

A weekend in...

Margate

Once a glamorous hotspot for the masses, this south eastern coastal town has been neglected over the years. Now recovering well, it's worth a visit thanks to new art spaces and restaurants aplenty, says writer Kris Griffiths



I was 11 when I first visited Margate in 1989, and I had one of the more memorable days of my youth: rollercoasters, chip shops, sandy beaches, and countless amusement arcades.

Sadly though, those giddy years at the turn of the 90s were the beginning of the end of an era dating back to early Victorian times for Margate, when Londoners were first drawn to the restorative air of its beaches and gardens. The rise of the cheap package holiday in the 1980s saw traditional seaside towns fall out of favour.

Margate has seen some green shoots of recovery in the last few years though. The fun park Dreamland has just reopened as the world's first heritage theme park and other areas have regenerated themselves to welcome back visitors whose numbers were restimulated by the 'staycation' brought on by the recession.

The opening in 2011 of the £17.5m Turner Contemporary gallery, championed by local girl Tracy Emin, heralded not so much a comeback as a cultural renaissance, and is now one of Britain's most-visited

'While Margate retains its traditional seaside charm, there's more of an artistic edginess about it nowadays'

galleries outside of London. Inside are progressive modern art installations alongside pieces by Turner himself, inspired by this coastline.

The duality of modern vs old pervades the rest of new Margate. While it retains its seaside charm, there's more of an artistic edginess about it, from its new indie galleries to the Banksy-style murals in the Old Town. It's little wonder that Margate suddenly found itself on must-see international destination lists – appearing in 2013's annual Rough Guide Travel Hotlist, the only UK destination featured.

It's all a world away from the innocent town I remember, but I would much rather it was as it is today than the crumbling, forlorn place it had become when visitor numbers dried up. Make no mistake, there's still a lot of work to be done, as certain areas remain run-down and awaiting their facelifts; the brutalist tower block near the station is still crying out for a paint job at least.

More recent visits have been rewarded with new sights and attractions, like the subterranean passages of the town's Shell Grotto, painstakingly lined with millions of seashells – how they got there nobody knows. I also discovered an equally beguiling living museum within Cliftonville's Walpole Bay Hotel, an Edwardian period hotel complete with original trellis-gated lift, which actually offers complimentary seawview rooms to struggling novelists for up to a month.

The Kentish seaside town of my youth may look vastly different these days, but there is still just as much fun to be had.

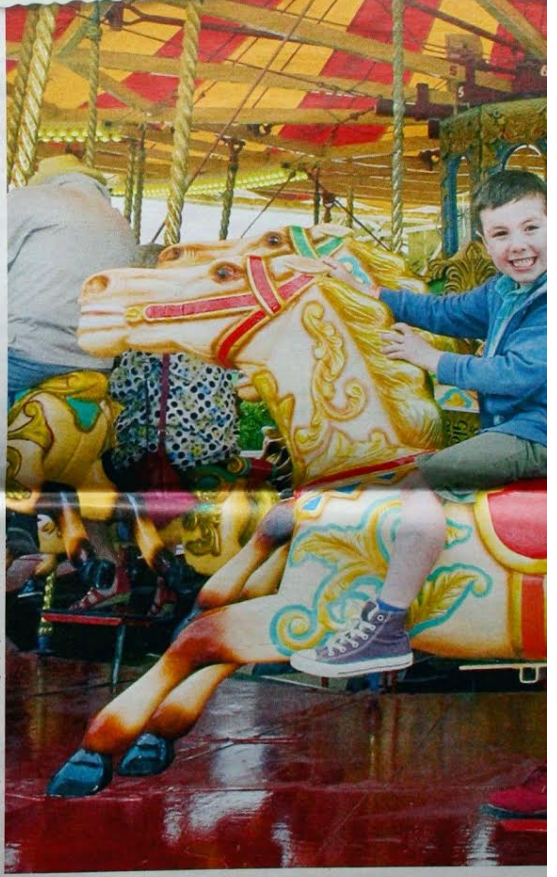


Illustration - Ely Walton. Photography: Corbis, Rex. © Thanet District Council 2015



The Waitrose Good Food Guide 2015



Local gems

GB Pizza
 MARGATE
 01843 297700
 greatbritishpizza.com
 There is nowhere better in Margate. Right on the

seafront, a huge window taking in the sand and skyline, this small pizzeria mixes rough-round-the-edges vintage with modern grit. It's all unpretentious, with casual vibes, half a dozen wood-fired, thin-

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