

Homes & Leisure

Debbie Travis The best of both worlds **F2**

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A great way to begin a tour of London is aboard one of its iconic double-decker buses, which provide an excellent view of landmarks such as those shown here—the Palace of Westminster, commonly known as the Houses of Parliament, with its Elizabeth Tower and renowned clock, Big Ben. The building is under construction and surrounded by scaffolding. PHOTO: CATHY DONALDSON

A FIRST-TIME GUIDE TO LONDON

Here's a 10-point checklist to help make the most of a short visit to Britain's capital

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TIMES & TRANSCRIPT

When I asked Facebook friends for recommendations before my first trip to London, I was flooded with suggestions about what to do and see in England's capital.

"Piccadilly Circus is a must, along with a river cruise!" urged one friend.

"If you can get a ticket to Shakespeare's Globe Theatre, go!" advised another, and on went the ideas.

After eight days in beautiful London, I now understand the reason for the volume of feedback. It would take more like eight weeks, eight months — even eight years — to experience all that the exciting, multicultural city of about 8.7

million people has to offer.

So how does one decide what to do on an inaugural, relatively short journey to London?

As with any destination, I considered which sites or attractions most interested me, their hours of operation, and how much time and money to set aside for each. I then built an itinerary, scheduling stops in similar areas on the same day when possible.

In planning my adventure to the sprawling city on the River Thames, I also took note of free places to visit and investigated other ways to make it more affordable. Since one British pound cost \$1.67 CAD at the time of my departure, I wanted to make every penny/pence count.

One of the tools that helped was the London Pass, a sightseeing card that provides access to more than 60 attractions. It also includes a one-day hop-on, hop-off bus tour.

I purchased a two-day London Pass and did the bus tour almost immediately. Seated on the second level of an iconic red double-decker, I listened through earbuds as a recorded guide gave details about central London. With the sun warming the morning air, I eagerly snapped pictures of landmarks such as St. Paul's Cathedral, the Shard skyscraper and the world's most famous clock, Big Ben. A quick swivel in my seat and there was the giant Ferris wheel known as the London Eye. It was such fun (and a break to the feet) to explore the city by bus, imagining as we motored along what London must have been like when it was originally settled by Celts and later claimed by the Romans in AD 43 after an invasion by Emperor Claudius.

Whether or not you're a history buff, the story of London—past and present—is captivating, from its beginnings and through the reigns of various monarchs to today. During the bus tour, I learned

more about the many disasters faced by Londoners over the years, such as the Great Plague of 1665 that claimed an estimated 100,000 lives and the Great Fire of 1666, which swept through parts of the city, consuming houses, churches and other buildings. Remarkably, only six people died in the blaze.

If London's wartime history is of particular interest, you'll find countless avenues for related discovery, such as accounts of what it was to live through the Blitz, the German bombing offensive against Britain during the Second World War.

Are art and architecture more your speed? Is your fascination for food or fashion? Whatever the case, London gives its visitors an almost overwhelming assortment of goodies from which to choose. To ease your selections, here are a few tips from this recent first-timer on

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While there are fewer today than in past years, traditional red telephone booths are still visible throughout London and across the United Kingdom. Here, Cathy Donaldson emerges from a booth outside the Victoria and Albert Museum. PHOTO: CATHY DONALDSON

A first-timers ultimate guide to the city of London

LONDON → F1

how to make the most of a short visit:

1. Pick a palace: London is brimming with magnificent buildings, grand homes and, of course, sumptuous palaces. There were many of the latter on my wish list but I made a point of touring at least one: Buckingham Palace, which serves as the official London residence of Queen Elizabeth II and her administrative headquarters.

Tours of Buckingham Palace are held in the summer, when the Queen is on holiday at Balmoral Castle in Scotland. The Buckingham tour I picked was a self-guided version using an audio recording that took guests through the palace's impressive State Rooms and an exhibition of more than 200 gifts the Queen has received from foreign dignitaries since she was crowned in 1953. If you want to be astounded by opulent interiors—colossal chandeliers, crimson walls, gold trims, lush furnishings—and a profound sense of history, Buckingham Palace is the ticket. Consider attending the Changing of the Guard prior to your tour. The 11 a.m. ceremony, held on certain days, involves one guard regiment taking over from another in a colourful ceremony. Three cheers for pomp and circumstance!

