

Sample journal

I had the pleasure of spending the last spring semester studying abroad at the Edinburgh College of Art in Edinburgh, Scotland. As a landscape architecture student, one of the things I paid attention to and pondered most in my wanderings about the city happened to be the landscapes. The town centers of Edinburgh (Old town, originally the ghettos; New town, where official buildings are located- divided by a now crumbled wall which generally served the purpose of keeping the poor away from the rich) were intricate mazes of cobbled sidewalks leading the pedestrian through closes (alleyways), under and above bridges, and always keeping pace of the traffic. Everything was gray in the city. The buildings were almost all of the same materials and architectural style, and one could easily get lost.

There was hardly any green space to be found anywhere- no street trees, no patches of lawn, no flower beds, and very few parks or town squares. The few public green spaces that did exist were enormous- almost like the scale of the parks was compensating for the lack of numbers. There were the Princes Street gardens- an elaborate garden space that was meticulously kept, never a dead head or a wilting plant to be found; Calton Hill, where monuments go to die due to the several replicas of monuments were started there but none were ever finished; the Meadows- almost like a college quad, with old trees scattered between the black lines of pedestrian paths; 3 main squares: Georges Square, Charlottes Square, and St. Andrews Square- which were quite large in size and filled with large trees, winding paths, and more park benches than one could hope for. And- which I like to think of as the Mother of All City Green Spaces- Arthurs Seat.

Arthurs Seat is a dormant volcano which sits to the east side of the city center. It is surrounded by jagged cliffs and happens to be the most dominating view, wherever you happen to be within the city. It is so wild and treacherous looking, and it is hard to believe that it's possible for one to walk from the Gap on Princes Street (in the heart of the city) to the very top, shopping bags and all, in less than an hour.

I got to know Arthurs Seat quite well when I chose it as my site for an installation art course that I took at the Art College. My project required documenting the site in many different conditions. It became almost my second home while I was there, and one of my favorite things to do was climb to the top peak. I've been up in every sort of weather imaginable (in the UK that happens to be fog, thick fog, rain in fog, rain without fog, light rain, heavy rain, sideways rain, upwards rain etc.) and I've traveled many of the paths carved into its slopes by the thousands of visitors per year- and traversed quite a few of my own, including some vertical climbs up bare rock faces when I had intended to go out for just a little stroll. I had some pretty memorable experiences, and my favorite days in Edinburgh were always punctuated with a walk up Arthurs Seat.

"Getting to know" Arthur's Seat was more like establishing a friendship with the volcano. I got to see it on its best days and its worst. I've spent countless sunrises and sunsets from various points, and I loved discovering where the best places were to see them. I grew to love certain parts, dislike others a little bit but ignore the quirks because overall, Arthur's

Seat was my friend. Being the good friends that we were- Arthur's Seat also got to experience many sides of me, as I would continually climb the hills to quite literally, put things in perspective when I just needed a break. Being abroad in such a busy town was a new experience for me, and being able to just climb and climb until everything was so tiny, and I was taller than everything in sight- was incredibly therapeutic.

It seemed as though the climbs to the top were always just what I needed, no matter what problem I'd be having at the time. If my mind was empty, I would go to the top just to be awestruck by how much there was to see, and I would just have all sorts of new ideas by the time I reached the bottom again. If I had too much on my mind, I would walk up the hill and my mind would just melt away into mellowness by the time I hit the peak. I would look across the city and out to the ocean, thinking about how small even the overwhelming city seemed from the vantage point- and then realizing how minute my own personal problems were. I once heard a quote about two friends, sitting beside each other in utter silence, but feeling though they've just shared one of the best conversations. Nothing but the flow of energy between the two people is exchanged- this energy was sort of what I felt as I hiked up Arthur's Seat.

In general, I find it quite pleasant to go outside and just try to clear my mind. I think gardens and wide, open fields are some of the best places to do this. However, my Scottish volcano seemed to be just a little bit more than that. Perhaps it was that I was completely alone in the city, and that I what I was experiencing was entirely new to me (being in a foreign country, after all), and that my issues just seemed a little more intense because it was just me in the wide open terrain. Then again, Arthur's Seat is really one of a kind- sort of like a diamond in the rough. All in all, I sort of had the same relationship within the city- trying to make my way but still feeling a little rough around the edges. I'll always have places to walk and contemplate no matter where I am in the world, but because Arthur's Seat is so unique, it will always be one of my favorite spots. I can't wait to go back to Edinburgh someday- but until I do, I know I'll have at least one friend waiting for me.