



By Nicole Pensiero

Piccadilly Circus, similar in spirit to New York's Times Square, is one of London's most popular hot-spots.



Iconic London city phone booth



A Charlie Chaplin street entertainer takes a selfie with one of the author's traveling companions along London's South Bank.

As a person who enjoys visiting Europe, I'm often asked, "What's the best city to visit for a first-time overseas trip?"

Hands down, I'd have to answer "London." With its mix of culture, history, and fun, this is a city for everyone. Plus, it's smack-dab in an English-speaking country — the original one, in fact — which makes getting around a breeze. Some 30 million tourists descend on London each year. And why not? It's fascinating, fun, friendly — and easy to get around without having to drive.

It's not hard to plan a trip to London without going broke in the process; websites like Expedia and Orbitz run specials all the time. And if you decide to go after the peak summer season, prices drop even more. With some advance knowledge and a willingness to push through long days, any visitor can experience the best of London, including the many museums that are free of charge.

After only a day in the English capital, everyone agreed that London's mix of old and new is very compelling: the ancient monuments — like Westminster Abbey and the Tower of London — that sit so close to modern-day attractions like the London Eye and The Shard. This is a city of contrasts that meld together beautifully.

We found our affordable, easy-to-book package through Expedia. It included non-stop flights and a five-night stay at a charming, small hotel in upscale Kensington for just under \$1,000 each. Our hotel, The Villa Kensington, just so happened to be reachable on the same Underground 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 hotel. Clean, quiet and homey (with only 38 rooms), we were pleased with our accommodations, as well as the affordable continental breakfast offered each day (about \$6).

After checking in at our hotel the morning after our overseas flight, we did what many overseas visitors do on Day One: tried to stay awake to get on the UK's time zone (five hours ahead of ours) without pushing ourselves too hard. That meant a quick visit to the massive Harrods, which — with 330 departments and 1.1 million square feet — is Europe's largest department store. The amazing Food Hall alone is reason for a visit — it is a jaw-dropping collection of culinary delights!

From Harrods, we made our way to England's tallest building, The Shard. Opened in 2013, this is now one of London's most recognizable buildings, not only for its height, but also for its distinctive angular shape. The "View from the Shard" attraction takes you up 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.

On Day Two, we visited the famed Tower of London, one of the city's most fascinating sites, and one that dates back to 1066. After passing the 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 (Note: baby ravens were born at the Tower this spring, the first time in more than 30 years they have been successfully bred on-location).

You need a good three hours, minimum, to fully 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.

Along with Westminster Abbey — which holds a treasure trove of British history within its walls — the Tower of London is a don't-miss attraction.

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"). Broadway and movie buffs may remember this is the place where Eliza Doolittle (*My Fair Lady*, 1964) sold her flowers. A visit to Covent Garden is a great way to spend a few hours, and it even has its own tube stop, making a visit even easier.

We spent one afternoon strolling the city streets to end up at Trafalgar Square, 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 held daily from 2 to 6 p.m. We loved the whole high tea experience and were impressed with the quality of the culinary delights — which included an assortment of teas, tea sandwiches, scones, and yummy desserts. 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 as well.

Later in the day, we paid a visit to Abbey Road Studios, where we — along with a handful of other music-loving tourists — strolled across the crosswalk made famous by The Beatles in 1969. There is now a 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" (1973).

Another fun thing we enjoyed was a stroll along London's South Bank, which is a hub of activity, with plenty of street entertainers, not to mention attractions like the London Eye, the Tate Modern museum and Shakespeare's Globe Theatre. The South Bank is also home to the popular Borough Market, which is open Monday to Saturday (closed on public holidays). One of the city's oldest, and largest, food markets, this is a happening scene for shoppers no matter when you visit.

While you cannot see it all in a five-day trip London, we learned that you can certainly hit the "big-ticket" items in this city that never ceases to fascinate. For more information, go to www.visitlondon.com.

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



A stroll across Abbey Road, the street made famous by the Beatles in the late 1960s.



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Geraldine Monti

*ABR, e-Pro, Home Staging Expert
Sales Associate, Realtor
BHHS Fox and Roach*

609.206.3051

856.227.8900 Office

198 Fries Mill Road, Turnersville, NJ 08012

Geraldine.Monti@foxroach.com