

How to Feel Like a London Family

Britain's capital is one of the most exciting places on the globe, both to visit and to live in, but it's also a slippery entity, changing so fast that it's hard to keep up. My husband and I thought we knew our city to its core, having written and edited for local guides and listings publications. It was part of our jobs to keep up, as best anyone can, with its changes, including the latest restaurant, shop, and hotel openings. But rediscovering London from a new point of view—that of our three young sons—has been a revelation. I've been astounded by the range and variety of activities on offer here for kids of all ages. In fact, what you read between these pages is only a small sampler, the *crème de la crème*, of all there is to experience here as a parent or a child.

London's greatest selling points are its vast size and extraordinary diversity—more than 300 languages are spoken here, and by 2015 it is estimated that 40% of Londoners will be from ethnic minorities. Very few places on earth can rival this city's cultural depth and rich heritage. Yet London inspires and maddens in equal measure. Ask Londoners how they feel about the city, and they will roll their eyes and unleash a litany of complaints about the traffic, the crowds, and the prices. These caveats prove doubly annoying when you have kids. In fact, many people up and leave the capital when they start a family. Their reasons are no doubt valid, but I would argue that London is actually one of the world's *greatest* cities for children.

Perhaps the biggest revelation of all has been just how much fun you can have in this expensive city for free or for very little money. Sure, there are high-priced premium attractions, but for each of them you'll find a wealth of wonderful parks and urban farms, one-off museums and galleries with great free workshops, and neighborhood cafes welcoming hungry families on a budget. Which brings me to my two main pieces of advice. The first is not to underestimate the power of the simple or everyday: When I first visited London on day trips with my intrepid grandmother Molly, riding the Tube awed and frightened me. Keep in mind that a simple bus ride on a classic red double-decker might be all it takes to set Junior's heart aflutter. Second, accept the appeal of the tacky where youngsters are concerned: As a kid, I adored all the rampantly tourist stuff that now riles me, such as Madame Tussaud's.

Much of the skill of being a parent lies in learning to stop being a control freak and to go with the flow. If that means occasional trips to a wax museum instead of an art museum, or burgers and fries in a loud themed restaurant rather than authentic Asian dishes in a Vietnamese canteen, so be it—there'll be other times to soak in art, and other dinners. Family holidays are about pleasing everyone, while recognizing that not everyone can be pleased at the same time. Luckily, London caters to all tastes, moods, and whims, so it's easy to get the balance just right.

1 FROMMER'S FAVORITE LONDON FAMILY EXPERIENCES

- **Seeing the Sights from the Top of a Double-Decker Bus:** Getting an over-view of some of London's top sights from one of its red public buses is one of the city's best bargains. Bus travel—free to kids 15 and under—also gives you a feel for where places are in relation to one another, unlike the Tube. One of the City's best routes is the **no. 15** between Paddington and the East End, via Piccadilly Circus, Trafalgar Square, and Fleet Street. Attractions along the way include Selfridges department store, the National Gallery, the Savoy Hotel, St. Paul's Cathedral, The Monument, and the Tower of London. "Heritage buses" (refurbished open-backed Routemasters) run on parts of the route. Special lanes on many streets mean you never get snagged in the worst jams. Bag a front seat on the top deck for prime views. See p. 53.
- **Enjoying a Traditional Afternoon Tea:** Most swank hotels in the city serve this highly civilized, very English ritual at premium prices (typically, upwards of £25 a head). Smart dress is generally required for these venues. A relaxed yet still genteel alternative is the 18th-century Orangery behind Kensington Palace, which serves special children's teas. See p. 84 and 105.
- **Ambling by the River:** Inhale the salty tang of the tidal Thames on the South Bank Riverside Walk. As well as close encounters with bridges historic and modern, and fabulous views of St. Paul's and the Tower of London, you can break your walk at a stunning array of attractions, including the London Eye, the Tate Modern, and Shakespeare's Globe theater. You can also shop at the crafts outlets of Gabriel's Wharf or Oxo Tower, or "beachcomb" when the tide is low. See p. 186.
- **Tackling the Sights and Delights of Kensington:** There's no avoiding this neighborhood west of the center, with its trio of world-class and wonderfully child-friendly museums (the Victoria and Albert Museum, Natural History Museum, and Science Museum) and its green spaces—Kensington Gardens, containing the Diana Memorial Playground; and Hyde Park, where you can horseback ride, in-line skate, row on the winding Serpentine lake, and much, much more. See chapters 7 and 8.
- **Hanging Out in Covent Garden:** It may be touristy, but Covent Garden is always a cool bet with visitors and Londoners alike. As well as market stalls, shops, cafes, and free street entertainment galore, there's the remodeled London Transport Museum with fascinating free-for-kids displays and interactive gadgets, and nearby Somerset House where you can splash away in the fountains or take a free art workshop. See p. 157 and 169.
- **Kite-Flying on Parliament Hill:** The 98m (322-ft.) summit of Hampstead Heath, with its views of St. Paul's Cathedral and farther afield, is the city's top spot for flying one-liner kites. (For more ambitious stunts with fancier kites, you're better off going down to the open area near the Lido.) See p. 134.
- **Munching the Morning Away at Borough Market:** Encourage kids' interest in real food by taking them on a snacking trip around this historic market under railroad arches, now a gourmet food market Thursday to Saturday. Around 70 stalls offer free tasting samples of delicious goodies, many organic

