

# The Best of London

**T**he British capital is alive and well and culturally more vibrant than it has been in years. The sounds of Brit-pop and techno pour out of Victorian pubs, experimental theater is popping up on stages built for Shakespeare's plays, upstart chefs are reinventing the bland dishes British mums have made for generations, and Brits are even running the couture houses of Dior and Givenchy. In food, fashion, film, music, and just about everything else, London now stands at the cutting edge, just as it did in the 1960s.

If this sea of change worries you more than it appeals to you, rest assured that traditional London still exists, essentially intact under the veneer of hip. From high tea almost anywhere to the Changing of the Guard at Buckingham Palace, the city still abounds with the tradition and charm of days gone by.

Discovering London and making it your own can be a bit of a challenge, especially if you have limited time. Even in the 18th century, Daniel Defoe found London "stretched out in buildings, straggling, confused, out of all shape, uncompact and unequal; neither long nor broad, round nor square." The actual City of London proper is 2.6 sq. km (1 sq. mile) of very expensive real estate around the Bank of England. All of the gargantuan rest of the city is made up of separate villages, boroughs, and corporations—each with its own mayor and administration. Together, however, they add up to a mammoth metropolis.

Luckily, whether you're looking for Dickens's house or hot designer Vivienne Westwood's flagship store, only the heart of London's huge territory need concern you. The core of London is one of the most fascinating places on earth. With every step, you'll feel the tremendous influence this city exerted over global culture back when it was the capital of an empire on which the sun never set.

London is a mass of contradictions. On the one hand, it's a decidedly royal city, studded with palaces, court gardens, coats of arms, and other regal paraphernalia, yet it's also the home of the world's second-oldest parliamentary democracy (Iceland was the first).

Today London has grown less English and more international. The gent with the bowler hat is long gone; today's Londoner might have a turban, a Mohawk, or even a baseball cap. It's becoming easier to find a café au lait and a croissant than a scone and a cup of tea. The city is home to thousands of immigrants and refugees, both rich and poor, from all reaches of the world.

## 1 The Most Unforgettable Travel Experiences

- **Watching the Sunset at Waterloo Bridge:** This is the ideal place for watching the sun set over Westminster. You can see the last rays of light bounce off the dome of St. Paul's and the spires in the East End.

- **Enjoying a Traditional Afternoon Tea:** At The Ritz hotel, 150 Piccadilly, W1 (☎ 020/7493-8181; p. 105), the tea ritual carries on as it did in Britain's heyday. You could invite the Queen of England herself here for a "cuppa." The pomp and circumstance of the British Empire live on at The Ritz—only the Empire is missing. See p. 201.
  - **Cruising London's Waterways:** In addition to the Thames, London has an antique canal system, with tow-path walks, bridges, and wharves. Replaced by the railroad as the prime means of transportation, the canal system was all but forgotten until it was rediscovered by a new generation. Now undergoing a process of urban renewal, the old system has been restored, with bridges painted and repaired, and paths cleaned up, for you to enjoy. See "River Cruises along the Thames," on p. 256.
  - **Spending Sunday Morning at Speakers Corner:** At the northeast corner of Hyde Park, a British tradition carries on. Speakers sound off on every imaginable subject, and "in-your-face" hecklers are part of the fun. You might hear anything from denunciations of the monarchy to antigay rhetoric. Anyone can get up and speak. The only rules: You can't blaspheme, be obscene, or incite a riot. The tradition began in 1855—before the legal right to assembly was guaranteed in 1872—when a mob of 150,000 gathered to attack a proposed Sunday Trading Bill. See p. 254.
  - **Studying the Turners at the Tate Britain:** When he died in 1851, J. M. W. Turner bequeathed his collection of 19,000 watercolors and some 300 paintings to the people of Britain. He wanted his finished works, about 100 paintings, displayed under one roof. Today you see not only the paintings
- but also glimpses of Turner's beloved Thames through the museum's windows. The artist lived and died on the river's banks and painted its many changing moods. See p. 218.
- **Strolling through Covent Garden:** George Bernard Shaw got his inspiration for *Pygmalion* here, where the cockney lass who inspired the character of Eliza Doolittle sold violets to wealthy opera-goers. The old market, with its cauliflower peddlers and butchers in blood-soaked aprons, is long gone. What's left is London's best example of urban renewal and one of its hippest shopping districts. There's an antiques market on Monday and a crafts market Tuesday through Saturday. See p. 292 for market details. When you're parched, there are plenty of pubs to quench your thirst, including the **Nag's Head**, 10 James St., WC2 (☎ 020/7836-4678; p. 314), an Edwardian pub that'll serve you a draft of Guinness and a plate of pork cooked in cider.
  - **Rowing on the Serpentine:** When the weather's right, we head to Hyde Park's 17-hectare (42-acre) man-made lake—the name derives from its winding, snakelike shape—dating from 1730. At the Boathouse, you can rent boats by the hour. It's an idyllic way to spend a sunny afternoon. Renoir must have agreed; he depicted the custom on canvas. See p. 253.
  - **Making a Brass Rubbing:** Take home some costumed ladies and knights in armor from England's age of chivalry. Make your very own brass rubbing in the crypt of St. Martin-in-the-Fields in Trafalgar Square; the staff there will be happy to show you how. See p. 230.
  - **Getting to Know North London on a Sunday:** Begin by looking for some smart fashion at **Camden Market**

