

Travel Guide: London, England

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GETTING AROUND

London is a huge city, but it's actually very easy to get around and the 'downtown tourist area' is actually quite walkable. As soon as you arrive, buy a small "A to Z" - it's a booklet style city map that you can pick up at any corner store for \$5 - \$10.

The London Underground is their subway system and if you're going to use it more than once in a day, you will want to get an Oyster card (transit pass) to save money. Electronic cards are swiped to enter the subway and to exit. If you just buy a paper travel voucher, you'll need to stick it in the slot at the entrance but don't forget to pick it up after you go through the little gate - you'll need to do the same thing to exit the station.

Double decker buses are a tourist attraction and a convenient way to get around and see things. Try to get the front seats on the upper level - you'll find yourself cringing, expecting to rear end vehicles and smack the sides of buildings while the skilled bus driver easily (and safely) drives along. (It's just a perception thing)

THINGS TO SEE & DO

BIG BUS TOUR

First thing you should do is get a ticket for the Big Bus Tour. There are 3 companies that offer this Hop On Hop Off (HOHO) tour but the best one is the red bus, with live commentary. This is great if you get stuck in traffic or at a light as the guide always has extra tips & trivia to share. Passes cost about £20 - £25 if purchased locally and it's a 24-hour pass to ride. The bus takes a somewhat circular route through Central London, past all of the major tourist attractions. You can just ride the bus and take photos of everything except Buckingham Palace (tour buses are no longer allowed to pass in front of the palace) or you can hop off at one of the many stops, wander about and then just catch the next bus when it comes along. Just hold on to your ticket. Ride on the top for the best view. If it's full, wait until people get off at the next stop and then go upstairs.

This tour also includes walking tours & a ride up the Thames. You'll disembark across the water from the London Eye & across the street from Big Ben.

✓ **Tickets can be pre-purchased to save money**

LONDON EYE

Originally called the Millennium Wheel, this tourist attraction was created to celebrate the turn of the century and was actually scheduled to be demolished after. It turned out to be so successful that they decided to keep it going. Across from the Parliament Buildings and Big Ben, the London Eye offers great views of the cityscape of London. There is a guide book you can purchase which shows photos of what you'll see onboard and points out tourist attractions and important landmarks.

✓ **Tickets can be pre-purchased to save money**

CAMDEN MARKET

This market operates daily, but it's best to go on weekends. As you exit the Camden tube station, you'll pass by some tattoo shops and other adult oriented stores. Beyond that, you'll pass the market, which is a bit like a flea market. Stalls of new & used goods are for sale. Cross over the bridge and you'll see another market with International food stalls set up - very much like Vancouver's Granville Island. Enjoy a great lunch here of anything from Mexican empanadas to Trinidadian roti to Greek kebabs. This area overlooks the Camden Lock and you'll see many cigarette boats as they enter the lock on their way around London.

NOTTING HILL MARKET

If you've seen the movie *Notting Hill*, starring Julia Roberts & Hugh Grant, you'll definitely want to check this out. At this market, you'll see everything from WWII silverware for sale, to fresh vegetables & bread, to used clothing, to freshly baked treats like sweet or savory crepes. The market is on Portobello Road and extends for about 2 miles. Fans of the movie will want to head up Bleheim Crescent to see the Travel Bookshop - the inspiration for the movie.

NATIONAL GALLERY

This gallery is full of popular classics and entrance is FREE. All they ask is that you provide a donation for upkeep. It's located in Trafalgar Square, and the entire area is great for tourist photos, with Canada House and South Africa's embassy overlooking the square as well.

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MONEY MATTERS

The currency in England is still the Great British Pound but they also accept Euros at some shops. Before you go, ensure that your Visa has a chip in it or it's not likely to be accepted there. ([Click for the full article on this](#))

You can withdraw cash at ATM's that use the Plus system; however, you may want to confirm what your bank's service charge is for this (much higher than at home). This does give you the current exchange rate though and is less hassle than travelers cheques.

If you take cash before you go, you can exchange it at banks or change a bunch at the airport.

COMMUNICATING WITH OTHERS

If you're traveling with other people and there are going to be times when you'll be separated, you'll want to have a strategy for communication.

If you have a GSM network cell phone then you can use it to send text messages or call, but the International service charges can be quite high. You can buy a new SIM card to save money.

Alternatively, you can simply buy a cheap pay-as-you-go cell phone for £10 or more (depending on how fancy of a phone you want) and then just buy airtime as you need it. Most phones come with some included airtime, and if all you're going to do is text, you may not need to buy extra time.

Renting a cell phone is another option, and if you simply need a blackberry or similar device, this may be the least expensive option for you. You can pre-arrange this or you can rent phones at Heathrow as soon as you land.

Internet cafes are everywhere, and if you've got an iTouch or similar WiFi device, you'll find that most coffee shops and pubs offer FREE internet access. Keep on top of email or simply keep in touch with friends and family this way.

OTHER GENERAL INFO

SHOPPING

Oxford Street is the best place to go. All of the major department stores are located here (Marks & Spencer, Debenhams, Selfridges, etc). As you wander along, you'll be surprised at the variety of languages being spoken, and if you keep your eyes open, you'll sometimes find shops that are closing out and have fantastic sales (designer shirts for £10!). You'll also have no trouble finding elite shops where plain cotton tank tops run £70.

Check out Harrods for another posh experience. Their Food Halls offer wonderful delicacies and the jewelry section is definitely worth a peek. Mind if you have to use the washroom, it will cost you £2. Seriously.

EATING OUT

London is known for being an extremely expensive place to eat out. To save a bit of money, eat at pubs ([Garfunkel's](#) always has good specials). If you just want something light, you can always pick up a relatively freshly made sandwich at Boots or tube stations.

If you don't mind succumbing to a bit of junk food, try some of the great pies & samosas (also at the tube stations), or get a take-away curry or fish & chips.

LOOK LEFT

It takes a while to remember that traffic comes from the other direction. So when crossing the streets, especially at tricky corners where you might have oncoming traffic, don't just "Look Left" (painted on the ground), look *everywhere*.