



# BRUM PUNCH

Birmingham's a big city with a big heart, says Roger Wheeler

The UK has 32 million overseas visitors every year. There must be a reason for them to come here – obviously most head straight for London but a lot go to the UK's second city, Birmingham. A city of a hundred cultures and polyglot nationalities, it has re-invented itself several times in the past 50 years. Today it's an exciting, busy and very gay city.

'liveable city'. It looks quite liveable right now but there is an enormous amount of building going on and no doubt in a few years' time an even newer city will emerge.

You must visit **Symphony Hall** to hear the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra (**CBSO**). This hall, opened in 1991, has, they say, the best acoustics of any concert hall anywhere in the world and I can believe them. Go and book last-minute seats for whatever is on that day. They cost about £10 and it is worth the price just to sit in the hall, but seeing and hearing one of the world's greatest symphony orchestras is amazing as you can quite literally hear a pin drop even with a few thousand people sitting there and a 90-strong orchestra.

Of course, Birmingham has all the problems and issues of any major city. There are the regulation Starbucks and McDonalds on every second corner, but the city centre has not succumbed to the identikit scheme favoured by most other major towns. Yes, I like Birmingham. Even the public loos are good (no, not for what you're thinking – go wash your mind out with soap). The locals seem to be very friendly, except some of the staff in the Tourist Information Centre, who are quite obviously bored answering questions from idiot tourists. Interesting, that.

There are dozens of hotels for all budgets and the gay scene is as good as it gets. There are loads of bars, clubs and saunas in the **Hurst Street** area, just a few minutes' walk from the city centre, and the beer is much cheaper than in Brighton.

The **Bullring shopping centre** underwent a major rebuild some years ago but the old covered markets are still there on the lower Bullring level. And what fantastic markets, with meat and veg at amazing prices. I bought virtually half a Welsh lamb for £14 and enough fresh goat for a curry for four for £2.50.

The city centre exudes confidence; it's a Mecca for the fashionistas and foodies, but get on a bus and travel for ten minutes away from the centre and you will arrive in another world. **Sparkbrook**, for example, the heart of the so-called **Balti Triangle** where you can eat some of the best Indian food anywhere, is also the city's drug hotspot and to the casual observer looks decidedly seedy and down at heel. But that is the situation in all major cities the world over – look away from the glitz and the glamour and you will see the darker side, but of course you don't have to look. It's just there around the corner, but there is nothing the casual tourist can do about inner-city deprivation so maybe it should stay just out of sight.

[www.visitbirmingham.com](http://www.visitbirmingham.com)  
[www.gaybrum.com](http://www.gaybrum.com)  
[www.symphonycity.co.uk](http://www.symphonycity.co.uk)



SYMPHONY HALL

You can eat some of the best food in the UK, certainly the best Indian cuisine outside the Subcontinent. You can shop in hundreds of cutting-edge designer stores, including Harvey Nicks; you could move into Selfridges, where you are in another world. Amazingly as well as the whole floor of food, all the standard designer labels and art exhibitions, you can also get tattooed and pierced in Selfridges! There are five huge shopping malls in the centre of the city – a shopper's nirvana. And yet within minutes you can be in the peaceful waterside area, now called **Westside**. On the **Birmingham and Worcester Canal**, which is the heart of the British Waterways canal network, there are trendy bars and cafes and some of the original pubs that have been there for hundreds of years, selling real ales and excellent pub grub.

Birmingham City Council has embarked upon a 20-year regeneration plan called **Big City Plan** (original title, that), aimed at creating a



CANAL AREA



HURST STREET

VICTORIA SQUARE