

Chapter 1

Discovering the Best of London

In This Chapter

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So, you're going to London. Gives you a thrill just thinking about it, right? The capital of the United Kingdom is one of the world's top destinations, visited year-round by millions from all corners of the globe. In fact, international travel surveys consistently rank London as one of the most popular holiday destinations in the world. After you arrive, you'll be making your way through one of the most historic, cultured, and exciting cities on Earth. You have every reason to feel a tingle of anticipation.

This chapter gives you an at-a-glance reference to the absolute best — the best of the best — that London has to offer. In the categories that I outline, you'll find some of the things that make visiting London so much fun and so endlessly fascinating. I discuss each of these places in detail later in this book; you can find them in their indicated chapters, marked with a Best of the Best icon.

The Best Places to Soak Up London's History

The great historic landmarks in London never fail to stir the imagination: They've been witness to so much — from glorious triumphs to bloody tragedies — that it's almost impossible to remain unmoved when visiting them. In Chapter 11, you'll find more details on London's top attractions; here are my picks for the best of the best:

- ✔ An almost perceptible aura of legend pervades the **Tower of London**, which was built over 900 years ago. When visiting the Tower, you tread the ground where the great dramas and terrors of

a turbulent kingdom were played out, where Elizabeth I was held captive while still a princess, and where Sir Thomas More and Anne Boleyn (second wife of Henry VIII and mother of the future Elizabeth I) were beheaded.

- ✔ No less venerable is **Westminster Abbey**, a magnificent Gothic church that ranks as the most historically significant religious structure in England. Stepping into Westminster Abbey, you enter the place where England's kings and queens have been crowned since William the Conqueror claimed the throne in 1066 and where some of England's greatest figures are buried or memorialized.
- ✔ Many of London's most historic sites are or were royal domains, and royal watching is a sport almost as popular as horse racing. Okay, so you're probably not going to get invited to the queen's garden party, but you can see where those famous parties take place — and stroll through the royal staterooms — by visiting **Buckingham Palace**, the queen's London residence and a seat of today's royal power and intrigue.
- ✔ If you missed the Changing of the Guard at Buckingham Palace or want another dose of that royal pomp and pageantry, **Windsor Castle** is less than an hour away. Reputedly the queen's favorite castle, Windsor has a 900-year history that stretches back to the time of William the Conqueror. Many of the rooms that you visit today were remodeled in the time of Queen Victoria.
- ✔ **Hampton Court Palace** is one of the most magnificent of former royal palaces, and you can easily get there in 30 minutes by train from Central London (or, more romantically, by taking a boat on the Thames). In addition to visiting dozens of staterooms in this 16th-century Tudor palace where Henry VIII once resided, you can enjoy the splendid gardens with their famous maze.
- ✔ Although you can't see the rooms where the late Princess Diana actually lived, you can get into her former home, **Kensington Palace**, situated at the western side of Kensington Gardens. In addition to the vast, visitable staterooms, this mostly 18th-century palace, where Victoria was born in 1819, houses a remarkable costume exhibit that includes royal raiment through the ages.
- ✔ Occupying a spot right on the River Thames, the **Houses of Parliament** and their landmark clock tower containing Big Ben have been a familiar sight to Londoners for over 150 years. In the summer, fascinating tours of this seat of power let you see the House of Commons and the House of Lords. Or you can just admire the buildings from the outside and wait for the hourly boom of Big Ben.
- ✔ **St. Paul's Cathedral**, with its landmark dome, is dear to the hearts of Londoners and is used for events of national significance. A masterpiece by the architect Sir Christopher Wren, the cathedral was built following the Great Fire that swept through London in 1666.

Pomp, ceremony, and scandal: The royals

In London, the royals are spied on the way movie stars are in the United States. The paparazzi furor lessened a bit after Princess Diana's death, but it still exists.

I never gave much thought to royalty, except as a footnote to history, until one day, years ago, when I was passing St. James's Palace and saw Princess Diana and Princess Anne being hustled into a waiting limo. There they were, two princesses, going about the mysterious routines of royalty. I saw them for maybe three seconds and stood there like a slack-jawed yokel as the limo pulled away.

