New Year Hogmanay Festival lays claim to the biggest street party on earth. It is part of a week-long carnival of traditional music, tartan-tinged dancing and whisky-fuelled mayhem.

**N**EVER ASK A SCOTSMAN FOR DIRECTIONS to a pub. Ask a Frenchman for directions on the back streets of Paris and be prepared for a Gallic shrug; ask an American for directions and be prepared for a life story about Little Pete, Bud and Chip from Arkansas; but ask a Scotsman for directions? Rather than grumble, point and confuse with a series of complicated directions that would confound a drunk octopus, a Scot will introduce himself, grab you by the arm, walk you to the pub, buy you a drink, buy you another drink and become a friend for the rest of the night. It's that kind of place. Asking for directions at Hogmanay is an even more dangerous game. The last time a friend of mine from Brisbane fell into the trap, she turned up a full 24 hours later, and told me she had met the man of her dreams.

But this Hogmanay – or 31 December as the rest of the world knows it – I have international friends to entertain from Switzerland, Sydney and, erm, Glasgow and – as I pitched the Edinburgh Hogmanay Festival to them back in July as ‘the best street party in the world ever’ – it has a lot to live up to. Two are in Scotland for the first time, one just wants to get ridiculously

drunk, and one is looking for the perfect New Year kiss. Looking at my watch, I realise it's already 5.30pm, New Year is nearly upon us and I'm running late to meet them: it's time to get the party started.

Hightailing it along Princes Street, the city's most famous artery, I pass the iconic Balmoral Hotel, cross the Waverley Steps and pass down Waverley Bridge. The coal-blackened Scott Monument, built in memory of Sir Walter, author of *Rob Roy* and *Ivanhoe* and one of Edinburgh's most famous sons, sits in the shadows of Princes Street Gardens. American author Bill Bryson described it as looking like a Victorian rocket ship, but I disagree. It's more like a Gothic bottle of the finest Scotch whisky – and tonight, Edinburgh will drink deep from its foundations.

The New Year excitement is palpable: it's six hours until the midnight bells will ring out across the city but already the streets – and the surrounding hills – are alive with the sound of music. Outside Waverley Station, revellers are stumbling on to Edinburgh's ramshackle streets and a united nations of silly hat-wearers are preparing to put a brave face on despite the zero-degree temperatures. As the entire city centre

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is closed to traffic to accommodate the world's largest street party, the city's ancient cobbles are trembling with the thought of more than 100,000 people doing the Highland Fling on their polished surfaces.

Originally a free-roaming street party held on Princes Street and the Royal Mile, the overwhelming popularity of Edinburgh's Hogmanay celebrations have led to it being officially organised to help control numbers and Jacobite warrior-style rebellions. With such an international audience, the festival now covers four days of processions, concerts and fireworks, with the street party commencing on New Year's Eve as soon as someone – quite literally – buys the first round of beers. It is a cross between Carnival in Brazil, the grandiose masquerade balls of Venice and the aftermath of the soccer World Cup final if both teams were to win. Accessible by ticket only, the street party plays out along the ramparts of the city with live bands, bagpipers, Highland dancers, food and drink stalls, and a clear view of the ubiquitous castle and fireworks overhead.

Wandering up Cockburn Street past The Scotsman's Lounge and The Malt Shovel, two idiosyncratic Scottish boozers decked out with tartan wallpaper, tartan kilt-wearing beefcake barmen, and perhaps even tartan toilet paper, I make it to the Royal Mile, the centrepiece of Edinburgh's architectural marvels. Flanked on both sides by museums, romantic arched passageways, Georgian turrets and modern Scottish restaurants, the Royal Mile is one

The pretty Edinburgh skyline in the early hours of the morning.

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of the most romantic streets in Europe and a focal point for Hogmanay nightlife. Built on seven hills like Rome, Edinburgh boasts a majestic skyline of spires and shortbread tin-shaped tenement houses. The Royal Mile leads to the top of its most famous mound, the home of Edinburgh Castle. Past the flag-wavers, the kilt-wearers, the Braveheart face-painters and the bagpipe players, I squeeze into Albanach, a modern whisky bar and restaurant, and sidle up to my friends. They are already nursing pints of Caledonian 80/-, the local Edinburgh ale. It is 7pm and there is plenty of time for a few drinks. All that walking has built up a mighty thirst. “Pint of 80 please, barman.” It feels like the softest kiss to the back of my throat.

