

## travel

# London's attractions are paved with gold

A visit to London always feels like a journey of discovery.

No matter how often I take a trip to the big smoke, and how well I think I am getting to know the city I always seem to find something new, whether a charming hotel, a shop filled with delights begging to be brought home, an intimate restaurant or simply a fun way to pass a few hours.

And my last visit was a veritable treasure trove.

Although I go to London fairly frequently, I can hardly remember the last time I visited any of the mainstream tourist attractions, usually preferring to stray a bit further off the beaten track and avoid the crowds armed with cameras and map books.

But on this latest visit my boyfriend and I decided to brave the masses and give some of the tourist attractions a try.

We were spending the first night of the weekend at The Royal Park Hotel in Lancaster Gate.

As we arrived by train and it was just a short walk from Paddington it was the perfect location.

And with a selection of other tube stations all within walking distance it proved to be a great base for getting around the city.

The Royal Park is an elegant 19th century townhouse which has been converted into a luxurious boutique hotel, but still retaining all of the period charm.

Our suite was very spacious and comfortable, with a living/dining room off the bedroom with large windows overlooking the leafy street.

This was an especially nice touch because since the hotel does not have a restaurant, breakfast is delivered to your room and being able to wander through from the bedroom wrapped in the fluffy bathrobe, to enjoy coffee and croissants with the morning sunshine streaming through the open window felt deliciously decadent.

From the hotel it was an easy tube ride to Westminster to take in the sights of Big Ben, the Houses of

## Emma Dance found two quiet hotels that were the perfect foil for trips around London's busiest tourist sites

Parliament and Westminster Abbey.

Just a few streets away we ate lunch at a hidden gem – Brasserie One.

This restaurant, tucked away in the basement of the Institution of Civil Engineers on George Street must be one of the area's best kept secrets.

Brasserie One doesn't open in the evenings, or at weekends, so it is often overlooked by those not in the know.

But with a regularly changing menu of expertly prepared fresh, seasonal ingredients it is definitely worth a visit – and as it is so close to the Houses of Parliament you may find yourself eating next to a politician.

Having enjoyed a peaceful meal we decided to brave the masses and took the short walk towards the river.

Our first stop was the Sea Life London Aquarium, home to one of Europe's largest collections of marine life. I always find aquariums relaxing and watching the various creatures, from rays and sharks to turtles and seahorses, gliding through the tanks was mesmerising.

Emerging from the softly lit tunnels of the aquarium into the sunshine we decided to continue with the water theme and take a river cruise.

The cruise is a fun way to see the city, and although the humour of the guide may have been lost on some of our foreign fellow passengers we were kept amused and entertained.

As you disembark the boats the entrance to the London Eye is just across the way so we swapped water for sky and took a flight.

Before we got on we visited the London Eye's newest attraction, a 4-D cinema, showing a short film which transported us around the city in a 3-D film with added effects such as wind and snow.

The flight itself offers spectacular views of the city.

As the capsule slowly rises the sight of the city unfolding below is breathtaking.

Because London is so easy to navigate with public transport it is easy to forget how vast it is.

But from the top of the wheel, the uncluttered view of the sprawling mass of buildings, littered with famous landmarks the sheer size of the city is unmistakable.

Returning to the hotel in the early evening we were treated to another of the touches which makes a stay in the Royal Park extra-special – complimentary champagne and canapés.

The hotel is just a stone's throw from Hyde Park, and so wanting to take advantage of the warm evening and excellent location we decided to go for a walk.

I always think of London as bustling and crowded but the park was like an oasis and as the sun set over the lake with the skyline silhouetted beyond it felt like a perfect moment.

The following day we moved the Royal Park's sister hotel The Cranley in one of my favourite areas of London – South Kensington.

With 39 rooms The Cranley is slightly smaller than the Royal Park, but in just the same way still maintains a feeling of staying somewhere much bigger, while keeping the personal touches of a boutique hotel.

I could happily spend many days browsing the shops and frequenting the bars and restaurants of Kensington and Chelsea, but as this



IN THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER: The London Eye

was a plan which would not have pleased either my bank manager or my boyfriend I agreed to continue on our tour of tourist attractions.

Our first stop was the London Dungeon which was at the same time educational, entertaining and utterly terrifying with actors bringing the darkest aspects of London's history to life.

And of course, no visit to tourist hotspots in London would be complete without rubbing shoulders with the (waxwork) stars at Madame Tussauds.

I had not visited since I was a child

but at any age it is fun to compare the waxworks with the images you have only otherwise seen on screen.

And this summer Marvel Superheroes arrived at the attraction, starring in a very entertaining 4-D film.

Of course there are crowds at these attractions but it doesn't detract from the experience although it is lovely to be able to retreat back to a peaceful, luxurious hotel after a day among the crowds.

I remain convinced that London is a city filled with gems. And sometimes those that glitter actually are gold.

## fact file

Rooms at the Royal Park Hotel are available from £139 per night.

For more details visit [www.theroyalpark.com](http://www.theroyalpark.com), email [info@theroyalpark.com](mailto:info@theroyalpark.com) or call 020 7479 6600.

Rooms at The Cranley start from £129 per night.

For more details visit [www.thecranley.com](http://www.thecranley.com) email [info@thecranley.com](mailto:info@thecranley.com) or call 020 7373 0123.

Brasserie One ([www.brasserieone.com](http://www.brasserieone.com)) at 1, Great George Street, is open for lunch every week day lunchtime from noon to 2.30pm. A three course meal costs around £20.

One Great George Street also offers private dining in the president's dining room and Stephenson room. A three course meal is available from £43.50 per person in these rooms and the restaurant caters for 12 to 30 guests.

For more details or to book visit [www.brasserieone.com](http://www.brasserieone.com), call 020 7665 2340 or email [brasserie@ice.org.uk](mailto:brasserie@ice.org.uk).

For details on the London Eye or the river cruise visit [www.londoneye.com](http://www.londoneye.com) or call 0870 400 3006.

For details on the London Dungeon visit [www.thedungeon.com](http://www.thedungeon.com), email

[london.dungeon@merlinentertainments.biz](mailto:london.dungeon@merlinentertainments.biz) or call 0207 403 7221.

For details on Madame Tussauds visit [www.madametussauds.com/London](http://www.madametussauds.com/London).

Merlin Entertainments also offers combination tickets for all of the above attractions.

For details and prices contact any of the attractions.

Emma travelled to London with First trains. For timetables and ticket prices visit [www.firstgreatwestern.co.uk](http://www.firstgreatwestern.co.uk) or call 08457 000 125.

**First** Great Western



GRAND BUILDINGS: Left, the Royal Park Hotel and, above, the Institution of Civil Engineers