(p. 294), a Sunday event on Camden High Street where stallholders hawk designer jewelry and clothing. Next, walk up to Hampstead Heath off Well Walk and take the right fork, which leads to an open field with a panoramic view of London. Cap your jaunt with a visit to the **Freud Museum** (p. 260), open on Sunday until 5pm. See “Attractions on the Outskirts,” on p. 258, for more information on North London.

- **Dining at Rules:** Rules, at 35 Maiden Lane, WC2 (☎ 020/7836-5314), was established as an oyster bar in 1798; it may be the oldest restaurant in London. Long a venue for the theatrical elite and literary beau monde, it still serves the same dishes that delighted Edward VII and his mistress, Lillie Langtry, who began their meals with champagne and oysters upstairs. Charles Dickens had a regular table. If you're looking for an old-fashioned British dessert, finish off with the treacle sponge or apple suet pudding. See p. 160.

- **Spending an Evening at the Theater:** London is the theatrical capital of the world. The live stage offers a unique combination of variety, accessibility, and economy—and maybe a look at next season's Broadway hit. See “The Play's the Thing: London's Theater Scene,” on p. 295.
- **Crawling the London Pubs:** Americans bar-hop; Londoners pub-crawl. With some 5,000 pubs within the city limits, you would certainly be crawling if you tried to have a drink in each of them! We have suggested the traditional pubs we think will make a worthwhile crawl in “The Best of London's Pubs: The World's Greatest Pub Crawl,” on p. 309. While making the rounds, you can partake of that quintessentially British fare known as “pub grub,” which could be anything from a ploughman's lunch (a hunk of bread, cheese, and a pickle) to shepherd's pie, to nouveau British cuisine. Today, in the right places, some of that pub grub tastes better than the fare served in many restaurants.

## 2 The Best Splurge Hotels

- **Covent Garden Hotel,** 10 Monmouth St., WC2 (☎ 800/553-6674 in the U.S. and Canada, or 020/7806-1000; www.firmdale.com): Once a hospital, this deluxe citadel of fine living is one of London's most charming boutique hotels, lying in one of the West End's hippest shopping districts. *Travel + Leisure* has pronounced it one of the 25 hottest addresses in the world. See p. 101.
- **One Aldwych,** 1 Aldwych, WC2 (☎ 800/745-8883 in the U.S. and Canada, or 020/7300-1000; www.onealdwych.co.uk): Once the headquarters for the London *Morning Post* at the turn of the 20th century, this luxe hotel, granted five stars by

the government, attracts the fashionistas of London to its noble precincts. You're coddled in comfort here. See p. 101.