From the queen on down, the monarchy is a huge business (they actually call themselves "**The Firm**"), and you can't avoid it. Buy a London paper any day in London, and you can find some juicy tidbit about Prince Charles, his new wife Camilla Parker-Bowles (the Duchess of Cornwall), Prince William, Prince Andrew, Prince Harry, Princess Anne, or some other member of The Firm. (I provide a few juicy items of my own in this book with my London Tattler asides.)

The Best Museums

If you're a dedicated museum maven, London's selection will keep you going for days, weeks, months, even years. This city is loaded with every conceivable kind of treasure from all over the world. And, amazingly enough, entrance to all the great national museums is free. You can read more about all of London's top museums in Chapter 11; the following are the best of the best:

- ✔ The venerable **British Museum**, with its unparalleled collection of antiquities, comes out on top — the magnificent Parthenon sculptures (formerly called the Elgin Marbles) understandably hold pride of place there, but you'll be amazed by the superlative Egyptian and Roman collections, as well as the ancient treasures found in England.
- ✔ The **National Gallery** houses the nation's greatest collection of British and European paintings from the 13th to the 20th centuries. Here, you find works by Italian masters, such as Leonardo da Vinci and Raphael; canvases by every great French Impressionist; a stunning Rembrandt collection; and paintings by great British artists, such as Turner and Constable.
- ✔ If you tire of the great Western European masterworks hanging in the National Gallery, you can walk next door to see images of pop icons like Elton John and Princess Di in the **National Portrait Gallery**. Here, you'll find a visual who's who of every famous Brit in history, captured in paint, stone, bronze, and photographs.
- ✔ Keen on decorative and applied arts? Then head over to the **Victoria & Albert Museum**, a linchpin in the cluster of great South

Kensington museums. The V&A, as it's called, houses wonderfully decorated period rooms, a comprehensive fashion collection, Italian Renaissance sculpture, and acres more.

- ✓ The other two outstanding museums in South Kensington are the **Natural History Museum** and the **Science Museum**. Animatronic dinosaurs, including a hungry *T. rex*, are the cold-blooded stars in the Natural History Museum's famed dinosaur exhibit, but while you're there, check out the mind-boggling collection of gems. In the Science Museum, you come face to face with legends from the world of science and technology.
- ✓ London's South Bank is buzzing with the addition of the stunning **Tate Modern**. Housed in a former power station on the river, the museum exhibits an international roster of contemporary greats.
- ✓ **Tate Britain** holds the world's greatest collection of British art. Wander through rooms filled with works by William Blake, Turner, Hogarth, Sir Joshua Reynolds, Constable, and all the pre-Raphaelites.
- ✓ London lovers will love the **Museum of London**, probably the world's most comprehensive city museum, which features an amazing collection of Roman antiquities (the museum incorporates part of a 2,000-year-old Roman wall) and tells the fascinating story of London through the ages.
- ✓ You can also enjoy masterpieces in museums that were built as private palaces, such as **Spencer House**, former home of Princess Diana's family; **Apsley House**, home of the first Duke of Wellington; and **Hertford House**, home of the Wallace Collection, a national museum.

The Best of British Cuisine

Once upon a time, you could always count on getting lousy meals in London. The nation's dull, insular, uninspired cooking was the joke of Europe. That reputation began to change in the 1980s, with the influx of new cooking trends that favored foods from France and Italy. Since then, London has become a food capital (allegedly with more Michelin-starred restaurants than Paris). For a handy reference guide to English cuisine, see the Cheat Sheet at the front of this book. You can find all of my top London restaurants in Chapter 10; here are my picks for the best the London dining scene has to offer:

- ✓ London is the best place to find restaurants serving inventive Modern British cuisine. Reserve a table at **Rules**, **The Ivy**, **Langan's Bistro**, **Veronica's**, **The Oratory**, or **Boxwood Café** — to name just a few — and let your taste buds do the talking.
- ✓ Traditionalists need not despair: All those wonderful old English faves are still around — eggs, kippers, beans, and fried tomatoes

for breakfast; bubble and squeak; roast beef and Yorkshire pudding; meat pies; fish and chips; toad in the hole; cottage pie; sticky toffee pudding; and trifle. You'll find the old English comfort foods at pubs and restaurants such as **The Stockpot**, **Founders Arms**, **Simpson's-in-the-Strand**, **Porter's English Restaurant**, and many others.

