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# London the Lionhearted

The best the city has to offer

WHETHER YOU REALIZE IT OR NOT, LONDON HAS AFFECTED YOUR DESTINY. There's hardly a quarter of the globe that it hasn't changed. The United States was founded in reaction to London's edicts. Australia was peopled with London's criminals and later, with settlers looking for a better life away from England's hardships. Modern Canada, South Africa, and New Zealand were cultivated from London. India's course was irrevocably changed by the aspirations of London businessmen, as were the lives of millions of Africans who were shipped around the world while Londoners lined their pockets with the profit. You're holding proof in your hands of London's pull: that you bought this very book, written in English somewhere other than in England, is evidence of London's reach across time and distance.

Although London is the world's city, it still has a distinct culture. Shopkeepers are respectfully standoffish and don't flatter their customers with effusive niceties. Strangers mind their own business, honoring the dearly held national mantra, "mustn't grumble." When you're in London, you know you're not home, yet it still feels strangely familiar. London never loses its sense of place or its livability. London is historical, but it's no inert museum.

London is inexhaustible. You could tour it for months and barely know it at all. Few cities are home to such a cross section of people living together in remarkable harmony. That diversity makes London like a cut diamond; approach it from a slightly different angle each day, and it takes on an entirely fresh shape and sheen.

That's the goal of this book: to encourage you to take one step sideways, off the beaten tourist track, and see the city from a different perspective. Don't see it only for its misty rains, its lilting accents, or its monumental buildings of stone. See it like a South Asian immigrant in East Ham, who spends Wednesday nights at the Bollywood movie house and worships in the largest Hindu temple outside of India. Or like the Jamaican-born Brixton resident

“*Much as I hate to agree with that tedious old git Samuel Johnson, and despite the pompous imbecility of his famous remark about when a man is tired of London he is tired of life (an observation exceeded in fatuousness only by 'Let a smile be your umbrella'), I can't dispute it.*”

—Bill Bryson, *Notes from a Small Island*

who spends each morning shopping for exotic greens at a street market that's been running for well over a century. See it like a twenty-something whose weekly highlights are the quiz night at the local pub and the Saturday breakfast at the local caff. Step sideways and see another London. And then another.

After all, their London is your London.

## THE SIGHTS YOU SIMPLY CAN'T MISS

For all the years during which London was the capital of a globe-spanning empire, treasures flowed into the city, so it possesses some of the finest collections of international art and antiquities on the planet. London deserves its reputation as an expensive city, but people overlook that its finest museums cost nothing to see: the relics of **The British Museum** (p. 134); the comprehensive holdings of **The National Gallery** (p. 143) and **The National Portrait Gallery** (p. 151); and the rare clothing, art, and decorative arts at the **Victoria and Albert Museum** (p. 148) are just four enormous collections, each of which could absorb you for an entire cost-free day.

London is also a nerve center for cutting-edge modern art, and the free display in the soaring industrial caverns of **The Tate Modern** (p. 145), on the bustling riverside promenade of Bankside, has quickly become a requisite stop during a visit. **The Saatchi Gallery** (p. 182), assembled by a renegade art fan, is a favorite for envelope-pushing ideas, and the world's top art aficionados convene on the many **galleries** (p. 182) and **auction houses** (p. 272) to augment their collections. Wealth has always created architectural showpieces: The distinctive two-level **Tower Bridge** (p. 184) over the River Thames was a great engineering feat of the Victorian era, and across town on the same water, the handsome observation wheel called the **London Eye** (p. 137) was embraced by the city quickly after its 1999 erection, proving that modern architecture can be just as iconic. The rounded tower at **30 St. Mary Axe**, nicknamed the Gherkin for its pickle-like profile, is the latest evolution on a skyline that, in recent years, has continuously reinvented itself.

