

Walking the Catacombs: Exploring Edinburgh's Underbelly

How One Skeptic Came to Believe in Ghosts

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When travelers leave the Waverly bus station in Edinburgh, Scotland, they immediately feel the weight of centuries of history settle onto their shoulders. At least, that's what happened to me one February night in 2012, just two days before my twentieth birthday. I'm a college student from East Tennessee who was spending a semester abroad in Ireland. During my time there, I took a week's trip to Scotland to enjoy some sightseeing. Any pictures included in this accounts were taken by me that night. I stepped out of the underground bus station to a cool, brisk night, and immediately had my breath taken away by the beauty before me.

Nicknamed "Auld Reekie," Gaelic for "Old Stinky" in the 18th century because of the sewage management problems (namely the fact that there wasn't any sewage management), Edinburgh no longer swims in sewage. Instead, the city's streets are clean: occasionally lined with rude homeless people, but clean. The only smells wafting from the city are the fragrances of the restaurants and family homes, where cooking food creates a barrage of olfactory delight.

However, it wasn't the world above the streets that held my interest that night, no matter how good they smelled or looked. I dropped my bags off at the Edinburgh Backpacker's Hostel, which is about a half mile from Edinburgh castle. It is also about 500 feet from my true destination that night; St. Giles Cathedral, and the meeting place for Blackhart Entertainment's "City of the Dead" tour. During the tour, a guide takes you deep into "Damnation Alley," a four-vault section of the 150 South Bridge Vaults, where a lot of paranormal activity has

occurred. Though skeptical about the existence of ghosts, I went in hopes of experiencing something that night.

The tour guide waited until my entire group of around 11 people, mostly Americans, had gathered in the square before beginning our journey. We walked a short way to get to the mouth of the South Bridge Vaults, the true starting point of our tour. As we walked the tour guide, Sarah, told us some of the history of the city, and especially the history of the South Bridge Vaults. The vaults were part of the South Bridge, which spans the Cowgate Ravine and connects the old and new parts of the city. The underside had been sealed off as extra storage space in 1788. At one point, they were used as storage for the businesses above, until the vaults began to flood because of inadequate water sealing. The legitimate businesses moved their merchandise out, and the slumlords moved theirs in. The vaults became a black-market paradise, with illegal brothels, taverns and last-resort housing for the city's poorest citizens.

The living conditions were unfit for humans; there was no sunlight, running water or sanitation. The poor were packed into the underground space like teenage girls at a Justin Bieber concert. As many as 10 people could be living one tiny, cramped vault at any given time. Crime was prevalent; robbery, rape and murder were some of the threats that the residents had to face on a daily basis. Scotland's most infamous serial killers, Burke and Hare, sold their victims' cadavers to medical schools in 1828, and are believed to have hunted for bodies to snatch (or create) in the very vaults that we were to enter that night. With that final, cheery thought, Sarah led us through the cramped portal, and into Edinburgh's famous Underground City. We would be exploring the four vaults that Blackhart Entertainment owned specifically for these tours.

It is easy to see why the vaults are often called "Damnation Alley." The ceilings were only about two feet over my 5'10" frame, and the floors were damp from the day's rain.

Sporadic rain puddles were present, and the occasional drop of water found its way into an unsuspecting tourist's ear canal. (I was looking up at the time.)

The tour guide mentioned that very few people had experienced anything paranormal in the two first-floor vaults, but that the last two vaults on the second floor of the tour were a completely different story. Children and pregnant women were the most likely to experience an event. At that announcement, the entire group looked at the parents traveling with their two small children. They waved off the concern of the tour guide, mentioning that they “were old pros at ghost tours.” So we moved on.

I should mention that I went into the tour as a complete skeptic. I didn't deny that the paranormal was possible; that would be remarkably egocentric. Instead, I thought that it was improbable. However, the things that happened to me while I was on the tour have completely changed my perspective.

The two vaults on the first floor of the tour were appealing to the history lover, and the currently legal to drink in the United Kingdom, sides of me. The vaults had housed a cobbler's workshop and an old tavern. In the latter room, an old tap was still embedded in the wall, and the remains of an old barrel decomposed in the corner. Everyone on the tour was still all right at this point.

