

Off the beaten track in London

London is red buses, red phone boxes, the Changing of the Guard, Big Ben, Trafalgar Square. For many tourists, London is the Zoo, Buckingham Palace, the British Museum, the Savoy or the Ritz.

But London has many hidden corners worth discovering. Head out to Southall for a taste of Asia - Indian sweetie shops, curry restaurants, sari sellers, and the Sikh Gurdwara. Or seek out the Horniman Museum in Forest Hill for a quirky collection of artefacts including a view of Africa, an aquarium full of seahorses, and a huge collection of musical instruments. Hampstead has its own attractions; Highgate has its famous cemetery, where Karl Marx is buried and horror movies have been filmed.

All these places lie outside the historic heart of London. Even in the central area, though, you can find neighbourhoods that are distinctive, with their own history and intriguing sights.

Southwark - Elizabethan London's pleasure grounds

Start off at London Bridge - not the original one, but a later replacement - and you'll soon find Southwark Cathedral, a fine Gothic church. It was originally the church of St Mary Overy, and only became a cathedral later, which accounts for its small size.

The nave was added in 1890 - though traces of earlier churches can still be seen; Norman doorways, early Gothic arcades, and the medieval tomb of John Gower, one of England's first great poets. The retro-choir, though, is a splendid piece of Early English work, a high open space with elegant, slender piers supporting a fine ribbed vault. Amazingly, it was once in use as a pig sty.

From the cathedral, turn right along the river Thames. This is where Elizabethan Londoners had their fun - bear baiting, the theatre, brothels and pubs lined the streets. A replica of Francis Drake's Golden Hind brightens the riverside - another reminder of the freebooting vivacity of the Elizabethans. But the area had fallen from grace by then - earlier, it was the site of the bishop of Winchester's palace, and you can still see the Star-of-David patterned round window of its gable.

Further on you'll see the modern replica of Shakespeare's Globe Theatre - brought to life again by Sam Wanamaker (there's a monument to him, as well as to Shakespeare, in the cathedral). If you're here in the season, it's worth being a 'groundling' - standing places sell for just five pounds and it's a totally authentic way to experience Shakespeare's theatre.

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Still further along the river is Cardinal's Wharf and the Provost's House - two fine seventeenth century houses. Christopher Wren lived here while he was working on the new St Paul's, taking a boat across the river every morning. River traffic has sadly declined since his day, as the number of bridges has increased.

Going back to the cathedral, take Borough High Street to the south and you'll soon find the George Inn, off the left hand side of the road. Nothing to see from the outside, once you've gone under the entrance arch and into the yard you can see the balconies and galleries of one of London's oldest coaching inns. Originally, the other two sides of the yard would also have been galleried; plays were sometimes given in the yard, with the audience standing in the balconies. You can still get a decent pint of beer here.

On the other side of Borough High Street, where it joins Southwark Street, stands the Hop Exchange where hops were traded in Victorian times. This was the centre of London's brewing industry, and there are still many old brewers' warehouses in the back streets. The hops, grown in Kent, gave the beer its bitter flavours, while malt was imported from East Anglia.



Tucked away between Southwark Bridge Road and the cathedral is Borough Market, squashed underneath railway viaducts. It's still a food market supplying London's restaurant trade, as well as individuals, and it has what many of us would call a 'real London atmosphere' - busy and slightly seedy. Two fine traditional pubs, the Wheatsheaf and the Market Porter, provide real ale and a relaxing end to the walk.

Hatton Garden and High Holborn

While High Holborn is one of London's largest and busiest roads, you don't have to step far off the beaten track to get into undiscovered territory. This walking tour takes you from one end of the road to the other - but shows you sights you won't see from the bus.

Ely Place, at the end of High Holborn, is one of London's few private roads. It belonged to the bishops of Ely, who had their town palace here in the Middle Ages, and once you're past the black painted railings, even the police aren't allowed to come in and get you unless they're invited. Here you'll find the church of Saint Etheldreda - the saint whose relics lie in Ely Cathedral - a fine Decorated Gothic style building which was the bishop's private chapel. And while most of the buildings in the street are later, there's still a late medieval building here - even better, it's a pub, the Mitre. Originally the tavern for the bishop's servants, it now serves a very decent pint of Adnams.

Go through the little alley by the Mitre and you'll find yourself in Hatton Garden,

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London's jewellery district. There are goldsmiths, there's the diamond trade - mainly very discreet, behind glassed-in frontages - and there are a couple of shops selling metalworking equipment.

