**How an Edinburgh Walking Tour Inspired Me to Carve My Own Path**

**Alternative Title Suggestion:**

How Edinburgh’s Homeless Taught Me to Be a Better Business Owner

A Global Commute Story by Kristi Porter,

Last year, I eagerly checked three destinations off of my bucket list: England, Scotland and Ireland. To be honest, Scotland was on my list because it’s part of my family’s heritage, but unlike England and Ireland, I didn’t actually have a chocked-full itinerary for when my friend and I landed in the wild and windy country. And while I thoroughly enjoyed London and Dublin, it was Edinburgh that caught me off-guard in the best way possible.

Before visiting, I didn’t know that Scotland would have the friendliest citizens, the most efficient airport I’d ever step foot in, the best cold medication (being sick while traveling sucks), and quite possibly, the highest affinity for social enterprise in the UK.

During our short stint in Edinburg, we saw posters for human trafficking awareness and prevention, learned about multiple purpose-driven cafes and restaurants, saw a marketplace that sold survivor-made goods, and even took a walking tour with a local social enterprise. It was this last one that really caught my attention, and would have a personal and professional impact on me long after arriving home.

**More Than a Tour**

Invisible Cities is a social enterprise that trains people affected by homelessness to conduct local walking tours. These innovative tours not only offer a unique perspective of the city to tourists but allow guides to use untapped potential — their knowledge of the streets — to earn a living wage doing meaningful work.

There are a lot of really remarkable social enterprises doing amazing work in the world, but this idea was one of those that stood out in a lot of ways to me. Simply put, it grabbed my imagination and held it. And I haven’t been able to stop thinking about it since touching back down in Atlanta.

One of my favorite aspects of Invisible Cities, the thing that first caught my attention, is the centerpiece of their model, training homeless people to be walking tour guides. It’s so simple and so brilliant.

Who knows the streets better than the homeless? Invisible Cities is utilizing the resources they already have at their disposal to make a difference in the lives of those they help, along with their community and the people who take their tours.

It’s not a flashy business model. It’s not overly complex. It requires no extraordinary skills. And yet, they are doing extraordinary work.

*In fact, it’s the relative simplicity that continues to inspire me in my own business. In a world where “it’s complicated” has become commonplace, getting back to the basics is a breath of fresh air. So, as I reflect on that tour, I’m reminded that, as a startup, learning and holding onto the fundamentals is essential for growing and scaling.*

**Use What’s Available**

I don’t know about you, but I continually get distracted by what I don’t have. If I only had more money, more time, more influence . . . *then* I can help more nonprofits and social enterprises. I often lose perspective by focusing not on the people I’ve helped and the ways I’ve grown over the last couple of years since starting my business, but the people I haven’t helped and the goals I haven’t met.

Goals are great, until they keep you from being grateful and seeing new opportunities.

For Invisible Cities, it’s not about what they don’t have. It starts with what their available resources, and grows from there.

I want to follow in their footsteps. Truthfully, I don’t think this is any different what the rest of us do, but it was a good reminder for me. I needed to see it in action to bring myself back to a point of gratefulness for what I have and what I’ve already done.

You may be one of those brave souls who is now doing something completely different than your degree or training. Not me. I went with what I knew—writing, marketing and communications. It’s what I enjoy, plus it’s a need for the cause-focused organizations I want to support. It still amazes me that you can graduate with a nonprofit management degree and not learn a lick of marketing. So, this knowledge was my available resource.

Additionally, I don’t have thousands of dollars to spend on advertising. I do, however, have amazing clients, generous friends and loving family members. And when they referred new clients to me, I’d send them a gift card as a thank you. But last year, I created a formal program that paid them in cash or free consulting hours for each referral. Most said they would have happily referred people to me anyway, but I’m just going to assume that having an incentive doesn’t bother them that much.

One more example to get your wheels turning. I think business coaches are a terrific idea. I may even hire my own one day. As a solopreneur, I only know so much and I can only learn so much. Despite that, I still seem to hoard PDF downloads and webinar links like the internet is going to run out of space. But collective knowledge always beats my individual knowledge. So, I found mentors to provide learning shortcuts and created a mastermind of fellow solopreneurs to provide feedback, insight and accountability. Even though I’m an introvert, I know that the greatest resources available to me are relationships. They give to me, and I gratefully give back to them. It serves us all well, and in the end, allows me to serve my clients better, too.

**Tell YOUR Story**

Invisible Cities not only empowers the homeless to design their tours, but to tell their own stories as well as the city’s. This is another factor that makes their excursions different from any others you’ll find.

It’s not only your “why” that sets you apart. It’s also your “who.” Even if someone else is doing exactly what you’re doing, and even if they managed to rip off your signature process or business model, they still can’t replicate you and your story. Your “who” is as unique as it comes, and your story deserves to be shared.

Remember the show “Behind The Music” on VH1? I’m totally dating myself here, but my best friend and I used to love that show in college. In each episode, they profiled a musician and how they became famous. It didn’t matter who the episode was about, *all* of them were utterly fascinating! That’s because every person has an interesting story. I’ve yet to meet anyone who hasn’t had a great story.

I absolutely need to tell the stories of the people that I’ve helped, but I also have to tell my own story. It’s part of what makes my business remarkable—and the same goes for you.

In listening to Biffy, our tour guide, talk about her struggles, her triumphs, her past, and her future, I came to appreciate my own story more. As much as her tale made her tour unique, my history makes my business different from anyone else’s business. It’s the foundation I’m building my future on, and it’s up to me to share it.

I only had three days in Scotland, and only about half of that time was in Edinburgh, but it had a significant effect on me, my business and my impact. In fact, I can’t wait to return. Until then, I’ll remember the warm people, the cold gusts of wind and the “invisible” people that revealed so much. Come to think of it, maybe Scotland isn’t coming off my bucket list after all.

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**Bio:**

Kristi Porter is a writer and consultant who helps nonprofits and social enterprises get noticed and grow through effective marketing and communications. She also teaches solopreneurs and small businesses how to incorporate philanthropy and giving strategies. When Kristi’s not working, you’ll probably find her at the movies, downloading more podcasts and audiobooks than she’ll ever finish, or planning her next trip.

**[Headshot](https://www.dropbox.com/sh/4ps3bw7pcwh82k4/AADbWDq6zvRMvhCdeVO-sZiha?dl=0)**

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**[Tour photos](https://www.dropbox.com/sh/imc6l8xxqxb5c0r/AADFdFtna6oBoXyYuyHNMfzGa?dl=0)**

1. Tour brochure. Each tour participant is given a sticker with the guide’s illustration to denote you are with the tour when walking around the city.
2. Nothing in particular. Just a beautiful, little street.
3. Biffy, our tour guide.
4. Biffy talking about the other social enterprises they work with in the area.
5. More lovely architecture
6. Can’t remember the significance of this particular church
7. Edinburgh Award winners
8. JK Rowling is the only female recipient
9. Edinburgh’s Grassmarket District
10. Greyfriar’s Bobby is a famous pub and landmark
11. Another interesting street near the end of the tour
12. A post-tour photo. (L-R) My friend, Raechel, is the red coat. Biffy, our guide, is in the glasses. Sonny, Biffy’s boyfriend, came along on the tour as well. He also leads the Crime and Punishment tour. Then me. The woman on the far right is a friend of the founder, but I can’t remember her name. She helps out a lot, and came along as a representative on the admin side of things, especially as this was a new tour offering at the time.