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Life & Culture

TRAVEL

London calling: City lures 30 million visitors per year

Nicole Pensiero For South Jersey Times

It was planned on a whim: a winter getaway to London with a group of college girlfriends. Some married, some single, we'd known each other for years (OK, decades) — and we were more than ready to embark on an overseas adventure together.

Two in our group of five had been to England's capital city before; myself, several times. But seeing London through the eyes of first-time visitors is, in some ways, like seeing it yourself for the first time.

I've always been dazzled by this massive city's mix of old and new — the ancient monuments, such as Westminster Abbey and the Tower of London, that sit so close to modern-day attractions like the London Eye and the Shard. It's a city of contrasts that meld together beautifully.

Some 30 million tourists descend on this city each year.

And why not?

It's a fascinating, fun place that's also clean, friendly and easy to get around. With some advance planning and a willingness to push through long days, we found time to experience the best of London, even managing to be "day-trippers" and enjoy a side trip to Liverpool for a Beatles pilgrimage.

We found an affordable, easy-to-book package through Expedia that included non-stop flights and a five-night stay at a charming, small hotel in upscale Kensington. The Villa Kensington just so happened to be reachable on the same Underground (subway) line that runs from Heathrow Airport — so we saved a bundle by taking the "tube" directly to Gloucester Road, where it was an easy two-minute walk to our accommodations. Clean, quiet and small (38 rooms), we were happy with our spaces, and the affordable breakfast offered each day (about \$6).

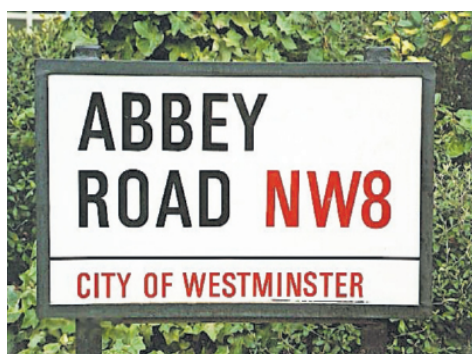
We were blessed with spectacularly mild and sunny weather for our mid-February visit. There were many highlights during our fast-paced getaway, but we all agreed that London is a city with something for everyone: cultural sights (including loads of free museums), historical attractions, great restaurants, theater, and plenty of parks.

After checking in at our hotel the morning after our overseas flight, we did what many overseas visitors do: tried to stay awake to get on the UK's time zone (five hours ahead of EST) without pushing ourselves too hard. That meant a quick visit to Harrods — where we tried on so-called "fascinators" hats made popular at royal weddings, and ogled culinary delights in its food hall. (Note: the "Dodi and Diana" display that had been there for years following their tragic deaths in 1997 is now gone; the famous department store is no longer owned by Dodi's father.) From Harrods, we made our way to England's tallest building, the Shard.

VIEW FROM THE SHARD

Opened in 2013, this is now one of London's most recognizable buildings, not only for its height, but its distinctive angular shape. Along with offices, restaurants, retail shops and a five-star hotel, there's also the popular "View from the Shard" attraction that takes you 800 feet above the city's skyline for a breathtaking 360-degree view.

You can purchase tickets in advance (to save money) or day-of; discounts are offered for children and seniors. The Shard has two viewing galleries — one, enclosed; another, open-air — and both are fantastic. And you



can hang out for as long as you'd like; on the day we visited, we were especially impressed with the elaborate floral displays in place for Valentine's Day.

A SPOT OF HISTORY

After a tasty meal at our favorite Kensington neighborhood eatery, the Stanhope Arms Pub, our jet-lagged group retired early. But we were up early for our first full day in London. Our morning out was to the Tower of London, one of the city's most fascinating sites, and one that dates back to 1066. After passing the famed Roman Wall from 200 AD (and the photo op-ready statue of Roman Emperor Trajan), we entered the Tower and enjoyed an included tour with a personable female Beefeater, where we learned everything from where (and why) Anne Boleyn was beheaded, to the folklore surrounding the prevalent ravens.

You need a good three hours, at least, to properly explore this iconic monument to London's illustrious (and sometimes bloody) past; you can avoid bigger crowds with a morning visit and you can save a bit of money by booking in advance. After an inexpensive and satisfying lunch at Pret A Manger — a wildly popular franchise with more than 225 locations throughout the city — we set off for Covent Garden, a popular shopping and tourist destination. Opened in the 1660s as a farmer's market, there you'll find upscale shops, an indoor/outdoor flea market, and street performers (called "buskers"). It's a great way to spend a few hours.

