

London, England: Making the Most of a Short Trip

by *Bernie Edwards, PassPorter Guest Contributor*

I was recently sent on an eight day trip to London, England to attend several international meetings, and I had some free time to enjoy the city. In this article, I'm going to discuss some of the things I had the opportunity to do in that great city.

If you've never been to London before, and are worried about getting around in such a large city, relax! I've had the privilege of traveling all over the world and London is one of the easiest large cities to get around in. My flight landed at Heathrow Airport and while many people took a taxi into London, I decided to try the Heathrow Express. I'm glad I did! The Heathrow Express service is provided by high-speed trains to and from Central London, departing about every 15 minutes. The trip takes only about 15 minutes to get from the airport to Paddington Station. Paddington Station is situated in the west end of Central London and it connects to the London Underground. The train cars were roomy and were not over-crowded at all. I was in my hotel within 45 minutes of getting through customs. A friend of mine staying at the same hotel took a taxi, and it took him about an hour and a half after first waiting for a taxi and then driving through traffic; my journey was also significantly cheaper. However, I didn't have a lot of luggage. With a lot of luggage, it would be easier to just take a taxi than to navigate the various London Underground stations; in that case, I would recommend taking the Heathrow Express to Central London and then switching to a taxi there.

Once in the city, the easiest way to get around is the London Underground, also referred to as just "the Underground" and colloquially as "the Tube." The London Underground is a rapid transit system serving a large part of Greater London. The system has 11 lines, 270 stations, and about 250 miles of track. I was able to get to everywhere I wanted to go in London by taking the Underground and then walking a couple of blocks at most. It was very convenient and safe. However, I was told that on hot summer days, parts of the Underground can become very uncomfortable and there are usually posters placed in the stations advising passengers to carry a bottle of water.

My party landed in London on Sunday, and while everybody else went to the hotel to get some sleep after the long flight, I decided to stay awake and tour London. One of the first things I did was to spend over two

hours on an open-top double-decker sightseeing bus. There are a lot of tour bus companies operating in the city; I decided to try the buses operated by "The Original Tour" company. That company offers three different bus routes with the ability to hop on and hop off at any of the spots. The cost of their ticket also covered walking tours and a cruise on the Thames River. Excellent commentary was provided live by a guide on one route and by digital recording on the other two routes.

London is the capital of England and the United Kingdom. A famous site in London is the Houses of Parliament, also known as the Palace of Westminster, the meeting place of the House of Lords and the House of Commons. It is a UNESCO World Heritage Site and should absolutely be visited. It lies on the north bank of the River Thames in the heart of the city, close to historic Westminster Abbey. The abbey is the traditional place of coronation and burial site for English, later British, and currently monarchs of the Commonwealth realms. Many national figures are also buried or commemorated in the abbey; it should not be missed!

One of the highlights of my trip was visiting the Tower of London, which is a castle on the north bank of the River Thames in Central London. It was founded in 1066 as part of the Norman Conquest of England. The tower is a complex of several buildings set within defensive walls and a moat. The castle was used as a prison since at least 1100, and has held many famous people. Today it is a museum and the home of the Crown Jewels of the United Kingdom, which is a very popular exhibit inside the castle. I've had the privilege of visiting a lot of castles throughout Europe, and the Tower of London is one of my favorites. It is definitely a "must do" on a first time trip to London!

Another "must do" is the British Museum, which is a museum of human history and culture. If you visit, be sure to visit the Elgin Marbles, sculptures that were originally part of the Parthenon in Athens; they are absolutely spectacular. Another famous artifact in the museum is the Rosetta Stone, which provided the key to understanding Egyptian hieroglyphs; it is an ancient stone inscribed with a decree in 196 BC and the decree appears in three scripts, connecting Ancient Greek to the Egyptian hieroglyphs. At its height, the British Empire spanned the world and a lot of important artifacts ended up here. You really need at least a half a day in the museum.

One of the last things we did in London was a Jack the Ripper Walk. I was a little hesitant at first, because I thought I should be doing something more "value" with the last little free time I had left to enjoy. However, I'm glad I went. There are a lot of companies and people offering a walking tour; most meet at the Tower Hill Underground

Station. After some research, we decided to go with Jack the Ripper Tours from Ripping Yarns, which meets at 6:45 pm on almost every night of the year. They are so confident that guests will enjoy their tour that they won't take any money until the end of the tour and then only if the guests have enjoyed it! The deciding factor was their tour guides; their guides are all retired British Army and Royal Marine Sergeant Majors whose day jobs are delivering history and tours at the Tower of London. Our guide was a great story teller and led our group to various spots where Jack the Ripper committed his brutal murders; our guide also did a great job giving us the background story on what London was like during that time. Our tour lasted about two and a half hours and it was a lot of fun.

London is a leading global city, and an amazing city to visit. There are plenty of activities for the entire family to enjoy. There are so many things that I wanted to do but couldn't; I could have easily spent a month there sightseeing every day. It is the most visited city in the world, with over 15 million tourists visiting last year. In 1777, the author Dr. Samuel Johnson famously said, "When a man is tired of London, he is tired of life." I can understand why he said that; if you ever get a chance to visit, even if just for a few hours, go!

About The Author: Bernie Edwards lives in Maryland with his wife and two children. He is an engineer for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration and a member of the Walt Disney World Moms Panel. He enjoys visiting both Walt Disney World and Disneyland, and sailing on the Disney Cruise Line.

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