- **St. Martins Lane,** 45 St. Martin's Lane, WC2 (☎ 800/697-1791 in the U.S. and Canada, or 020/7300-5500; www.stmartinslane.com): This Covent Garden hotel was once a dull 1960s office building—now it's on the cutting edge, with its eccentric, irreverent design and whimsical touches. Refugees from New York or Los Angeles will feel at home in this ultra-sophisticated environment with state-of-the-art amenities. See p. 101.
- **The Sanderson,** 50 Berners St., W1 (☎ 800/697-1791 in the U.S. and

Canada, or 020/7300-1400; www.sandersonlondon.com): Deep in the heart of Soho, this winning choice provides a hip New York–style scene: Its owners call it an “ethereal, transparent urban spa.” Everything is here, from a lush bamboo-filled roof garden to a restaurant under the general supervision of Alain Ducasse, hailed by some as the world’s greatest chef. See p. 104.

- **41**, 41 Buckingham Palace Rd., SW1 (© 877/955-1515 in the U.S. and Canada, or 020/7300-0041; www.41hotel.com): Admittedly an offbeat choice in this category, this well-placed gem offers a touch of class and one of the most prestigious addresses in London (even the queen uses the

road as her mailing address). Evoking the atmosphere of a private club, it offers individually designed bedrooms with luxurious touches, modern amenities, and spoil-you-rotten service. See p. 112.

- **The Milestone**, 1 Kensington Court, W8 (© 877/955-1515 in the U.S. and Canada, or 020/7917-1000; www.milestonehotel.com): In the Royal Borough of Kensington, this boutique hotel of charm and grace is installed in a converted Victorian town house across the street from Kensington Palace, where the late Princess Diana used to live. From luxurious beds to marble bathrooms, The Milestone is richly imbued with luxury. See p. 120.

### 3 The Best Moderately Priced Hotels

- **Windermere Hotel**, 142–144 Warwick Way, SW1 (© 020/7834-5163; www.windermere-hotel.co.uk): Near Victoria Station, this award-winning small hotel, in a converted Victorian building from 1857, is imbued with English character and comfort. Rooms come in various sizes, some large enough to accommodate three or four overnighters, making them suitable for families. See p. 114.
- **Willett Hotel**, 32 Sloane Gardens, SW1 (© 800/270-9206 in the U.S. and Canada, or 020/7824-8415; www.eeh.co.uk): Right off Sloane Square, deep in the heart of chic Chelsea, this hotel dates from the reign of Edward VII. It has been completely modernized and brought up to date and lies only a 5-minute walk from the turned-on shopping mecca called King’s Road. See p. 122.
- **The Gallery**, 8–10 Queensberry Place, SW7 (© 800/270-9206 in the U.S. and Canada, or 020/7915-0000; www.eeh.co.uk): This exclusive little town house in South Kensington is

composed of two splendid former Georgian private residences that have been successfully converted to receive paying guests, who are housed in comfort. Bedrooms are romantically decorated in the Laura Ashley style, with half-canopied beds and marble-tiled bathrooms. See p. 124.

- **Hart House Hotel**, 51 Gloucester Place, Portman Square, W1 (© 020/7935-2288; www.harthouse.co.uk): In the fashionable West End district of Marylebone, this historic building is one of a group of Georgian mansions occupied by exiled French nobles during the Revolution. Today it is one of London’s better small hotels, within walking distance of many theaters and offering bedrooms of comfort and character. See p. 127.
- **Lincoln House Hotel**, 33 Gloucester Place, W1 (© 020/7486-7630; www.lincoln-house-hotel.co.uk): Built during the reign of King George II, this successfully converted town house lies only a 5-minute walk from Marble Arch in the center of London.

Bedrooms are traditionally furnished and full of comfort and character. See p. 130.

- **St. George Hotel**, 49 Gloucester Place, W1 (☎ 020/7486-8586; www.stgeorge-hotel.net): This privately owned hotel in a restored Georgian

building overlooks one of London's most famous squares, Gloucester Square. A short walk from Oxford and Baker streets, the latter of Sherlock Holmes fame, it offers comfortably refurbished bedrooms that are well maintained. See p. 130.