Hogmanay is a peculiarly Scottish celebration. Forget New Year parties the world over, the Scots take their New Year much more seriously. The tradition of Hogmanay reaches back to the celebration of the winter solstice on the Gregorian calendar by the Norse Vikings. Though the celebration disappeared from the history books during the Protestant Reformation that swept Britain, it re-emerged near the end of the seventeenth century with much added vigour, leading to the week-long celebration that Edinburgh witnesses today. For the Scots, the question is why have one night of partying when you can have a week instead?

And despite thousands of years passing since Thor and his Vikings threw their hammers across the North Sea – perhaps with the intention to stifle the cat-like wails of the bagpipes – the Norse influence can still be felt. On 29 December, my eyes had been set ablaze by the Torchlight Procession, a dramatic river of fire that passed through the city centre from the Royal Mile to Calton Hill. Reminiscent of the ancient custom at centuries-old pagan parties, the charity procession is now led by the Up Helly Aa Vikings from Shetland, the country’s northernmost island. Anyone can take part and a flaming (eyebrow-singeing) torch is only A\$8. While this traditional Hogmanay procession once involved people dressing up in the hides of cattle and running around northern villages being hit by sticks, which admittedly sounds more fun, a procession of some 25,000 torch carriers remains an awe-inspiring sight. Apparently, the fireballs and torches signify the power of the sun to purify the world by consuming evil spirits. There is no doubt that tonight will see the consumption of plenty of evil spirits, that’s for sure. Some may even put the fear of God in me.

The bells ring out ten o’clock and it’s time to hit the streets. There is a saying in Scotland that you can have more fun at a Glasgow funeral than at an Edinburgh wedding. But when a forty-year-old man comes hounding past us like the famous Scottish terrier Greyfriar’s Bobby in a kilt screaming, “Sex, drugs and sausage rolls!” it is

enough to make anyone reconsider. When the Edinburgh Fringe swings into the university quarter every August, and especially during Hogmanay week, Edinburgh has more parties, more social activity and more buzz than anywhere else in Europe. Looking down from our vantage point overlooking the National Gallery of Scotland, The Mound and Calton Hill, the festivities are truly underway. As the Edinburgh Eye, the famous Christmas Ferris Wheel, spins in a disco ball of red, silver and gold lights, DJs spin club classics and Celtic reels from the outdoor stages, and dance godfathers Groove Armada are limbering up to play a headline set in Princes Street Gardens. It’s a 1.6km-long, beer-induced, deep-fried carnival. Sydney and New York? They’re just pretenders to the throne. Scotland has Bonnie Prince Charlie and the street party; the real young pretenders.

As we squeeze through the crowds, I explain to my friends the simple rules to guarantee a perfect Hogmanay. “You need to buy a stupid hat,” I tell them. This can come in the form of a trademarked See You Jimmy Hat with flaming red hair for the boys, or a Viking-style horned helmet with ginger pigtails and tartan bows for the girls. “Rule two: be prepared to bare

all to the elements.” Although it is illegal and any exposure of dangly body parts can be highly dangerous considering the arctic-like conditions, a strategic evacuation plan is a must – put simply, waiting half an hour for a portaloos can get in the way of the serious partying time. “We also need to take a carry out,” I insist, which in Scotland doesn’t refer to a Chinese takeaway. With queues at breaking point like Scottish pop idol and YouTube sensation Susan Boyle, sneaking in a half-bottle of vintage whisky under a kilt is the expert’s strategy. Sipping a classic Glenmorangie at the midnight bells from a gilded hip flask is for the connoisseur; tasting a watered-down pint of Tennent’s (a Scottish version of VB but always poured warmer) is for the out-of-towner. Really, the hip flask is what Sean Connery would do.

With my friends in tow, bottles of whisky in our back pockets, and with eyes as wide as Dorothy’s while dancing the Yellow Brick Road, we stride out into the heart of the party. At the foot of Hanover Street, the world’s largest ceilidh is underway. An alcohol-induced version of ballroom dancing, a Scottish ceilidh gives an excuse for revellers to swing their partners around like golf clubs, all in the name of a good

time. “I’ve never seen anything like this in my life,” laughs my Swiss friend. She’s right: there are literally thousands of pairs of tartan trousers shaking and bums flashing from under the pirouetting kilts as reel after reel of eight- to 80-year-olds jig past. The Gay Gordons, Dashing White Sergeant and Strip the Willow may sound like the names of YMCA theme bars on Sydney’s Oxford Street, but they are in fact the song titles of the country’s finest Highland dances. Who could resist being asked for a Gay Gordons? The truth is, after a few drinks, nobody can.