- ✔ Some would say that Indian cooking is the new national cuisine of England. Well, it's certainly one of multiethnic London's faves, and Indian restaurants are often far more affordable than your other options. Like other cuisines, Indian cooking in England has been undergoing many transformations. **Veeraswamy** is the oldest Indian restaurant in London, but the interior is cool and contemporary. You can also find great Indian cooking at **Mela** and **Noor Jahan**.
- ✔ If French cooking is your idea of heaven, you won't lack for dining options in London. Both traditional and nouvelle French restaurants remain alive and well. You may want to try the classiest of them all, **Aubergine**; other choices include **Oxo Tower Brasserie**, with its stunning river views, **Criterion Bar & Grill**, and **Brasserie St. Quentin**.
- ✔ And don't forget that London boasts more ethnic restaurants than anywhere else in the United Kingdom, so almost any kind of cuisine can be on the tip of your tongue. For delectable tapas and Spanish/Moroccan food, go to **Moro**. For slurpy and superlative Japanese noodles, head for **Wagamama**. At **Ken Lo's Memories of China**, you can feast on food inspired by a Chinese master chef. For fresh New Zealand mussels and the most delicious New Zealand dessert, known as Pavlova, **Suze in Mayfair** is your best bet.

The Best Places to Shop in London

It's not just my credit cards talking: I'm here to tell you that London is one of the world's great shopping cities — possibly the greatest. Why? The sheer variety of what's available.

Trend-setting London is to the United Kingdom what New York City is to the United States: the place where it happens first (or ultimately ends up). London is where you can eyeball what's hot, British style. You see the latest hard-core street fashions side by side with the quintessentially traditional.

Not into new? In London, you can hunt for an old engraving, try on a cocktail dress from the '50s, paw through bric-a-brac at an outdoor market stall, or wander through the London silver vaults in your quest for a Georgian soup ladle.

For my complete rundown of London shopping, see Chapter 12; below are some hints on finding London's best stores and shopping districts:

- ✓ Is **Harrods** the most famous department store in the world? Quite possibly so. See for yourself if it deserves all the hype. And be sure to visit the Food Halls.
- ✓ **Fortnum & Mason** is the queen's London grocer, and it's probably the only store in the world where you'll see cans of soup displayed on wooden shelves along carpeted aisles. Other departments include china, crystal, leather, antiques, and stationery — plus, you can dine at the store's famous restaurants.
- ✓ Shopaholics hold **Oxford Street** in very high regard. Lined with major department stores like **Selfridges** and **Marks & Spencer**, and chockablock with dozens upon dozens of moderate to upscale shops, it's a rendezvous point for shoppers of all ages from all over the world. Motto: Big Names, Reasonable Prices.
- ✓ **Knightsbridge** is a flash-and-cash point of the highest order, home of the aforementioned Harrods, the smaller **Harvey Nichols**, and a lot of luxurious designer boutiques where real and wannabe aristocrats shop for "the season."
- ✓ Time and money just fly when you visit the super-chic boutiques of **Covent Garden**, **Bond Street**, and **King's Road** in Chelsea. In these certified shopping zones, you can find everything a true fashionista could ever want.
- ✓ Hidden away from the hoi polloi, the 200-year-old shops on **Jermyn Street** cater to traditionalists who want the finest goods available. Many of the shops on Jermyn Street have *Royal Warrants* — that is, they're allowed to advertise that they sell to the royal family. Look for custom-made shirts and suits, hand-tooled leather shoes, and fabulous toiletry shops, such as **Floris** and **Tailors of Old Bond Street**.
- ✓ What reader wouldn't be tempted by the wonderland of bookstores on **Charing Cross Road**? It's a reader's feast and a browser's paradise, with major U.K. independent bookstores like **W & G Foyle**, major U.K. chains like **Waterstone's**, and smaller specialized bookstores like **Murder One** all represented.