and all produced with love. Don't miss the candy at Burnt Sugar or the chorizo rolls at Spanish specialist Brindisa. See p. 228.

- **Talking to the Animals in Urban Hackney:** Get environmentally conscious at the inspiring **Hackney City Farm**, the hub of its local community, with organic gardening courses, beekeeping sessions, and farm animals to pet (p. 182). Its excellent Frizzante (p. 122) is one of city's most original spots to eat with kids, and you're not far from the wonderful Museum of Childhood (p. 136).
- **Snagging a Bargain at Brick Lane:** Go beyond the high street clone zones and discover the flourishing community of independent shops and the new markets inhabiting the former Truman Brewery in the East End. There's something for everyone, from offbeat baby-wear and handmade toys to retro gear,

colorful saris, and Indian jewelry. Foodies can sample everything from Bangladeshi sweets to Caribbean fried plantain sandwiches. See p. 224.

- **Riding in a London Taxi:** This isn't a cheap way of getting around town, but even if you make public transport your mainstay, try at least one trip in a traditional black cab—though not at rush hour, when you'll notch up a heavy bill for the luxury of sitting in a queue of traffic. You're more than likely to strike up a conversation with your “cabbie”—many like nothing better than the chance to share their worldviews with passengers. In fact, a competence test known as “The Knowledge” found that London taxi drivers' brains are larger than those of most of their peers, because they have to remember up to 400 routes within a 9.5km (6-mile) radius of Charing Cross. See p. 54.

2 THE BEST HOTEL BETS

London's hoteliers and B&B proprietors have wised up to the needs of families over the past few years, and services and facilities for kids and parents are improving all the time. Prices are dropping too, as the recession forces accommodations providers into unprecedented price wars.

- **Most Family-Friendly: The Athenaeum**, 116 Piccadilly, W1 (☎ 020/7499-3464) includes a funky Family Apartment with seats resembling giant computer keys, a kids' sleeping niche, and a games console that doubles as a coffee table. Like all the apartments here, it has a full kitchen and washing machine, and highchairs, potties, and strollers can be supplied free of charge. All junior guests, including those at the adjacent Athenaeum Hotel, get complimentary movies, gadgets, toiletries, and milk and cookies, and there are kids'

menus throughout the hotel and on room service. See p. 58.

