

Catch all the action with trip to Welsh capital

This is a tale of one amazing city, and two very different hotels.

First up, the minimalist budget hotel Sleeperz in the very heart of Cardiff, looking out over a busy railway line, multi-storey car park, and host of abandoned ramshackle buildings.

Second, the ultra-swish five-star St David's Hotel & Spa jutting out proudly over the city's fast-growing bayfront development, where multi-millions have been invested in the past decade to create a top Welsh tourism magnet.

Between them, a price differential of over £100 a night, give or take the odd note, depending on when you choose to stay. So, picking a favourite should be a no-brainer, shouldn't it?

And it is - I'll go for Sleeperz every time.

Cardiff will always hold a special place in my heart, having spent a fabulous chapter of my life there while training to become a journalist.

It's a city which was lively enough all those 20-odd years ago, but which has multiplied and diversified amazingly in the ensuing time.

St Mary's Street, the spine of the city centre, never sleeps, thanks

BY CARL JONES

largely to the enormous student population with an endless supply of energy . . . and, it seems, money.

Everything is within easy walking distance in this compact city centre. Innovative architecture sits alongside historic buildings, the bustle of shops is only a few strides from acres of peaceful parklands including the 2,000-year-old Cardiff Castle which, like the impressive Millennium Stadium, is smack-bang in the centre of the city.

And then there's Cardiff Bay - which didn't even exist during my student days. The old docklands at the end of Bute Street have been redeveloped in the past decade to create a large freshwater lake for sailing and water sports, swish apartments and hotels, and Mermaid Quay, a restaurant hotspot with everything from Italian and Turkish cuisine, to chains such as Nando's and Harry Ramsden's.

There's a water taxi connecting the bayfront to the city centre, and regular excursions to some of the islands which lie a few hundred yards off the Cardiff coast.

Dominating the skyline at the bay is the St David's Hotel & Spa, which carries the millstone of being

Cardiff's premier five-star hotel. It has 132 guest rooms including doubles, twins and suites - every one with a balcony overlooking the sea.

It also has a bar and grill serving Welsh cuisine, and an acclaimed spa with thalassotherapy treatments using the benefits of the sea, marine hydrotherapy pools and gym.

We checked in on the night of Take That's concert at the Millennium Stadium. Or, rather, tried to check in. Our room should have been ready by 2pm at the latest, yet it was nearly 4pm when we finally got our key.

Warning

And it came with a warning about breakfast the following day. "Breakfast is served until 10.30am, but it's best to make sure you come down before 9am or you may struggle to get a seat - the hotel is fully booked," the receptionist said.

What kind of five-star establishment is this when you can't even guarantee to find a place to sit for a bacon buttie in the morning?

Fair play, the room was terrific when we eventually got in. But when you're only there for one night, the tedious wait in reception took the shine off our visit.

St David's Hotel is a cold building lacking any semblance of atmosphere, and the price of food or drink is extortionate. We won't be returning.

Sleeperz, on the other hand, where I'd been with a group of friends just two weeks earlier, could hardly have been more different. Check-in was infor-



Cardiff Castle, in the heart of the city

mal and hassle-free, the breakfast buffet in its glass-sided ground-floor restaurant was wholesome, relaxed no-nonsense fare, and the bar stayed open as late as we wanted it to.

This modern urban hotel is spotlessly clean and functional. All rooms have tiled en suite wet rooms, 26in flat-screen TVs, chic wooden floors and air conditioning. Standard doubles come with a queen-sized bed, or you can choose a compact double, or "cabin" room with bunk beds. For the price, I simply couldn't fault it.

Outside London, Cardiff is for my money the most "happening" city in the UK. There's always something new and intriguing going on

in this young, ambitious and vibrant cultural melting pot.

It's the home of Dr Who and Torchwood (you'll spot many familiar locations in the bayfront area), and also hosted the first Ashes Test between England and Australia this summer.

And when top artists like Take That aren't selling out the Millennium Stadium, they're packing fans into the Wales Millennium Centre, which has become a national icon, and one of the UK's most recognised landmark buildings.

You almost forget, in fact, that Cardiff has a coastline too. It can only be a matter of time before cruise ships start calling at the bay.

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