

From the end of the pier, Blackpool straggles across the far horizon. This coastal and cultural phenomenon – this ‘great roaring spangled beast’ as JB Priestley called it – inspires different reactions. Some see bright vitality, others just brash vulgarity.

Leaving Southport for Blackpool, I take a tram down the prom, past the Tower, shooting skywards like a rocket of packaged holiday fun, past the piers, past the largely deserted beach – bewilderingly different from the 1940s photographs in the town’s Grundy Art Gallery, which show it as packed like an ant hill.

The tram trundles on past pound shops and Super Prize Bingo, past hotels advertising ‘en suite’ as though it’s still a novelty, past Gypsy Lavinia and the Dragons Den Tattoo Studio and a group of lads setting off on an early-afternoon pub crawl. And eventually, down on the smartened-up South Shore, I turn down a quiet street to Number One South Beach, the spanking new 14-bedroom hotel where I’m staying.

With black leather furniture; whirlpool baths and smoked salmon bagels for breakfast, it isn’t what you necessarily expect in Blackpool. But then it is from the same stable as nearby Number One St Luke’s, which won Visit Britain’s Best B&B award last year for landlady Claire Smith, who talks up her town with evangelical zeal.

‘This is a really exciting time to be in Blackpool because so much is happening,’ she says. ‘The new South Beach promenade is an absolute pocket of joy.’

Over tea alongside St Luke’s pitch-and-putt course, Jane Seddon, Blackpool’s director of tourism, is refreshingly honest. ‘Our brand is tarnished at the moment and we recognise that,’ she says. ‘It has funnelled down into being a resort with a working-class image. The stag-and-hen culture has kept us going, and the middle-classes don’t expect us to be what they want to come to see.’

She talks about smartening up the resort, reinventing it as ‘the city on the beach’ with a cafe and bar culture and celebrating its entertainment history.

One key factor here is Admission All Classes, an ongoing series of weekends of magic, circus, music hall, fairground and other forms of mass entertainment that flourished between 1850 and 1950.

People came to enjoy themselves, says Professor Vanessa Toulmin, director of the National Fairground Archive, who has devised Admission All Classes. And that enjoyment doesn’t, she thinks, have to rely on the tried-and-tested. ‘It’s not just Punch and Judy. Last month we did the *Iliad* as a half-hour puppet show on the streets. There’s more blood and guts in the *Iliad* than in Punch and Judy.’

On the tram back to the railway station, the man next to me quotes an old Lancashire maxim: ‘A working-class man took his slapper to Blackpool, and a middle-class man took his mistress to Morecambe.’