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The London Eye wheel, across the river Thames from the Houses of Parliament, features 32 passenger capsules—one for each London borough.

## Lively London

*Touring the city's blend of historic and modern attractions*

By Eric Lucas

**Almost eight centuries ago**, in a lush spring meadow, King John put his seal on a parchment that would change human history. ■ Just inches beneath my fingers, guarded behind thick glass, rests that very document—the Magna Carta. Under duress from his barons, the king sealed the charter at Runnymede meadow in 1215, thus restricting his royal powers and establishing what is considered to be the foundation of liberty in the

English-speaking world. Among other things, it created the basis for later habeas corpus laws—you can't be imprisoned without legal justification. And, now, here I am admiring the Magna Carta in London's British Library.

This incredible experience typifies the wonders to be found in Great Britain's

capital: On this cool and misty early-December morning, my wife, Leslie, and I have walked into the British Library, located in north London, on the spur of the moment, unaware of the enormity of its collection. Entry to the library—including the Sir John Ritblat Gallery, which features the "Treasures of the British Library"—is free.

No one else has wandered into the corner nook that houses the Magna Carta, which is here because the British Library is the kingdom's official archive, so we are studying this priceless treasure of human thought by ourselves.

Next, we survey the gallery's other cases and find Paul McCartney's handwritten lyrics for *Yesterday*; Handel's 1741 score for *Messiah*; and the "First Folio," a collection of 36 Shakespeare plays published in 1623. These gems offer captivating reminders that London has been a center of human progress and endeavor for more than a millennium.

**VISITORS TO 21ST CENTURY LONDON** are invariably enchanted by this cosmopolitan epicenter. London, population 7.5 million, is one of the most multiethnic and culturally diverse cities on earth, with human beings in every imaginable form of dress bustling along its streets: Some are in Fleet Street pinstripes, some in street-length vermilion saris, some in torn jeans and '60s-throwback Carnaby Street flowered shirts. Dozens of languages, from Croatian to Castilian, echo through old cobblestone avenues like the notes in the *Hallelujah Chorus*. A chorus, indeed: More than 300 languages are spoken in greater London.

Culinary diversity is equally expansive, with curry the universal fast food, and Italian bistros the supertime mainstay in the tony lanes of Kensington. Aromas of cardamom, ginger, bacon, garlic, green apple, chestnut and ale waft through the crisp air.

This is not to say that the classic, tried-and-true facets of a London visit have vanished. You can still gaze upon the crown jewels and armor at the Tower of London. You can cross the Tower Bridge, hear the sonorous toll of Big Ben, watch the changing of the guard at Buckingham Palace, and admire the intricate neo-Gothic spires of Parliament from across the river Thames. Broad, venerable plane trees shade the exclusive Knightsbridge district, and tea roses edge the paths in Kensington



The Piccadilly Circus Tube station offers connections to many London neighborhoods.

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Gardens. All these are worthy sights.

**BUT LONDON IS A LIVING CITY**, and change is constant. The most popular vantage for seeing those traditional venues is from this millennium's London Eye, an engineering marvel on the south bank of the Thames across from the Houses of Parliament. The Eye, Europe's biggest Ferris wheel, carries 3.5 million visitors a year 443 feet into the sky; each 30-minute revolution transports up to 800 passengers. That's about equal to the capacity of 10 red double-decker buses.

Change has even come to these iconic vehicles. Many of the old buses have been retired, and some routes now feature modern hybrid-engine double-deckers (still red). Starbucks is ubiquitous: 155 stores within a 3-mile radius of London's center. That, however, is surely not more than the number of pubs, which still stand at almost every major intersection, their elegantly lettered facade signs announcing "Crown & Sceptre" or "Moon & Sixpence."

Pubs can be the best place for a meal in Britain, and I practice that philosophy one afternoon in a charming spot,

## DETAILS

### LODGING

**THE MILESTONE HOTEL** is a handsome, 57-room stone-and-brick hotel directly across from Kensington Palace, just a few minutes' walk from the High Street Kensington Tube stop. Floral fabrics, satin-brocade bedspreads and burnished dark oak and walnut typify the Edwardian decor. Each room is different, and the location is perfect for many London activities; 44-0-20-7917-1000; [www.milestonehotel.com](http://www.milestonehotel.com); from \$360 per night.