As 11pm strikes I find myself dancing with fuzzy flying Scotsmen and a group of 30-year-olds from Barcelona, who have returned to the festival for the past three years. They scream something at me in Catalan and I can’t help but get carried away on a wave of infectious dancing. Think *Strictly Come Dancing* as though it was performed by the Edinburgh Zoo chimpanzee enclosure.

“Let’s get the drinks in,” says one of my singleton friends from Glasgow, snuggling up to one of the outdoor bars. Peter has more reason than most to be excited about the countdown to the midnight bells. As is tradition, a New Year kiss in Edinburgh can be a passionate affair.



Midnight revellers seal the deal with a new year kiss.

While a Glasgow kiss – as made famous on television detective show *Taggart* – is more of a violent head-butt dished out by a deranged psychopath, a Hogmanay kiss is a romantic embrace synonymous with Robert Burns's love sonnet 'Ae Fond Kiss'. Amazingly, when Pete was eighteen he managed to pash more than 40 girls at Hogmanay.

On the Waverley Stage in front of me, one of four outside music venues constructed for the night, current rock supergroup Glasvegas are pounding through their pre-midnight set in typical Glaswegian style. It's freezing cold and pitch black, but they play on regardless, in uniform James Dean sunglasses, downing cans of Tennent's Lager at every opportunity. Lit up by just enough dirty neon and streetlight, they look like the four horsemen of the apocalypse. Ex-Libertine and Pete Doherty's former best mate, Carl Barat, is onstage with them crooning through the first few bars of Vera Lynn's 'We'll Meet Again', but he is drowned out by a group of Aussies wearing sombreros slurring a discordant 'Waltzing Matilda'. I look at my watch again: it's just gone 11.30pm and I doubt they'll make it past twelve. A group of Japanese ladies giggle beside them. They are wearing luminous green dragon-hump hats as a tribute to the Loch Ness monster. "Photo, photo!" they cry.

As I huddle in the cold and share the warmth with my friends from under the broken seal on our hip flask, a countdown begins to the clock at St Giles' Cathedral striking midnight. Within moments, all hell breaks loose. The carnival lights flash, stereos boom out Robert Burns's 'Auld Lang Syne' and complete strangers grab and vie for kisses. Linking hands with my friends (and some friends I have not yet met), the street merges into one as people clasp fingers and thumbs to sing the loudest New Year's anthem ever heard. Amidst a chorus 100,000-strong, the fireworks erupt from above Edinburgh Castle, perched on its volcanic rock like a medieval wedding cake. The fireworks rain down from the castle like kisses and burst into the heavens, a cacophony of wheels, bangers and rockets. Unexpectedly, my Swiss companion grabs me by the arm and seals the night's firework performance with a lingering kiss. I can taste the whisky on her breath, honeyed and sweet. As we part and make our way towards the ensuing dancing and singing along the street, I think back to Robert Burns. "Ae Fond Kiss, and then we sever," he wrote. "Ae fareweel, alas, for ever." It's a new year, and I wouldn't want to be anywhere else on earth.

## GET PLANNING

### Getting There

Edinburgh International Airport is the main travel hub for the east coast of Scotland. Etihad Airways offers return flights from Sydney to Edinburgh starting at approximately A\$2,100. See [www.etihadairways.com](http://www.etihadairways.com) for booking details.

Edinburgh's Hogmanay festival runs from 29 December to 2 January. Tickets can be bought online and are normally priced at A\$20 for a street party pass. Different tickets are available for entrance into the Princes Street Gardens concert and the official ceilidh, where international acts perform. In previous years, the Scissor Sisters, Blondie, Texas and Paolo Nutini have brought in the bells. [www.edinburghshogmanay.org](http://www.edinburghshogmanay.org)

As the city attracts one million overseas visitors a year, with around 100,000 of these coming at New Year, it's advisable to book accommodation well in advance. With its striking castle façade and location on a gorgeous Georgian waterfront terrace, a sure-fire winner is Malmaison, a boutique hotel beside the rejuvenated Leith harbour. [www.malmaison-edinburgh.com](http://www.malmaison-edinburgh.com)

For more information on Scotland and visiting Edinburgh visit [www.visitscotland.com](http://www.visitscotland.com)