#### 4 The Most Unforgettable Dining Experiences

- **St. John**, 26 St. John St., EC1 (☎ 020/7251-0848): In a former smokehouse north of Smithfield Market, this is London's major venue for serious carnivores. Chef Fergus Henderson is England's biggest devotee of offal cuisine—meaning “nose-to-tail cookery.” This earthy food obviously will not appeal to vegetarians, but it would delight a reincarnated Henry VIII. See p. 150.
- **Fifteen**, 15 West Land Place, W1 (☎ 0871/330-1515; www.fifteen.restaurant.com): In Shoreditch, the author of *The Naked Chef*, James Oliver, takes “disadvantaged” young people and trains them from scratch. In just 4 months, they are tempting you with their modern British cuisine as chefs of the day. Amazingly, the food you're served is praiseworthy, even attracting some of London's Michelin-starred chefs. See p. 151.
- **Simpson's-in-the-Strand**, 100 the Strand, WC2 (☎ 020/7836-9112): At least once forsake London's trendy restaurants and dine as Sir Winston did back in the post-war '50s when he was prime minister. It's partaking of “The Deadly Sins” to dine here: roast sirloin of beef; steak, kidney, and mushroom pie; and roast saddle

of mutton with red currant jelly. See p. 160.

- **Gordon Ramsay at Claridge's**, Brook Street, W1 (☎ 020/7499-0099): We'd cast our vote for Ramsay as the hottest and most talented chef in London today. In the city's swankiest hotel, he dazzles serious international foodies with his take on modern Continental cuisine using, for the most part, British products. Close your eyes and point to any item on the menu—chances are, you'll be delighted. See p. 172.
- **Sketch**, 9 Conduit St., W1 (☎ 087/0777-4488; www.sketch.uk.com): Hailed by the British press as a “camp wonderland,” this is a restaurant, tearoom, art gallery, bar, and patisserie. There is no more chic joint at which you could be at night. The Continental and modern British cuisine is divine as well. See p. 174.
- **Club Gascon**, 57 W. Smithfield, EC1 (☎ 020/7796-0600): Chef Pascal Aussignac is all the rage, bringing a corner of southwestern France to London—and that spells Armagnac, foie gras, and duck confit. This bistro stands next to the famous meat market in Smithfield, and it's the best place in town for a foie gras pig out. See p. 148.

#### 5 The Best Museums

- **British Museum**, Great Russell Street, WC1 (☎ 020/7323-8299; www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk): When Sir Hans Sloane died in 1753, he bequeathed

to England his vast collection of art and antiquities. This formed the nucleus of a huge collection that's come to include such remarkable

objects as the Rosetta Stone and the Parthenon sculptures (which Greece wants back). See p. 208.

- **National Gallery**, Trafalgar Square, WC2 (☎ 020/7747-2885; www.nationalgallery.org.uk): One of the world's greatest collections of Western art—from Leonardo da Vinci to Rembrandt to Picasso—dazzles the eye at this museum. The gallery is especially rich in Renaissance works. See p. 215.
- **Tate Britain**, Millbank, SW1 (☎ 020/7887-8888; www.tate.org.uk): Sir Henry Tate, a sugar producer, started it all with 70 or so paintings. The collection grew considerably when artist J. M. W. Turner bequeathed some 300 paintings and 19,000 watercolors to England upon his death. Having handed International Modernism over to the Tate Modern, the Tate Britain now concentrates on British work dating back to 1500. See p. 218.
- **Victoria and Albert Museum**, Cromwell Road, SW7 (☎ 020/7942-2000; www.vam.ac.uk): This is the greatest decorative arts museum in the world, boasting the largest collection

of Renaissance sculpture outside Italy. It is also strong on medieval English treasures and has the greatest collection of Indian art outside India. See p. 222.

- **Gilbert Collection**, Somerset House, the Strand, WC2 (☎ 020/7240-9400; www.gilbert-collection.org.uk): This is the permanent home of the Gilbert Collection of decorative arts, one of the most important bequests ever left to the state. The exhibition of some 800 objects in gold, silver, and mosaics, and gold snuffboxes—collected by Sir Arthur Gilbert—is hailed as one of the greatest in the world; its silver collection rivals that of the Victoria and Albert Museum. See p. 245.
- **Science Museum**, Exhibition Road, SW7 (☎ 087/0870-4868; www.sciencemuseum.org.uk): The collection here of scientific artifacts is among the largest, most significant, and most comprehensive in the world. Everything is here, from King George III's collection of scientific instruments in the 18th century to the *Apollo 10* space module. See p. 251.