This has always been partly a Jewish district; Hassidic Jews with their hats and dreadlocks still run some of the shops. You'll find a kosher sandwich bar, the Chap-a-Nash, in Greville Street, if you're hungry.



Head back to High Holborn to see the fine Victorian terracotta of Holborn Bars, the headquarters of the Prudential Insurance Company until recently. This amazing building by Alfred Waterhouse takes Gothic ideas and puts them at the service of a huge office building. Look for the statue of 'Prudence' over the gateway.

Up the narrow Brooke Street, just after the Pru, you'll find the church of Saint Alban, a home of Anglo-Catholicism since Victorian times. Though the church has been rebuilt after bomb damage in the Second World War, it's still got a strong Victorian character with its saddle backed, fortress-like tower. It was indeed a fortress of Christian mission, in the days when many of the streets round here were no better than slums, with squalid tenements, and it still has a thriving congregation today. Pop in to see an amazing modern mural - and smell the incense.

Finally, make your way along High Holborn to the Citty of York to see one of London's most traditional pubs. It's a real taste of 'Olde England' with its high timber ceilings (actually dating from the 1920s), little booths, wrought iron work and a fine triangular stove in the centre of the bar. Even if all you want is an orange juice or a cup of coffee, it's worth a visit just to see its nostalgic finery.

Spitalfields and Shoreditch

East London is an area with an incredibly mixed background. It's Huguenot, Jewish, Communist, Bangladeshi; it's Jack the Ripper, Daniel Defoe, Gilbert and George. For centuries, it's been an area where successive waves of immigrants have left their mark - and then departed for the suburbs.

Start in Brick Lane, curry epicentre of London, and you'll see the striking Jamme Masjid mosque, which was originally a Huguenot church and later a synagogue. Take a walking tour from here and you can see Victorian history, radical politics, or modern art - depending on which way you look.

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The Old Truman Brewery, for instance, dates back to the early 18th century, but it's now a creative hub housing artists' studios and art materials shops as well as bars and events spaces. Further up Brick Lane, if you're here on a Sunday, you'll come to the Brick Lane market, a huge mix of bric-a-brac, vintage clothes, and cheap gear. (For fashion, head towards Petticoat Lane; Monday to Friday and Sunday - when it's busiest.)

From Brick Lane make your way up Commercial Road to Christ Church Spitalfields, one of the finest achievements of the English Baroque. Nicholas Hawksmoor designed the church in 1714 under a scheme to build 50 new churches in London; in the event, only 14 were ever built. Its abrupt and austere play of geometrical forms is typical of Hawksmoor's style. Restored over the last twenty years, it's now a venue for regular concerts and an annual festival.

The old Spitalfields market was the fruit and vegetable mart for the whole of London till the business moved out to Leyton in 1991. Parts of the Victorian market buildings remain, but much has been demolished and replaced by glitzy new office blocks - the wealth of the Square Mile spreading out of the City into the East End.

But there are still some fine Georgian houses around here, particularly in Princelet Street where you can see the huge penthouse windows that let in light for the weavers who lived here. Dennis Severs' House at 18 Folgate Street was refurbished in period style - it's not just a refurbishment but a piece of theatre, each room left just as if the family have just gone out. It can still be visited on some evenings (booking is essential). Artists Gilbert & George, and author Jeanette Winterson, also restored houses in this quarter.

Finally, join Bishopsgate and head north up to Shoreditch church, a Palladian style building of 1740 with a soaring steeple, designed by George Dance (better known for the Mansion House). The churchyard still contains a stocks and whipping post - so you had better behave. Behind the church is the fine architecture of Arnold Circus, part of the Boundary Estate which was built in the 1890s to replace the slums that previously crowded the East End. It's a fine testimony to Victorian philanthropy.

Head up Kingsland Road, under the railway bridge, and on the right you'll find the Geffrye Museum, one of the most interesting small museums in London. It's housed in old Ironmongers' Alsmhouses, a fine classical style range of buildings. Rooms have been created to show the history of style, from the Elizabethan age to the 1960s, and a herb garden is open in summer. And two other good things about it; it's free, and it's got a cafe - a great place to end the walk.

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The back streets of Westminster

Westminster Abbey and the Houses of Parliament are major tourist attractions. But most of the visitors who come here never see the back streets of Westminster - a world of gracious Georgian streets and hidden medieval courts.

Go past the end of Westminster Abbey and the fine Perpendicular architecture of Henry VII's chapel, and you'll see the Jewel Tower, standing isolated on its own piece of greensward. Edward III built it in the 1360s to house his treasury and wardrobe, and it's one of just two pieces of the original Westminster Palace to survive the disastrous fire of 1834. Outside, you can see the remains of the moat and quay that gave access for cargo.

