



# A pilgrim in the city

A MINDFUL WALK IN AN URBAN SPACE IS AS CALMING AS IT IS ENLIGHTENING, SAYS CLARE GOGERTY. COMMUTING IT ISN'T!

**W**alking in the city is, for most of us, about getting somewhere: something to be endured to get to where we want to be. As a result, we tend to think of the activity of 'walking' as something to save for the weekend, for a country lane or a coastal path. Which is a shame: there is much to be gained from a stroll through the city, particularly if we walk there slowly and mindfully and if the destination is somewhere of significance. Make a pilgrimage across a city and it begins to reveal itself.

A city pilgrim becomes an active observer of places and people. Things that shoppers and commuters pass by with their heads down, you will notice. An architectural detail above a shop front; ivy pushing its way through a crack in a wall; a face at a coffee shop window: as you move forwards, the scenery constantly shifts. It can feel like walking through a film set. And

the best thing is you can do all of this anonymously: no one notices you in a city, but you can notice them en route. You become the observer.

## A NEIGHBOURHOOD PILGRIMAGE

You don't need to be in a city centre to experience an urban pilgrimage. If you live in a town or in the suburbs, walking through your own neighbourhood works just as well. Head for somewhere you haven't been before – a church, perhaps, or a wood – and make it the focus of your pilgrimage. As you walk, look at your surroundings as though you are new to the area and are seeing them for the first time.

## LUNCHTIME PILGRIMAGES

The temptation to grab a sandwich and eat it at your desk is hard to resist: but instead of sitting dormant in front of your computer, consider planning a mini-pilgrimage. Choose a place that you can walk to and



back from within an hour, and you will return to work revived (and maybe a little smug). Unlike your co-workers who have been glued to screens, you have been out and you have accomplished something.

Let the American poet Frank O'Hara be your inspiration. Without skipping lunch (his favourite meal), he liked to stroll around New York in his lunch hour. His observations, combined with what was going on his life at the time, informed his poetry, which is gathered together in *Lunch Poems*.

Writing poetry in your lunch hour may be a stretch, but a mini-pilgrimage could inspire you to be creative. Thoughts and ideas may come to you as you walk, which can be used as material for your own creative work. Here are some possibilities...

#### PILGRIMAGE DESTINATIONS IN THE CITY

**Wells** Although many ancient wells in cities have vanished, many still exist and, with a bit of sleuthing, can be found gushing from sides of roads or bubbling up inside specifically constructed buildings. Districts of the city with 'well' in their name provide obvious clues (the theatre at Sadler's Wells in London has incorporated the well into the building, for example), and old maps found in local history sections of libraries will point you in the right direction. Often they can be found near churches or churchyards or in parks. A quick internet search will reveal any near you.

**Churches, chapels and cathedrals** Step into a church and, whether you're a believer or not, you enter a cool, quiet place that is instantly calming. Hallowed, numinous places such as these make a welcome respite from the hurly-burly of the city outside. They are places to sit quietly and reflect. Also there is often much of interest to explore and admire, including the stained glass, the architecture and tombs of the great and the good. Light a candle when you're there to distil your thoughts or to remember a loved one: it always focuses the mind, whatever your beliefs. Easy to find and often overlooked, churches are well worth seeking out as the destination for a city pilgrimage. The bigger ones might even have relics of saints and be a traditional medieval pilgrimage church.

**Lost rivers** During the Victorian period, many of the rivers coursing through the UK's cities were used as open sewers. The smell and sanitation problems that arose resulted in these rivers being covered over and 'buried' beneath the streets. Traces of these 'lost' rivers can still be found, most notably in London. The best known is the river Fleet, which now flows underground from Hampstead and Highgate Ponds in north London to Blackfriars Bridge on the river Thames. Find other hidden rivers at local museums and see if you can follow their course above ground through the city to where they finally emerge. Alternatively, »



walk alongside the banks of a river – like the Mersey in Liverpool, the route of which crosses bridges and passes docks and piers – to the sea.

**Landmarks** To keep your pilgrimage meaningful and to avoid becoming one more snap-happy tourist, choose your city landmark carefully. Find one that resonates with you for a particular reason: this could be because of some family connection, or because its history fascinates you. Then walk to it, keeping it in mind as you do so. As you approach and it grows larger in your line of vision, it will have greater significance and the experience will be more memorable.

**Statues and monuments** Most cities and large towns have statues of people who've made a notable contribution locally. Many of these are of royalty, parliamentarians or religious and military figures, but there are others, too. Artists, poets, musicians and scientists can all be found frozen in time. In Manchester, there is a statue of computer scientist Alan Turing sitting on a bench in Sackville Park. Find one that has meaning to you, make your pilgrimage there, and reflect on that person's life and its inspiration.

**Squares** These pockets of traffic-free space in urban settings make a peaceful place to head on a city pilgrimage. Many are part of a larger town-planning

scheme and are surrounded by handsome terraces and have been planted with shady trees and flowering borders. Others have interesting histories: Coram's Fields in London was once the site of the Foundling Hospital established by Thomas Coram in 1739, where abandoned children were cared for. It's now a park for children to enjoy. The Place des Vosges in Paris is the oldest planned square in the city and is surrounded by trees and houses built in the Louis XIII-style of architecture, one of which houses the Victor Hugo Museum. Most cities have a similarly interesting squares. They also have benches for the weary pilgrim to rest and chomp on a bag of crisps.

**Parks** These welcome patches of greenery attract anyone wanting a restful place to pause. In Central Park, New York, you will find runners, strollers, sandwich eaters and yoga classes (and John Lennon's memorial 'Strawberry Fields' – a place of pilgrimage if ever there was one). Barrancas de Belgrano in Buenos Aires has a bandstand where local people dance tango. And Shinjuku Gyoen park in Tokyo turns a glorious pink in spring when the cherry trees burst into blossom. As a PS, another reason to head for a park is that they often have very fine cafés... **S**

*This is an extract from Beyond the Footpath: Mindful Adventures for Modern Pilgrims by our very own homes & gardens editor (and pilgrim), Clare Gogerty (Piatkus).*