

Stoke-on-Trent: A City That Fires The Imagination

As home to the world's greatest pottery manufacturers, the City of Stoke-on-Trent not only possesses a unique history and heritage, but has also entered the 21st century fully equipped to entertain almost four million visitors a year.

Affectionately known throughout the world simply as 'The Potteries', this great British city has rightfully earned a reputation for firing the imagination of its visitors.

World famous names such as Wedgwood, Moorcroft and Portmeirion are responsible for attracting huge numbers of visitors into the city. But even if factory visits, and the opportunity to purchase some of the finest pottery and bone china in the world, *are* the major reasons for wanting to visit The Potteries, it is still worthwhile delving a little deeper to discover what else there is on offer. For these days, Stoke-on-Trent can lay claim to a great deal more than the fine china which has brought it such international acclaim....

Situated within an hour's drive of Birmingham, Manchester and East Midlands airports, Stoke-on-Trent itself is conveniently located in the 'Heart of England', and offers easy access by road and rail. The journey from central London, for example, takes only one-and-a-half hours - making it possible to visit The Potteries in a day. In common with most other leading cities in Britain, however, one day is never long enough.

The history and heritage of the area is well preserved at numerous locations across the city - most notably at the award-winning Gladstone Pottery Museum, the most complete Victorian pottery factory in the UK which, more recently, opened a new and permanent 'tribute to the toilet', called Flushed with Pride.

Elsewhere, the Potteries Museum and Art Gallery houses the finest collection of Staffordshire ceramics in the world; and most present-day visitors are also impressed by the wide range of attractions and activities now on offer in and around the city - which is within easy reach of the wide open spaces of the Peak District, and the UK's No.1 visitor attraction, Alton Towers.

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But the major reason for visiting Stoke-on-Trent are undoubtedly the potteries themselves.

The only region of Britain named after its main industry, 'The Potteries' owes an enormous debt not only to the skills of Messrs. Wedgwood, Spode and Doulton, but also to the literary genius of Arnold Bennett. For it is Bennett who has perhaps best illustrated the enormous debt which Britain, in turn, owes to The Potteries. "You cannot drink tea out of a tea-cup without the aid of the Five Towns, you cannot eat a meal in decency without the aid of the Five Towns," observed Bennett in his classic novel *The Old Wives Tale*.

The Potteries' very own shopping opportunity, dubbed the 'China Experience' features a remarkable array of factory shops, selling everything imaginable - from fine china dinner services, intricate figurines, table and cookware, to mugs, tiles, jugs and jewellery. Better still, all of the famous names are featured on the shopping list. Add to this all of the major high street stores in the City Centre, and it is easy to understand why the City of Stoke-on-Trent has become one of the UK's leading destinations for shoppers - *and* their flexible friends.

The Stoke-on-Trent Ceramics Festival, meanwhile, is to become an *international* event in 2009, and will be called British Ceramics Biennial. Already recognised as a showcase event for contemporary lifestyle ceramics, it will feature designers, cutting-edge studio potters, experts, and celebrities from around the globe, and will also draw large numbers of collectors and members of the general public into "The Potteries" in **October, 2009**.

In 2001, Wedgwood opened a new £4.5-million visitor centre, featuring a new interactive tour, restaurant and shop. The centre also offers visitors the chance to see the full production process; to see master craftsmen at work in the demonstration area; and – arguably, best of all - to 'have a go' themselves. A £5.8-million grant by the Heritage Lottery Fund meanwhile, sees the opening of a new £10-million Wedgwood Museum this October.

Hard on the heels of the opening of the new Museum, Wedgwood will offer yet another reason for visiting The Potteries **throughout 2009**, as the company celebrates its 250th anniversary. A host of special events and exhibitions is planned to mark the year; and full details will be launched soon.

Another, 'hands-on' opportunity for visitors to the city is available at both the homes of Royal Stafford and Bridgewater Pottery. Best described as "D.I.Y. on a plate", the Royal Stafford Ceramic Café and Bridgewater Pottery Café both allow visitors to paint their own designs on

cups, saucers and plates, and to therefore return home with an original souvenir from The Potteries.

But that's not all. As tourism officials are quick to point out, the dramatic changes to Stoke-on-Trent's image, and skyline, which have taken place in recent years are simply the early stages in a period of transformation for the whole of the city.

Millions of pounds, for example, have been spent on creating a 'Cultural Quarter' in the city centre. This includes the 'rebirth' of the Regent Theatre (capable of staging major West End productions); the refurbishment of the famous concert venue, the Victoria Hall; and the complete regeneration of a quiet corner of the city centre into a cosmopolitan quarter.

Add to this the other family attractions of Waterworld, the UK's No.1 water-park, and the Stoke Ski centre and you'll *begin* to understand why around four million visitors a year arrive in this city. But then just consider the development of Trentham (formerly 'Trentham Gardens'), which began in 2004 and which, when complete, will feature two new hotels (one of which is already open) alongside its host of other leisure and retail facilities.

The £17-million being spent on revitalising the 30-acre Victorian gardens there is merely one 'small' part of an overall spend of £100-million to create one of the leading 21st century visitor destinations in Europe.

This particular corner of Stoke-on-Trent, in Staffordshire, is also now 'home' to around 140 Barbary Macaques, who are now happily welcoming visitors into their supervised enclosure of The Trentham Monkey Forest. Brought to Trentham from similar forests in France and Germany, which have been run by the de Turkheim family for the past 30 years, the monkeys are part of an endangered species, and are being cared for by a team of 50 workers and volunteers including qualified zoologists.

Copies of all tourism literature, listing accommodation, attractions, factory shops and museums in The Potteries, are available free of charge by contacting Stoke-on-Trent Tourist Information Centre, Victoria Hall, Cultural Quarter, Stoke-on-Trent City Centre, ST1 3AD. (Tel: 01782-236000). E-mail stoke.tic@stoke.gov.uk. For further details, log on to www.visitstoke.co.uk.

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