

If any city has turned the old maxim that 'it's grim up north' on its head, it has to be Leeds. What was once a grimy Yorkshire town has been transformed into a hedonist's playground and there are now more shops, bars and restaurants than you can shake a stick at. Barely a decade ago, a trip to Leeds meant changing trains at the station on your way to somewhere more interesting. Now, the first thing that hits you as you step on to the platform, is how modern and upbeat everything looks.

Massive financial investment has created a bright, shiny city that oozes wealth and optimism. Gleaming riverside apartments have sprung up at a rate of knots, grand old civic buildings restored to their former glory and derelict mills and warehouses like Granary Wharf (granary-wharf.co.uk) turned into funky shopping, eating areas and entertainment areas.

Leeds folk have taken to café and club culture like ducks to water, and the only problem you'll have is choosing where to eat, drink and sleep between your bouts of shopping, dancing and gallery hopping.

Spendthrifts are well catered for in Leeds. A complete blow-out calls for nothing less than Harvey Nichols in the Victoria Quarter (vqleeds.com), a lovingly-restored 19th-century listed building with gilded mosaic floors, fountains and the biggest stained glass window in Europe, which forms the ceiling. The arcades are also home to Vivienne Westwood, Jo Malone, Space NK and Molton Brown, as well as dozens of independent boutique shops, hairdressers, designer lingerie stores and hair salons.

Just round the corner, the Corn Exchange (cornx.net) on Call Lane is Leeds' answer to Covent Garden. This circular 19th-century building houses around 35 funky stores selling one-off fashion, music, gifts, sportswear and photography. There's also a shop that claims to sell every kind of condom you might ever need and, at weekends, a design and craft fair, when around 20 local artists and jewellery designers set up shop.

Eating and drinking

Leeds after dark once meant a pie and a pint down the local. Now, the choice of restaurants runs the gamut from French to Fusion, Middle Eastern to Afro-Caribbean, all served up with enough drinking outlets (most with a 2am licence at weekends) to satisfy the most hardened hobo.

Room (roomrestaurants.com) is one of the best places to go for cocktails/American soul food, where every Friday and Saturday, you can get sweaty dancing to soul, funk and northern soul 'til late.

If you fancy a trip out of town, the Flying Pizza (theflyingpizza.co.uk) in trendy Moortown is just a 10-minute taxi ride away from the city centre and is one of Leeds' oldest Italian restaurants. It's a firm favourite with the local glitterati (well, Jimmy Saville is a long-standing patron) and walking into the restaurant on a Saturday night feels a bit like walking on to the set of Dynasty. Even though its patrons have long since abandoned their shoulder pads (reluctantly, you feel), a night out here still provides a glimpse into how the "rich-and-not-afraid-to-show-it" likes to part with its cash. When you've finished eating, you can have fun totting up the Mercs and Beamers parked outside.

Nightlife

For later in the evening, if you're into the best that soul, funk, Motown reggae and R&B has to offer and you don't mind getting down with a bunch of students (who seemed to be in the majority the Saturday night we visited), head for the

Hi-Fi club (thehificlub.co.uk). This friendly, unpretentious club also hosts regular live music sessions on Thursdays and Sundays (daytime and evening).

Allegedly modelled on New York's iconic Studio 54 nightclub, Arch 54 in the lively Calls area is the place to be if you've passed the "hands in the air stage" but are not quite ready to hang up your dancing shoes. Set underneath Leeds City train station, it's a louche mix of low-slung leather sofas, exposed brick walls and glittery disco balls and somewhere to go to see and be seen rather than get slaughtered.

Culture

Henry Moore Institute

A welcoming respite to all those shops, the Henry Moore Institute showcases work by one of Yorkshire's most famous sons, as well as that of other 20th century sculptors. Leeds City Art Gallery is right next door, as is the Craft Shop and Design Gallery which sells some wonderful costume jewellery and one-off pieces (henry-moore-fdn.co.uk).

Where to stay

Quebecs

This former 19th century liberal club two minutes from the railway station is the last word in old-fashioned luxury. A beautiful stained glass window that winds its way up three floors, gleaming oak panelling, sumptuous bed linen and complimentary goodies from Molton Brown add to the feeling of grandeur. (theetoncollection.com).

Radisson SAS

Situated in the Light shopping centre (thelightleeds.co.uk), an airy glass and steel affair housing yet more cafes, bars and shops, the Radisson offers all the mod cons you'd expect from a modern chain, plus you get free entry to the Esporta health club to work off the hangover you're bound to get. (radissonsas.com)

How to get there

By air

bmi (flybmi.com) flies to Leeds/Bradford from London Heathrow, Cork, Dublin, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Inverness and Jersey.

By rail

GNER (gner.co.uk) runs train services from 20 cities, including London, Edinburgh, Aberdeen and Newcastle.