



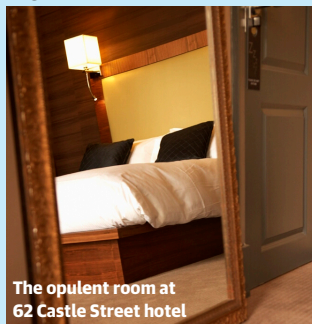
# Well-heeled city

Looking for an exciting city break with flair, elegance and just a touch of luxury? Liverpool has all you need for a chic weekend, as Helen Ochyra discovers

As Liverpool was announced Capital of Culture 2008 the discreet coughs emanating from down south were almost audible, punctuated with the occasional disbelieving, under-the-breath “Liverpool?”

So disembarking at Lime Street station I’m not too sure what to expect from this city more often associated with the Beatles and football, than with high art and cultural exploration.

But there’s a distinct buzz in the air as we leave the station and head for our accommodation, the 62 Castle Street hotel. Housed in a stunning 19th-century bank adorned with marble pillars and high, ornate ceilings, the atmosphere here is one of tranquillity and luxury. Our lavish room is decorated in toning autumnal hues, and equipped with every possible flashy accoutrement from an iPod dock to a supersized flatscreen Philips TV. The copy of Vogue on the table says it all: this is elegance at its salubrious best.



The opulent room at 62 Castle Street hotel

**Accessible art**  
FACT is an ultramodern multi-disciplinary arts centre. Situated in Wood Street among the shops and bars, this creative nucleus attracts all comers with its Fairtrade-stocked, wireless internet-enabled cafe, and wide variety of engaging exhibitions and events. Throughout 2008 the Human Futures series astounds and beguiles in its exploration of where human beings are heading.

In here, they mostly seem to be heading upstairs, to the stylish bar and three cinema screens showing an enticing selection of art house classics and bang up to date thought provokers.

Practically next door is the Open Eye photographic gallery, a simple space which houses innovative photography: the kind which makes you stop and stare, sometimes head-inclined, brow-furrowed, but often wide-eyed and wonder-struck.

**A night on the town**

The bar at the hotel, Room, is so inviting it calls us in against our will. Well, against our schedule anyway. With stunning domed ceiling and ornate stonework, the historic architecture of this reincarnated bank sets off the sparkling modern fittings perfectly. Sitting in an enveloping red heart-shaped chair, and sipping a delicious Polotini cocktail of Snow Leopard vodka and polo mint, I realise I could get used to a life of



## Our lavish room is equipped with every possible flashy accoutrement

sophisticated style.

With dinner reservations fast approaching, we walk to Ziba, a modern restaurant housed in the stately Racquet Club. In here it is all heavy white napkins, novel-length wine lists and faultless service. I can’t quite decide if it’s traditional or a tad suffocating to be sat in the bar to order our wine and starters, but the calm atmosphere and fantastic bottle of Western Australia Peppertree Shiraz make me forget all that, sit back and enjoy.

It would be hard not to when the food is this good. The specials menu yields treats including a delicious curried sweet potato soup and a succulent roast

rump of lamb, while the mouth-watering slow roast cinnamon and orange Goosnargh duck breast would satisfy even the fiercest of foodies. Finishing off with a rich dark chocolate tart, I leave a generous tip and still the bill barely reaches half what it would in London.

To toast this new-found foodie gem we head to Korova, a cutting-edge, music-focused bar with a unique atmosphere. Its popularity has made seating scarce so after one drink we move on to Chaya with its dark wood decor, luxuriously long, white bar and booth-like tables, where we regroup with delicious bellinis behind bamboo curtains.

Ready to dance we join the queue at Alma de Cuba where a carnival appears to be in full swing. There’s a crush at the bar so we take advantage of the convenient table service. This was once St Peter’s Catholic church and the Madonna images, stained glass windows and



Clockwise from left: the stylish Room bar at 62 Castle Street hotel; music lover’s mecca, Korova; dancing the night away at vibrant Alma de Cuba



ecclesiastical stonework remain, although I think the woman dancing in a red headdress and bikini may be a new addition.

