

Brum roamin'

Ever-changing Birmingham may roll with the times at astonishing speed, but it has plenty of intriguing windows to the past.

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Birmingham's a curious city to behold. It's a bit like a kaleidoscope, constantly changing. At first glance, it's a sea of cranes, building sites, factories and some ugly 1960s/70s concrete monstrosities. But a few twists and turns here and there show grand Victorian buildings, among them the neo-classical Town Hall – now an acclaimed concert venue – and the Grade II listed landmark that is Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery.

Then there's the stunning modern architecture such as Selfridges' façade of 16,000 silver discs, the International Convention Centre and the Library of Birmingham, said to be Europe's largest public library. The Mailbox still appears, at least from the outside, like Europe's largest sorting office. It was built to withstand a nuclear bomb, but now it's a posh and pristine mall of designer shops and eateries. All this is set amid a rich pattern of well-used canals and thriving quarters, each with a unique industrial history, as befitting a place once known as 'the workshop of the world' and 'the city of 1000 trades'.

To truly appreciate the eclectic character of Birmingham we explore some of the towpaths of the city's 103 miles of canals; in fact, there are more miles of canals here than in Venice. Our route skirts vast malls packed with every type of restaurant imaginable and across impressive squares with fountains, statues and colonnaded halls.

My initial impression? This is a city



which doesn't stand still for a minute. There's something either going up, coming down or going on around every corner. This is also a city where we only have to scratch the surface a little to find some extraordinary gems. St Philip's Cathedral, for example, appears small from the outside by most cities' standards. Yet, inside, are the four fabulous jewelled-effect 19th century stained glass windows designed by Birmingham artist Edward Burne-Jones

In Birmingham's Museum and Art Gallery we gaze in awe at the largest public collection of Pre-Raphaelites in the world. And, in the Jewellery Quarter, where 400 specialists ply their craft, we visit an old bracelet factory frozen in time where the workers literally hung up their coats and shut the door on an intriguing

time capsule. It's now the award-winning Museum of the Jewellery Quarter.

Talking of gold, I was keen to see the exhibition about the Staffordshire Hoard – the largest hoard of Anglo-Saxon gold ever found – at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery. I'd seen a few pieces from the hoard before, at Lichfield Cathedral and The Potteries Museum and Art Gallery in Stoke on Trent. So, as well as being amazed by some new-to-my-eyes 'treasure', I was also hooked by the story behind the hoard's find.

Truly, this has to be one of the best museum and art galleries that I have ever been in. Past the 40 or so galleries of magnificent paintings, 2000-year-old Peruvian pottery and whistling kettles sculpted like seals and cats and displays of silver, sculpture and ceramics, we



come across The Stranger's Guide to Birmingham. This tells the stories behind the city. And what a history! This is a place which shot up as a result of markets and the entrepreneurial spirit of one Peter de Birmingham who, 900 years ago, bought a market charter from the king. In the 18th and early 19th centuries the city's growth was immense. As a mecca for gifted entrepreneurs and hard grafters, Birmingham's population rose from an estimated 11,500 to around 147,000 people.

It's fascinating to see a drawing from around 1800 showing the Bull Ring with a modest water pump, jumble of small shops and market stalls and, in the centre, the iron ring. The artist, Samuel Lines, described the area as being "choked with filth."

I read a rather poignant ode about the relentless progression of development in Birmingham, albeit written in 1825. The author, William Dobbs, was reflecting on how the city used to look.

"There's hardly a single place I know and it fills my heart with grief and woe, for I can't find Brummagem," he lamented. If only he could see his city now!

We certainly uncover plenty of novelty on a visit to BBC Birmingham's Public Space (free) on the seventh floor of The Mailbox. Sadly, the blinds were drawn

on the Archers' studio during our visit. If we'd booked a guided tour we could have taken part in an interactive Archers drama operating such sound effects as boots crunching on gravel or glasses clinking.

Fish – succulent sea bass – is on the menu on our last night, at cosy Del Villaggio in Broad Street and the next day as part of our four course Sunday brunch (£24.95) at the Hotel du Vin in the former eye hospital in Church Street. We're told to take as much time here as we like – and don't we need it! Perhaps it's something to do with having got very close to 2000 or so marine creatures, including Hammerhead Sharks and an enormous turtle at National SEA LIFE Birmingham earlier in the day.

Centuries ago the people of Birmingham used to bait bulls with dogs for fun. Apparently it made the animals' meat more tender. It seems that peoples' main occupation nowadays is shopping or sipping coffee in the Bull Ring, the swish centre built around the spot where the bulls were once tethered. Close by is the Rag Market, where, I'm told by a friendly local, you can "get anything" and "things you didn't even know that you wanted".

This makes me recall a visit to the Bull Ring back in my schooldays. For years I'd harboured this vision in

my head of Birmingham as a grey and grim concrete city centre surrounded by subways. Now that illusion is well and truly shattered. The 'kaleidoscope' city has shown me far more enticing views.

Our hotel

Birmingham Marriott Hotel, 12 Hagley Road, Five Ways, Birmingham, England B16 8SJ. Tel: 0121 452 1144, www.marriott.com

Save Money

There are lots of free things to do besides those mentioned, including lovely parks and free concerts and events at the Town Hall and Symphony Hall throughout the year. www.visitbirmingham.com/what-to-do/things-to-do-for-free

For More Information

- www.visitbirmingham.com
- www.visitsealife.com/birmingham
- www.cadburyworld.co.uk
- www.nationaltrust.org.uk/birmingham-back-to-backs
- www.thinktank.ac
- www.hotelduvin.com
- www.bmag.org.uk (museums)
- bbc.co.uk/showsandtours
- www.del-villaggio.co.uk