The Best of London's Performing Arts

London is a world capital, and that includes being a world capital of the performing arts. When the sun goes down, the curtain comes up. For a description of London's major performing arts venues and companies, see Chapter 15; here are my recommendations for the very best:

- ✓ For many visitors, going to the **theater** is reason enough to go to London. When actors of the highest caliber are on the boards — as they always are in London — you don't need to think twice about going to the theater; you just go. The London theater scene is phenomenal, and prices are lower than in New York. Take your pick:

long-running international-hit musicals, light comedies, hard-hitting dramas, new works in “fringe” venues, everything from William Shakespeare to Oscar Wilde to Neil LaBute and beyond.

- ✓ Opera buffs appreciate the fact that London has two major opera companies. International stars appear at the historic **Royal Opera** in Covent Garden, where operas are performed in their original languages. A few blocks away is the **English National Opera**, where every opera is sung in English by mostly British performers and the productions tend to be more adventuresome.
- ✓ Every night, lovers of classical music have an embarrassment of riches to choose from. London is home to several world-class symphony orchestras. The **London Symphony Orchestra** plays at the Barbican Center, where good seats cost as little as £15 (\$30). The **Royal Philharmonic Orchestra** performs at Cadogan Hall and the Royal Albert Hall. The newly refurbished Royal Festival Hall is home to four resident orchestras: the **London Philharmonic**, the **Philharmonia Orchestra**, the **London Sinfonietta**, and the **Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment**. Other renowned U.K. and European orchestras perform regularly in the city, as do internationally known chamber music ensembles. A summer highlight is the Proms concerts at Royal Albert Hall, featuring an international roster of the best orchestras and soloists in the world.
- ✓ Dance aficionados can enjoy an evening at the **Royal Ballet** and/or the **English National Ballet**, both of which have regular London seasons. Smaller dance companies, from traditional to cutting edge, are at home in venues throughout the city.

The Best Urban Charms

London is one great city that has actually gotten better over the years. In deference to the millennium year 2000, the city dusted itself off and spruced itself up in ways that have benefited residents and visitors alike. Old museums, such as the Great Court in the British Museum, have been revamped with stunning results, and new museums, such as Tate Modern, have opened (see “The Best Museums,” earlier in this chapter). Sleek, new bridges now span the Thames, and riverside areas have seen a flurry of development. Trafalgar Square has been joined to the National Gallery, making pedestrian access a breeze rather than a chore. All in all, London has shaken off its old mantle of hidebound traditionalism, has embraced multiculturalism, and is now high tech and cutting edge.

But the old fabric of London still remains and invites exploration. Despite all the improvements in public transit, London remains a city where walking is a joy that reveals no end of simple urban pleasures; the following are the best among them:

- ✓ London is blessed with marvelous **parks**. You may have heard of them: **Hyde Park, Kensington Gardens, St. James's Park, Green Park, and Regent's Park** (all described in Chapter 11). These carefully groomed havens, where you can stroll beneath stately trees, lounge on the grass, watch ducks in a pond, or admire the color of the springtime daffodils, were former royals-only hunting grounds. Now they're part of every Londoner's life and life's blood, the green lungs of an otherwise congested city.
- ✓ What could be more fun than just wandering around **London's streets**? Try it. Pick a neighborhood — the City, Soho, Chelsea — then just stroll at will, taking note of the wealth of architectural styles, the curious reminders of days gone by, and the array of local sights, such as the blue, “famous-person-lived-here” plaques on house fronts. On some streets, you can almost hear the horses' hooves clapping on the cobblestones as they did up until about 1915.
- ✓ The **South Bank** and **Southwark** areas on the “other” side of the river have been opened for pedestrians and show off an ancient area of London that's been completely revitalized. You can enjoy a waterside walk with city views from Westminster Bridge to Tower Bridge.
- ✓ The variety of **architectural styles** adds to the beauty of the city. Because the Great Fire of 1666 burned down most of medieval London, the building and house styles that you see tend to range from the sober neoclassical of the early 18th century, to the more elegantly light-hearted Regency style of the early 19th century, to the heavier and less graceful Victorian period of the mid- to late 19th century. The human scale of London streets, with their long terraces of attached brick, stone, and stucco homes built around leafy squares, gives the city a charm and character that intrigues and delights the eye. London grew from a series of villages, and you can still find that villagelike character in many London neighborhoods. (For a list of those neighborhoods, see Chapter 8, and for more on London architecture, see Chapter 2.)