**City strolling**

Feeling lazy, we call reception this morning requesting breakfast in the room. Within minutes a full English fry-up and plate of thick pancakes with blackberries, strawberries and maple syrup arrive. After such a feast the leap from fluffy white bathrobe and slippers to check out is a far easier one.

A relaxed morning walk leads to new discoveries. The city’s dominating landmark is its 20th-century red-stone Cathedral, but this may soon be dwarfed by something even more imposing. The Liverpool One development covers over 42 acres and promises a new place of worship for the city’s devotees of shopping from May.

In the meantime there’s the Met Quarter (see Shopping

## SHOWCASING THE REGION

Liverpool may be taking centre stage in 2008, but that doesn’t stop the rest of the northwest from getting in on the act with some world-class events

**CHESHIRE YEAR OF GARDENS**

Home to some of the UK’s most elegant stately homes and gardens, Cheshire is the natural choice for a celebration of all things horticultural. This year also sees the first ever Tatton Park Biennial (May 3-Sept 28), which features specially commissioned works of contemporary sculpture.

**TASTE LANCASHIRE**

The area that brought you black pudding, Goosnargh duck and potted shrimp is rediscovering its culinary heritage with a year-long celebration of local produce. There’ll be plenty to get your taste buds tingling, including the Taste Lancashire festival (April 5-6), a must for all foodies.

**LAKE DISTRICT AND CUMBRIA YEAR OF ADVENTURE**

Get a buzz from the great range of adventurous activities offered by the Lake District’s magnificent mountain scenery. Visitors can feel the rush at the Keswick Mountain Festival (May 14-18), or at WOW, Windermere’s water-based festival of activities and entertainment (June 8-10).

**MANCHESTER WORLD SPORT**

Expect fun and games as Manchester puts on an action-packed year of sporting events. From the FINA World Swimming Championships (April 9-13) to the UEFA Cup Final (May 14) there’ll be plenty to cheer at all year.



Clockwise from top left: captivating art at the Niki de Saint Phalle exhibition; Visible Virals at Met Quarter; Geisha bar

Scouse-style box) where the Visible Virals art project has sited one of its first pieces: a set of gold scales which can tell you if you weigh as much as the potatoes a family eats in a year, or the bananas a person eats in 10. Fascinating and accessible, this is art for the masses.

Having worked up an appetite, we head for Sunday lunch at Simply Heathcotes. The £18 three-course menu is more of a bargain than you might expect from a place with Heathcotes' elegant sloping glass frontage, and the tasty broccoli soup, filling roast sirloin of beef and lovely sticky ginger pudding threaten to bring on an afternoon nap.

**Stunning sights**

The largest modern art gallery outside London, Tate Liverpool may be 20 years old this year but it's still as fresh as a daisy.

Niki de Saint Phalle's first UK exhibition is here until May 5. This vivid, engaging artistic compendium showcases everything from almost-childlike assemblage to near-autobiographical film, as well as Niki's famous shooting paintings: canvases which she underlaid

with pouches of paint, then shot at to release a riot of colour.

The ongoing Twentieth Century exhibition is just as captivating. If you're a little hazy on 20th-century art this is the place to familiarise yourself, with everyone from Andy Warhol to Pablo Picasso represented.

After this artistic feast, I head to airline themed bar PanAm to digest what I've seen over a fruity Panamopolitan and stunning views of the sunset over Albert Dock. If it wasn't for the instantly recognisable Liver Building, a snapshot of this view could easily be mistaken for Barcelona or New York. Liverpool looks beautiful from here.