**THE GORING HOTEL** is tucked in along a discreet street just behind Buckingham Palace. Not that guests can pop in for tea with the queen, but the aura of royal elegance pervades every nook of this 71-room palace of service. Celebrating its centennial in 2010, the Goring's glistening Edwardian ambiance ranges from the pale-green marble lobby to the soothing tones of the six Silk Rooms. The dining room specializes in proper British cuisine, such as roasted pork belly with cabbage; 44-0-20-7396-9000; [www.thegoring.com](http://www.thegoring.com); from \$350 per night.

Britain also has numerous lodging chains that offer à la carte services—you pay for what you want and nothing more. If you don't want a TV, for example, the room is less. The exemplar of this approach is **TRAVELODGE** (not the same as the U.S. chain with an identical name), whose London properties offer rooms at prices as low as about \$80; [www.travelodge.co.uk](http://www.travelodge.co.uk).

### DINING

**MORPETH ARMS** pub is just steps away from the Thames, and excellent attractions such as Tate Britain, Westminster Abbey and Parliament are all within walking distance. The menu ranges widely, from vegetable samosas to Cajun chicken, but the traditional English fare is best, especially the London bangers (sausages); *CONTINUED ON PAGE 125*

## UNITED KINGDOM



Morpeth Arms, poised on a quiet corner right along the Thames, near the Tate Britain art museum. At the Tate, I'd marveled at some of England's greatest art from 1500 to the present day, ranging from the famous light-filled, pre-Impressionist works of J.M.W. Turner to the gargantuan, fantastic religious paintings by John Martin. Martin's incredible yet foreboding canvases make me seek warmth and comfort, so I'm grateful for the atmosphere at Morpeth.

The pub is offering a traditional Sunday supper—roast pork or beef, plus vegetables. And, yes, in Britain, Sunday supper “vegetables” still mean potatoes, carrots and peas. Thoroughly cooked. But who can complain?

The polished dark oak, walnut and brass glimmer like I'm in a movie set. The milieu is not only historically Dickensian, it's historic: The pub was built in 1845 to serve the wardens at nearby Millbank Prison, from which convicts were shipped away to colonies such as Australia. Today, the typical clientele is a mix of tourists and locals. And the pork, beef and chicken are all free-range.

Did Henry VIII enjoy the same? Actually, yes. I ask the businesslike barkeep if I can change my order from beef to roast pork. He flashes a quick grin on hearing my accent. “Visiting from the States?” I nod. “No worries—in London we aim to please.”

That would be a grandiose claim in many metropolitan areas, but I find it exactly so later when I descend into the Underground, popularly called “the Tube,” to hop a train back to my Kensington hotel. Something is wrong with my Oyster fare card—a smart card that lets you store credit and pay as you go, and can be used on London's public-transportation network—and the turnstile flashes a stern red warning to “See Station Personnel.” Personnel



ALEX SEGRE / ALAMY

Westminster Abbey has been the coronation site for British monarchs since 1066.

turns out to be an amiable uniformed officer posted nearby. The subsequent interaction epitomizes the beautiful meld of tradition and progress in London: Personal attention is oh-so British, but the Oyster card is an utterly modern stored-value device. On hearing my dilemma, the attendant takes my card, dashes off to a computer, rejiggers the thing and brings it back with the declaration that he has straightened everything out.

“In fact,” he announces cheerily, “for good measure, I put £2 back on it. Enjoy the ride.”

How could I not? My absolute favorite souvenir memory of London is the mellifluous announcement that greets a train's arrival at most Tube stations: “Please mind the gap between the platform and the train.”

Music to my ears. Partly because it is so endearingly British; partly because it reflects the fact that traveling on the Underground is a quick, efficient, user-friendly way to get around. The Tube costs

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44-0-20-7834-6442; [www.morpeth-arms.com](http://www.morpeth-arms.com).

**ARCADIA RESTAURANT** exemplifies a London neighborhood bistro: Tucked into the ground floor and basement of a heritage building in Kensington, it has a menu that is Italian with British flair. Fish is cod fillet; bistecca is Scottish rib eye; and lamb shanks are a mainstay. The atmosphere is cozy and warm, and the proprietor may be on hand to greet you with his parrot perched on his shoulder; 44-0-20-7937-4294.

Dating back to 1676, the **GEORGE INN** has galleries looking out over a courtyard that reflects its history as a coach inn. Located across from London Bridge, it's now owned by Britain's National Trust, but operates as a pub, with English ales and traditional food such as roasts and pies; 44-0-20-7407-2056.