Further along the park is a Henry Moore sculpture - 'Knife Edge Two Piece', an early 1960s bronze piece. You can see the way he used natural forms in his work - but it's not representative art; it's about movement, rhythm, and abstraction, and even the title doesn't tell you how to experience the artwork. It's left open to the viewer to create their own experience.



Take the next street in from the river, and any of the streets that run off to the left will take you into a little world of Georgian houses - of elegance and civilisation. Barton Street, Cowley Street, Smith Square. This is politico-land, too; the Conservative Party headquarters was in Smith Square until recently, and we're not far from the Labour Party HQ at Millbank.

And then in the middle of Smith Square is something totally unexpected - an eccentric baroque church like a table waving its legs in the air. St John's Smith Square was designed by Thomas Archer in 1728 and even Hawksmoor never made anything quite as strange as this. It's said the four angle towers were designed to ensure the foundations settled evenly in this rather swampy area. It's now a regular venue for classical concerts.

Now at the end of Great College Street, dive through the little archway that leads into Dean's Yard. This atmospheric courtyard leads through to Broad Sanctuary, the area at the west end of the Abbey. Originally, this was a place where refugees from civil justice could throw themselves on the mercy of the church - hence the name of the area - but this privilege was abolished by James I.

The last sight on this walking tour isn't particularly off the beaten track, but does seem

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to be missed out by many visitors. It's the Banqueting House, on Whitehall - a fine piece of classical architecture by Inigo Jones, who designed it as a dining hall for the Palace of Westminster in 1625. The architecture, cool and elegant, is matched by the fine paintings inside, created by Rubens for Charles I. Ironically, it was from one of the windows of the Banqueting House that Charles I stepped on to the scaffold in 1649.

Little Venice to Camden along the canal

The Regent's Canal contours north London all the way from Paddington in the west to Limehouse in the east, where it finally joins the Thames. Almost all of the towpath is now open to the walker and it makes a pleasant - and unusual - day out.

Although Paddington itself has seen a lot of recent development changing the character of the area, Little Venice has hardly changed in a hundred years. Here, the Paddington Arm of the Grand Union Canal meets the Regents Canal, forming a basin occupied by narrowboats. Tree lined streets and small, pastel painted houses make this a charming area - and very expensive, should you want to live here.

As you leave Little Venice you'll see 'Blow Up Bridge' - properly, Macclesfield Bridge. Here, in 1874, a dreadful explosion killed three men and a horse. The moral of the story is; don't carry petrol on the same boat as loose gunpowder.

Take the towpath east through Maida Vale with its genteel apartment blocks and houses, past Lord's cricket ground to the north. Soon, you're entering Regent's Park, where the canal actually runs through the middle of London Zoo. You pass the Aviary, designed by Lord Snowdon, and if you keep your ears open you may hear the gorillas and other animals.

From here, the canal runs into Camden, an intriguing mix of old and new. Nicholas Grimshaw's apartments, with sticking out pods, characterise the new Camden, home to media companies and architects - Camden Lock, with its craft market and second hand goods, reminds you of the old. Take a trip to the Roundhouse - a circular engine shed built in 1847, now home to a fine performance space.

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You'll have to leave the canal in Islington; there's a mile long tunnel. While you climb over the top, remember the poor boatmen who used to have to negotiate the tunnel by 'legging' - bracing themselves against the boat and pushing against the tunnel wall with their feet. Here as in Camden you'll find a mixture of modern flats with old commercial space along the canal sides.

The canal turns south, heading for Mile End and Limehouse. Some of this area is derelict wasteland, waiting for redevelopment, and some of it is parkland; it's got a rougher feel than the western part of the canal. You'll see the towers of Canary Wharf in the distance - pompous po-mo architecture noted mainly for its size rather than its quality.

The canal ends in Limehouse, an interesting area that still has a small Chinese community from the days when many Chinese sailors manned the sailing ships that came to harbour here. But it's much smaller than it was, and most of the Chinese living here now are elderly. Visit the Grapes pub - the original of the 'Six Jolly Fellowship Porters' in Dickens's 'Our mutual friend' - to get a feeling for the Victorian past.

And finally, you meet the Thames at Limehouse Basin, with two huge and impressive lock gates holding back the grey expanse of the river. It's still, somehow, redolent of adventure, despite the glitzy housing developments around it; look out to the river and you can imagine the clippers and barges sailing out, the challenge of Cape Horn ahead, or perhaps just a trip up the East Coast to Newcastle.

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