

Travel

Helen Elliott & Jackie Atkins Take A 2 Day Break In Plymouth, Devon

Following last issue's review of Wales, my friend Jackie and I were delighted to be invited to Plymouth for two nights, to sample the various activities at this historic city in the South West of England. It didn't help that my husband's automatic car with its built in sat nav, broke down the night before our journey, so we resorted to the old fashioned (and some might say better) method of reading maps to reach our destination, which from Surrey took five hours.

Our first port of call was to the Plymouth Gin Distillery, based in the city centre, where it was originally established in the 1400's. Personally, I had reservations of a two and a half hour tour, as my attention span is generally a little bit shorter than that. However, I have to say, it was one of the best tours I have ever taken, as it was educational, interactive, and the last half hour was spent creating our own personalised gin, which we were then able to take home. Our tour guide was extremely



Royal William Yard

knowledgeable, friendly and brought the whole history of gin, and Plymouth Gin to life. We were taught about the botanicals that make up different brands of gin, which to be honest, as a gin and tonic drinker, I had never even considered, and I was amazed to find that most gin's have on average ten botanicals (natural flavourings), including juniper (obviously), lemon, orange, orissa, cardomon, nutmeg, liquorice, and coriander seeds. We were then able to smell the botanicals, and then tasted five well known gin brands, to see if we could identify which botanicals had been used, and which gin was what brand.

There are different types of tours, and our tour included a £1 discount voucher for the shop, and a gin of our choice or sample bottle, in The Rectory, (the bar named in memory of the monks who frequented the original building and whose image is printed on the back of all the Plymouth Gin bottles), but you can find out more yourself, on the interesting history of the building and Plymouth Gin brand, by taking one of the tours on offer, which we do highly recommend.



Plymouth Gin

Following the tour, we then headed, via the edge of Dartmoor National Park, with its evocative, desolate landscape, full of wild plants and flowers and roaming cows and ponies, to the Moorland Garden Hotel, possibly named after the lovely gardens that it is set in. The hotel is perfectly positioned for those who wish to explore these famous moors and the varied wildlife that live there.

The next day's itinerary started with a personal visit to friends who live in Cornwall, which is only about an hour's drive away. We returned to Plymouth late afternoon for our personal tour of the National Marine Aquarium. The National Marine Aquarium has a mission to 'drive marine conservation through engagement', and this was certainly reflected through the exhibits, environment and enthusiasm of all the staff. The staff were extremely knowledgeable, and keen to ensure all visitors, both adults and children, got as much out of their visit as possible, through both displays and interaction. Throughout our visit we saw marine life from the Plymouth Sound, the British Coasts, the Atlantic Ocean and the Blue Planet overall, but the highlight for us was the main viewing auditorium where you could take a seat and watch all marine life swimming by and almost imagine you were swimming in the water too - but needless to say I would be giving the sharks a wide berth! We finished the tour, exiting through the shop, which has a great range of gifts and reference books for sale. The National Marine Aquarium is a charity which is 'dedicated to conservation,



Plymouth Gin

research and education', and really did inform us of the challenges faced in marine conservation, and how we can all play a part in improving our environment. At the National Marine Aquarium you can see fish from all over the world and see the great work that they do in preserving and managing our marine environment, including sustainable fishing.

After a busy day, and in anticipation of an awe inspiring British Fireworks Championships later that evening, we walked to the Rockfish Restaurant just alongside the Aquarium. Rockfish offers seafood dining in a perfect ocean side location, looking out across

the harbour. Rockfish is a relaxed, family friendly restaurant, with a wood burning fire and great 'beach shack' themed decoration. The main restaurant has 120 covers, and seating for 80 outside, with a good choice of seafood dishes on the menu. We both had fried salt and pepper prawns, which were simply delicious, followed by traditional cod and chips, which was cooked to perfection and certainly satisfied our hungry tummies. Due to the Fireworks Championships, the restaurant was completely full inside and out, and all fellow diners looked suitably happy with both the attentive service and

dinners served. It was pleasing to see that a discretionary £1 is added to each bill to be donated to the National Marine Aquarium for the study into conservation of local seafood stocks, and you really do get a feeling that the whole community is genuinely engaged in promoting marine conservation and sustainability.

Following dinner, we literally took 30 steps out on to the harbour side to secure our viewing position for the British Fireworks Championships. To be truthful, I had no idea this competition even existed, but it soon became apparent that this was quite an event, as not only the immediate area, but also the whole shoreline, reaching up past Plymouth Hoe was lined with people, 3 or 4 rows deep, taking up their places in anticipation for some spectacular fireworks displays - and we were not disappointed. There were three fireworks manufacturers displaying their creations on the first night, and then another three taking place the following night. Each display lasted approximately 15 minutes, with short intervals between each one. The displays were spectacular, with some fantastic colour combinations and loud bangs and whizzes that everyone enjoyed, with 'oohs' and 'ahs' all around – Guy Fawkes would have been proud. This is an annual 2-day event that we both thoroughly recommend.

