

# The city that changed its spots



The first time I visited Glasgow, I stayed in a youth hostel that was last cleaned when Margaret Thatcher was Prime Minister. There were bed bugs the size of my fist, drunken brawls outside the window that made sleep impossible and a manager whose favourite pastime was drinking copious amounts of whisky and showing unsuspecting female guests what lay beneath his kilt.

Thankfully, the intervening decade has been kind to both my bank account and Scotland's largest city.

"Aye, Glasgow hasn't always enjoyed the best reputation," says the receptionist who checks me in to my spotlessly clean hotel in the upmarket Merchant City, once an area of 18th-century tobacco, cotton and sugar warehouses.

Glasgow used to be known for its slums, gangs and violence. The kind of place where, if you looked at someone the wrong way, they'd smack you in the mouth," she says.

At least I think that's what she says – her accent is so heavy you could lift weights with it.

"Chairs and tables would be chained to the street to avoid theft," she adds, really getting into her stride. "And customers always had to settle the bill before they got their food, because so many people would do a runner without paying. But we've thrown off the mantle of industrial decline to become a dynamic hub of art, theatre and music."

The city's tourist brochures couldn't have put it better. She's right, of course: the

By Sharon Stephenson





Burrell Collection in Pollock Country Park



Kelvingrove Art Gallery & Museum in Kelvingrove Park

regeneration started in 1990, when Glasgow was named the European City of Culture. Since then, whole swathes of this city of around half a million have been whacked with the developer's stick and it's now almost unrecognisable from the dangerous and dirty location of my backpacker days.

So much so that when Brad Pitt's film *World War Z* was filmed in Merchant City last year, they had to import burned-out cars to create an authentic post-apocalyptic feel!

The Commonwealth Games, which are being held in Glasgow in July, have further turbo-charged development in the city. More than 1,000 new hotel rooms are reportedly being built and everywhere you look the city is in the grip of a vast urban renewal. Having once been the Second City of the Empire, there's a feeling that Glasgow is again on the cusp of greatness.

There's probably nowhere better to get a feeling for the contrast between old and new than at the Riverside Museum. Opened in 2011 and named European Museum of the Year 2013, the Riverside has been dubbed 'Glasgow's Guggenheim'. Designed by well known Iraqi architect Zaha Hadid (her first in the United Kingdom), the \$NZ144 million development on the banks of the River Clyde houses Glasgow's transport museum. The show starts as soon as you enter – orange and green trams trundle past, ready to deliver you to the exhibits, including three recreated Glasgow streets from 1895 through to the 1980s, complete with cobblestones, street lamps, a typical Glaswegian pub and a subway train.

There are more than 3,000 objects that showcase Glasgow's past, from the days when there were 50 shipyards in operation (there are now three), including vintage cars, locomotives and even tall ship *The Glenlee* circa 1896 (berthed out the back), a 75-metre-

long vessel that circumnavigated the globe four times. A transport museum isn't the kind of thing that would normally push my buttons, but the Riverside, built on the site of a former shipyard, is as sharp as the edges of its pleated roof – and a fun way to while away an afternoon.

The next morning, a weak sun peeks through the clouds. "This is sunbathing weather for us," says a barista, and I'm pretty sure he's not kidding. So I stroll through beautiful Kelvingrove Park, one of more than 70 parks within the city's boundaries. Set within its grounds is the Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum, a magnificent Victorian sandstone building that features one of the finest civic collections in Europe, including a room of Scottish art, a room of Impressionist works and Renaissance paintings from Italy and Flanders.

By now I'm almost 'arted' out, but I'm determined to make it to the Burrell Collection. Last time I was in Glasgow, a visit to this wonderfully idiosyncratic gallery a few kilometres out of town was derailed by the excellent local pubs. Now, older and wiser, I make it a priority to check out the treasures amassed by shipping magnate Sir William Burrell, including medieval furniture, Chinese porcelain, 13th-century tapestries and artworks by Degas and Renoir. Thankfully the sun stays out, so I'm able to eat lunch in beautiful Pollock Country Park, where the purpose-built gallery is set, and watch the locals enthusiastically bare their pale winter skin to the first rays of spring.

