

48 HOURS IN...

The Scottish Borders



Vivienne Crow goes on a whirlwind campervan tour of the Scottish Borders, discovering remote, beautiful countryside with ruined abbeys, amazing views and coastal charm

As we travelled through the Scottish Borders, I was struck by its sense of remoteness. This sparsely populated region, once controlled by thieving, murderous clans known as Reivers, feels like it's a long way from anywhere. It's not though - Galashiels, its largest town, is about an hour from Edinburgh and less than two hours from both Glasgow and Newcastle. Still, I couldn't shake off the feeling I was going to see a raiding party come thundering down the next hill on horseback, stolen cattle in tow.

Our first stop on our campervan tour of the region, Hermitage Castle, is typical of this sense of isolation. Located in upper Liddesdale, this formidable fortress is surrounded by hills. From the outside, it's an imposing block of stone; there are just a few tiny windows in its high walls and only one entrance at ground level. Its eerie appearance and its location, associated with many bloody border skirmishes, have given rise to various legends over the centuries. One of these centres around the castle's original builder, Lord Soulis, said to have been a dark wizard who kidnapped and sacrificed local children.

RIVERSIDE STROLLS AND BEAUTIFUL RUINS

Planning to cover a lot of ground in 48 hours, my partner Heleyne and I pushed on through the hills and dark conifer forests. Our base was the town of Jedburgh, home to a small Club Site on the banks of the Jed Water. From here, it's a short riverside stroll to the main attractions in the centre of this 'royal and ancient burgh': a 19th-century jail with cells now open to the public, the 16th-century towerhouse where Mary Queen of Scots briefly lived and the ruins of an Augustinian abbey.





▲ Clockwise from top: The Eildon Hills can be climbed from Melrose; Hermitage Castle lies in a remote spot in the Southern Uplands; writer Vivienne Crow's Auto Sleeper campervan parked up by St Abbs harbour; Dryburgh Abbey is one of many ancient ecclesiastical sites that visitors can see in the Scottish Borders; writer Vivienne with her terrier Jess on the Eildon Hills; bust of Sir Walter Scott at Abbotsford

There are abbey ruins all over this part of the country. Kelso Abbey is a short drive from Jedburgh, as is Dryburgh, located in a peaceful rural setting surrounded by mature trees. But the biggest and best of the lot is the beautiful, pink-tinged Melrose Abbey. Painted by Turner and lauded in poetry by Sir Walter Scott, these fine ruins have captured the imagination of visitors for generations. King David II asked for the heart of his father, Robert the Bruce, to be buried here, and a small plaque now marks the spot where, in 1921, a heart-burial was discovered. Lots of intricate masonry has survived the centuries, much of it dating from the late 14th century when the abbey was rebuilt following attacks by the English. If the day we visited was anything to go by, it seems the gargoyles adorning the outer walls are one of the big attractions, particularly the bagpipe-playing pig.

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SCOTTISH HILLS AND ROMANTIC ARCHITECTURE

As well as visiting the abbey, we had a stroll around the many independent shops lining Melrose's main street and hiked to the top of the Eildon Hills. The steep climb, although fairly short, was a tough ask on one of the hottest days of the summer, but it was worth it for the far-reaching views - and the much-appreciated gentle breeze. We rewarded ourselves, later in the day, with a culinary treat - an excellent meal at the town's Provender restaurant, perfectly rounding off our few hours in one of southern Scotland's loveliest towns.

Visitors interested in ancestral homes are spoiled for choice in the Borders. There's a whole website dedicated to the 11 'big houses' scattered throughout the region (bighousesgroup.com), all massive mansions with long and fascinating histories. We managed to squeeze in a visit to Abbotsford, the house built by the writer Sir Walter Scott in the early 19th century. We'd already visited his grave at Dryburgh Abbey; it seemed only right we should see where he spent much of his life too. Adorned with whimsical turrets and stepped gables romantically reminiscent of even earlier buildings, it is credited as being one of the first

3 MORE BIG HOUSES IN THE BORDERS



Floors Castle

More stately home than castle, Floors is Scotland's largest inhabited castle. Visitors can view restored tapestries, explore the grounds and gardens, and enjoy a meal in one of the site's cafés.

floorscastle.com



Traquair

Sticking with superlatives, Traquair is Scotland's oldest inhabited house. Hidden in the folds of the Southern Uplands, this former royal hunting lodge has been lived in for more than 900 years and visitors have included Mary Queen of Scots.

