

ENGLAND URBAN

The £50 challenge

Can you enjoy a weekend away without blowing the budget on food and drink? We've challenged two people to find out if they can eat and drink on £50 a head

Fiona Sims hits Bristol

The pastry is crisp, the filling creamy and the top perfectly caramelised. I'm talking *pastel de nata*, Portugal's flagship custard tart, and I'm munching the best I've ever tasted in St Nicholas Market, in Bristol. This is a very good start. But then I knew I was in for a treat with Bristol. The city, which has just been voted Britain's most environmentally sustainable, knows how to eat. From its artisan breadmakers to its perfectionist deli owners, scoffing culture is strong here. My food-obsessed friends who live here reckoned eating well on a budget would be a doddle and directed us to St Nick's, as the locals call it. Located in the old Corn Exchange in the city centre on Corn Street (open Mon-Sat, 9.30pm-5pm), it's a bustling mix of boho clothing, jewellery and second-hand books, mixed up with colourful food stalls. The biggest queues were at the Bristol Sausage Shop and at Taste @ St Nicks but we chose the Portuguese Taster on the strength of that tart.

Chef Maria wakes early every day to make the tarts, along with Algarve speciality fig and almond cookies. I choose her meatballs, which come in a rich tomato and onion sauce served with sautéed potatoes and salad (£4), munched at a white Formica counter next to her little kitchen, decked out in the old country's trademark blue tiles and painted plates.

Before we leave St Nick's, I buy a slab of Gorwydd caerphilly from the Trethowan Dairy Shop next door, but can't resist the smell of melting cheese emanating from its cooking station alongside, where you'll find the best toasted cheese sandwich you'll ever eat (£3.50), and English raclette (£4), served over boiled potatoes and gerkins, which we share guiltily.

That evening, we head to Clifton, which looms above the city centre with its elegant Georgian terraces, and which we are told has a great neighbourhood vibe. You've got two options for eating dinner well and cheaply in Bristol: Indian vegetarian or Indian vegetarian. Actually there are a whole host of BYOB restaurants in the city that offer cheap dining, but we decide on Tiffins. It's basically a Gujerati take-away with two brightly lit trestle tables (open 12noon-9pm), but it has a licence, and the food sounds great.

Owners Nick and Jay Jethwa opened in 2003 and have built up a loyal following for their authentic, home-cooked, mostly vegetarian curries. I loved the khichadi, made with split green lentils and rice, and the kadhi soup with yoghurt, along with chickpeas in tamarind, and toor dhal made with peanut and coconut. Their coriander, chilli and coconut chutney is worth the trip to Bristol alone, so is Jan's nut and saffron kulfi. Our bill? £20 for two.

The next morning the sun was out so we headed to the terrace of Bordeaux Quay for breakfast. Opened by award-winning eco-chef Barny Haughton in 2006, it sources pretty much everything locally. We tried delicious Somerset bangers and eggs with local mushrooms and West Country black pudding, hash browns and homemade toasted bread (£9), and light fluffy cinnamon pancakes with apple, crème fraiche and maple syrup (£5).

We had the budget left, but there wasn't much room for lunch before heading home, so after cruising Bristol's swanky new Cabot Circus shopping centre, we stopped to share a ploughman's at Chandos Deli, served with perfectly ripened locally made cheeses, tangy Bath Ale chutney and a light rye sourdough (£10.50). Bristolians really know how to eat, I'm telling you.

HIP HOTEL: HOTEL DU VIN & BISTRO, BRISTOL

Housed in a grade II-listed converted sugar refinery, the hotel, part of a 14-strong chain, is stylish, friendly and buzzy. The industrial-chic bedrooms come with generous bathrooms, complete with free-standing tubs and huge showers. The bistro is decent, too, with an enviable wine list. Until 31 March get dinner, bed & breakfast for £129 for two (subject to availability). 0117 925 5577; hotelduvin.com



St Nicholas market: The Portuguese Taster, Taste @ St Nick's, Trethowan Dairy. The Jethwas at Tiffin in Clifton

WEEKEND FOOD BILL

Lunch £4
 Tea and biscuits £4
 Dinner (with two beers) £15
 Breakfast £10
 Lunch (including glass of wine) £12
 Afternoon hot choc £3
TOTAL £48





Helen Ochyra tries Leicester

For me, sticking to a budget means dealing in cash, so arriving at Leicester station on Saturday morning, I draw out five crisp tenners from the cashpoint. Stashing my limited assets, I make my way to Leicester's 700-year-old market to pick up a picnic lunch.

The market is buzzing. In one particularly lively area, fruit and veg stalls jostle for position, their produce arranged in bowls, each one £1. Seeing an opportunity, I buy a bowl of locally grown apples and one of perhaps not-so-locally produced grapes.

Next stop is Sherwin's Cheese Bar where a steak pie is just 90p. I get slightly carried away when stall owner Alison points out the local cheeses, plumping for some Sparkenhov farmhouse leicester from nearby Market Bosworth and, of course, some stilton.

