

Fancy a Trip to Liverpool, Eh Eh Eh?

Sophie Walker
Aka Alan Wicker

YOU CAN go there by plane, train or car but the best way to arrive in Liverpool is to take the ferry from Birkenhead. "Life goes on day after day/ Hearts torn in every way/ So ferry 'cross the Mersey/ 'Cause this land's 'the place I love.'" They still play this whimsical 1960s hit-song as you cross the wide, brown Mersey River, wowed by the city's imposing seafront, and arrive at the docks.

The sea shaped Liverpool's soul from the outset. Undeniably, the city's first boom came in part from the slave-trade. Textiles, firearms and alcohol were shipped from Liverpool to West Africa, where they were exchanged for slaves.

Then in the US, the captives were bartered for cocoa, tobacco and cotton, which then made their way back in the same boats to the European market. After the abolition of slavery, Liverpool continued trading goods, and a booming industry grew on the backs of dockers and

ship-builders, with their backslang and sing-song accents.

At the same time, there were the emigrants, all nine million of them, who left Europe on Liverpool's boats for a life in the New World. They took Liverpool's architecture with them, moulding the American

cityscape, both real and imagined. The last time I was in Liverpool, the rain was torrential, almost apocryphal, and the Atlantic wind was blowing so strongly that people were being lifted off their feet as the squalls caught at their umbrellas. The clock-faces on the Liver Building were glowing orange in the gloom. For a few hours, Liverpool was transformed into Gotham City.

The city is of course the home of the Merseybeat bands that defined a British generation. Touristy it may be, but you can spend many happy hours in the Beatles Story. It takes you from Lennon and McCartney's teenage skiffle-band, the Quarrymen, through their stint on the Reeperbahn in Hamburg, to worldwide fame, the break-up and their solo careers. Along the way, there's an

amazing mock-up of the Cavern, where you can almost smell the sweat on the walls, and hear the high-pitched screams of Beatlemania.

And Liverpool couldn't be the same without its friendly native inhabitants, the Liverpudlians, or the Scousers, as they are more affectionately named. A typical British joke goes along these lines:

*"What do you call a Scouser in a suit?
The accused."*

As you can perhaps tell, Scousers are caricatured as being small-time thieves, always on the make or scrounging for another benefit payment. A major reason for these jokes is the fact that during the 1970s and 1980s, the city had its heart torn out as the trading moved up the coast to the massive container ports, while its manufacturing

base crumbled. Unemployment became rife and there was a pressing need to make a little bit extra on the side.

But this is a story with a happy ending. Re-generation money has been pouring in for the last 10 years, employment is back up, and the city has definitely got its swagger back. It's been named European City of Culture for 2008 and the famous seafront has become a UNESCO World Heritage Site. The beautiful Albert Docks house the Tate Liverpool and the Maritime Museum, whilst the centre is shaping up to be one of the quirkiest and most glamorous places in the UK for shopping. Its history and its people mean that Liverpool is, quite simply, an unmissable British adventure.



Leuven It Up...

WHEN I arrived in Leuven at 8 pm the only thing I could see were bicycles. They are everywhere, shooting around and blocking your way.

The second thing I became aware of was the incredible amount of students. It might be nearly 80% of the residents of Leuven. The center itself seems to be the largest bar in Western Europe. Pubs, bars, cafés and restaurants everywhere with... you guessed a lot of bikes and students. It is a very busy town especially in the night. But it is also a very nice and old town which is just waiting to be discovered.

Although the first references to the town can

be traced back as far as the 9th century and in spite of its strategic location on the river Dyle, it was not until around the 11th-12th century that Leuven began to develop as an important trading centre within the Duchy of Brabant. It was at this time that its first town wall, churches, monasteries and abbeys were built.

The town's once flourishing cloth trade had fallen into decline by the 14th century, but a new golden age dawned with the 15th century. The university was founded, various industrial concerns flourished and the main market square with its fine Gothic town hall was laid out.

Its finely sculpted Town Hall and Saint Peter's church with its magnificent interior which is hung with the famous 'Last Supper' by Thierry Bouts, are fine examples of flamboyant Gothic architecture at its best. Dating from the same period are the Cloth Hall, 't Sestich House and many churches, including St Gertrude's with its magnificent choir stalls.

The Baroque style abounds in Leuven, from St Michael's church and the interior of the St John the Baptist's church to the unrivalled stucco of the Park Abbey. Both the Park Abbey and the Arenberg Castle are exciting mixtures of architectural styles.

The town still owes much of its character to the numerous university college buildings dat-

ing from the 16th and 17th centuries, many of which were renovated in the 18th century. The Van Dale College is pure Renaissance style and the College of the Falcon, Pope's College and the Arras College are neo-classical style. Vlierbeek Abbey is a fine example of this trend.

The building of paved roads, the canal in the 18th century and the expansion of the brewery created a great impetus for trade and population growth. Unfortunately, this prosperity came to a sudden end under the reign of Joseph II when the French invaded.

The most significant development for Leuven in the 19th century was the building of the railway station and the construction of Bondgenotenlaan leading to it.

The two World Wars in the 20th century destroyed much of Leuven and a great deal of the reconstruction work lasted well into the nineteen-sixties.

Leuven has developed into a well-equipped,

modern town with a thriving service industry and with a good balance of old and new buildings combining to offer a well-designed infrastructure to suit the demands of today's modern town with a rich tradition.



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