

A CITY ON THE RISE

FROM BRUNEL TO BANKSY TO THE REVAMPED HARBOUR AND A THRIVING MUSIC SCENE, THE GRITTY CITY OF BRISTOL IS ON THE UP-AND-UP. **GISELLE WHITEAKER** EXPLORES THE WEST COUNTRY'S CAPITAL.

We're holding first-class tickets on the First Great Western service to Bristol, giving us access to the First Great Western Lounge. Relaxing over coffee while we wait to board, I realise that I have no mental image of England's sixth largest city and the departure point of John Cabot on his way to claiming the title of the first European to land at North America in 1497. Neither my mother, Judy, or I have been there before. That's a good enough reason to go and see what the port city has to offer.

We're pleasantly surprised when the First Great Western train pulls in to Bristol Temple Meads Station. Originally opened in 1840, the majority of this impressive structure is Grade I-listed. Naturally, it's been expanded and refurbished in the intervening years, but the façade continues to reflect the railways' monumental style at the start of the heyday of train travel. It's a fitting introduction to Bristol's collection of architecture, including 51 Grade I-listed buildings, 500 Grade II* and over 3,800 Grade II buildings. The

city even has its own unique architectural style developed in the mid-19th century – Bristol Byzantine – and several hardy examples endure, resisting both the heavy bombing during the Bristol Blitz and the passage of time.

A short bus ride and we're at the revitalised harbour quarter, checking in to The Bristol Hotel. A Doyle Collection Hotel, the four-star establishment is right on the waterfront, in the heart of a thriving restaurant, nightlife and arts scene. A quick coffee in the comfortable lounge and we're ready to start our exploration, orienting ourselves with a stroll around the neighbourhood. We cross Queen Square, where a festival is being set-up, before circling back to the riverfront. On the far side of Pero's Bridge, we amble past many of the city's popular watering holes, detouring into Millennium Square, dotted with recycled-art projects including a massive whale sculpture made of willow and 70,000 plastic bottles, designed to mark the city's status as recipient of the 2015 European Green Capital Award.

Back on the riverbank, we catch a glimpse of Brunel's *SS Great Britain* across the water's expanse, the masts of the former passenger steamship, the first iron steamer to cross the Atlantic, belying its location. We continue along the walking path around the harbour and stumble across a work of Banksy's, the 2014 *Girl with the Pierced Eardrum*. It's oddly beautiful in its back alley location and inspires us to seek out more of the street artist's work, in what is widely believed to be his home town. Circling around the Cumberland Basin more artistry is visible, this time in the form of a horizon of brightly coloured Victorian terraced houses lined up on the hill overlooking the river in the suburb of Totterdown.

Eventually, we reach the gates protecting the *SS Great Britain*, now closed for the night. Paying 80 pence to skip back across the waterway, we pop in to Brigstow Lounge, a relative newcomer to Bristol's dining scene. It's relaxed and friendly and the contemporary dishes are beautifully presented, simple, yet exquisitely flavoured. It's rare to find food this good by chance. After licking the final smears of the stewed rhubarb and chocolate mousse dessert from our spoons, we depart for the brief walk back to The Bristol Hotel, with shared smiles at our serendipity.

After a comfortable night's sleep, a quick gym workout, and a filling breakfast, we're ready to explore the city further. The weather is not playing along. The skies are grey and rain is bucketing down, washing the streets and those who dare walk them. Undeterred, we borrow enormous umbrellas from The Bristol Hotel's reception desk and splash through the puddles on a self-guided tour of Banksy's street art.