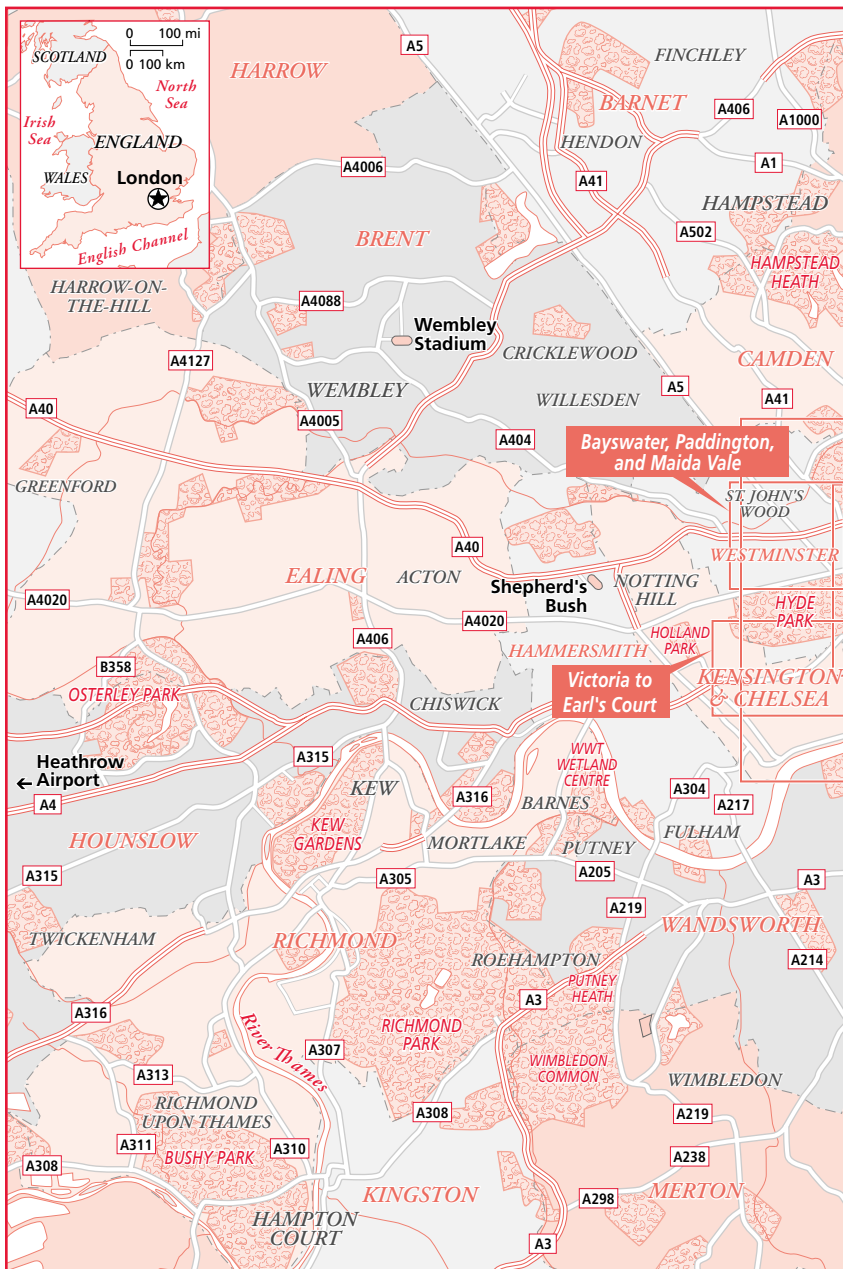
- The **Citadines** “Apart'Hotel,” 18–21 Northumberland Ave., WC2 (☎ 0800/376-3898), just steps away from Trafalgar Square, offers a great location, facilities, and value. As with other members of the chain, it allows you to enjoy hotel services (a breakfast room, babysitting, and a launderette) as well as to self-cater, since the flats have full kitchens. See p. 66.
- **Best Neighborhood Option: Europa House**, 79a Randolph Ave., W9 (☎ 020/7724-5924), is a collection of spacious serviced apartments in a residential area with wide, tree-lined avenues leading down to the canals of Little Venice, where a barge hosts puppet shows and companies run narrow-boat trips to London Zoo. You'll find family-friendly delis,

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THE BEST HOTEL BETS



cafes, and pubs, an organic grocer, and a small 24-hour supermarket nearby, while the center of London is a 15-minute bus ride away. The apartments have access to a 1.4-hectare (3½-acre) enclosed garden with a playground. See p. 72.

- **Best Views:** Deluxe rooms and suites on the river side of the **Four Seasons Canary Wharf**, 46 Westferry Circus, E14 (☎ 020/7510-1999), east of the center in Docklands, overlook a dramatic sweeping bend of the Thames and have views as far back as the London Eye. Order from the superior kids' room-service menu, and then sit in your window and watch boats and ferries chug by. In the morning, swim in the adjoining infinity-edge pool, which seems to merge with the river outside. See p. 81.

History doesn't come much more in-your-face than at the **Grange City**, 8–14 Cooper's Row, EC3 (☎ 020/7863-3700), where some rooms look out over the Tower of London and Tower Bridge virtually next door. There's even a section of the old London wall running alongside the hotel's large piazza, where kids can run around while you enjoy a drink. Family rooms feature two double beds and a small sitting area. See p. 78.

- **When Hipness Is Important:** **High Road House**, 162–166 Chiswick High Rd., W4 (☎ 020/8742-1717), a western outpost of the fashionable Soho House members' club, turns its club-room with its squidgy sofas and low-level tables into a family playroom in the daytime, with games, toys, table football, a pool table, and a menu of light bites and kids' dishes. Guest rooms fall into two categories: Playpens and the Playroom, with one Playpen kitted out to be baby-friendly. A bit like upmarket beach cabins, they have bath products from the group's trendy Cowshed range. See p. 74.