As a magnet for the world's sophisticates, London has peerless **shopping areas** (including Oxford St., Regent St., Piccadilly, and King's Rd.), although given the power of the pound, you'll probably be more inclined to window-shop. London's **theaters** (p. 289) have been setting the aesthetic bar for more than 500 years. You won't have experienced the depth of London's culture without spending at least one night in front of one of its stages. You can also experience unique performances at **Shakespeare's Globe** (p. 296), a faithful re-creation of an Elizabethan theater, or at one of the city's many **comedy clubs** (p. 303), from which spring movie stars and household names. And, of course, the productions at the **Royal Opera House** (p. 301) are among the world's most acclaimed. To get around, take the city's **Underground** (p. 9), or Tube, parts of which opened as the world's first subway system in the 1860s; the Tube is a sight unto itself.

## THE FINEST HISTORICAL SIGHTS

Fortified with enough maps and books, you could find true tales that happened on virtually every corner in London, and a long ramble through its jumbled streets, soaking up the places where history happened, is an essential experience. Since the city was built before cars and trains, it's a true walker's town.

## London in a Nutshell

Population: 7.2 million (an eighth of the entire U.K. population)  
 Ethnicity: More than 25% ethnic, the largest non-white population of any European city  
 Languages spoken: More than 250  
 Annual salary, manual jobs: £21,000 (men), £19,000 (women)  
 Annual salary, non-manual jobs: £42,000 (men), £31,600 (women)  
 Area: 1,584 square kilometers/618 square miles (30% of that is parkland or open space)  
 Total English land area occupied by London: 1.2%  
 Source: Visit London

Many spots where bygone famous names conducted their business have been carefully preserved, and visiting some of these ancient sights, some of which are more than a millennium old, can boggle the mind and inspire the imagination. The world's most famous castle, **The Tower of London** (p. 140), has stood sentry on the Pool of London since 1068, and has been used as a keep, a prison, a zoo, and now as the repository for the legendary Crown Jewels. **Westminster Abbey** (p. 138) has been the location of every coronation since 1066, and is the final resting place of the bones of more than a dozen monarchs including the steely Elizabeth I. **St. Paul's Cathedral** (p. 150), in the oldest quarter of the city, has been a symbol of London since it was designed by the impossibly prolific Sir Christopher Wren in the late 1600s. Many royal homes are open for public inspection, including the ancient **Hampton Court Palace** (p. 160), **Windsor Castle** (p. 321), **Kensington Palace** (p. 159), and their junior sister, **Buckingham Palace** (p. 160).

The day-to-day operation of the United Kingdom is still undertaken around Whitehall, where the finely decorated **Houses of Parliament** (p. 186) are proclaimed by the clock tower containing the famous bell **Big Ben**. Nearby is the prime minister's home, **10 Downing Street** (p. 239), whose Georgian facade appears humble but actually masks a virtual citadel of power.

## DREAM ACCOMMODATIONS

Many visitors put off their dream trips to London simply because they don't think they can afford to go. Hotel costs usually take the blame. Yet the reality is that the least expensive places to stay often yield the most exciting visits. Many London residents maintain spare homes or rooms expressly for international visitors. Most are located in the same areas where the most popular hotels are found (p. 28).

One of the least expensive but most rewarding accommodation options is to rent a room in family-owned B&Bs, which are usually located in historic Georgian or Victorian town houses, complete with sweeping staircases and basement-level kitchens where the owners prepare you a hot breakfast as part of the bargain. The meal and the advice dispensed by your hosts—just politely ask for

what you need and let the friendship develop—will prepare you for the rigors of a day of touring. Three such home-grown inns are the **Jesmond Hotel** (p. 49), the **Alhambra Hotel** (p. 46), and **St. Margaret’s Hotel** (p. 50), all within walking distance of the West End. Your rooms will be clean and simple, but affordable, leaving you money to spend on what you came to do—see London.

For more cash, smartly designed **B+B Belgravia** (p. 77), **Twenty Nevern Square** (p. 59), **Hotel La Place** (p. 64), and **Number Sixteen** (p. 60) heighten the B&B concept with fashion-sensitive style that bridges the gap between a guesthouse and a hotel. If more traditional hotels are your preference, it’s possible to find a room within a sensible budget. **The Sanctuary House Hotel** (p. 80) and the **Southwark Rose** (p. 69) provide amenities you’d see in a more expensive corporate hotel but with more attentive management and for less money. A few chain hotel brands also provide comfortable rooms, spacious enough for families, at acceptable prices; if you stay at the **Premier Travel Inn London Southwark**, you’ll take your breakfast overlooking the Thames.

