

British break

Kiss-me-quick? Now it's more kiss-me-chic



Room with a hue The stylish Number One South Beach

Blackpool was once the epitome of tackiness. Now it's casting off its shabby image for boutique hotels and striking sculpture. **Rose Rouse** pays a visit

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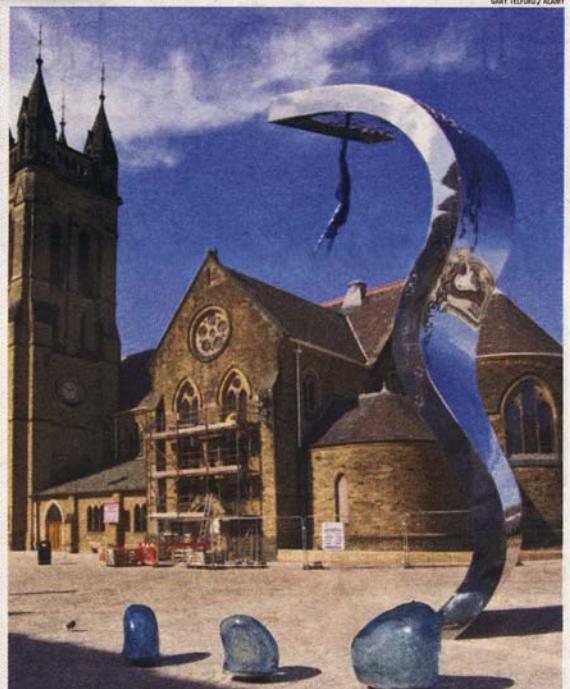


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I'm luxuriating in a hot-tub watching *The Andrew Marr Show* on TV. Yes, it's a first for me (though for others, maybe not). And guess where I am? Blackpool. The new Blackpool. Pan out to the eclectically designed mauve and grey bedroom, where my sister is lounging on the Egyptian cotton sheets with her head on the Siberian goose feather pillows while gazing outside at what is apparently the largest disco-style mirror ball in the world. It is called *They Don't Shoot Horses, Do They?* and is one of ten public sculptures that enliven the new South Beach promenade.

Downstairs, we are deliciously watered and fed. I am treated to locally sourced smoked haddock topped with a poached egg, while being thoroughly entertained by our joke-loving hosts, Mark and Graham. They're not gay — they have lovely wives, Claire and Janet — but it almost seems as though they should be. We feel fêted. This boutique hotel, Number One South Beach, where Neil Tennant stayed last year, is a clear indicator that Blackpool is changing. It's not that tired and tacky B&Bs have suddenly disappeared, it's a



Ancient and modern The Wave by Lucy Glendinning, a new feature in Blackpool

matter of the extremely tasteful now emerging (Number One South Beach also has a stylish sister property, St Luke's).

Blackpool seems to have gone trendy... but it's not all trendy. In town, the annual festival of new magic, cabaret and circus — Showzam! — is in action and we find ourselves in the spacious 19th-century Winter Gardens admiring weirdly wonderful old-fashioned sideshows such as *Girl in the Goldfish Bowl* (a tiny woman in a red bikini, and real) and the *Headless Lady* (she breathes but has no head).

In the redesigned St John's Square we find a tall steel sculpture with a blue swimmer made of glass diving off the top. Called *The Wave*, by the artist Lucy Glendinning, it has a dramatic presence, and transforms

a slightly shabby Blackpool town centre into something more interesting. Already, just looking around, it feels like a town in transition. It is also one with big plans. Last week it was announced that Blackpool Tower will become the centrepiece of a huge new tourism development, with a Madame Tussauds waxworks, a Legoland, Dungeon and a "London Eye-branded attraction".

But for now there are more than enough surprises. Round the corner in Birley Street there are six steel arches with lights and music. This looks unusual enough in the day, but in the evening we return and watch as families dance underneath to *Hot, Hot, Hot*. It's a fabulously disinhibiting idea and obviously has oodles of potential.

Oh, Blackpool — we haven't been since