- **When Price Is No Object:** The **Baglioni**, 60 Hyde Park Gate, SW7 (☎ 020/7368-5700), a blast of Italian chic opposite Kensington Gardens, welcomes kids in true Italian style, with a family package including connecting suites, handmade cookies, London Eye tickets, and use of the hotel's bikes. The restaurant is a thrilling, ultra-glam place for comforting Italian fare, but if you can't be tempted out of your cocoon, the room service, including a kids' menu, is the best I've ever had. See p. 67.

- **When Price Is Your Main Object:** The family-run **Crescent**, 49–50 Cartwright Gardens, WC1 (☎ 020/7387-1515), is the best central option for those keeping an eye on their pennies. It's virtually unique in its price range in that it offers baby-listening, highchairs, a guest lounge, and access to a garden square and four tennis courts. See p. 64.

Even those who normally eschew chains struggle to find fault with **Premier Inn**, 215 Haverstock Hill, NW3 (☎ 0870/850-6328), the most family-friendly of the chains. What it lacks in character it makes up for in great rates combined with discount offers on many local attractions. It also offers free kids' activity packs, and free breakfasts for up to two kids 15 and under with every paying adult. Family rooms have a very comfortable double bed and a pullout sofa bed. See p. 83.

- **Best Hotel Restaurant for Kids:** Overlooking the Lobby Bar of swish but family-friendly hotel One Aldwych (p. 65), **Indigo**, 1 Aldwych, WC2 (☎ 020/7300-0400) hosts buzzy weekend brunches that include an excellent kids' menu with everything from boiled eggs with toast soldiers to Toulouse sausages with pesto mash and crispy onion rings. For adults there are all manner of delights, from brioche French toast with cinnamon and

bananas to confit duck hash with a fried duck egg, plus wonderful bloody marys or rhubarb and vanilla champagne. Some Sunday brunches are followed by a family-friendly movie screening. See p. 100.

- **Tops for Teens:** A little bit of whimsy in an ever-more homogenized world, **Rough Luxe**, 1 Birkenhead St., WC1 (☎ 020/7837-5338) appeals to hip and adventurous families with its edgy location and juxtaposition of luxury—sumptuous furnishings and bed linens, opulent wallpapers, giant photographs of Italian Renaissance architecture, and pieces of modern art—with bare boards and distressed walls that reveal the history of this Georgian building layer by layer. Funky daybeds convert to proper beds for nighttime. Several rooms can be connected via the bathroom to form a suite, and there's an on-site art gallery and cafe. See p. 64.

The flexible arrangements at **base2stay**, 25 Courtfield Gardens, SW5 (☎ 020/7244-2255), make it particularly ideal for a family with older kids, who might, for instance, book themselves a standard double for Mom and Dad and a room with two bunk beds for the teens. There are also superior doubles that can fit up to three guests on an additional sofa/chairbed, and deluxe doubles that can fit up to four—or pick and mix any of the above to form a two- or three-room unit to suit your needs. All units have a minikitchen with microwave and fridge, allowing a degree of self-catering. See p. 72.

- **Tops for Toddlers:** **The Athenaeum's** apartments can't be beat for their amenities for babies and toddlers, including movies, toy boxes, highchairs, potties, strollers, and more. See p. 58.

3 THE BEST DINING BETS

London has evolved over the last decade or so into one of the world's gastronomic capitals. Though people don't tend to expect much of the food in a restaurant that sets out its stall as a family-friendly venue, that, too, has changed.

- **Best Family Dining:** The gastrocomplex that is **Villandry**, 170 Great Portland St., W1 (☎ 020/7631-3131), is all things to all people: a food store selling goodies for picnics in nearby Regent's Park, a French restaurant with nutritionist-devised meals for kids, a charcuterie serving *croques*, sandwiches, French-style salads, and cold cuts, and a bar offering casual breakfasts, lunches, and dinners. Come for a Saturday brunch and your kids can join in a cookie-making class. See p. 95.
- **Carluccio's Caffè**, 8 Market Place, W1 (☎ 020/7636-2228; and more than 20

other venues) is a bustling all-day Italian eatery with a bargain three-course kids' menu featuring homemade breadsticks, breaded chicken breast with rosemary potatoes or pasta with a choice of sauces, and real ice cream. In summer, don't miss the fresh lemonade; in winter, warm up with a *cioccolata fiorentine*—a thick Florentine-style hot chocolate served in an espresso cup. See p. 96.