## 6 The Best Activities for Families

- **Sightseeing**: London is filled with attractions that appeal to young and old—take **Madame Tussaud's** wax museum (p. 249), that all-time favorite. There's more: everything from **London's Transport Museum** to the **National Army Museum** (p. 250) and, of course, the **Natural History Museum** (p. 250). A cruise along the Thames (see “River Cruises along the Thames,” on p. 256) is a great way to spend an afternoon, as is a trip to the **London Zoo** (p. 269).
- **Trips Out of London**: Board a riverboat for a **cruise to Greenwich**

(p. 256), with its **National Maritime Museum** and other amusements. Part of the fun is getting there. In Greenwich you'll find many attractions, including the **Old Royal Observatory**. See “Greenwich,” under “Attractions on the Outskirts,” on p. 262.

- **Royal London**: No kid wants to leave London without a visit to the **Tower of London** (p. 220). And, of course, children will want to see the **Changing of the Guard** (p. 212). For castles that evoke Disney, take them on a trip to **Windsor Castle** (p. 320) or **Hampton Court Palace** (p. 264).

- **Playgrounds:** London brims with parks, nicknamed “green lungs,” including **Regent’s Park**, with its two boating lakes, one just for children. An afternoon in sprawling **Hampstead Heath** (see “Hampstead,” under “Attractions on the Outskirts,” on p. 259) can fill enjoyable hours, as can a stroll through **Kensington Gardens**, with its playgrounds. **Battersea Park** has a small children’s zoo

and adventure playground. For more information on **Regent’s Park**, **Kensington Gardens**, and **Battersea Park**, see “Parks & Gardens,” under “More Central London Attractions,” on p. 253.

- **Entertainment:** London has a number of theaters designed for children, notably **Little Angel Theatre**, which hosts regular visiting puppeteers. The minimum age is 3. See p. 268.

## 7 The Best Things to Do for Free (or Almost)

- **Visit Museums:** London’s greatest museums are now free. The world-class treasure troves where you can now roam without charge include the British Museum, National Gallery, National Portrait Gallery, Tate Britain, Tate Modern, Natural History Museum, Science Museum, Victoria and Albert Museum, Museum of London, and Sir John Soane’s Museum. And don’t forget the British Library, with its marvelous collection of literary gems. See chapter 8 for listings.
- **Watch the Changing of the Guard:** This Buckingham Palace event has more pomp and circumstance than any other royal ceremony on earth. See p. 212.
- **Explore Hampstead Heath:** Take the Tube north to Hampstead for the most delightful ramble in London, following in the footsteps of Keats and other luminaries. The heath’s near-wilderness feel is a delicious contrast to London’s other manicured parks. Drop in later for a pint at a local pub.
- **Take in a Spectacular City View:** Take the Tube to Tower Hill or Tower

Gateway, then cross Tower Bridge. Wander along the South bank of the mighty Thames at night and gaze upon London’s historic landmarks and skyscrapers, floodlit in all their evening spectacle.

- **Soak Up the Scene in Regent’s Park:** Once the exclusive hunting grounds of royalty, it’s now used by everyone from footballers to barefoot couples in summer. Regent’s Park is home to the London Zoo, the Open Air Theatre’s Shakespeare in the Park, the Prince Regent’s original grand terraces, and Queen Mary’s rose gardens. See p. 254.
- **Go to Court at the Old Bailey Public Gallery, Warwick Passage:** Britain’s Central Criminal Court, or the “Old Bailey,” was built on the foundations of the infamous Newgate Gaol. These courtrooms have seen it all, from Oscar Wilde to the Yorkshire Ripper (but never Jack). Robed and bewigged barristers and judges still administer justice with much formality and theatricality. See p. 238.