## DINING FOR EVERY TASTE

London’s cuisine reflects its diversity. Asian cooking is particularly prevalent, having supplanted fish and chips as England’s go-to casual meal. One of the best Indian meals of my life was served at the long-running **Punjab Restaurant** (p. 110) in Covent Garden, although I also appreciate the authentic Indian flavors of **Masala Zone** (p. 122). The all-you-can-eat vegetarian buffet at **Indian Veg Bhelpoori House** (p. 94) is one of the city’s greatest bargains.

Contemporary Southeast Asian is also in vogue; the communal wooden tables at the many locations of Chef Alan Yau’s **Wagamama** (p. 100) chain are terrific places to chat with strangers over a flavorful bowl of noodles, and Yau repeats the winning formula with his equally popular **Busaba Eathai** (p. 106). Hip Asian is also served in style at **Ping Pong** (dim sum, p. 107), and **Hare & Tortoise** (Malaysian, p. 89), two places where you’d be as happy to be seen as to be sated. Vegetarian dining is something carnivores and herbivores alike appreciate, and you’ll always find a crowd at **Govinda’s Restaurant** (p. 104), student hangout **Food for Thought** (p. 109), and the diner-like **Eat and Two Veg** (p. 100).

Of course, traditional meals are back in fashion, and you’ll be hard-pressed to find a table where English cuisine’s dowdy reputation is upheld. **S&M Café** (p. 114) celebrates sausage; **The Fryer’s Delight** (p. 114) is perhaps the prototypical “hippie” making fish and chips. **Frontline** (p. 124), a hangout for foreign correspondents, typifies the current trend toward upscale versions of comfort food that a British mum might prepare. Combating the high price of sit-down meals, the **triangle sandwich** (p. 92) is the ubiquitous London lunch, consumed on the go by seemingly everyone. And the so-called “beigels” of Spitalfield’s 24-hour **Beigel Bake** (p. 113) are the unique missing link between the Polish originals and the breadier “bagels” of North America.

## THE BEST SPORTS & “OTHER” EXPERIENCES

Londoners revel in learning and in sharing experiences—call it another byproduct of a city raised on diversity. Be one of them. Take a chance and leap out of the tourist rut so that you can experience what London life is really like. Kibbutz with

East End salt of the earth at the Victorian steam baths of **York Hall Leisure Centre** (p. 218) or with Marylebone doyennes at the ritzy **Porchester Spa** (p. 218); delve into deep topics at a scientific discussion at **The Dana Centre** (p. 200); or dig around in the sediment of the river for buried treasure with **Thames21** (p. 205). Hear one of the world's great choirs at a service at **Westminster Cathedral** (p. 210) and one of the world's best organs at **Brompton Oratory** (p. 210). In a city full of ghosts, hold a séance for spirits in the creaky old town house owned by the **Spiritualist Association of Great Britain** (p. 212).

Britain exports its soccer players around the world, and there are fewer pursuits more integral to an Englishman's sporting life than attending a British **football match** (p. 228); or a **cricket match at the Oval** (p. 230). Some little-known museums live on the margins of your normal experience: Spend the evening in the **Dennis Severs House** (p. 164), a thoroughly authentic 19th-century town house whose sights, sounds, and smells trick visitors into believing they have gone back in time. Despite their reserved appearances, Londoners relish a bit of irreverent nose-tweaking, and you can join in on that, too: Dress up as a nun and talk back to the silver screen at the **Sing-a-Long-a *The Sound of Music*** (p. 216); give the universe a what for at **Speaker's Corner** (p. 202); drink away your Sunday with a British brew at one of the countless pub roasts (p. 214); or go on a graffiti safari for work by the maverick artist **Banksy** (p. 185).