2. Choose a church: It's hard not to be awed by London's lovely churches, from massive creations to smaller places of worship. I ventured inside three and ambled by many others.

The first was St. Paul's Cathedral in London's financial district. Designed by famed British architect Sir Christopher Wren, the present structure is the fourth on the site. Built between 1675 and 1710 after its predecessor was destroyed in the Great Fire, the current St. Paul's hosted the wedding of Prince Charles and Lady Diana Spencer in 1981 and has been the venue for many notable funerals, including those of Lord Horatio Nelson — the British naval officer famous for his victories against the French during the Napoleonic Wars — and former prime ministers Winston Churchill and Margaret Thatcher. The cathedral is spectacular, from its checkerboard pattern of black-and-white marble tile floors to its breathtaking domes.

I happened by another church, St. Martin-in-the-Fields, while in Trafalgar Square. I poked my head in the front door of the 18th-century chapel and sat quietly in the pews with a handful of other passersby as a talented orchestra rehearsed works by Bach, Handel and Vivaldi for an evening performance. (St. Martin's is known for hosting some of London's best live classical music events.) It was magical to hear great musicians bring their instruments to life in such exquisite surroundings.

Topping my church recommendations, though, has to be Westminster Abbey. The place oozes history and transported me back through time, that process aided by vivid descriptions from the knowledgeable verger leading my tour. I learned that Benedictine monks first came to the site in the 10th century. It has since been the site of 16 royal weddings (including that of William and Kate), as well as the final resting place of 17 monarchs and a barrage of others, from poet Geoffrey Chaucer to naturalist Charles Darwin. Since the coronation of William the Conqueror in 1066, Westminster Abbey has also been used for all coronations of English and British monarchs. The ornate stone structure is considered one of the most important Gothic buildings in England, filled with aged paintings, remarkable stained glass, historic clothing and other artifacts. One of the most jaw-dropping sights is the Henry VII Chapel at the far eastern end of the abbey. Its fan-vault ceiling of intricately curved wooden ribs is truly a work of art. Don't miss it!

3. Make tracks to a museum or gallery: London has loads of museums and art galleries, with most nationally-run ones free to visit. Friends had raved about many, from the British Museum to the Tate Modern. I made time for three freebies—the Victoria and Albert Museum (better known as the V&A), the National Gallery and the National Portrait Gallery—and also toured the Churchill War Rooms, for a fee. I could write a book about my glorious meanderings but suffice to say I loved them all and would recommend a couple of hours at each to relish the offerings.

4. Behold the bling: Who doesn't like a little sparkle? I sure do, thus the reason I toured the Crown Jewels, a unique assemblage of crowns and other sacred and ceremonial objects on display at the Tower of London. The jewels are still used regularly by the Queen for national ceremonies like the State Opening of Parliament. It was a joy to roam the Jewel House and drool over the dazzling regalia, some of which has been stored at the site for more than 600 years. Among the gems adorning objects in the collection are some of the world's most exceptional diamonds. Incidentally, the entire Tower of London site—a UNESCO world heritage centre—is exceptional,



Two landmarks converge in this photo: Tower Bridge looms in the distance while a section of the Tower of London—a UNESCO world heritage site—takes the foreground. PHOTO: CATHY DONALDSON



Yeoman Warders, also known as Beefeaters, are the ceremonial guards of the Tower of London. Here, Yeoman Warder Simon Dodd hams it up for the camera. PHOTO: CATHY DONALDSON

considered Europe's most complete example of an 11th-century fortress.

5. Plan some people-watching: Need a break from sightseeing? Grab a beverage and take in the hustle and bustle of cosmopolitan London. My favourite spots to gawk were Trafalgar Square, Piccadilly Circus, Harrods department store, and just about any pub, with Ye Olde Cheshire Cheese and The Clarence the most entertaining of the watering holes.

6. Eat, drink tea and be merry: Along with sampling a few pints, I had two other items on my food and drink agenda for London: trying some traditional grub and experiencing afternoon tea.

