

London

Once you have arrived in London, there are assorted places that you should, you really should, go and see.

A good starting place is Trafalgar Square with Nelson's Column right in the centre. It is a 51m column, poised on top of which is the hero of the Battle of Trafalgar, who was killed while winning in 1805. The four lions which surround the column are of more recent date, having been sculpted by Sir William Landseer in 1868. There are many claimants to being the heart of London, but Trafalgar Square has the best right, because it is the hub of so much that is wonderful.

Just alongside is the church of St Martins in the Fields, which is open throughout the day and has been around for a long time. The current church dates from 1726, but there has been a church on that site since the thirteenth century. This is the parish church for Buckingham Palace and, yes, there is a royal pew. The church has some wonderful lunch time concerts, which are normally free.

On the next side of the square is the National Portrait Gallery, which is fascinating because it has the largest collection of portraits in the world although, understandably, only part of the collection is on show at any one time. Behind is Charing Cross station, not of great interest except that in the side road running alongside is The Players Theatre, old time music hall where the audience is expected to dress up in the right costume and positively join in with the show.

Running from there is the Strand, which was once the fashionable thoroughfare of London but fell on slightly seedier times. It is currently being upgraded and it still contains the Savoy Hotel - one of the great hotels of the world.

If you reverse your course from Trafalgar Square, you will go up the Mall, past Horse Guards Parade and at the end is the impressive building which is Buckingham Palace. And you pass St James on the way up.

So that's one quick fix on part of London from one central point. But London has so many other central points. You can do the same sort of orientation from Piccadilly Circus or Hyde Park Corner or, indeed, pretty much anywhere. Once you have your bearings you can start to

concentrate on specific areas. You might like to start with the Houses of Parliament, which have been operating in one form or another since 1275. Worth knowing that the original Parliament was in St Stephen's Chapel and the members sat in the choir stalls facing each other. That tradition carries on to this day.

You can go to the visitor's gallery in the afternoon and evening when Parliament is sitting. Typically it opens at 2.30 PM and will stay open until 10.30 PM or even later. If you plan your visits for the evening you will not have to queue.

Just round the corner is Westminster Abbey. Every King and Queen of England since William the Conqueror has been crowned here, and many are buried here, as well as many other notable historic figures. In the memorable words of an American Wimbledon contestant - "it's just a lot of dead dudes." Westminster Abbey is one of the great tourist attractions of London and it is nearly always crowded. Your best bet is to get there at opening time, which is 8 AM.

And from there you might like to go and see the Changing of The Guard, which happens from about the middle of April until the end of July at 11.30 in the morning, and creates monster traffic jams with parked tourist buses everywhere. Get there early and you will see one of the five regiments of Foot Guards march from Wellington Barracks and go through the age-old ceremony. You may not understand the orders being shouted, but they are in English. On one occasion that whole guard was mounted using the single command, "bacon and eggs." Strange but true. If the scene outside Buckingham Palace is a bit too crowded for you, go to Horse Guards in Whitehall and watch the Household Cavalry mount the guard and then ride off along the mall. Both guards are changed about the same time.

From military pomp and circumstance you can venture to somewhere a little softer, a little more restrained. One of the new places, which have grown into a major tourist attraction, is Covent Garden. This used to be where all the fruit and vegetables coming to London from the country were sorted out and sold. You may recall that the opening scenes of Pygmalion and, later, My Fair Lady are set there. Now the fruit and vegetable markets have moved out to the suburbs, but some of the old feeling still remains. There have been tremendous efforts made to refurbish the old buildings so they retain a feeling of authenticity.

Covent Garden Plaza in the centre of the area has regained some of the popularity it experienced in the 17th-century. It has coffee-houses,

street entertainment, boutiques, elegant shops and a feeling of cafe society. All traffic is banned, which makes walking around a pleasure.

Walk from Covent Garden down Fleet Street, once the newspaper capital of Britain until Rupert Murdoch moved his newspapers to the old dockland area. And there, ahead of you, is the majesty of St Paul's. This is the building that survived the Second World War against all odds. It was designed by Christopher Wren, although this is the third church on the site. The previous one burned down in the Great Fire of London in 1666. It is interesting that this is one of the very few cathedrals in Britain to have been designed by an architect, and the result is glorious.

If you're feeling exceptionally energetic, climb to the Golden Gallery - 530 steps, and you will be puffing at the end - to see one of the great views of London. In a very real sense St Paul's is one of the churches of the City of London. It gets a bit confusing, but note that the City of London is quite separate from the rest of London, which is Greater London. The City of London even has its own special police force. It is the financial centre of the city of Greater London, and once boasted Dick Whittington as its Lord Mayor. You can walk the narrow streets for hours and find something fresh and fascinating around every corner.

From there it is very easy to walk down to Tower Bridge and the Tower of London, which is awesome, frightening and yet at the same time extremely charming. While you are there, look at the Crown Jewels in the Jewel House. You go past them on a traveling walkway, which gives you time to try and work out how much they are worth. All of this that has been suggested would take two days and would give you a feel for the city and a taste, but only a taste, of the charms of London. Noel Coward in one of his better songs had the line "every stone bears the stamp of history". The song was called London Pride and the words are very true, very precise and very accurate.