- **Most Kid-Friendly Service:** Staff in the hip **Cibo Caffè**, 256–8 Regent St., W1 (☎ 0845/268-2000), couldn't be more on the ball or welcoming when it comes to kids, but then it is part of the flagship branch of the Italian nursery retailer Mamas & Papas. The real Italian food, freshly prepared, runs from breakfast, antipasti, and light bites, to full lunches. The outstanding kids'

menu includes organic baby food and several organic dishes. Toys and magazines keep everyone well entertained. See p. 94.

- **Best Kids' Menu:** A triumphant addition to the London scene, **Le Café Anglais**, Whiteleys, W2 (☎ 020/7221-1415), is a beautiful, buzzing space serving incredible, imaginative food, from simple but brilliantly executed staples such as omelets to more daring fare such as anchovy toast with Parmesan custard. The fabulous kids' menu includes a platter of salami, coppa, and mortadella, a choice of omelets, and roast chicken, all with spring cabbage and new potatoes or fries. On Sunday lunchtimes the resident clown performs card tricks and bends spoons. See p. 113.

Otherwise, French restaurant **Le Cercle**, 1 Wilbraham Place, SW1 (☎ 020/7901-9999), offers a tasting menu for budding gastronomes. See p. 109.

- **Best Neighborhood Hangout:** In a north London neighborhood popular with hip young parents, **That Place on the Corner**, 1-3 Green Lanes, N16 (☎ 020/7704-0079), has a tasteful play space and a calmer eating area. Breakfast runs from pastries and boiled eggs with soldiers to full English or poached eggs with smoked salmon. The kids' menu offers small and large portions of the likes of pasta and meatballs, fish sticks with sweet chili dip, and smoked mackerel fish cakes; adults get posh sandwiches, pasta dishes, or full mains. The nonstop program of kids' activities and classes includes drama, arts and crafts, cookery, and French language.

Somewhat of an anomaly in chi-chi Hampstead, **Chaiwalla**, 4a-5a Perrins Court, NW3 (☎ 020/7435-2151), is a fiery-red tea salon serving masala chai and other Indian teas in little clay cups, plus snacks such as samosas, Indian-style sandwiches, and mini nans with

paprika hummus. There's also a lunch menu, plus all-day breakfasts of Indian rice pudding with pistachios and almonds, kulfi and other Indian sweets, freshly made cakes, cookies, lassi, fruit juices and smoothies, cinnamon hot chocolate, and even a kids' warm masala milk.

- **Best Outdoor Eating:** You get a true taste of the great outdoors at **Frizante@CityFarm**, 1A Goldsmith's Row, E2 (☎ 020/7739-2266)—it's in the middle of a farmyard, complete with clucking chickens and a garden with a kids' play area. The homemade Italian cuisine includes all-day breakfasts with eggs from those same chickens, imaginative daily specials, Sunday roasts, and amazing gelato. See p. 122.
- Only open when the weather allows, **Stein's**, Richmond Towpath, TW10 (☎ 020/8948-8189), is a Bavarian beer garden on the banks of the Thames. Fetch authentic German sausages from the hut; then sit at wooden tables and benches to enjoy your meals. Under-5s can have fun in the small play area while you sup beer or wine in the sunshine. See p. 121.
- **Best Park Cafe:** The lovely views of the surrounding royal park and palaces from its decked terrace make **Inn the Park**, St. James's Park, SW1 (☎ 020/7451-9999), within its striking grass-roofed, glass-fronted building, very special. It offers diners the choice of upscale cafe fare, including children's lunch sets, or top-notch seasonal British cuisine. See p. 92.
- **Best Museum or Gallery Cafe:** Views of the Thames, the Millennium Bridge, and St. Paul's Cathedral accompany family breakfasts, lunches, afternoon teas, snack pit stops, and (on Fri and Sat) light evening meals at **Café 2** within Tate Modern, Bankside, SE1 (☎ 020/7401-5014). For each adult ordering two courses, one child gets a

three-course meal. Kids also get crayons to create their own mini masterpieces in homage to the artworks they've seen. See p. 119.