Grade I-listed architecture and styishi cocktails await at PanAm

**Exotic nightlife**

Liverpool's cultural quarter centres around Hope Street, making the chic Hope Street hotel the perfect place to stay for maximum cultural exposure. Housed in a Venetian palazzo-style 19th-century warehouse, the building was semi-derelict before its rescue in 1998 when it became the modern, comfortable hotel it is today. The rooms are small but perfectly formed, with all mod cons from under floor heating to luxurious REN toiletries.

But perhaps the best reason to visit is the London Carriage Works restaurant, unofficially considered to be Liverpool's best eatery. The sleek interior design, with sculpted glass floor-to-ceiling dividers, bare brick walls, and wooden floorboards complements the modern food. Every dish feels like a labour of love: the Duroc iron age pork is a rare breed which hails from the Rhug estate in north Wales, the seasonal vegetables are grown at Claremont Farm on the Wirral, and the daily fish special depends on the local catch of the day.

Everything is excellent, especially the deliciously succulent pan-fried fillet of

halibut, and the spoon-lickingly fabulous chocolate fondant. With friendly, relaxed service to top it all off, this is a restaurant to travel out of your way for.

Back out on Hope Street, people are pouring out of the theatres, noisily dissecting the latest concert at the lively Philharmonic, or waxing lyrical about the ambience at the Everyman. Liverpool certainly is ever surprising. With culture around every corner, you could easily mistake this fascinating city for many a better known cultural icon.

The atmosphere is just as electric at nearby Geisha, a new addition to the Liverpool after-hours scene, which invites you to "eatdrinkfoodclub" in funky eastern-inspired surroundings. Video footage of a woman's face blinks and twitches on the walls and staff are swathed in gold Japanese-style dresses. It's the perfect place to enjoy exotic cocktails like the Lychee Collins:

**After this artistic feast, I head to PanAm to digest what I've seen over a fruity Panamopolitan**

fresh lychees muddled with lemon juice and sugar shaken with sloe gin. Heaven.

Checking out the next morning I learn that the hotel is expanding, opening 41 new rooms as well as its own gym and treatment centre in October. This seems indicative of the whole city: it's all happening here. So, Liverpool-doubters take note: this is a city on the up. And one which will remain home to an abundance of culture and style.

**Shopping Scouse-style**

**Who needs Oxford Street or Fifth Avenue when you've got Liverpool? For a weekend of credit card flexing, look no further than this northern star**

Looking for an original artwork or piece of one-off clothing? Grand Central Hall on Renshaw Street is packed to bursting with lively shops selling a range of quirky products. Visit Eye Candy on the first floor for handmade bags and pop art prints. Conceived during the heady days of a music festival, then "organically grown" by owner John Paul, this is shopping at its most idiosyncratic.

More a follower of fashion? Then head to the city centre's Cavern Walks: home to classic Vivienne Westwood and rising star Cricket. Allegedly to be keeping the wags in designer gear, Cricket's zebra print bag has become the latest must-have accessory on the Liverpoolian high street.

**Handbags at dawn**

Scouse shopaholics are counting down the days to the opening of the much-anticipated Liverpool One. Bringing 3,000 extra parking

spaces, over 160 new stores and the opportunity to shop until 8pm, this is sure to be an enticing shoppers playground once it opens on May 29.

In preparation, warm up your credit cards at the spacious, modern Met Quarter, home to over 30 high street favourites, from Armani Exchange to Whistles, or the central Bold Street where you can buy and sell music at Hairy Records or dive into a book at News from Nowhere.

Literary minds will also love the Amorous Cat bookshop on Lark Lane, which holds its own writers club each Wednesday. This suburban street is also home to a lineup of little gems like the Serendipity boutique, and plays host to a farmers' market on the fourth Saturday of every month.

Make your last stop the Albert Dock for a spot of Liverpoolian memorabilia hunting, some gadget coveting at the Apple Store, or a cultural purchase at the Tate. Wallets at the ready.



Take flight from the mundane at the unconventional Grand Central Hall