

48 Hours In: London

With world-class shopping, diverse restaurants and great riverside attractions, the British capital has plenty to offer.

By Simon Calder

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Travel essentials

Why go now?

The biggest city in the European Union and cultural hub par excellence, London looks especially appealing after the transport chaos earlier in the week; wherever you are in Britain, you can probably find some way to reach the capital. The winter sales begin today, yet the pre-Christmas crowds have melted away like the frost. And in the deep midwinter there are plenty of places to warm up during your exploration. Even if you are a frequent visitor, or indeed a resident, London in 2010 offers plenty of new developments and hidden gems to discover.

Get your bearings

From the visitor's point of view, the centre of London is surprisingly compact and walkable. Almost everything in this 48 Hours is within a mile of Charing Cross (1), the official centre of London, on the edge of Trafalgar Square. It is linked by the Hungerford Bridge (2) to the South Bank, whose most notable landmark is the London Eye (3), and which is rapidly becoming the tourism heart of London – though this title is also claimed by Covent Garden, whose Piazza (4) is full of life.

The Tube and bus network are reasonably reliable, but in order to avoid punitive fares you should invest in an Oyster stored-value card (from Tube stations or online at www.bit.ly/OysterShop) and load it with enough cash for your stay; there is no expiry date.

Check in

The impressive new Sanctum Soho Hotel (5) at 20 Warwick Street (020-7292 6100; sanctumsoho.com) opened in the summer in a superb location, just a minute's walk from busy Regent Street yet a haven on the edge of Soho. Your personal sleep palace boasts extravagant colours and textures, and the baths are works of art – with added Neroli and grapefruit zest body wash. And while rooms with a view are in short supply in central London, the Sanctum Soho has a roof with a view – and a Jacuzzi. A double room costs £370 excluding breakfast, though specials are often available.

For the price of a night at the Sanctum Soho, you could stay three-and-a-half weeks at the Generator (6), a former police hostel that is now Europe's biggest backpacker hostel. It is tucked away in a cul-de-sac at 37 Tavistock Place (020-7388 7666; generatorhostels.com). A bed in an eight or 12-person dorm costs £15, including "all you can eat" breakfast and bed linen. Smaller dorms, including some civilised women-only rooms, and doubles are also available.

Between the two extremes, London has an increasing number of budget hotels. When you're tired in London, choose a favourite haunt of Dr Johnson: the Bankside Premier Inn (7) at 34 Park Street (0870 990 6402; premierinn.com). The front of the complex, overlooking the Thames, is the Anchor pub, whose present manifestation dates from the 17th-century. Rooms are typically priced at around £139, excluding breakfast.

Day One

Take a view

The Art Deco structure known as the Oxo Tower (8) was designed by the stock-cube manufacturer to circumvent advertising rules. Its top floor, the eighth, is now occupied by an upmarket brasserie and an

expensive restaurant. But between the two is a free public viewing gallery that opens to 10pm daily. It provides a spectacular view of the City of London to the north and east, and the West End.

Take a hike

The South Bank riverside walkway that stretches from London Bridge to Lambeth Bridge has been closed at Blackfriars, and requires a tricky detour to access Tate Modern and other attractions to the east. So instead head west from the Oxo Tower, perhaps calling in at the Royal National Theatre (9) or the National Film Theatre (10), which has an excellent café. Then change levels, and climb the staircase to the Hayward Gallery (10), featuring (to 10 Jan) an Ed Ruscha retrospective. Wander into the Royal Festival Hall (11), which often has free entertainment in the ballroom, and then descend once again to the riverside. This part of the walk along the South Bank is part of the Jubilee Walkway, celebrating 25 years of Queen Elizabeth II. Here it meets the Jubilee Bridge, marking 50 years of her reign – better known as the Hungerford Bridge (2).

The stretch beyond here is usually lined by street entertainers. Just beyond the London Eye (3), climb the stairs and you can walk right through the middle of County Hall (12), the former home of London government. When you emerge on the other side, turn right to walk along to the east end of Westminster Bridge and cross the road, where "bendy bus" 12 or 453 will soon turn up and take you to the stop just beyond Piccadilly Circus.

Lunch on the run

Heddon Street (13), hidden from most of the shoppers on Regent Street, is well worth tracking down: lunch options range from French and Italian to a vegetarian place where you pay by weight (the food's, not yours), at a rate of £18 per kilogram. But for something exotic, try Momo (020-7434 4040) at number 25. One minute you are in London's West End, the next in Marrakech. Momo offers exotic Moroccan specialities, from falafel to pigeon. An express lunch, comprising a kofte wrap and a mint tea, costs £7.50 including tip; or stay longer and draw deep on a shisha pipe.

Window shopping

For years, the curve of Regent Street was occupied by airline offices – so you could buy a ticket to anywhere in the world. Today, the world has come to Regent Street, in the shape of the National Geographic Store (14) at numbers 83-97 (020-7025 6960; nglondonstore.co.uk).