To begin tackling my first objective, I made short work of a Sunday roast with Yorkshire pudding and all the trimmings at The Stoke House restaurant near Buckingham Palace. A few meals later, I devoured a hearty portion of 'bangers and mash'—sausage and mashed potatoes in onion gravy—at the chain restaurant Garfunkel's before jaunting to the nearby Dominion Theatre for the rousing musical *An American in Paris*. (I wasn't sure if my-tasty-but-rather-rich menu decision would sit well during the show. Fortunately, no quick exits were required.)

As for my examination of 'proper' fish and chips, the best came during an outstanding trip to the Borough Market with Secret Food Tours London. Lightly-battered haddock and triple-cooked chips from Fish Kitchen were divine. Second place on my delightful 'chippy' spree went to the Rock & Sole Plaice, a cute corner restaurant discovered during a stroll in the quaint Covent Garden neighbourhood.

Meanwhile, my tea experience was blissful on an entirely different level. Two Maritime friends living in England for a year joined me for the memorable occasion at Palm Court in London's luxurious Langham Hotel.

Seated at one of a sea of tables topped by crisp white linens, fine crystal and gleaming silver, we were given menus by our friendly server who then explained how the afternoon would unfold. We began with a glass of champagne while pondering our Wedgwood specialty tea choices from a group of intriguing options. Before long, the steaming tea arrived in tailor-made 'Langham Rose' Wedgwood teaware, followed by a feast of delicate finger sandwiches ranging from classic English cucumber with cream cheese and chive to beef pastrami with watercress on caramelized onion bread.

The event continued with different teas and a medley of classic and raisin scones, accompanied by strawberry preserve and clotted cream. (The dairy product, previously unknown to me, tastes like a happy marriage of whipped cream and butter. My friends and I decided calories weren't counting that day.) Pastries came next, the best in my estimation being a puff creation with vanilla-infused



Considered one of the most important Gothic buildings in England, London's Westminster Abbey is the site of most royal weddings, the final resting place of monarchs and many others of renown, and has served as the coronation church since 1066. PHOTO: CATHY DONALDSON

mascarpone and berry coulis. Just when we thought it couldn't get any better, a pianist began tinkling the ivories across the room, adding to the elegance of the affair. I'd never make a morning home brew again without remembering it all.

7. Dress for success, and the weather: Learn from my mistake and don't break in pretty, new shoes on travels in London. Sneakers or ultra-comfortable footwear are essential for the miles you'll cover. (I was forced to shell out for a pair of Nikes after battering my tootsies.)

As well, heed the warnings about London's unpredictable weather. They are true. Dress in layers and bring a lightweight rain jacket and/or tote a collapsible umbrella, even when you think the sun will shine all day. I used a small cross-body bag for touring, perfect for storing clothes when not necessary as well as a brolly, smallish camera, phone, guidebook, water bottle and snack. Look for a bag with zippers that stay hidden against your body when worn, a good way to deter pickpockets.

8. Become an Oyster fan: Get an Oyster Card when you arrive in London or order one before you go. It's a plastic smart-card that allows you to use various forms of public transit, whether subway ('tube'), bus, rail or other services. You can conveniently top up the amount on your Oyster using a credit card at ATM-like machines in tube stations and other locales.

9. Lodge well and save: Accommodation can be pricey near popular central London sites. Look for more moderate rates a slight distance away but close to transit. The Ibis Blackfriars London Hotel, a two-minute walk from Southwark tube station, was a great fit for hubby and me. Our contemporary room was a decent size, spotlessly clean, had a comfy bed, free Wi-Fi and a flat-screen TV. An ample hot breakfast, funky lounge area and cheerful staff rounded out an excellent stay.

10. Do your homework: Get psyched for your trip to London by reading up on its history. If Netflix is your thing, check out *The Crown*, a biographical drama about the reign of Queen Elizabeth II. I only started watching when I got home and love how it gives clarity to past and present monarchs with a fair bit of historical accuracy. If you're a Harry Potter devotee and plan to do 'The Making of Harry Potter' tour at the Warner Brothers Studio in Leavesden, about 30 kilometres outside of London, use the time before your excursion to read all of the books or watch the films for the upteenth time.

For more information on all that London has to offer, check out www.visitbritain.com.

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Cathy Donaldson is a writer based in Moncton. During her stay in London, she was a guest of the Ibis Blackfriars London Hotel and toured with assistance from Visit Britain, neither of whom reviewed or approved this article prior to publication.