



The Tower Bridge specially decorated for the Olympics

Notes from an Olympic Host City

By Dr Jenny Lim

2012 is the year of Queen Elizabeth's Diamond Jubilee as well as the Summer Olympics in London. What better time to revisit this great city than in June before the hordes arrive for the Olympics in July. I was lucky to have a good friend to stay with and 11 days of decent weather to rediscover this wonderful city. There are countless tourist attractions in London and the following are just some of my personal favourites.

Kew Gardens

I visited the famous Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew (usually called Kew Gardens) for the first time. Despite having been to London several times, I never made time to visit Kew Gardens as it is located in the suburbs. It became a pilgrimage this trip as I have developed a passion for gardening in recent years. The place was easy to reach by tube and a short walk through the village of Kew.

Do study a map of Kew Gardens before venturing out as it is 121 hectares of gardens and botanical greenhouses, and you could miss an attraction that you might regret. I am sorry that I did not make it to the compost heap as it is one of the largest in Europe. Alternatively, there is a hop on and off tourist tram that will drive you around the gardens. Do not miss the Marianne North Gallery, which was built in the 1880s to house the paintings of Marianne North, who travelled alone to North and South America, South Africa and Asia, at a time when women rarely did so, to paint plants. The gallery has 832 of her paintings, including some featuring plants from Singapore and Malaysia.

After visiting the Gardens, take a bus to Petersham to visit Petersham Nurseries. Try to have lunch at their rustic restaurant which won a Michelin star last year. Unfortunately the original chef quit after receiving the star, but the new chef has had very good reviews. You can enjoy a walk downhill from the nursery back to Richmond Tube Station, located along the River Thames. The town of Richmond, located in a meander of the Thames, is also pleasant to visit. It is noted for its high quality of life, as well as its affluence, and has been assessed as one of the happiest places in which to live in the UK.

Soane Museum

I also visited the Soane Museum for the first time. This was formerly the home of the neoclassical architect Sir John Soane, who designed the Bank of England. The museum holds many drawings and models of his projects and is a treasure trove of paintings, drawings and antiquities that he collected. Walking through the museum is like walking through the home of a rich acquaintance with excellent taste and a sense of fun. Very pleasant staff members will open wall panels to reveal secret galleries with paintings by Hogarth, Canaletto and others, and even answer questions regarding them. The brief discourse on the eight canvases of *A Rake's Progress* by Hogarth with the actual paintings a few feet away was very interesting. Read this article at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/art-news/8354262/Sir-John-Soanes-Museum-the-museum-that-time-forgot.html> and it will make your visit even more memorable. I

will definitely return to the Soane Museum the next time I am in London.

The Wallace Collection

Revisited The Wallace Collection, a national museum located in a historic London townhouse. Its 25 galleries display works of art from the 15th to 19th centuries, including a large collection of 18th century French paintings, furniture and porcelain. Don't miss the exquisite Old Master paintings and world class armoury. This museum has an intimate ambience and has never been very crowded the times I have visited.

Westminster Abbey and St Paul's Cathedral

Finally, I explored Westminster Abbey and St Paul's Cathedral. I have passed these very impressive architectural wonders before, and was glad I took the time to check out their interiors. You can spend many enjoyable hours in these massive buildings and be awestruck wandering around, reading plaques with names familiar from history books and covers of story books.

Greenwich

Spent a very pleasant day out in Greenwich. There is much to see there, including Christopher Wren's jaw dropping Painted Hall and Chapel in the former Royal Naval Hospital, the Maritime Museum with a special Jubilee exhibition, Royal River: Power, Pageantry and the Thames, that runs from 26 April to 9 September 2012. I was pleased to discover Canaletto's paintings of the River Thames in this exhibition, having enjoyed his paintings of Venice in other museums. This exhibition was especially interesting, as over the previous days, I had walked along the River Thames from Petersham to Richmond, from the Embankment to the Tate Modern, from Billingsgate Market to Wapping along the lower Thames, crossing the Millennium, London and Tower bridges. It was enlightening to learn how the history of this river unfolded in this exhibition.

Another worthwhile attraction is the *Cutty Sark*, the world's last surviving tea clipper, which was opened to the public in April this year, after a £50 million renovation. You can also visit the Royal Observatory in Greenwich which is the home of Greenwich Mean Time and the Prime Meridian of the world.