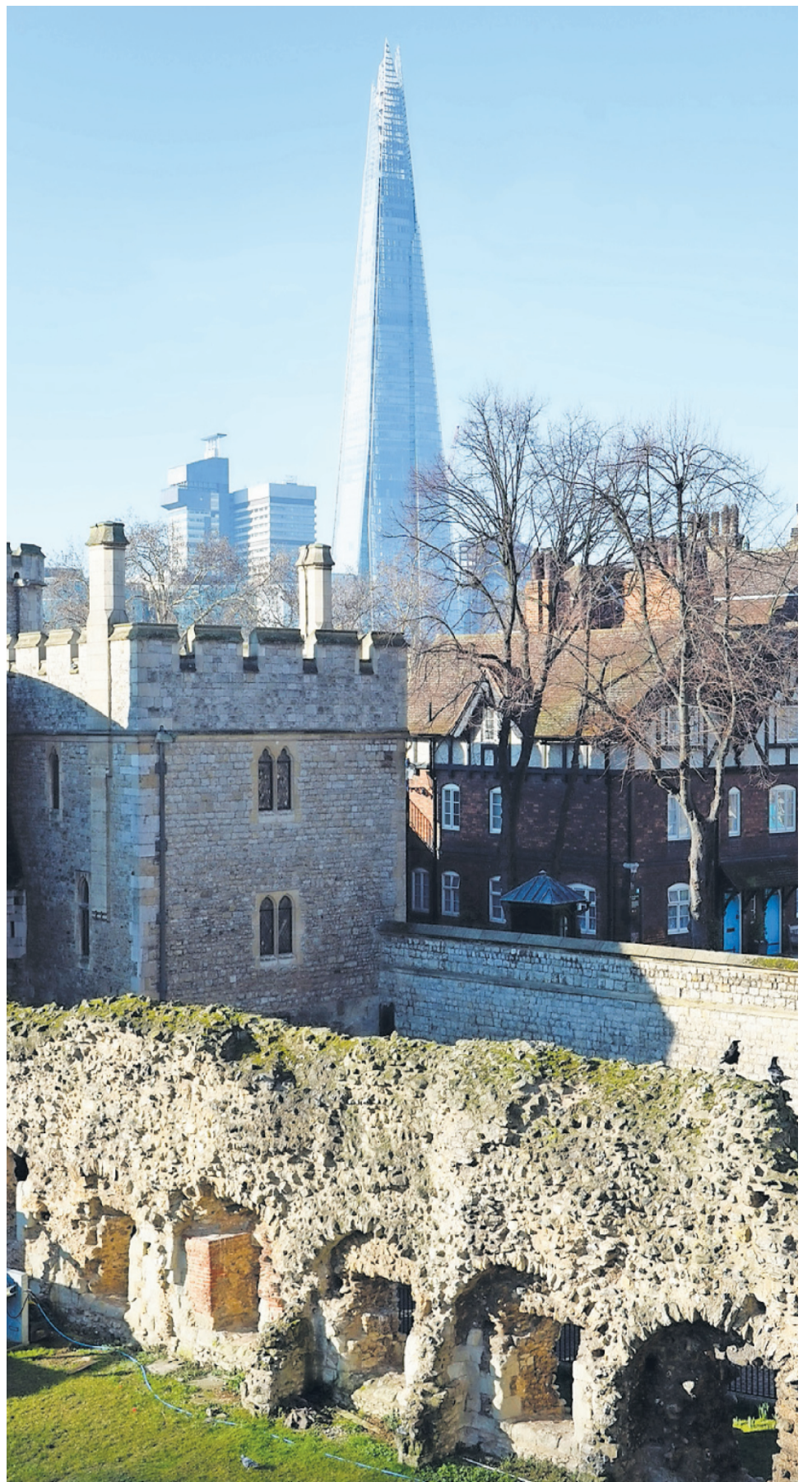
We wound down the afternoon with a stroll to nearby Trafalgar Square to take in the sights before enjoying high tea at St. Martin In-the-Fields, one of the city's most beloved churches, and one that has a wonderful (and affordable) restaurant and gift shop.

