

MERSEY MAGIC

After a spell in the doldrums, forgotten and faded, Liverpool is in the midst of a renaissance. **JD van Zyl** visits the dock city and finds that being 2008's European Capital of Culture is only the beginning of much bigger things to come



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Liverpool is in the throes of transformation. Its skyline is teeming with a forest of cranes visible from miles away and the city centre is undergoing the urban equivalent of open-heart surgery. As I stroll from the platforms of centrally located Lime Street station towards the shopping area of Lord Street, with uniformed men around every corner, one image repeatedly pops into my mind: a city under siege. Only this is a rather untraditional army. These soldiers don hard hats and luminescent yellow vests. Jack hammers are their weapons of choice, bulldozers their tanks.

“Shouldn't this all have been finished in time for the European Capital of Culture?” I mumble to a fellow visitor. Like me, he's craning his neck at what will be the second phase of Liverpool One, a development smack in the middle of Liverpool's commercial district and currently the largest retail construction site in Europe. “You'd think,” he says. “What?” I shout back over the roar of a passing truck laden heavy with building debris. “Finished in time for 2008,” he says. “You'd think...”

That's just the thing. It is not that it isn't important for Liverpool to be this year's European Capital of Culture – it is impossible to turn a corner without seeing a brightly coloured flag, stretched-out banner, poster or sticker to make its significance clear – but this status is only one of many steps towards giving this formerly faded industrial backwater a new lease of life that will extend beyond the end of this year.

FROM RATS TO RICHES

Since The Beatles' heyday, Liverpool has been on a slippery slope. When work dried up in the Seventies, a mass exodus ate away at its core quicker than in any other British city. Liverpoolians were jumping ship in their hordes



From top: a ferry cross the Mersey; the Metropolitan Cathedral; below left, signs of the city's Capital of Culture status abound; even Queen Victoria, right, has the party spirit; left, the changing skyline

and the once magnificent city of the North fell into decay and dilapidation. William Blake put it most eloquently, almost two centuries earlier, when he wrote: “Manchester and Liverpool are in tortures of doubt and despair.”

In more recent times, however, Manchester managed to pull itself together. Now Liverpool is following suit. As I bump my way across the River Mersey on the “world's most famous ferry” I decide to brave the bite in the wind and climb the narrow wooden stairs to the deck for a better view of the docks we've left behind. What will the new Liverpool look like? That's the question going through my mind as I gaze back at the city's shrinking shapes.

“When I was young, everybody left after school,” explains the 30-something guy standing next to me on the ferry.

“Why?”
 “Dunno. That's just what you did.”
 “But you came back?”
 “It's different now. There's work again – especially if you're in the construction business like me,” he says, patting his Day-Glo yellow builder's jacket as if to underline his point.

With billions of pounds being pumped into Liverpool, its skyline will never be the same again. Like a butterfly in a chrysalis, the city is inching its way towards a new beginning. “With more than £5 billion of public and private investment flowing into the city over the next few years, business confidence is high,” confirms Martin King, director of tourism at The Mersey Partnership (the official tourist board for the Liverpool City Region).

No other development better symbolises the rebirth of the city than Liverpool One. Constructed around a sculpted park in the heart of the city, this development is the size of 28 football pitches and boasts numerous retail shops, restaurants, bars, cinemas and apartments. When





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it opened its first phase at the end of May it was with grand hopes of being the city's ticket to becoming the shopping heaven of the North. "Liverpool currently ranks number 15 on the UK's list of shopping destinations," says Joanne Jennings, chief executive of Liverpool One. "With this development we want to move it back up into the top five."

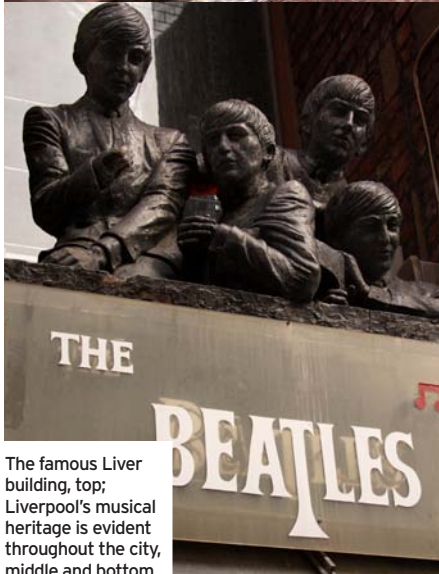
STRAWBERRY FIELDS FOREVER

Indeed when you flick through the pages of the proposed developments that Liverpool has planned for the next decade, you get a feeling that the city is able to build and create anything.