- **Best Views: Babylon at the Roof Gardens**, 99 Kensington High St., W8 (☎ 020/7368-3993), has one of London's most sensational locations—a lush rooftop garden with views of west and south London, with resident flamingos and ducks, a fishpond, and tropical trees and plants. The ambitious modern European food is best sampled at Sunday lunch, when a magician does the rounds. The Young Diners' menu changes all the time but might feature roast tomato soup with chive cream, cheddar cheese soufflé, and sea bass with creamy mash. Summer sees alfresco barbecues and a shellfish bar. See p. 104.

Views over the Thames and St. Paul's Cathedral draw folk to the landmark riverside building housing the **OXO Tower Restaurant & Brasserie**, Barge House St., SE1 (☎ 020/7803-3888), on its top floor. The food is generally stellar too, if expensive, and there's alfresco dining on a glorious terrace when the weather is clement. Both the restaurant and the brasserie offer kids' menus, the latter being more casual. Adult dishes in both appeal to foodies who like to experience new and daring combinations. See p. 118.

- **Best Breakfast and Brunch: Tom's Kitchen**, 27 Cale St., SW3 (☎ 020/7349-0202), is famed for its phenomenal weekday breakfasts and wide-ranging weekend brunch affairs. There's no kids' menu, but no child could fail to find something to please on a menu that includes beans on buttery toast. In addition to the relaxed brasserie, there's a family-friendly first-floor bar where main meals can be taken, as well as breakfasts, coffees, cakes, and muffins. See p. 111.

- **Best Fish and Chips:** Newfound hipness and increased prices haven't put off the East End taxi drivers who come to **Fish Central**, 149–55 Central St., EC1 (☎ 020/7253-4970), for spanking-fresh battered fish with chips and mushy peas. Junior diners are made welcome by the cheery staff, kids' main courses, and patio for fine weather. Or head for **fish!kitchen** near Borough Market, Cathedral St., SE1 (☎ 020/7407-3803), for beautifully cooked classic British fish, chips, and mushy peas to enjoy in Southwark Cathedral's gardens or by the river. See p. 97 and 119.

- **Best Burgers:** The retro American diner chain **Ed's Easy Diner**, 19 Rupert St., W1 (☎ 020/7287-1951), may have shrunk, leaving just three branches, but its burgers, trimmings such as fries and onion rings, and shakes are still the business. The under-13s menu includes burgers (veggie included), hot dogs, or chicken filets with fries, plus Mini Moo shakes and baby sundaes. Kids love the hokeyness of it all. See p. 103.

- **Best Sausages: S&M Café**, 268 Portobello Rd., W10 (☎ 020/8968-8898; and five other venues), serves sausage and mash (the "S&M" of its name) in a variety of guises, traditional or otherwise, including chicken and asparagus, wild boar and Calvados, and mushroom and tarragon. Lashings of gravy and creamy potatoes complete the picture. Stodgy, old-school puddings are available if you have room to spare. See p. 116.

- **Best Vegetarian Restaurant:** Unique in London, the new veggie **Strawbale Café** at Freightliners Farm on the fringes of Islington, Sheringham Rd., N7 (☎ 020/7609-0467), is in an eco-friendly building and gives its proceeds to the farm. The homemade food—soups, salads, cakes, and daily specials, plus a healthy kids' menu—is excellent

and boasts ingredients from the farm itself, including honey. There's outdoor seating in a garden, and the wonderful farm with animals to pet, tours, and activities. See p. 128.

- **Best Pub:** Just off Islington's chaotic Upper Street, **The Florence**, 50 Florence St., N1 (☎ 020/7354-5633), has a dedicated family room where kids can enjoy themselves with the toys, books, puzzles, and crayons provided, or watch children's programs on the big screen while you relax over a drink and the paper. Eats-wise, they can get smaller versions of the main dishes, or order hot dogs and burgers (including veggie), fish fingers, eggs, beans, and the like. Most ingredients are organic.
- **Best Fast Food: Hummus Bros**, 88 Wardour St., W1 (☎ 020/7734-1311),

serves its namesake chickpea-based spread, freshly made without additives or preservatives. Add hot or cold toppings, from hard-boiled eggs, guacamole, or fava beans to chili con carne, and you have the perfect, nutritiously sound light lunch or dinner. There are also salads, soups, and sides. See p. 104.

- **Best Asian Food:** That the canteen-style **Masala Zone**, 147 Earl's Court Rd., SW5 (☎ 020/7373-0220), has recently expanded from three to seven branches is testament to its appeal. The menu focuses on Indian street-stall dishes and *thalis*—large platters containing small dishes to share, just as Indian families traditionally eat at home. See p. 112.