In the town hall square, I unwrap my market-fresh picnic and tuck in. It's delicious but after a few minutes I realise those cafe overheads are easy to say goodbye to financially, but hard to go without when it comes to the English weather. In need of some central heating, I relent to the pull of Café Dido on Loseby Lane to enjoy a pot of earl grey and a slice of chocolate cake.

Saturday night finds me in the city's slickest restaurant, Maiyango, cocktail menu in hand. With some quick calculations I work out that a cocktail won't break the bank and order a winter mojito. Sweet and syrupy, it's worth every penny of its £6.20 price tag.

The trick to eating well on a budget is to steer away from meat, and Maiyango's cheapest dishes are all vegetarian. The cream of the crop is the "vegetarian inspiration", a creation by head chef, Phillip Sharpe. Unsure what to expect, I'm far from disappointed when not one, but four, small dishes arrive arranged beautifully on a chunky china plate. The beetroot and shallot tarte tatin is deliciously sharp, the goat's cheese croquette unctuously rich, and the Thai-spiced vegetables packed with flavour. However it's the root vegetable dauphinois that is substantial enough to ensure I won't be going to bed hungry. I can't afford dessert but then I don't really need it, especially as the bill (which eats up half my budget) arrives with a side of gooey truffles.

Sunday morning dawns and I'm down to my last two tenners. Fortunately Leicester is home to the fabulous Dos Hermanos, a renowned brunch spot on suburban Queens Road, where a "half monty" fry-up is just £3.95. Expecting a greasy spoon, Dos Hermanos is a revelation - every detail in its Cuban-themed interior has been considered, from the ornate tiled walls to the original advertising posters. The food shows the same care and attention. My half monty includes locally reared pork, homemade ketchup and delicious handmade hash browns. Owners, brothers Jhan and Anwar, are passionate about their city, sourcing everything they can from the area, and both are often found here chatting to the regulars. It's a wrench to leave, and walking back to the city I realise I'm down to my last tenner.

Budget firmly in mind, my final stop is Feast India. Just outside the city centre, this budget restaurant is packed with local families filling up on its buffet. Just £8.95 buys you all the dhal, saag and lamb rogan josh you can manage, but I'm scuppered at the finish line because tap water is not available. Handing over £2.50 for a bottle of water, I console myself with far too many marshmallows from the dessert table - I may be £1.88 over budget, but I'm certainly not hungry.

WEEKEND FOOD BILL	
Lunch	£6.48
Tea and cake	£3.40
Dinner (with one cocktail)	£23
Breakfast	£6
Lunch	£13
TOTAL	£51.88



Leicester's fruit and veg market, Maiyango for cocktails and dinner, Dos Hermanos for brunch

HIP HOTEL: HOTEL MAIYANGO, LEICESTER

Opened in November 2007 as an extension to the already successful Maiyango restaurant, Leicester's first boutique hotel is a haven of tranquillity. Laid out over two floors of an old shoe factory, the 14 elegantly modern rooms are equipped with large, stylish bathrooms and every possible accoutrement from flatscreen TV to pillow menu. Superior £135 per room per night. 0116 251 8898; maiyango.com, goleicestershire.com

Four different cities, four different culinary hotspots: where to go for what

BEST PLACE FOR CURRY Birmingham

Ever since Jabbar Khan opened Lasan (3-4 Dakota Buildings, James Street, 0121-212 3664) six years ago, Birmingham has been building up a fine reputation for even finer Indian food. Try the Doi Maich - pan-fried black bream cooked in a coriander-flavoured

yoghurt curry with mustard seeds and fresh curry leaves.

BEST PLACE FOR CHINESE Manchester

Since opening in 1977 in Manchester's China Town, Yang Sing (34 Princess Street, 0161-236 2200) is as popular as ever, and one of many great places to eat good Chinese here. Think

1930s Shanghai as you sit on brown leather chairs, using sleek, black chopsticks to munch one of 60 different dim sum, or try steamed scallops with green bean vermicelli topped with garlic.

BEST PLACE FOR JAPANESE London

There are now great

Japanese restaurants popping up all over the country, such is our appetite for this particularly healthy and thrilling cuisine, but London beats them all, from taxi-driver hangout Kikuchi (14 Hanway Street, 020-7637 7720), tucked behind Oxford Street - the sushi is the best-value, the fish spankily fresh

- to swanky Zuma in Knightsbridge, which puts a spin on the traditional with great effect.

BEST PLACE FOR BISTRO Liverpool

The Merseyside city doesn't do posh. But good casual dining it has aplenty, making great use of the surrounding area's stunning produce,

from Bowland Forest beef to Rhug Estate salt marsh lamb. Side Door (29a Hope Street, 0151-707 7888) is a good place to start, with its geranium-filled window boxes and bare brick walls. Start with a fresh-tasting pea, mint and lettuce soup, followed by tender chargrilled swordfish with spinach and teriyaki noodles.