Liverpool One might be the current star of the scene but there's plenty more waiting in the wings: channelling the Leeds Liverpool Canal through Princes Dock to link up with the waterfront for the first time in 100 years; completing the Liverpool Echo Arena, which is set to become the "Fourth Grace" next to the current trio of iconic buildings on the Pier Head; upgrading John Lennon Airport. Not to mention reams of new hotels, business developments and leisure facilities. There are even talks of a monorail to connect the city and airport.

Of course, you can't talk about Liverpool without mentioning its most famous sons, and one of the long-planned developments well under way is The Beatles Story in Albert Dock. Here, the historic Fab Four journey begins at Woolton Village Fete, where John and Paul first met, and touches on virtually everything related to The Beatles. The museum even boasts a plank from John's old tree house, which gazed out over Strawberry Fields orphanage.

An expansion is currently underway at The Beatles Story that will more than double



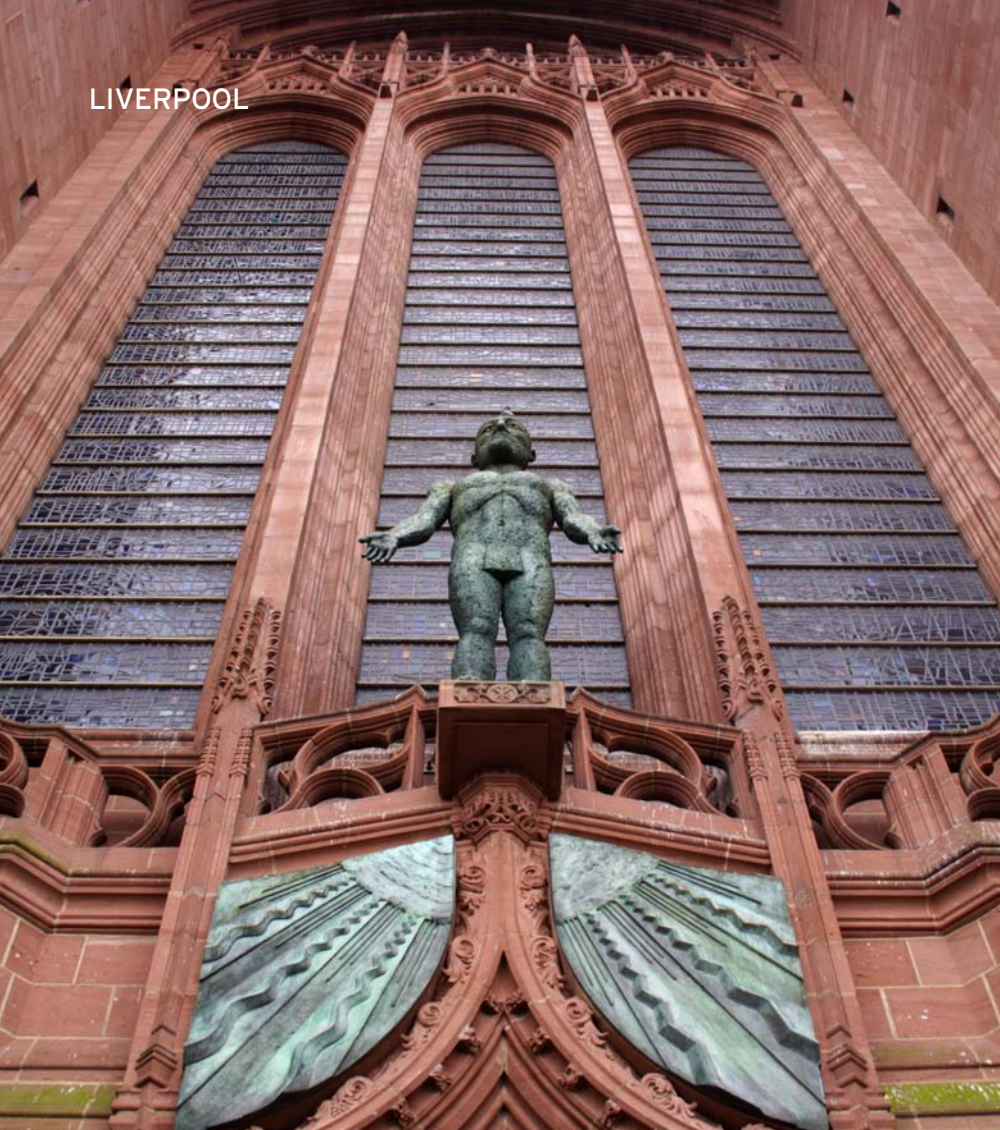
The famous Liver building, top; Liverpool's musical heritage is evident throughout the city, middle and bottom

its existing floor space, but some of the new exhibitions are already open. Among them is a revamped space dedicated to John Lennon, complete with white baby grand and "Imagine" playing on perpetual repeat.

