

Donkey waiting for a rider on Blackpool beach

BLACKPOOL ROCKS

The resort has smartened up its act with sculptures on the prom, but the glitz and glamour is still there...

Roll up! Roll up! It's Blackpool's Great Promenade Show. There's glam rocks and glitter balls, light shows and music actually played by the sea – yes, really! If this all sounds like another load of over-the-top entertainment typical of Britain's most full-on fun-filled seaside resort, then it is. But my, is it a lot more tasteful and sophisticated than I'd expected; certainly a lot more my cup of tea.

This being Blackpool, the mirror ball is the biggest in the world. By day its 47,000 tiles throw a cascade

of diamond patterns across the promenade. By night it's illuminated with a colour-changing light show. Pretty dazzling stuff – and this is just the start. We haven't been near the razzmatazz of the rest of Blackpool yet.

Strolling from one amazing sculpture to the other along the revamped prom turns out to be the perfect way of easing myself in to Blackpool mode, giving me a taste of things to come. Perhaps this is where a little explanation may be in order. I am the last person you would think

would visit Blackpool. Crowds, noise, flashing lights and surround-sound music indoors and out is just not my usual scene. Give me deserted hills or bracing coastal paths any time. So when I succumbed to persuasion from my youngest daughter, Sophie, my friends laughed and said; "Blackpool; now there's a challenge for you".

But here I am, clinging on for dear life, my stomach doing flips, as I hurtle dip after dip along a dragon's back of a clackety wooden rollercoaster at the Pleasure Beach. I'm shrieking and laughing, initially out of fear but then



Looking through the twists and turn of 'Infusion' to 'The Big One' at Blackpool Pleasure Beach



Donkey rides on Blackpool Beach

out of sheer enjoyment. This is such childish fun. As soon as the ride stops I'm in the queue again. It's one thrill after another. My favourite rides are the oldest. The Flying Machines (1904), the Big Dipper (1923), the speedy carousel which certainly lives up to its name of Derby Racer (1959) and, for me, the most enjoyable, the Steeplechase (1977). I ride on that four times, my horse winning three 'races'. Not bad for someone who'd rather be galloping across a moor.

The biggest thrill away from the fairground is the birds' eye view through the glass floor of the SkyWalk at The Blackpool Tower Eye. It's an unnerving, yet strangely compelling, experience this. Your brain is telling you that there's nothing between you and the pavement 158 metres below; your feet know that there's about five centimetres' thickness of glass supporting you. Plenty of people are standing gingerly on the sidelines while others tentatively tiptoe across one of the girders, not quite confident enough of the transparent under-floor. We're surrounded by uninterrupted, floor to ceiling views. Far below I can read Bruce Forsyth's famous 'Nice To See You ...' catchphrase on The Comedy Carpet. The atmosphere is hushed. Everyone, whatever their age, is transfixed.

Blackpool is starting to have that effect on me. Of course I'd come knowing what to expect. I'd imagined that it wouldn't be long before I'd be yearning to retreat to the mountains of the Lake District, which I can clearly see in the distance, leaving the rest of the family to the glitz, glamour and ubiquitous entertainment. Yet it's not been hard to find some quieter spots to escape to for a while and recharge my batteries.