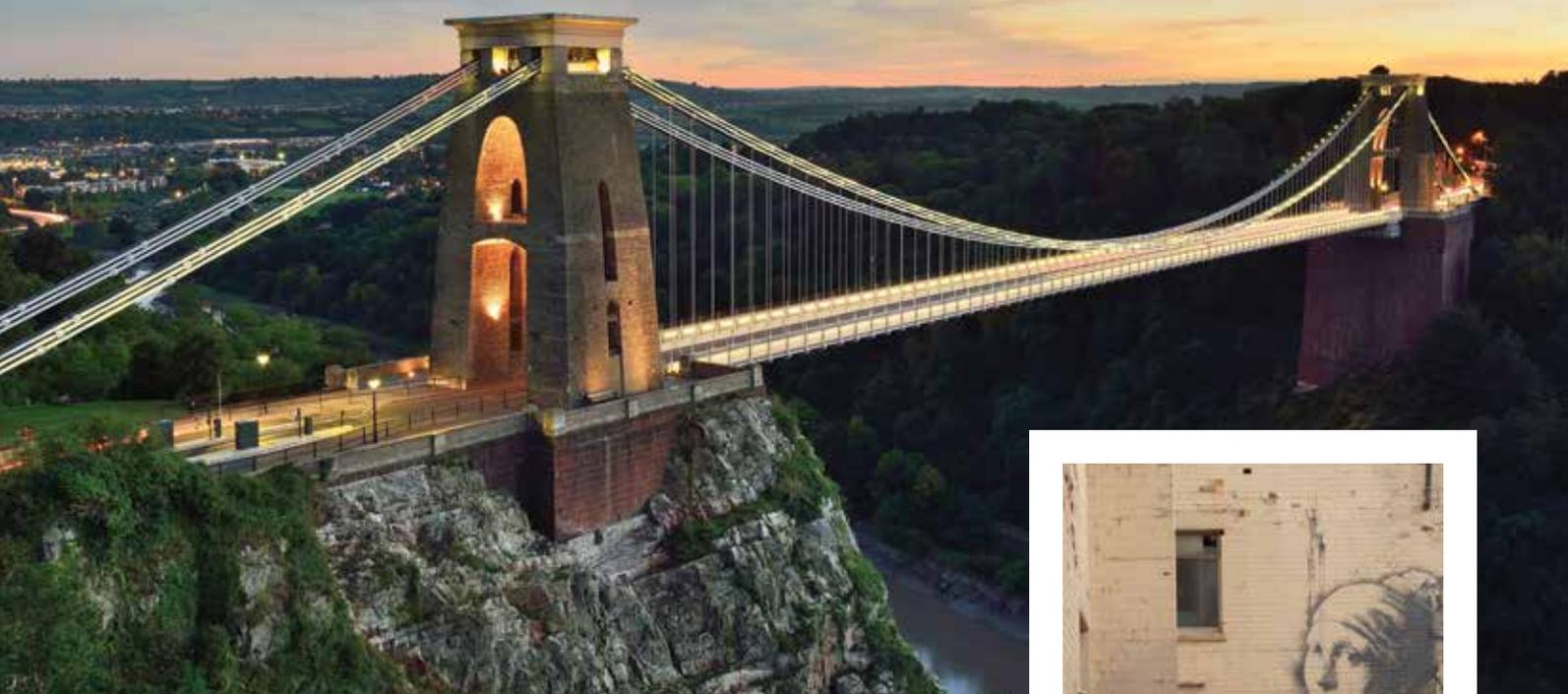
Banksy's infamous *The Grim Reaper*, was originally painted on the side of the Thekla Social boat moored in Bristol harbour. Now, to protect it from wear and tear, it is housed in M Shed, as is a fascinating collection of 3,000 eclectic artefacts that tell an insider history of Bristol. It's minutes away from The Bristol Hotel, but our toes are already damp by the time we enter the former dockside transit shed. We're aiming to find *The Grim Reaper* and depart, but we get sidetracked – it's that kind of place. It takes quite some time for us to re-emerge in readiness for our next work of art.

We swing by the immense Bristol Cathedral on our way to *Well Hung Lover*. Painted on the side of a red-brick building visible from Park Street, the piece depicts a naked man hanging out of a window, escaping his lover's suspicious husband. The site is surrounded by funky vintage boutiques and cafes and the Bristol Guild of Applied

Above far left: Bristol Cathedral.
Above left: The colourful houses of Totterdown.
Above: Street art.



Far left: The comfort of the Bristol Hotel.
Left: The Bristol Hotel's River Grill & Lounge.



Art, a store primed for browsing, with objects ranging from food to homewares to artwork displayed over its three floors.

Further up the road is the Bristol Museum and Art Gallery. Banksy's *Paint Pot Angel*, a statue of an angel with a pink paint tin upended on her head, was placed in the front hall of the museum for the 2009 'Banksy versus the Bristol Museum' exhibition. The exhibition is long gone, but the angel remains, underneath a Bristol Biplane replica hanging from the ceiling that was made in 1963 for the film *Those Magnificent Men in their Flying Machines*.

Our next target is Stokes Croft, an area known for its plethora of street art. Here our navigation skills fail, leading us through a few leafy suburbs on an extended route, before we are faced with *The Mild, Mild West*. This Banksy piece depicts a huge, smiling teddy bear with a Molotov cocktail in his paw, facing three policemen holding up riot shields. There are plenty of up-and-coming graffiti artists at work in this neighbourhood, too. Murals adorn many a wall and doorway, making it a riot of colour.

Feeling somewhat soggy from the non-stop rain, we stroll through a shopping district on our way back to the The Bristol Hotel, ducking in and out of high-street style stores. A quick change of clothes and we rush back into the streets, the rain now a drizzle, to Tobacco Factory Theatres. As the name suggests, this former tobacco factory, built between the late 19th and early 20th century, is now home to two intimate theatres and a jam-packed programme of diverse shows, workshops and events. We score tickets to a double act of comedy and spend the evening giggling. It's a lovely end to the day.

By morning, the rain has cleared. There are blue skies overhead and the sun is drying the last of the sidewalk swimming holes. We have just enough time to swing by the Clifton Suspension Bridge, a Grade I-structure that spans the picturesque Avon Gorge. There's something awe-inspiring about this engineering marvel and we could easily spend longer here, but we have a train to catch.

There's so much more to Bristol than meets the eye. We've barely scratched the surface of the city that spawned Portishead, Tricky, Massive Attack, and Wallace and Gromit. There are boat tours, art galleries and entire districts to be discovered. Just like the sun, Bristol is rising, and it's a sight worth seeing. ■

Above: Clifton Suspension Bridge.
 Right: *The Girl with the Pierced Eardrum*.
 Below: *The Grim Reaper*.
 Bottom: *Well Hung Lover*.



The Bristol Hotel is in an ideal base for exploring Bristol.
 For more details, or to book, see www.doylecollection.com.
 For train services to Bristol see: www.firstgreatwestern.co.uk