We traveled up the stairs to the second floor and, in unison, the two children began



s...obbing. A woman also began to shake uncontrollably. Sarah stopped the tour to lead the family with the kids and the woman and her husband out of the entrance to the vaults that we had traveled through at the beginning of the tour. This left me and two other couples alone in the dark, as the guide had taken her flashlight--or torch, as they call it in the UK--with her. I remained skeptical at this point, thinking that those who “reacted” may have been actors planted on the tour to add drama.

View of downtown Edinburgh from Waverly Bus Station

I was still all right, holding onto my skepticism like a security blanket, until Sarah returned a few minutes later and the remaining five tour participants ventured to the first of the final two vaults. It was a completely different atmosphere than the two before it. I started trembling, although I wasn't cold, and periodically broke out in goosebumps. I was the last one through the door of the vault as the group left, as I wanted to inspect the rear corner of the room where there was a set of manacles bolted to the wall beside a set of stocks an acting company had set up. Unlike the stocks, the manacles weren't planted there, and were genuine to the time of the vault's use.

As I followed the remaining members of the group out of the vault, I felt a tug on my pants at the back of my knee, like a small child was attempting to get my attention. There was no

one behind me. I was nowhere near anything that could catch my pants, and my jeans weren't long enough that I may have stepped on them to cause the tug. I brushed it off, thinking that my imagination was beginning to get the better of me.

We were standing in the final vault of the tour, and Sarah was telling us about the various paranormal attacks that had occurred inside its walls, including one where a woman was forced into a supplicant position on her knees with her forehead to the ground, when I again began to feel uneasy. Suddenly, I felt a burning sensation on my leg, and let out an audible gasp of pain. Sarah asked me if there was anything wrong, but it felt like something had a grip on my tongue; I couldn't speak. She placed a hand on my arm, and the burning stopped. I nodded that I was okay, shaken by my experience, and we left the room and the Underground City.

Outside, Sarah asked me what had happened to me on the second floor, and I relayed my experiences. Her eyes got wide, and she told me that their company had unknowingly led a medium, someone who can see and speak to ghosts, through one of their tours. She had mentioned that the first vault, the one where my pants were tugged, was filled with the souls of children who had been kidnapped from their parents, violated by a pedophile with long fingernails, and then were sold to a brothel when he was finished with them. Sarah hypothesized that, because I was the only woman there who wasn't clinging to a man--whom they would have viewed as a threat--the children probably saw me as a safe mother figure. The tug on my pants was likely a plea for my attention so that I could get them out of there.

When I asked about the second vault, Sarah grew very quiet before mentioning that the vault had been the home of the pedophile. Several children's skeletons had been found buried under the brick floors. She mentioned that the man, whom they have named the South Bridge Poltergeist, probably saw the child (children?) clinging to me and attempted to pull them off. He

also could have attacked me for daring to steal away with his treasures. Hence the burning sensation.

More than a little disquieted by the encounter, I headed back to my hostel to try to get some sleep around 8:00pm. In the shower, I discovered three finger-shaped burns on my calf, right in the same area that I had felt burning in the vault. I freaked out, and didn't get much sleep that night.

I wasn't the only one attacked, either. Sarah emailed us later in the week to tell us that the two children had scratches on their backs, and another woman had three scratches on the back of her neck. Only the picture of the woman was included in the email, because the parents apparently didn't consent to having their children's image distributed on the internet.

Once I got home to the United States in May 2012, I printed out all of the pictures that I took in my time abroad in order to make a scrapbook. I began to look through the pictures that I took that night, and noticed a man-like, pale translucent figure in one of them. I may have captured a picture of my attacker that night. I have included that picture twice on the next page, with one figure outlined for comparison. Looking at the pictures from the tour, I again felt my calf tingle with remembered pain. The images made me recall how scared I was that night when it grabbed my tongue to keep me from speaking, and how terrified I was when I noticed the burns.

I went into the "City of the Dead" tour a skeptic; I came out a true believer. Of my entire trip to Scotland, the tour is what I remember most. So, anyone who is seeking a thrill, who doubts the paranormal, or who wants to be scared out of their minds while in one of the most beautiful cities on Earth, try Blackhart Entertainment's "City of the Dead" tour. If your experience is anything like mine was, you won't be disappointed.