For traditional afternoon tea, visit **THE SAVOY**; the restored iconic hotel reopens October 10. Sample teas, homemade jams and cakes; 44-0-20-7836-4343; [www.fairmont.com/savoy](http://www.fairmont.com/savoy). —E.L.

£2.30 (about \$3.55 USD) for a peak-hour single ride using Oyster, or £4 (about \$6 USD) using cash. An even better deal is a £25.80 (about \$40 USD) seven-day pass that will take you to virtually anything you want to see. Many London hotels are within a 20-minute walk of the Piccadilly blue line; most sights can be reached with one transfer or less.

This includes, to my mind, the most memorable of all London attractions, Westminster Abbey, constructed in multiple phases between 1245 and 1745 on the site of an earlier monastery. History has been made for centuries in this relatively small, unassuming Gothic church. Here were held all of the coronations since 1066. Here are buried the legends of English civilization—Browning, Chaucer, Darwin,

Dickens, Handel, Kipling, Purcell, Tennyson. Mary, Queen of Scots is here; so is her archrival Elizabeth I. So is Elizabeth's predecessor, her half-sister Mary Tudor, who confined Elizabeth to the Tower prison. In a novel display of English even-handedness, the two foes in life share a tomb in death, and seeing the stark, stone evidence of that does make you ponder the mutability of earthly struggles.

Strolling the nave of the church, which is paved with immense flagstones worn smooth by millions of feet, I'm struck by the notion that, no doubt, Elizabeth I walked on this same stone—she who saved England from dissolution, who framed the society that made Shakespeare, who loosed Britain's navies on the world and transformed a tiny island into a colossal power.

The next half-millennium saw seafaring trade emerge as the centerpiece of British strength. This legacy takes colorful form today at Harrods. While this famed luxury department store may not be the best place for savvy shoppers to hunt for socks, it's a marvel for visitors—an emporium that makes most department stores look like convenience stores. Harrods boasts 1 million square feet of retail space in 330 different departments, and welcomes 100,000 shoppers on peak days.

The store's motto is "All things for all people, everywhere," and cosmopolitan progress is a tradition here—Harrods installed England's first escalator in 1898. The massive food court spans the comestible globe, from sushi to steak-and-kidney pie. Fine dining ranges from high tea to the Veuve Clicquot Champagne Bar.

But it's the Harrods Chocolate Bar, I feel, that most delectably measures the sophisticated breadth of modern London: Here you can order not one, but five, varietal hot chocolates, made fresh on the spot, perfect for the damp of late autumn. I opt for the Ghana, slightly bitter; Leslie has the sweet and light Venezuela. As we sip them, we admire the confectionery wonders being consumed by others at the bar. The treats include the Chocolate Dome, a puff pastry filled with dark-chocolate ganache and garnished with your choice of six ice creams.

**AFTER FINISHING OUR COCOAS**, we walk over to the Victoria & Albert Museum, which has more than 2 million decorative objects in its collection. If it's silver, gold, enamel, porcelain or velvet, you can view it here, for free: Indeed, most of the major museums in London are free of charge.

This fact features prominently in the British Museum's controversial display of the Elgin marbles: sculptures and friezes that were part of the Parthenon in Greece until the British ambassador to the Ottoman Empire removed them between 1801 and 1805. Greece would like them back, and Britain has balked. The British position is that here the marbles are safe from the elements and accessible to all.

In this century, the museum's famed, round reading room is also open to all. Built in 1857, the room hosted such visionaries as George Bernard Shaw, Bram Stoker and Mark Twain, who applied for a ticket to research, write or read in the beautiful domed space. Since its renovation in 2000 (the books were moved in 1997 to the British Library), the reading room has hosted exhibitions.

After a look around, we repair outside to the cobblestone plaza, where we buy a sack of roasted chestnuts. Light clouds streak the sky above, leaving occasional openings, like transoms, for shafts of sunlight. The aroma of roasted nuts blends with the sharp scent of charcoal and the mellow must of fallen leaves as we mull Twain's famous aphorism that travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry and narrow-mindedness. No city better exemplifies that than modern London. ▲

*Eric Lucas lives in Seattle's Ballard neighborhood.*

## GETTING THERE



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Air France, American Airlines, British Airways, Delta, Icelandair and KLM Royal Dutch Airlines. For more information or to enroll in Mileage Plan, go to [alaskaair.com](http://alaskaair.com) or call 800-654-5669.