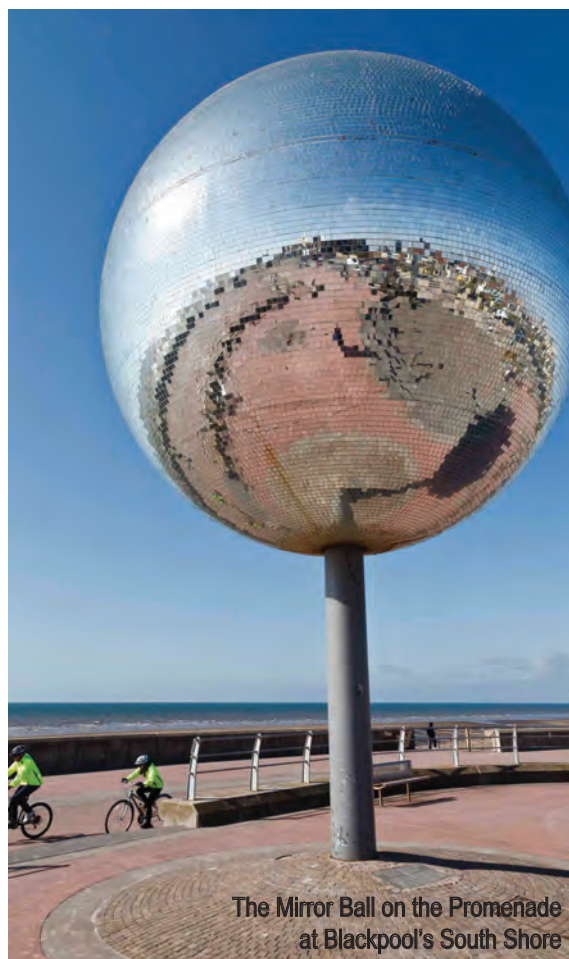
The best place to unwind turns out to be in The Blackpool Tower itself. We'd just left the

circus, one astounding acrobatic feat after another that left my senses reeling as much as they had the performers, and headed upwards. The famous ballroom becomes my soothing, stunning, sequined sanctuary; all plush red seats and opulent décor. It's entrancing to simply relax and watch twinkle-toed couples twirling and gliding to the Viennese Waltz.

There's rather an air of sophistication about the Italianate Gardens at Stanley Park, with a marble fountain and four sea horses at their centre. They're very peaceful, yet we're less than 10 minutes from the Pleasure Beach. While Sophie clammers over the adventure playground (it's highly Sophie-rated, by the way) I take the steps past two imposing lion statues, copies of the Medici Lions of Florence, and in to the fabulous Art Deco café. The outside is very plain, so I'm stunned by the fabulous interior. Even the waiters look like they have stepped out of the 1930s. I'm even more stunned by the array of gooey cakes in the chiller cabinet. 'Time for a sharp exit, before I truly succumb to Blackpool's delights.

Food's on the menu at my next destination. Unfortunately it's not for me. It's for the magnificent Marcella, a former circus elephant who's putting on a bit of a show by having a pedicure in public at Blackpool Zoo. She complies with most of the keeper's requests to move this or that foot, then rather conveniently loses interest in being obedient. That is, until loaves of bread and chunks of apple are proffered.

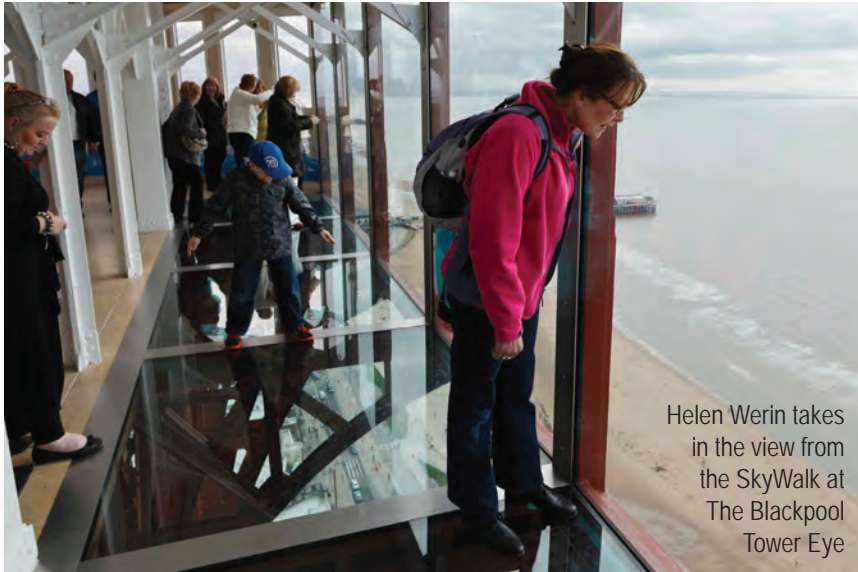
Marcella is not the only mammoth attraction here. I peer into a dark hut in a quiet corner uncertain of what I'm going to find and shake my head, unable to believe my eyes. Inside is Darwin, a giant tortoise who is about 80 years old. He's certainly the biggest tortoise