The streets of London

I explored the streets of London, with names familiar from Monopoly, using *Walking Dickens' London*, a guidebook which tells the history of the area, including obscure alleys and buildings. My favourite discovery was the historic Seven Dials area with a roundabout of seven streets and a sundial obelisk which has six faces to reflect the original planning application of six streets. The attractively restored narrow streets (some of which are paved with cobbled stones) have a quirky mix of trendy shops with Victorian storefronts,



The Cutty Sark



The Millennium Bridge, which crosses the River Thames, with the famous dome of St Paul's Cathedral visible in the background



Roundabout at Seven Dials



A stall selling sweet treats at the only traditional street market, which dates from the 18th century, in West End



Giant lily pads at Kew Gardens

entertainment venues and residences. An advantage of narrow streets is the relative lack of cars making it a haven for window shopping. Neal's Yard Dairy, which sells some of the best British cheeses, and Monmouth Coffee Company were started and are still located here.

Marylebone

The friend I stayed with lives in Marylebone, and she introduced me to Marylebone High Street. This is an attractive shopping area, populated with beautiful boutiques,

restaurants and shops, and without the crazy touristy frenetic pace of Oxford Street.

We had a tasty lunch at stylish La Fromagerie that has a temperature controlled, walk-in cheese cellar and a shop floor that sells breads, fruits and vegetables as well as olive oils, vinegars and other condiments for cooking a great meal at home. She brought me to another favourite food shop, The Ginger Pig, but I could only look longingly at the raw meats and sausages, wishing I had time to cook an elaborate meal. They also sell prepared food to take home. There is also a small farmer's market on Sundays in Marylebone. Meanwhile, Daunt is an old-fashioned bookstore with a beautiful interior worth visiting to browse or to buy a book or two.

Borough Market

Borough Market is a farmer's market on a grander scale and definitely a must visit especially if you enjoy food. It is normally only open from Thursday to Saturday. Neal's Yard Dairy, Monmouth Coffee and Spanish food emporium Brindisa also have stores in the vicinity and so this area can be a fabulous one-stop food-buying experience for those with limited time. Go hungry.

The less touristy areas of London have received a lot of renovation effort in recent years especially with the hosting of the Olympics. In addition special exhibitions and programmes to celebrate the Queen's Jubilee and the Olympics, plus the stronger Singapore dollar make this a great time to visit London and stay on the beaten path or wander off.

Tips

1. Obtain a good guide book with walking tours. London is a great city for walking and its rich history makes it an ideal place to wander about. A search on Amazon will surely bring up a travel guide to suit one's taste.
2. Get your Oyster card for public transportation in London. Use Transport for London (http://journeyplanner.tfl.gov.uk/user/XSLT_TRIP_REQUEST2?language=en) to plan your trip; it will save you time and hassle.
3. Should you need a SIM card, Giffgaff (<http://www.giffgaff.com>) has a great deal, although you will need a local address for them to mail their free SIM cards to. Meanwhile, Lebara (<https://www.lebara.co.uk/freesim>) also offers free SIM cards, a cheap plan and apparently has the advantage of real stores where you can obtain them. Information about Lebara is from the



London is full of useful street maps like this

Fodor's Travel Talk Forums (<http://www.fodors.com/community/>) and I have no personal experience.

You can activate your SIM cards and load them online using a UK credit card, or you can buy vouchers in many stores. If you use Giffgaff and their website asks who recommended you, please type "jennylin". My Giffgaff SIM card with calls, text and broadband ("£10 goodybag") worked great in Cornwall too. Alternatively, you can get a prepaid SIM card easily at many newsagents and mom and pop shops. This information may be outdated soon, as the mobile phone industry is very competitive in the UK, where new companies may pop up any time, and hence the incredibly low prices as compared to the US.

4. You can't get lost for long in London anymore. Street maps abound at many intersections and at docking stations where bicycles can be hired. These are the most user friendly maps I have ever seen. So if you are lost within a five-minute walking distance of your destination, fret not. Don't waste your time looking at your map, or the maps at bus stops which are rubbish, just look around for a map station as shown in my photograph on the facing page.
5. For those who want to cycle check out <http://www.tfl.gov.uk/roadusers/cycling/> 1598.aspx. It is a great guide

on exploring London for the competent bicyclist.

6. For folks who love musicals and are cheap like me, same day discounted tickets are easy to obtain. Do some research for the best prices. The TKTS booth is no longer the only place to go. Small shops in Leicester Square advertise their offerings, and I was pleasantly surprised to obtain a discount ticket for *Wicked* and a full price ticket for the sold out *Matilda* (fantastic musical especially if you have older kids to go with) at one shop, which were not available at TKTS. Some special discounts are only available online, so do google for the musicals or plays you want to watch. Time Out (<http://www.timeout.com/london/>) is also useful for shows and other happenings in town.
7. You need not worry about finding decent public toilets in London (unlike New York City). So go ahead, drink your fluids. **SMA**



Jenny Lim lives in North Florida where she works in the Urgent Care section of the Emergency Room. She is married to a commercial pilot. They have no kids.

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