ART IN THE RIGHT PLACE

Around the corner from The Beatles Story and still in the red-brick housing of the Albert Dock is Tate Liverpool. For three months from the end of May, visitors to the city are guaranteed to swarm in droves to this gallery. "It is not often that we get to host blockbuster events such as the Gustav Klimt exhibition," explains Tate director Christoph Grunenberg. "It really is something exceptional."

Another "blockbuster" that the gallery recently played host to is the Turner Prize, an annual award for a



LIVERPOOL 2008 HIGHLIGHTS

1 *Gustav Klimt: Painting, Design and Modern Life in Vienna 1900*

30 May-31 August, Tate Liverpool

First comprehensive exhibition of Klimt's work in the UK.

2 *Go Superlambananas*

16 June-25 August, city wide

Catch these crazy creatures – painted by local artists, communities and celebrities – dotted around the city (pictured above).

3 *Tall Ships' Races '08*

18-21 July, waterfront

Liverpool plays host to this maritime extravaganza as these magnificent vessels depart for Den Helder, Netherlands.

4 *Tour of Britain Finale*

14 September, city centre

For the first time, this event will finish outside of London.

5 *The 5th Liverpool Biennial*

20 September-30 November, city wide

The UK's largest international festival of contemporary art.

For more events and to plan your break, see liverpool08.com and visitliverpool.com.

GETTING THERE

EAST MIDLANDS TRAINS RUNS HOURLY SERVICES TO LIVERPOOL FROM SHEFFIELD, CHESTERFIELD, NOTTINGHAM, GRANTHAM AND PETERBOROUGH. TRAINS WILL CALL AT LIVERPOOL SOUTH PARKWAY FOR JOHN LENNON AIRPORT FROM DECEMBER 2008.

British artist younger than 50. For the first time since its inception in 1984 this highly publicised – and often controversial – prize left its London home (Tate Britain) last December for a trip to Liverpool. “The Turner Prize coming to Liverpool is an event of huge significance and really is an endorsement of the importance of our city’s cultural scene,” Grunenberg explains.

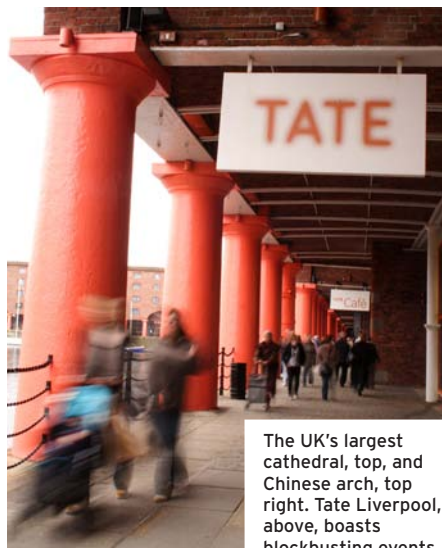
It seems that an international endorsement, such as being 2008 European Capital of Culture, was all that the city needed. Liverpool has always had a proud cultural heritage, only now Brits and overseas tourists alike are sitting up and noticing. And the city is flourishing in the spotlight. Looking beyond the obvious Beatles connection, Liverpool lays claim to one of the finest orchestras in the UK, award-winning public exhibitions, the largest number of Grade II buildings outside of London and is a UNESCO World Heritage City to boot.

Liverpool also boasts the biggest cathedral in the UK, the largest Chinese arch outside China and has produced more music chart-toppers than any other city in the world. And as for sporting prowess, look no further than Liverpool FC – the most successful British football club, with 18 league championships to its name.

“Before The Beatles hit it big, music journalists preferred to stay in London and couldn’t be bothered to travel to the North,” explained Jamie Bowman, publicist at The Beatles Story, as we navigated through the

exhibit. It was only once The Beatles had lured them northwards and acted as a spotlight that they realised what a talent-trove the city was. Much the same can be said for Liverpool’s current cultural status highlighting the city’s heritage.

On the ferry my newly acquainted construction friend summarises it perfectly: “Liverpool is where it’s at,” he explains, his arm resting on the railing that surrounds the deck. “So you’re not leaving again after all this excitement has died down?” I ask. “Die down? No mate. The engines are only warming up.” ■



The UK’s largest cathedral, top, and Chinese arch, top right. Tate Liverpool, above, boasts blockbusting events