The Mirror Ball on the Promenade at Blackpool's South Shore



The beautifully ornate Blackpool Tower Ballroom



Helen Werin takes in the view from the SkyWalk at The Blackpool Tower Eye

I've ever seen and looks more like a giant boulder than a beast. Roaming around the zoo is relaxing. We get a special treat when we spot a Joey in its mother's pouch in Wallaby Walkabout, a walk-through enclosure where the marsupials bound free.

Our keenly-anticipated visit to Amazonia is rather more stressful. To be fair, we had been warned. A sign outside warns that the animals are free roaming and to put away any food, drink or loose items, especially babies' dummies. Well, we don't have any of those but I do have mesh pockets on my rucksack. Once inside I realise, far too late, that stuffed right at the bottom of these are tissues. In a blink some tiny squirrel monkeys have filched them and run off in to the branches. I can almost hear them laughing at my carelessness. A somewhat cynical regular visitor looks at me with a 'told you so' expression. His wife explains that, last time they



Just Champion! Rowan gives a hug after her ride

Picture by Darren Gouldsbrough

came, she'd had an entire packet of cream cakes whipped from the bag on her granddaughter's pushchair before you could say "look out!" She said: "It all happened so quickly. I was gutted to see the cakes disappearing in to the greenery. They were for my tea".

Sophie's firmly on the side of the culprits, especially as the keeper keeps squirting the appealing little monkeys with water to curtail their cheeky activities. It doesn't seem to have much effect on them.

On the prom we're shielded from a spell of Blackpool's blustery weather by shelters which swivel with the wind. For more than a mile we've jumped from one dazzling discovery to the next. There's the High Tide Organ and a fascinating artwork powered by the wind, which determines the colours and patterns of pulsating light units. It's title? The Sound of the Wind Looks Like This.

So what's been my biggest discovery? That Blackpool's been surprisingly easy going; from the good parking facilities at the Pleasure Beach to the impressive cycle hire arrangements and, especially, all the free fun of wandering the promenade and piers.

Before we leave, we chuckle our way across the Comedy Carpet opposite the tower. I could spend hours reading all the daft jokes, from music-hall to comic classics from Britain's most popular entertainers and laugh-out-loud scripts from legendary acts such as the Two Ronnies.

Yes, *Blackpool's been a laugh!*

WHERE TO FIND OUT MORE

www.visitblackpool.com
www.blackpoolpleasurebeach.com

WHAT ELSE TO SEE AND DO

* Blackpool Illuminations (www.blackpool-illuminations.net) This world-famous, free, spectacle, which attracts more than three million visitors every year, runs from August 30 until November 3 2013. There's every kind of light display you can imagine – even the trams are lit up and decorated along such themes as the Wild West or Space. Travelling by tram is probably the best way to see the lights as displays stretch over more than six miles. Landmarks are also picked out in luminous detail.

* Blackpool Tower, Promenade, Blackpool FY1 4BJ. (For tickets 0871 222 9929; www.theblackpooltower.com) The national symbol of the British seaside is nearly 120 years old. As well as the famous Tower Ballroom (it's free to visit the upper galleries) Tower Circus and the Blackpool Tower Eye at the very top, there's also the gruesome The



Photo by Jason Lock

Blackpool Tower Dungeon (Tel: 08712229928; www.thedungeons.com) where actors will have you shrieking with fright – and laughter, followed by a 'drop ride to doom'.

* The Great Promenade Show, South Shore (Tel: 01253 476520; www.visitblackpool.com). Some of the country's top artists have created two kilometres of sculptures and lighting. Also among them is 'Desire', inspired by holiday romances, which casts a shadow or a broken heart on the ground. The giant mirror ball is illuminated at night with a colour-changing light show. Sir Peter Blake's Life As A Circus celebrates the great entertainment tradition of Blackpool with a variety of circus acts cast in bronze.