Even if you have spent all your cash at Christmas, it's well worth exploring this global emporium, full of furniture, fabrics and art crafted in the developing world. You can also buy all kinds of gear for going to extremes, but how do you know it's going to be warm enough? Easy: an in-store refrigerator, where you can try it on. An infra-red camera shows where warmth is escaping from.

Continue to whet your travel appetite at the world's biggest map and travel guide store: Stanfords (15) at 12-14 Long Acre (020-7836 1321; stanfords.co.uk). If you can't find the guidebook to your chosen destination here, you're probably better off staying in your armchair.

An aperitif

Travel no further than south of the river, to the closest Waterloo has to a High Street: Lower Marsh, close to the Old Vic and where you can often play spot-the-thespian. If you think a mojito is a malevolent disease-bearing insect, either you've spent too long at Cubana (16), or you haven't spent long enough here (48 Lower Marsh; 020-7928 8778). This is London's original Cuban bar, and has a happy hour from 5pm-6.30pm daily except Sunday (plus late-nightsalsa, Weds-Sat).

Dining with the locals

Stay in Cubana for tapas and Cuban dishes that taste better than those in Havana, or walk diagonally across the road to one of the little-known South Bank gems: Marie's Café (90 Lower Marsh; 020-7928 1050), a bring-your-own-wine venue that is a cheerful café by day and transforms into a good, inexpensive Thai restaurant by night. Open 8am-10pm daily except Sunday. With starter, main course, corkage and tip you should have change from £10.

Day two

Sunday morning: go to church

Start at St Paul's (17)... not the one with the dome, but the elegant Inigo Jones church in Covent Garden, dating from 1633. Known as the Actors' Church, with memorials to Charlie Chaplin, Noël Coward and Michael Redgrave, it is an oasis of calm in the middle of this hyperactive area. The main façade is now the back of the church, because the architect was instructed by the Bishop of London to move the altar from the west to the east.

Take a ride

From St Paul's (17) in Covent Garden walk south to the Strand and catch an historic monument to St Paul's Cathedral (18). The relic in question is the Routemaster bus, which still runs on a couple of routes. You want the 15 towards the Tower of London. It is classed as a "heritage route", but normal fares apply. As you enjoy the view from the top deck, lazing on the strange but sought-after seat fabric, remember that these were the workhorses for the capital for half a century.

A walk in the park

London is dotted with lovely little parks – usually denoting locations that were once graveyards. The one just north of St Paul's belongs to St Botolph's, still a functioning church, but it is known as Postman's Park (19) because a sorting office used to stand across the road. Peruse the GF Watts Memorial Wall, full of heroic deeds with tragic conclusions.

A minute's walk away is a Christopher Wren church, Christchurch Greyfriars (20) – or at least it was, until the Second World War. Now it has been resurrected with a rose garden laid out in the original floor plan of the nave.

Out to brunch

Take the Central Line of the Tube, or bus 25, to Bond Street station (21). From here, meander north along Marylebone Lane to Le Relais de Venise (22) at number 120 (020-7486 0878; relaisdevenise.com). On a Sunday, simplicity is all – and here there's only one item on the menu: green salad followed by steak frites, with a second helping if you feel like one (you will). With a bottle of house wine, and service, you pay £30 for two. Get here early (from 12.30pm at weekends, noon on weekdays) to avoid the queue; no advance booking. It is also an evening favourite (open from 6pm, except Saturdays from 6.30pm). Le Relais is closed for refurbishment to 14 January. In the interim, Ecco (23) (the Express Coffee Company) at 186 Drury Lane (020-7404 3555) serves big pizzas for small change (£3.50). Open 7am-6pm on Sundays.

Cultural afternoon

If you are in Marylebone, don't miss the Wallace Collection (24). It occupies Hertford House, an historic townhouse in the middle of Manchester Square (020-7563 9500; wallacecollection.org), and opens 10am-5pm daily, admission free. The 25 sumptuous rooms are notable for some fine French 18th-century art – and, until 24 January, an exhibition of 25 works by by Damien Hirst, entitled No Love Lost (also free).

If you make the short trip to South Kensington, the Natural History Museum (25) is a joy to behold. Three months ago the landmark Darwin Centre opened to the public, allowing museum visitors to "explore world-

class science in action in a dramatic new public space". Book in advance for a timed slot: 020-7942 5000; nhm.ac.uk. It opens 10am-5.50pm daily, admission free.

The icing on the cake

You've seen in the media, as coverage of the Eurostar breakdown unfolded – now have a drink at St Pancras station (26), the most beautiful in the world. Take in the beauties of the Barlow Shed, see the expresses to Paris come and go (hopefully), and have a final drink at the Champagne Bar or the Betjeman Arms.

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