

DESTINATION ♦ ENGLAND



GAS STREET BASIN

Walk down Gas Street Basin for waterfront pubs and colourful canal boats; the city is celebrating 50 years since Black Sabbath's debut.

PICTURES: ALAMY, SUPPLIED

BRUM'S THE NEW BLACK

The hip rebirth of Ozzy Osbourne's home town

JAMES MARCH

If you were to time travel to any point in the recent past and tell someone that in a few years the World's Best Gin Bar would be in Birmingham, they would probably laugh and then scold you for having such breathtaking hubris. The days where reactions like that would be commonplace have long since faded away, however.

It has been such an amazing turnaround for a city once so derided that it now boasts the most Michelin star restaurants in the UK outside of London (four) and will be proudly hosting the Commonwealth Games in three years. Britain's "Second City" is a young, vibrant place bursting with ideas and an exciting food scene.

ARRIVAL

Birmingham, nicknamed Brum, is 160km from London and there are many rail options to take you to New St or Birmingham Moor Street station in less than two hours. From Birmingham Airport, a train to the city is far quicker than a taxi, and cheap at £2.50 (about \$4.40) for a single trip.

GETTING AROUND

Despite being Britain's second largest metropolis, the city centre is surprisingly compact so getting about on foot is your best option. You can

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walk from the industrial chic of Digbeth in the south side to historic Jewellery Quarter in the north of the centre in about 30 minutes. If the weather is particularly disagreeable, an Uber will take you to most places in the city for less than £10.

WHERE TO STAY

There are a plethora of hotel options dotted around the city. Avoid any of the ones on Broad St as your night's sleep may get interrupted by the unhungry revellers who roam Birmingham's most notorious (and overrated) entertainment strip. Instead, book a room at Bloc Hotel in the Jewellery Quarter, just a stone's throw from the elegant Georgian setting of St Paul's Square. Less than a

10-minute walk from the city centre, this green space is a hive of relaxed activity in the summer months and is surrounded on all sides by wine bars, cafes and 40 St Paul's – The World's Best Gin Bar 2019.

HEAD TO THE WATER

"More canal than Venice" is a popular refrain here and while quantity isn't always an indicator of quality, some of Birmingham's finest city scenes are found by the waterside. Go for a walk down the Gas Street Basin and you'll pass by welcoming waterfront pubs, gaudily coloured canal boats and enthusiastic photographers trying to capture the perfect moment. The Canal House pub is a great place to grab a beer and take it all in.

CULINARY CAPITAL

Barbecue season may still be lamentably short on these shores but the "bland" British food stereotype is quickly becoming a thing of the past. I'm not guaranteeing you'll never receive a warm beer and a grim plate of fish and chips but things have changed considerably. Michelin star restaurants show there's life outside of London and the Second City is leading the charge. Every culinary need is covered, from fine dining to mouth-watering street food, but for a true taste of Birmingham's cultural diversity head to the "Balti Triangle", a frantic and friendly South Asian neighbourhood serving all varieties of trademark fiery curry dish – The Balti.

VISIT THE PRINCE OF DARKNESS

For better or for worse, Birmingham's most recognisable musical export is undoubtedly metal legend Ozzy Osbourne. His band Black Sabbath is one of the most influential bands of all time and a new exhibition at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery opened in late June celebrating 50 years since the band's debut. From showing off the gaudy stage outfits to recreating the bedrooms of superfans, it runs until September 29 but you should definitely book tickets (homeofmetal.com/tickets) in advance as it'll be popular.

THE OLD RIVALRY

It's almost that time of year when Aussies and Englishmen become the best of enemies for a few weeks. The Ashes is upon us and Edgbaston Cricket Ground in Birmingham is a premier venue for the Test match series taking place now. Located just outside the city centre, Edgbaston is known for its rowdy atmosphere where groups of grinning men can be seen dressed up as superheroes, priests or anything else that might get them on camera. A voracious capacity for beer and a sense of humour are all that is needed to enjoy yourself here.

THE GREAT OUTDOORS

If cricket isn't your thing, then across the road from the stadium is Cannon Hill Park, home to attractions including an arts centre, wildlife conservation park, tennis courts, crazy golf and a boating lake. It also contains a quaint amphitheatre which treats audiences to open-air cinema screenings as well as theatrical and musical performances throughout summer. The bars, cafes and street markets of cosmopolitan Moseley village, named in 2015 by *The Sunday Times* as the best place to live in the UK, are only a 10-minute walk away.

MAKE TIME FOR A PINT

Brits and Australians share a common affection for beer, and Birmingham has seen an explosion of craft ale bars and breweries popping up all over the city with weird and wonderful offerings to satisfy every need. Purists, however, should head to The Wellington on Bennett's Hill. "The Welly" is the most gloriously unpretentious pub in Birmingham, free of pumping music, elaborately titled food options or jaunty decor. It offers eight regular beers and a revolving door of nine different guest ales as well as lagers, ciders and a formidable whisky collection for those who aren't as hopelessly devoted to hops as the regulars.

THE BARD'S COUNTRY

If you must head out of the city then Stratford-upon-Avon, the birthplace of Shakespeare, is less than an hour away by train from Moor Street station. The Bard's medieval hometown is drenched in history but it does receive London-levels of tourists so be prepared for flailing selfie sticks and herds of guided tours. When you've had your fix, a return ticket to Birmingham's welcoming embrace will only cost you £8.40.



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