

Southampton is not all about cruising

The lights in Southampton quayside flickered in the darkness as the flybe plane from Edinburgh made its approach over the extensive dock area.

The South Coast port is, of course, synonymous with cruising with two million passengers going through the city every year.

Many cruisers sadly never see this port city, jetting in and sailing immediately out, but Southampton is undergoing an ambitious regeneration scheme which has attracted over £2n of investment.

The city is also using its heritage to pitch for more tourism business from the Lothians as it is only 90 minutes by air from Scotland's Capital – there are up to five direct flights every day.

This makes this interesting and historic city, which has 50 parks and green open spaces and over 3,000 hotel beds in the city and surrounding area, so accessible.

However, beware of the new luggage rules with flybe which are stringent and rigidly applied to every passenger at the gate. If your case does not fit then cough up £50.

On arrival, it was a swift 15 minutes by cab – you can take the train to Southampton Central from the terminal only 99 steps away and it takes seven minutes (£3.90) and then walk around 20 minutes (mostly downhill) or take a bus – to the city centre, four-star, 99-room, dog-friendly – there are lead hooks in the foyer – Mercure Southampton Centre Dolphin Hotel.

It is Southampton's oldest hotel having been on site for more than 500 years.

Jane Austen held her 18th birthday here and Lord Nelson and Queen Victoria have stayed. It enjoyed a £4m facelift in 2010 and is used regularly by cruisers.

Why? Because it is minutes from the cruise terminal. The staff are obliging and my spacious room was comfortable. It housed a deep bath, ideal after hours spent walking around the city.

There are six resident ghosts, by the way, an attraction for some, and Dan Wilson, the general manager, said the hotel is ideally placed for those who wish to explore the city and surrounding area including the New Forest.

Breakfast is buffet-style or specially-cooked and the ham, cheese and tomato omelette was well-filed. Also try the local sausages.

Our bar meal of fish and chips and a classic burger and fries came beautifully presented and was excellent pub grub.

However, what about the city? Local tourism bosses say it is "the biggest and brightest city in the UK that you have never been to".

It is also ranked one of the three top places to live and work in Britain and it houses the new Cultural Quarter which includes one of the UK's few remaining production theatres, Nuffield Southampton, and a world-class contemporary art gallery. An engaging Leonardo da Vinci drawings exhibition is on until May.

Southampton has a thriving music scene and boasts more than 400 shops. The new Westquay development which attracts over 16.5 million visitors a year is impressive with large department stores and household retail names.

The city also has independent boutiques and it is understood

from locals that plans are being considered to bring small, unique goods traders back into the city, like The Shambles in York.

There are more than 150 different cuisines on offer in the city and Ennio's is a favourite. That is no surprise. It is a few minutes stroll from the town centre and there is a feeling of relaxation as soon as you enter.

The cosy bar is an ideal place to order and then you are led to a two-tier dining area for around 70 covers. It is tastefully decorated and lit.

The extensive menu includes chefs specials. Try the calamari with a crunchy coating and a small rocket, cucumber, onion and tomato salad with a wonderful, tart lemon dressing.

The seafood main, another signature dish, was a joy with the fish flaking on the fork and the parsley adding to the rich flavours of the sea. The juice did tend to flood the potato accompaniment but, over all, this was special.

Across the road is the old pier building which houses a traditional Indian and a new upstairs British-style restaurant called Gatehouse which is owned by the same company.

It's a new concept but the Romsey chalk stream cured trout with capers, cornichons, shallot rings and soda bread appealed on paper but disappointed on arrival.

The lamb breast croquette which comes with charred cucumber, wild garlic puree and peas was only marginally better. Our schedule did not allow time to try a main.

We moved on to self-funded Solet Sky, a hugely-impressive preservation of the heritage of British aviation. Well-versed volunteers take you around and underline that the Solent region was the centre of the world of aviation research and development between 1910 and 1960.

More than 26 aircraft manufacturers made the area their home, building biplanes to spacecraft and the legendary Spitfire.

There is nothing stuffy about this museum. You are allowed on board to sit the pilot seat of former fighter planes and try getting schoolchildren, or adults for that matter, out of the pilot seat of the prize exhibit, a Sandringham Flying Boat, one of a handful remaining.

The museum chronicles flying during peacetime and war and details the bombing of Southampton. The Germans tried to halt production of the Spitfire and the museum is a stone throw away from the Supermarine factory where the Spitfire was designed and built.

I'm no air buff but loved the museum. We made our farewells and the city wall soon loomed into view. Yards from it stands Tudor House, one of the city's most historic buildings with 800 years of history.

It has recently been repaired and refurbished and you discover who lived and worked there through a variety of displays and a simple-to-operate audio guide.

The Tudor knot garden provided a peaceful haven. We found another peaceful haven after that, the cosy and atmospheric, oak-beamed Duke of Wellington pub.

It has a tempting portfolio of real ales including the rich, dark and thirst-quenching Swordfish served by a chatty barman with a splendid waistcoat.

It was then on to the Seacity Museum detailing the lives and the times of Southampton focusing on the city's Titanic story – it set sail from here on its fateful voyage – the port as a Gateway to the World and also The Pavilion, looking at local history.

We then completed a city wall walk – Southampton is home to

some of the longest surviving stretches of medieval walls in England – with volunteer, award-winning guide Ally Hayes of SEE Southampton.

The extensive tour is packed with interesting facts, figures and anecdotes.

They included the plunder of the town by French raiders one Sunday morning, the reclaiming of a sizeable chunk of seashore and the loss of a lion's tail from a major icon. It was vandalised when a reveller swung on it and it cracked. The offender was never caught.

Southampton is, of course, dominated by water with The Test – the chalk stream water, world famous for its trout fishing – and The Itchen flowing into Southampton Water.

Local enthusiasts are working hard at connecting more of the population with the water and we sailed out of the magnificent new Ocean Village Marina which is surrounded by a plush, ship-type designed hotel, trendy bars and restaurants and a cinema.

St Mary's, home of Southampton Football Club was clearly visible as we slipped under the Itchen Bridge and we then headed leisurely out towards the sea in full sail at five knots as the Isle of Wight Ferry (quick one 25 minutes) blasted past us.

The sun split the blue sky and we were in tee-shirts on April 1, it was that warm even in mid-channel.

Other sporting events in the city include a Marathon – very few hills – and a sailing event, both organised by locally-based Rees Leisure, a company run by Chris Rees, a swimmer, runner and sailor.

And the city will raise its profile significantly next year when they celebrate 400 years since the Mayflower set sail in 1620 for the New World. Major events are planned.

The ship was chartered by Pilgrims to escape religious oppression actually sailed from London to Southampton and then cast off to make the journey across The Atlantic. It apparently turned back because of a leak and docked in Plymouth and the two cities are still squabbling.

Pubs are also part of the culture and history. The Grapes in Oxford Street is famous as four crew members, including the three Slade brothers, had one too many and missed the sailing. Another we gem from the city tour.

Jane Austen's house is no more but a plaque on the Juniper Berry pub indicates where it was so there is much to see and do.

That is why tourism chiefs have upped their game to entice more visitors, particularly those on air routes like Scotland's Capital.

Southampton is only 90 minutes from Edinburgh. I breezed through the airport and into the comfortable seven-gate departure area and I found the trip well worth the effort.