After our second night at the Westmorland Hotel, we were treated to a personal historical tour of the harbour side/Barbican area of Plymouth. We firstly visited the Heritage/Tourist Centre, which has a very informative three floor exhibition dedicated to Plymouth's rich seafaring history and its famous



quayside, from where Drake embarked on circumnavigating the World, and from where the Pilgrim Fathers boarded the Mayflower for their epic voyage to the New World. We then began a walking tour around the immediate area. The streets are mainly narrow and cobbled, flanked by many Elizabethan houses and warehouses. Evidence of Tudor architecture could be seen all around, be it the Elizabethan House that you could visit, or the beautiful walled city garden that recreates an Elizabethan garden using old plant varieties, tucked away behind the Tudor buildings in New Street. As you explore this area a number of wooden plaques naming the Pilgrims who sailed from Plymouth can also be seen on buildings around the town, denoting where the Pilgrim Fathers rested, prepared and feasted before the long sea voyage ahead. The Mayflower Steps mark the spot where it is believed the Pilgrim Fathers set off from the water's edge aboard the Mayflower. Visiting the harbour and Plymouth Barbican really helps to bring this time in history alive, and you can only begin to imagine both the anticipation and excitement that these intrepid travellers must of felt, in search of a new life. 2020 will be the 400th anniversary of the Pilgrims' voyage, and celebrations, commemorations and festivities are already being planned, which I am sure will be fitting for this very significant event.

Our final visit was to the Boathouse Café, near the Plymouth Barbican. We were due to take to the seas for a 'CYC Cook your Catch' experience, where we would have embarked on a 4 hour fishing trip, catching our own fish, and returning to the Café for it to be cooked to our liking. Unfortunately the conditions were not suitable for deep sea fishing that morning, but that did not spoil our Boathouse Café experience in any way. We were welcomed to the café and due to improved weather conditions took a seat outside, again in a perfect spot right next to the harbour. The menu offered dishes created using sustainably caught fish, as well as other fresh, locally sourced produce. I ordered crispy calamari and Jackie had haddock goujons to start, followed by freshly caught mackerel with new potatoes and leaves. All of our dishes were well received, and reflected the delicious, fresh foods that this Café really does have to offer – perfect for the seafood lover.

Before we were due to leave Plymouth, we were fortunate enough to meet the owner of the Boathouse Café, who had been out fishing that morning. He described Plymouth and the great visitor experience it offers with great enthusiasm and pride. I can only but agree with this sentiment - we were welcomed by everyone that we met and came away feeling very positive. Plymouth is well worth a visit



Moorland Garden Hotel



Boathouse Cafe



Catfish exhibit at the National Marine Aquarium

and I look forward to seeing what more Plymouth can offer as it nears the 2020 400th year anniversary celebrations. ■

TOURIST BOARD:

For more information on Plymouth visit: www.visitplymouth.com

ACCOMMODATION:

Moorland Garden Hotel

Garden Rooms at the Moorland Garden Hotel start from £85.00 per night with breakfast. Yelverton, Dartmoor, PL20 6DA. Tel: 01822 852245. www.moorlandgardenhotel.co.uk

ATTRACTIONS:

Master Distillers Tour at Blackfriars Distillery: www.plymouthdistillery.com

The Master Distillers Tour costs £40 per person and includes a bottle of 'your own' handmade gin to take away plus a G&T from the bar.

Black Friars Distillery, 60 Southside Street, The Barbican, PL1 2LQ. Tel: 01752 665 292

National Marine Aquarium:

www.national-aquarium.co.uk
The National Marine Aquarium in Plymouth

is the UK's biggest Aquarium with a fantastic collection of fish including over 70 sharks. Adult tickets cost £12.75 and a family ticket (two adults, two children) costs £37.

National Marine Aquarium, Rope Walk, Coxsides, PL4 0LF. Telephone: 0844 893 793

Cook-your-Catch Fish 'n' Trip with Plymouth Boat Trips: www.fishntrips.co.uk

The 'Cook Your Catch' experience gives passengers on three or four hour fishing trips the option to have their catch cooked and served by staff at the Boathouse Café. From £25 per person and £12.50 for spectators. 2-5 Commercial Wharf, Barbican, Plymouth, PL1 2NX. Telephone: 01752 253153

RESTAURANTS:

RockFish Plymouth, Mitch Tonks 3 Rope Walk, Sutton Harbour, Plymouth, PL1 0LB. Tel: 01752 255974 www.rockfishdevon.co.uk

Boathouse Café, set in the fisherman's arches on the Mayflower Steps 2-5 Commercial Wharf, Barbican, Plymouth, PL1 2NX, Telephone: 01752 600560 www.theboathousecafe.co.uk