



London Baby - Modern Day Metropolis meets Old Day Glory

As far as European Cities are concerned, London is probably the one that features in the most stories, movies, news or TV shows these days. Whether it is the classical novels, like Dracula, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, or Sherlock Holmes, films like Notting Hill, the newest Star Trek movie, or even Thor – the English capital is getting lots of attention. And with good reason!



Seldom are modern day metropolitan life and glamour and glory from days long past so perfectly mixed like in this 8.3 Million City. That's right, 8,3 Million live along the Thames and in the outermost quarters of the city. Four airports serve the city's business travelers and tourists, and even on a rainy Monday in March, the Changing of the Guards Ceremony in front of Buckingham Palace is visited by hundreds of curious foreigners, making it hard to maneuver through the masses on the shortest route from Hyde Park to St. James'.

But what is it about this city that draws in so many people towards the heart of England and inspires so many stories? Is it the tall, fine-built marble buildings going back centuries? Is it the old charm of the tower or Big Ben? Is it the free museums or the variety of worldly food? Or is it the abundance of performances, both on theater stages and in concert halls?

In 2014, the German newspaper "Die Welt" declared London the "most visited city in the world" with approximately 16,8 Million tourists visiting the capital in 2013, more than Paris, New York or Bangkok. Sure, the last Olympic Games might have further fuelled this tourist-overload, but it seems that whenever I visit London (and I've been there during the season, in the off-season, during the week, on weekends and in the dreadful February weather), the city is full of guests taking a picture of a red phone booth or climbing to the top level of a London Bus.

It's this perfect mixture of ancient buildings, world-history, theatricality, modernity and an abundance of culinary insider tips that makes every trip to London an event. And while there are many typical tourist stops and sightseeing tours, there are also a few rare places that haven't been picked up by all the city guides just yet. This here is my London, my very personal mixture of must-see tourism and local ingenuity.

A perfect day in London starts with a morning walk through Hyde Park. Granted, the park can look rather dull in the winter months, but once spring has arrived, this green heart of London comes to life in every corner and offers a beautiful spectacle of British correctness and natural chaos. The Rose Garden is well-groomed, the green meadows are kept short, but the Swan Lake in the middle of the park or the small but beautiful little waterfall just

next to it offer a little bit of resistance against the English Rule – if only in the form of loudly chattering swans and ducks.

From the park, most of the main sights are easily reached within half an hour. A straight line brings every tourist and every mounted guard from the park through the Wellington Arch and towards Buckingham Palace. From here, you can either walk straight towards Trafalgar Square, following the “Mall”, a road running directly from the Palace through the two parks surrounding the Palace (St. James and Green Park) towards the impressive Admiralty Arch right at Trafalgar Square. It is also the road most commonly used for ceremonies and highly decorated during national holidays or state visits. I prefer the route that runs just south of the Mall and takes you through St. James Park into the direction of Big Ben.

It also leads up to the old Horse Guards Parade, which in itself borders on 10 Downing street (the house of the English Prime Minister) and the Horse Guards, a building formerly belonging to the British Army. Running past the Horse Guards on the south is Great George street, which points directly at Westminster. And what is most commonly associated with Westminster apart from the Abby? Big Ben of course. The clock tower was completed in 1858 is probably the most-photographed and most-referenced landmark of London, beating even the Tower bridge in its iconic status.



It is definitely a sight to see, especially from the other side of the Bridge that not only allows the inclusion of the London Eye into the standard tourist picture, but also offers the entire façade of the Palace of Westminster. Plus the river walk on the other side of the Thames leads right back into the heart of the city with nothing more than a bridge to cross to make your way to Charing Cross station.

Now, you might have noticed that there's a lot of walking involved. Of course you can always hop onto one of the big red busses to see the city from the second level, but the city center of London, the city of Westminster, is a jewel best discovered on foot. How else would you stumble into Covent Garden Marketplace on a busy Sunday afternoon and enjoy some local artistry mixed with some of the best food stands in the city? Covent Garden, this beautiful mixture of Soho funk and West End creativity, is a must-see for anyone who is interested in the local art scene, unique tourist gifts and delicious food.

And if your feet are rested and your body is strengthened enough, you just circle right back through Soho's narrow streets that once housed the underbelly of the city and fall into Chinatown. This exotic part of the city with its impressive Chinese gates greeting its visitors in red and gold seems to be shrinking lately. The theater scene and shopping venues from Leicester Square and Covent Garden seem to encircle the Asian community and force them to be little more than a tourist attraction. But if you're lucky, and you know how to read Chinese, you can find real delicacies here, in the streets between Leicester Square and Oxford Street.



The common tourist then marches on towards said square and even further off to Piccadilly and its iconic display of gigantic plasma screens matched with the old house fronts of Regent Street. But if you prefer a more silent, more narrow route full of little foodie havens, then take a right onto Wardour Street and walk on until you see a little brown sign with a pink hummingbird on it – then you’ve found the most-delicious cupcake bakery ever invented by men. If you prefer a real lunch first, there are many possibilities to find good, cheap food along this old backroad of Soho as well.

Freshly sweetened and in the mood for shopping? Great, because the next stop will be Oxford Street. If you’re looking for big retail stores and glamorous store fronts, just follow the endless line of red busses making their way through one of the biggest shopping streets in the city and enjoy the view. Oxford Street is one of London’s most popular shopping destinations. And if you really can’t find anything on this one and a half mile of over 300 shops, then simply make a left into Regent Street and add that to your shopping experience. If you prefer a break after all the shopping, keep going until you hit Marble Arch and you’re back right where you started – in Hyde Park.

Now, of course there are important attractions outside of this little walking route – most importantly The Tower of London and the iconic Tower Bridge – but there is always tomorrow to visit those ...

(text and pictures: Carolin Schmitt)