The Serenitea offered at its Café in the Crypt is relatively new, and is held daily from 2 to 6 p.m. We were quite impressed with the experience and quality of the culinary delights — which included an assortment of teas, tea sandwiches, scones, and an array of luscious desserts. It was relaxing and elegant.

From there, we headed upstairs to the church to enjoy a candlelit evening concert of classical music. Depending on the evening performance, tickets range from less than \$20 to about \$40, and there are many free daytime concerts at St. Martin's as well.

While we didn't get a close enough view to see much of Buckingham Palace's Changing of the Guard — the glorious weather that Friday drew massive crowds — we enjoyed being part of the experience, and our 30-minute stroll through beautiful St. James Park was a genuine delight.

SEE LONDON, B3



London old and new: The Shard tower rises over remnants of the Roman wall dating from 200 A.D. near the Tower of London. You might recognize the man at left as a Beefeater, but his proper title is Yeoman Warder. King Henry VIII established the first Yeoman Warder in 1485 as his bodyguard. Today, each having served a minimum of 22 years of military service, they live at the Tower and lead tours. Photos by George Hobica and Faith Cathcart, Tribune News Service



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London

FROM B1

Later in the day, we paid a visit to Abbey Road Studios, where we — long with a handful of other tourists — strolled across the much-smaller-in-real-life crosswalk made famous by the Beatles in 1969. There's now an overpriced but fun gift shop next to the studio, filled with souvenirs focused primarily on the Beatles (and some other famous records made there, including Pink Floyd's "The Dark Side of the Moon").

Getting around London was a breeze, thanks to the popular Oyster Card.

This easy-to-use electronic ticket — which you just "top off" when funds get low — gets you around the city via the Underground, buses and even the river buses (yes, that's what they're called). If you still have money on your card when you leave, you can turn it in at the airport and get refunded; it's that easy.

When a longtime English friend joined us in London for a day visit, she suggested taking the river bus, called a Thames Clipper, to Greenwich, a borough in London that's home to some 275,000 residents and known for its popular market and maritime history. Located on the banks of the Thames, Greenwich is also home to the Cutty Sark, a restored 19th-century ship.

We set off for our outing there by strolling along London's South Bank, which is a hub of activity, with plenty of street buskers offering entertainment, not to mention attractions like the London Eye, the Tate Modern museum (housed in the former Battersea Power Plant) and Shakespeare's Globe Theatre.

We were grateful to take in the sights there before setting off by (a very speedy) boat to Greenwich (about a 20-minute ride). There, we enjoyed a relaxing lunch outside before milling through the countless stores and vendor stalls in search of the perfect gift (for ourselves or family).

On our final day, three in our group decided to become real-life day-trippers, traveling from London to Liverpool (about \$100 round trip via Virgin Trains), while our two other friends enjoyed a relaxing, unstructured day in the capital city. After arriving in Liverpool after an easy two-plus hour train ride, we headed straight to the Albert Dock to board the popular Magical Mystery Tour (about \$25 per person), a two-hour experience that is offered several times a day. Even on a Sunday in February, the colorful bus — painted to resemble the one in the Beatles movie of the same name — was packed, and we met Beatles fans from



London's South Bank is a hub of activity and attractions, including the London Eye observation wheel. *Laura DeMarco*

around the globe.

Our tour guide was knowledgeable and friendly, and played plenty of Beatles songs to correspond to things we saw (including all four Beatles' childhood homes, Penny Lane and Strawberry Field, a former Salvation Army children's home currently undergoing renovations).

Having enjoyed James Corden's "Car-pool Karaoke" in London with Paul McCartney, the tour seemed even more fun than expected (if that were possible). It concluded at the legendary Cavern Club, with admission to the small (but historically gigantic) venue. We absolutely loved the vibe there, and danced along to live music before heading back to London.

The bottom line is you can't see and do everything in a five-day trip to London; I'm not sure you could even achieve that in five weeks. But, you can certainly hit the "big ticket" items and fill in time with unplanned adventures. Then, as one of my friends put it, "save what you didn't get to see for next time." I can't wait.

For more information, go to visitolondon.com.

Nicole Pensiero is a South Jersey resident and member of the North American Travel Journalists Association.

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