An expat friend I meet for dinner that night tells me I've seen too much of the 'new' Glasgow and recommends a trip to the weekend Barras Market which, like much of its East End neighbourhood, seems to have side-stepped the gentrification process.





The historic Barras Market.

A Glasgow institution, the market was founded by James and Margaret McIver early last century and several of the smaller market halls still bear the McIver name. The name 'barra' comes from the Glaswegian dialect for barrow, a reference to the market's early years, when traders sold their wares from handcarts.

The day I visit it's a sea of plastic blue carry bags and more people buying stuff they don't need than I've ever seen. But there's a lot to choose from: the Barras sells everything from sporrans and fur coats to cell phones and DVDs of dubious origin. It's loud, dirty and the kind of place where you tend to grip your handbag closer to your chest (and then feel bad about it) – but it's loud and fun and the stall-holders are so friendly it's almost unnerving. The market has also moved with the times and the original fruit market has evolved into a farmers' market that sells produce on the more 'exotic' side of the ledger.



Shoppers walking along Buchanan Street in central Glasgow.

There's a much more refined shopping experience to be had downtown. Glasgow has long strived to be the best shopping city in the UK outside London, and all that strategising by the city fathers has paid off. The so-called Style Mile is a square mile in the centre of Glasgow that houses the largest concentration of shops outside London, something the locals are proud of. The area is formed by the Z-shaped pedestrianised route of Argyle, Buchanan and Sauciehall Streets. Princes Square and the Buchanan Galleries are the places to

## Let the Games begin

Glasgow will host the 2014 Commonwealth Games from 23 July to 3 August 2014. The 11 days of competition will be the largest multi-sport event ever held in Scotland, although the country previously hosted the 1970 and 1986 Commonwealth Games in Edinburgh.

Around 6,500 athletes from 71 countries will compete in 17 sports from lawn bowls and wrestling to track events and gymnastics. Most sports will take place on three compact site clusters to the east, south and

west of the city centre, but there are some events that will take place outside the city, including shooting at Carnoustie, diving in Edinburgh and the triathlon in Strathclyde Country Park.

According to the Commonwealth Games Ambassador, Scottish comedian Billy Connolly, the city is ready to party. "Glaswegians are great partakers, support IS our sport!" For more information, visit [www.glasgow2014.com](http://www.glasgow2014.com)



One of the greens that will be used for lawn bowls during the Glasgow 2014 Commonwealth Games. Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum is in the background and the University of Glasgow overlooks the scene.

go for clothes as well as major department stores and upmarket chains, while Merchant City's posh Italian Centre features imported glamour from the likes of Versace and Armani – with price tags to match.

But while Glasgow has managed to shake off the industrial soot and slipped on a sparkling new dress, some things have, thankfully, remained the same. Foremost among those is the great Scottish tradition of haggis. All that

sightseeing can make a girl hungry, and while haggis isn't to everyone's taste, it makes sense to try it where some believe is its home.

Made by simmering a lamb's heart, lung and liver in game stock and then mincing it twice with fresh onions, pinhead oatmeal and spices, haggis is available all over Glasgow. But a local recommended The Bothy, a Scottish eatery in the West End that offers a full Scottish menu and a setting that, as my friend commented, "makes you feel like you've stepped onto the set of *Braveheart*". Haggis here is mainly of the traditional variety, so sadly there's no sign of more recent variants such as haggis pakora, haggis nachos or veggie haggis. But it's fun and, as the setting for my last night in Glasgow, a fitting way to say goodbye to this city that has so successfully reinvented itself. ♣



The 'Big Man Walking' at George Square during the Merchant City Festival.