

London village

Triumph of nice over naughty

BEN GURR FOR THE TIMES

As money moves in, Soho's seedy side is becoming a thing of the past, writes Francesca Steele

The death of Paul Raymond, the "King of Soho", two years ago was thought by many to signify the end of a Soho synonymous with the sex industry. After building up Soho Estates, the property company that now owns 60 of the 87 acres between Oxford Street and Shaftesbury Avenue, off the back of his porn empire, Raymond sold the management of his most famous stripclub in 1998. Today many of the peep shows and clip joints have given way to expensive rental property, chic wine bars and glass-clad office blocks popular with media types. That is not to say that the old attractions have disappeared completely, but with plenty of international money pouring into the area and developers looking around, the seedier side of "East Mayfair", as some agents call it, is on the way out.

Where is it?

Roughly a square mile slap bang in the centre of London, with Shaftesbury Avenue to the south, Regent Street to the west, Oxford Street to the north and Charing Cross Road to the east.

What is the property like?

A mixed bag of lovely 18th-century mews houses, brick flat conversions above shops and newbuild penthouses. Most is only available to rent because Soho Estates and Shaftesbury, the other big landholder, prefer to let. A grubby flat above a café will cost you from £700 a month. Something prettier or larger could be up to £2,500 a month, but that's still a lot cheaper than neighbouring Mayfair. When they do come up, you can buy one-beds from about £500,000, or refurbished ex-locals for a bit less. Many are quirky, with unconventional layouts, such as en suite kitchens. Greater London Properties (GLP) has a swanky



Respectable street? Developers and foreign money may be changing the face of Soho, but some of the area's traditional "attractions" are still in business

two-bedroom pad with a private roof terrace on Upper John Street for sale at £1.15 million. (www.greaterylondonproperties.co.uk; 020-7734 4062)

Who lives there?

A lot of gay couples — nearby Old Compton Street is London's gay-bar hotspot. The area is also popular with overseas students, hedge-fund managers with offices near by and, increasingly, bankers and lawyers working in the City. Celebs tend to prefer the relative privacy of nearby Mayfair, although Robert Pattinson did rent here several years ago before filming *Twilight*.

Is it safe?

These days, you aren't likely to encounter anything more than pickpocketing unless you are involved in the sex trade, although John James, the managing director of Soho Estates, admits that "certain pockets don't feel pleasant at times". Westminster City Council is understood to be in favour of converting office space to flats to replace late-night punters with permanent residents. Jonathan Glanz, of Westminster City Council, says: "Although it's good to see the seediest elements recede, it is the less conventional businesses in Soho that give it its character — many residents don't want to see them all disappear." Rob Hill, of GLP, says many

of the sex shops are disappearing because rents have risen while DVD sales fall because of cheaper internet alternatives.

What's new?

Firmdale, the owner of the new Soho Hotel on Dean Street, has bought Ham Yard just off Great Windmill Street and is building a mixed-use development, with space for a hotel, retail, art gallery and flats. There may be space available for emerging businesses to hire on subsidised rents. Soho Estates is about to submit plans for a scheme on Wardour Street to contain three or four two-bedroom flats.

Any green spaces and schools?

Not many, but Soho Square and Golden Square offer some leafy relief from the urban sprawl. Soho Parish primary is the only school.

How about food and bars?

There really is something for everyone, from the cheerful all-you-can eat Chinese buffets on Gerrard Street to the booked-out tables at the elegant Dean Street Townhouse restaurant. Polpo and Bocca di Lupo are rising stars on the foodie scene. Ronnie Scott's Jazz Club is a local staple, Madame Jojo's has cabaret nights and Floridita has salsa. Plenty of cheaper, cheesier options for night owls too.