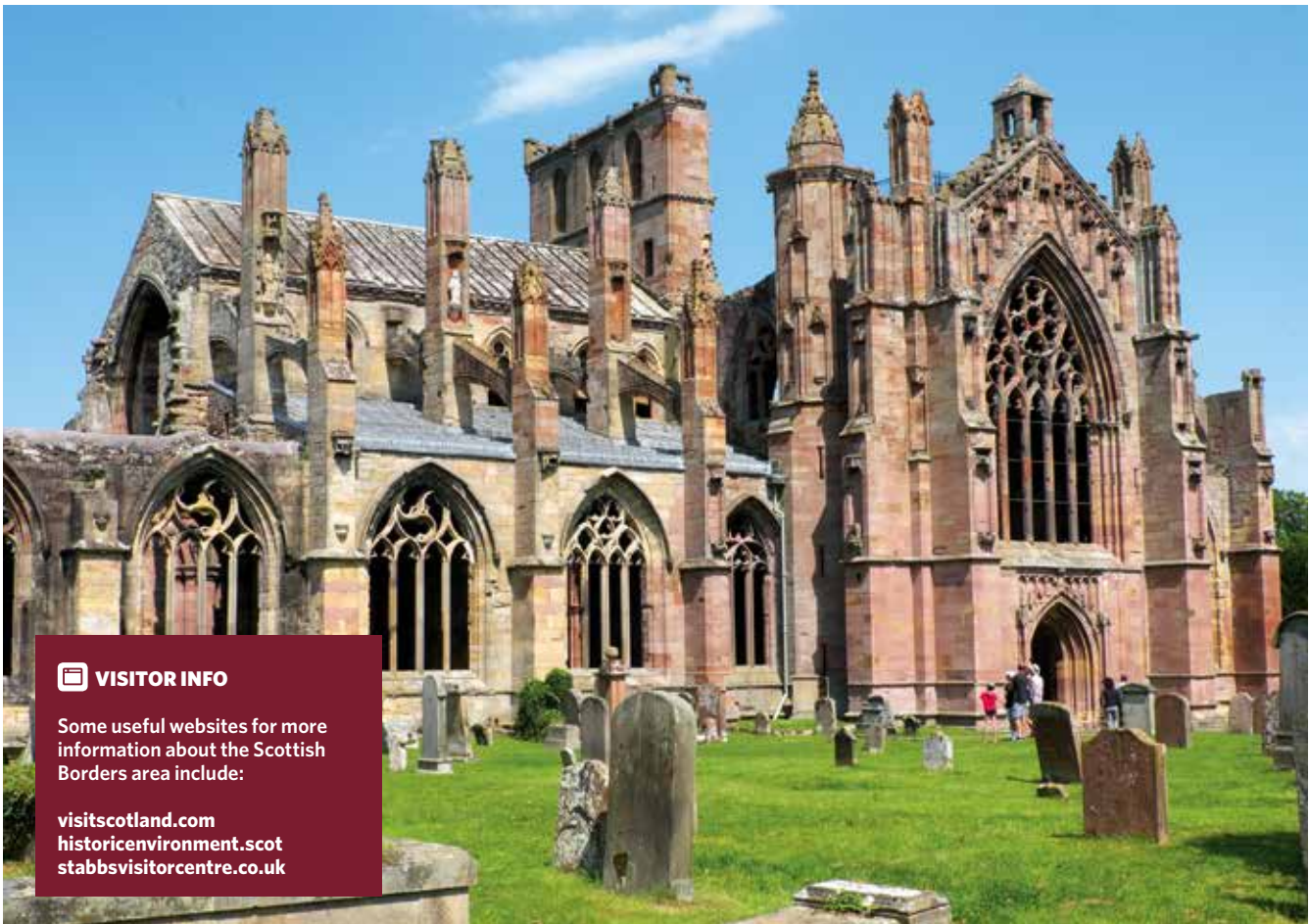
traquair.co.uk



Paxton House

There's nothing stuffy about this gem on the banks of the River Tweed. Boat trips, an adventure playground, a zip wire and fairy trail are just a few of the activities on offer. There's also a collection of Chippendale furniture, riverside walks and a tearoom.

paxtonhouse.co.uk



 **VISITOR INFO**

Some useful websites for more information about the Scottish Borders area include:

visitscotland.com
historicensevironment.scot
stabbsvisitorcentre.co.uk

▲ The substantial ruins of Melrose Abbey
▼ Simple gravestone at Melrose Abbey; gargoye at Melrose Abbey



Jedburgh Club Site is a peaceful haven in the Scottish Borders (reopens 1 April). Book online at siteseecker.co.uk or by calling 024 7647 5426.

There are also several Certificated Sites and Listed Sites in the area, such as Berwick on Tweed - Raglan Cottage (CS680) in Northumberland, open year-round.

For Club Meets and THSs in the area, see our Out & About magazine or go to myccc.co.uk/outandabout.

examples of the Scottish Baronial revivalist style. Inside, the medieval theme continues with dark wood panelling and suits of armour hanging from the walls.

IN SEARCH OF NATURE IN ST ABBS

I had a long list of places I wanted to see, things I wanted to do while we were in the Scottish Borders... if time allowed. Of course, time never allows. There was no time to see the town of Peebles, no time to ride a trail in one of the 7stanes mountain biking centres. But I was determined to see the seabird colonies at St Abbs Head. So a race across the Borders ensued, from the Tweed Valley to the Berwickshire coast. We loaded the fridge with mouth-watering picnic items from Hunter's deli in Kelso and headed



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east. By the time we reached St Abbs though, the heatwave had broken, replaced by strong winds and heavy rain - not the sort of weather for wandering along cliff-tops. I felt cheated. But then, as we sat beside the harbour in our 'van, looking out forlornly at the grey sea and grey sky, I saw what I thought was a dorsal fin just beyond the rocks. Then another appeared, and another. A pod of dolphins, perhaps a dozen of them, had chosen this moment to brighten the dreich day with their presence. The mad dash had been worth it after all. 🦈