

Clockwise from left
 Cardiff Castle
 Wales Millennium Centre, Cardiff Bay
 Millennium Stadium
 Royal Arcade



Cardiff

I thought I knew Cardiff pretty well. I moved here nine years ago, and I definitely consider it to be my home. In true fashion though, when a city becomes your home you kind of take it for granted. You don't really explore what it has to offer – it's just there! So it was fascinating to spend a weekend in Cardiff as a tourist again and re-discover just how great it is.

All the icons are correct and present: the castle, the Millennium Stadium which dominates the central skyline, the neoclassical Civic Centre, the shiny new shopping malls.

Since I'm being a tourist, I start at the top of most visitors' list: Cardiff Castle.

With over 2,000 years of history, it's an incredible mash-up of all the major historical events that have shaped Cardiff, from Roman times, through Norman conquest, to the fabulous wealth that coal brought here.

The 3rd Marquess of Bute was the biggest influence on how the castle looks today. Bute hired the flamboyant (and expensive) designer William Burges to work with him in the design of his living quarters, which reflect their fascination with all things medieval. With Burges's vision and Bute's money, there were no limits to their sumptuous designs.

It's the little details that you remember, though: I particularly liked the little

statues of monkeys reading books, which were apparently Bute's way of mocking Darwin's theory of evolution.

Cardiff itself continues to evolve. The weekend's highlight for me was exploring the independent businesses that are flourishing in the old arcades which intertwined with the more commercial shops. The eclectic shops within each arcade have a real charm about them, from local skate shop City Surf to Spillers Records (opened in 1894 – the oldest record shop in the world). I even took the opportunity to do some research for my wedding in Hubbard's Cupboard in Castle Arcade, which was a bit of a dangerous move with my fiancée with me!

And Cardiff isn't just about the city centre any more: the individual boroughs are emerging strongly and making names for themselves – places like Cathays, Roath, Canton and Pontcanna offer their own high streets by day and an alternative night out for people looking for something a bit different.

A good example of this new generation of pioneers is Simon Thomas, who owns a record shop called Catapult in the Duke Street Arcade. But it's more than that. It's also a record label, and a clothing brand. His latest business is a pop-up restaurant called Chuck's, which shone brightly last summer in an old disused dairy.

Simon, like many of the bright young

independents in Cardiff, is on a mission: to inspire. 'I'm not in it for the money,' he laughs. 'I do it because I want to. I started Chuck's simply because it was the kind of place I wanted to eat. But at the same time a business like mine gives the chance to develop the careers of other Cardiff locals, whether they're musicians on the label or chefs in the kitchen.'

'I'm not against commercial businesses,' says Simon. 'I just want people to have the choice of where they eat and shop – a quality, credible alternative to the mainstream.'

Back at the hotel, I'm thoroughly enjoying my tourist trip to my home town. We're staying at the Park Plaza, a relaxed hotel right in the city centre, with its own spa and health club. After a couple of hours in the steam room and the unique stainless steel pool, I feel like a new man. At least, after the deep tissue massage, I feel like I've got a new pair of shoulders. More than that, I've seen my adopted home city in a whole new light. And it feels really, really good. ■

millenniumstadium.com
cardiffcastle.com
citysurfshops.co.uk
spillersrecords.co.uk
hubbardscupboardonline.co.uk
catapult.co.uk
parkplazacardiff.com



Above Jamie's Italian



Eating out in Cardiff

Cardiff has all the big-name chains like **Jamie's** and **Carluccio's**, as well as a great selection of home-grown independents. **Milgi Lounge** (milgilounge.com) is a perfect example: a vegetarian restaurant on City Road, a mile or so out of town. It has a real community feel, with locally sourced food and a clientele of all different ages and styles, so no one seems out of place. Their cocktails are amazing, especially the Milgi Mojito, made with elderflower and lychee. It's not just a restaurant, either: they hold live music and storytelling evenings in the yurt in the rear garden, and art exhibitions and markets in the lane and garages behind.

Mint & Mustard (mintandmustard.com) has a fantastic reputation locally for its South Indian cuisine, and now I've been there I can see why! You don't just go there to eat; you go there for the complete dining experience.

La Cuina (lacuina.co.uk) is a family-run Catalan place that's a deli by day and a restaurant by night. It's relatively new but already a hotspot with local foodies (it was packed when we visited). Then there's **Torre Coffee**, another family business run by an Italian-Romanian husband and wife team. The cakes are amazing, and they're especially welcoming for families – and it's right opposite Cardiff Castle.

For more information on Swansea and Cardiff visit: visitswanseabay.com and visitcardiff.com



Access all areas

Think that a country known for its coastline and castles might be off limits for wheelchair users?

I'm pretty easy going when it comes to things like this. I always approach accessibility with a 'where there's a will there's a way' attitude.

Over two weekends spent in Swansea and Cardiff I was treated just as any visitor would be – and that's how I like it. I didn't encounter any obstacles in terms of wheelchair access. Both hotels had rooms with plenty of wheeling space and the bathrooms had all the necessary equipment.

Staff at all the restaurants were really accommodating by allocating a table that was easy to get to and making sure a chair was removed to enable me to roll straight in!

I was particularly impressed with Cardiff Castle. It's a Grade I listed building with its origins dating back to Roman times. You don't really expect to be able to access all areas of the castle, but if there's a heritage building demonstrating just what can be achieved with a sincere commitment to accessibility, then Cardiff Castle is it. There were lifts installed to allow wheelchair access not only to the castle tunnels but also to the main rooms of the mansion!

360 Beach & Watersports in Swansea offers genuinely innovative levels of disabled access. Suddenly you've got none of the usual worries: 'How am I going to get changed?' or 'How am I going to go to the toilet?' Using a beach wheelchair eliminates further issues by enabling easy access across the sand and into the sea. It's great to see a visitor attraction offering such levels of inclusivity.

If you're looking to plan a visit to Wales and you need sound advice regarding accessibility matters: visitwales.com/explore/accessible-wales

Above
TV presenter Liam Holt
360 Beach and Watersports, Swansea