



Members of the band, seventies vinyl and a walrus. Does it get any cooler than this?

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Now I could be wrong but was that Noel Gallagher I just saw mooching into Vinyl Exchange or Eastern Bloc or That Beatin Rhythm or any of the vintage music and clothes meccas in Manchester? Could have been, as everyone in Manchester is in a band who are going to be the next big thing. The small matter of The Beatles aside, Manchester reckons that, from The Hollies to The Smiths to New Order to Oasis, they are the cocks of the North. The vibrant indie scene here is throwing up more bands than you could fit in the Oz arena (wherever that is) And all these icily cool trend setters and their fans have to shop somewhere. So where?

In the smart new Harvey Nicks or the achingly stylish boutiques of King Street? No, you'll find them in the Northern Quarter .

The Northern Quarter is actually in the heart of the city, but somehow miraculously escaped the zeal of the town-planners and managed to survive with its old eccentric little street grid intact. You know that line 'build it and they will come?' Well the Northern Quarter experienced the opposite. Nobody wanted to develop it. So, perversely, people came. Creative people who wanted to be in town but without shelling out the rent in the more chi-chi addresses. Galleries, ditto. And, amazingly, the odd deli. Or to put it another way, an amazing deli. (you'll have to find it for yourself).

What isn't a secret is Afflecks, which is the hub of the Northern Quarter; for generations they have come to Afflecks, part Aladdins cave, part cultural icon that attracts shoppers from across the Northwest. Inside, there's floor after floor with warrens of stalls, cubby holes and counters offering not only clothes but tattooing, hairstyling, jewellery and ceramics. It's a must-visit destination for retro fashionistas. In fact one stall was displaying what bore an uncanny resemblance to the entire contents of my seventies wardrobe. Mentioning this to the guy operating the till, who turned out to be the owner, he laughed and said you could get anything you want at Afflecks. It's a bit of a launch pad for fledgling designers to try out ideas and for the more adventurous souls to find experimental fashion. Without, it has to be said, the pretentious price tags.

The Market Restaurant where I grabbed some lunch has taken unpretentiousness to delicious and sublime levels. A Northern Quarter landmark way before they were calling it the Northern Quarter, it's small, friendly, cosy and homely. But oh, the food. The Executive Cheese On Toast may have vanished (Bring it back, go on!) but the Cheesecake is still, as they say, "to die for". Most patrons were settling in for a long afternoon, but I wanted to get back on the streets where at almost every turn there are all kinds of sculptures, pictures and other little artworks, freestanding or set into buildings. Tib Street and the little labyrinth of streets around it, being one of the most fascinating. None of your chain store multiples.



“ This is shopping’s equivalent of ‘indie music’. Clothes, accessories, vinyl – and some rather more unconventional goods. And since you ask, the odd bar. One of them, wait for it, called the Odd Bar. ”

Very aptly named. I think ‘free spirited’ is as close as I can get to a description. They don’t take themselves too seriously and it’s a fun place to drink with fantastic background music. It claims to have the most massive offering of drinks from around the world, has a giant cinema screen downstairs, and will lend you a brolly if it’s raining. Fortunately, I didn’t need one as I strolled off to get my head down for the night at Staying Cool. Not a hotel, but Manchester’s only officially five star rated serviced apartments. Fluffy robes, Apple computer, wi-fi, i-Pod dock, flat screen TV with Sky. Fell fast asleep thinking about the new Manchester. Next day I would be visiting a corner of New York, going via the Far East.

Morning saw me continuing my exploration of the Northern Quarter . . . or should I say ‘Eastern’ Quarter?

“ Because amidst all the hurly burly of the place I’d discovered a little oasis of oriental peace and tranquillity. ”

The Manchester Buddhist Centre, run by the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order. It’s not a temple but a centre open to anyone interested in Buddhist principles, so you can just drop in and use one of the meditation halls. Or, as I did, nose round the bookshop and have breakfast in Earth, their vegetarian café. A poster on the wall told me that Buddhism offers practical teachings to help us contact the clarity, contentment and understanding that lie within us all.

All I can say is that I came out feeling very contemplative, and as if fate had taken a hand I was led into another eastern setting where the creative force is revered. The Chinese Arts Centre. The clue is in the name – it’s the international agency for promoting the work of contemporary Chinese artists, and amongst a great many other things it stages exhibitions, festivals and tours. All this was explained to me by a dazzlingly elegant Chinese woman, who went on to tell me that Manchester has the second largest Chinese community in the UK, before leaving me free to wander round. Incredible stuff. Not delicate watercolours of sampans in the sunset, but huge room sized installations that wouldn’t look out of place at Tate Modern. But if you have a taste for tradition you’ll love their Tea House, which serves far more exotic brews than your usual cuppa.

Seeing as it was nearly one o’ clock, I needed something more substantial. First though, I needed to freshen up, so it was off to the City Inn where I’d be overnighing later. It’s on the new Piccadilly Place landmark development – which last time I’d been in Manchester had been the site of a scruffy car park and a miserable looking curry house. The transformation is unbelievable, and so is this hotel come to that. There’s a real buzz to the place, and it’s almost opposite the streamlined new Piccadilly station, which would be handy for me. But the tracks I made were to the Northern Quarter Restaurant and Bar. The owners call its style ‘funky but not frightening’, while the Sunday Times Style magazine described it as: “The place to people watch”. I should add that it’s also the place to get an excellent meal, the frequently changing menu using prime local ingredients with added flavours of the Med and beyond. That’s what the chef told me, and I could taste he was right. By coincidence, this place is built on the corner of what was once Smithfield Market, where greengrocers and butchers would come at crack of dawn to buy their stock.

Stuart's Short Stories for Short Breaks

A fragment of the old stone façade survives, just outside the restaurant. Intrigued, I wandered round the block, and guess what? There, completely intact, was the original Victorian fish market, crowned by a huge glass roof. Somewhere you can trawl for all sorts of original ideas, because it's now the Manchester Craft and Design Centre. Two floors of curiosity-shop studio spaces where you can see an innovative hand-made creation being crafted . . . and if you like it, buy it.

One marine creature I bet they never netted there in the old days was the walrus. But this is new Manchester, and things don't come much newer than the nearby Walrus Canteen and Bar.

“ It may have been a specky scouser – or was it Edward Lear? – who first explored the psychedelic dimensions of our favourite toothed marine mammal but the Walrus has taken it to its vibrant conclusion. ”

A kaleidoscopic explosion of electric colour, pop art, zany lighting and rubber flooring. The cocktail menu is equally off the wall, listing the flavours in each drink – so you have to work out the ingredients. Which made me think, the whole Northern Quarter is itself like a giant cocktail. Part Soho, part Camden Lock, part Covent Garden . . . and part downtown Manhattan. That's right. Such is the resemblance, it convincingly stood in for the Garment District of New York in the 2003 remake of 'Alfie' starring Jude Law. So if you fancy a stroll on the set and some of the action, come and join the fascinating cast now thronging Manchester's Northern Quarter.

For more information on the places visited in this and Stuart's other stories, please log onto www.visitenglandsnorthwest.com