Tired of London—tired of life

by Maryalicia Post

Dr. Samuel Johnson famously observed in 1777, “If a man is tired of London, he’s tired of life.” If a visitor is tired of London—these days anyway—chances are he’s just tired of sightseeing. More than most cities, London takes a little forward planning; you can’t see it all in one go.

That’s because London is not a single city, but a conglomeration of villages. There are more than two dozen of them, absorbed over the centuries into the urban fabric of the capital, yet with their identities as separate neighborhoods intact. Even London residents are seldom really familiar with more than two or three areas.

It’s a question of size: until the 18th century all of London covered only one square mile. That area, now London’s financial centre, is still called “The City”, but the city called London covers 700 square miles. Where should you start?

Most people begin with a look at all the picture-postcard icons: Big Ben, Buckingham Palace, Westminster Abbey, Houses of Parliament, Tower Bridge, the Tower of London (see box). But after that, you simply have to make choices. On a recent visit, I decided to balance earlier glimpses of “traditional” London with a look at “up-to-date” London. Here’s where this choice led me:

NEW LONDON:
Among London’s new attractions there is literally nothing to top British Airways London Eye. At 135 metres high, it’s the world’s tallest observation wheel. A slow and steady 30-minute “flight” gives you a leisurely, unobstructed view of London and the Thames River. On the rare clear day you may see as far as Windsor Castle. To avoid the ticket queue, book online at www.londoneye.com. A Thames riverboat links London Eye with the Tate Modern.

The Design Museum, London’s “temple of cool” is another Bankside attraction. Founded in 1989, it sponsors the prestigious British Designer of the Year Award. A current exhibition, “Designing Modern Britain,” displays a fascinating range of contemporary artifacts—from a reconstruction of an early tube station to a 1980 nightclub. “Formula One—the Great Design Race” combines an exposition of formula one technology with some famous cars. Open every day from 10:00; last admission is at 17:15.

www.designmuseum.org

The reconstructed Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre, opened in 1997, is as faithful to the original as modern scholarship and traditional craftsmanship can make it. Even the building’s water reed thatching derives from samples found during the excavation of the original Globe. The theatre season runs from early May to early October. Book online at www.shakespeares-globe.org. Throughout the year, 90-minute guided tours of the theatre and of the Globe’s historical exhibition start every 15 to 30 minutes during opening hours: May to September from 9:00 to 12:30 and 16:30; October to April from 10:00 to 17:00. Booking not necessary.

The colourfully painted buildings may date from the Edwardian and Victorian era, and the vibes are Afro-Caribbean, but Notting Hill is “new”. The 1999 film, Notting Hill, starring Julia Roberts and Hugh Grant, confirmed the regeneration which started 50 years ago. Still more bohemian than bourgeois, the current mix jumbles top designer boutiques, vintage clothing shops, chic restaurants and an outdoor produce market. On weekends, antiques stalls line Portobello Street; on the August Bank Holiday weekend, the Notting Hill Carnival attracts millions of visitors.

LONDON RENEWED
There’s been a theatre in Covent Garden since 1728; it became the Royal Opera House in 1892. In its latest incarnation on this historic site, the Royal Opera House reopened in 1994 in a stylishly refurbished building that welcomes the public not just for performances but during the day as well. Come for coffee or lunch on the 4th floor amphitheatre terrace overlooking the piazza, a meal in the restaurant or a drink in the extravagant Floral Bar. Or take a backstage tour to visit the costuming, wig and jewellery and props workshops and the room in which ballet slippers are stored. For tickets and times of tours, ring the box office at +44 (0)20 7304 4000 or book online at www.roh.org.uk. Click “What’s On”, then “Backstage Tours” for details.

Somerset House stands on the site of a riverside palace built in the 1540s. The 18th century building, now open to the public, is a veritable treasure house. In 1990, the world-famous collection of the Courtauld Institute of Art Gallery was given a home here. Four years earlier, when Sir Albert Gilbert presented his magnificent collection of gold and silver objects, mosaics and gold boxes to the British nation, these were housed in another wing. Five new galleries, decorated in the Russian imperial style, display precious items on loan from the Hermitage Museum. Check the status at www.somersethouse.org.uk/attractions/hermitage/index.html. In an underground gallery of Somerset House, you can admire a sumptuous 18th century river barge.

London’s Science Museum, founded in 1857, was already famed as the best science museum in the world when, in June 2000, it opened the Wellcome Wing. This enormous extension contains a 450-seat IMAX cinema, a “sensation simulator” and specially created exhibitions covering genetics, digital technology, biomedicine and artificial intelligence. Take a lift to the 4th and 5th floors of the old building to visit two old-style exhibitions: “The Science and Art of Medicine,” and “Glimpses of Medical History.” You’ll see a diorama of an 11th century eye courage operation, some early cataract operation instruments and a reconstructed 1930s eye-testing lab among many other curiosities. Open every day from 10:00 to 18:00, www.sciamuseum.org.uk

The Queen’s Gallery underwent a £20m expansion in 2002, making it the most significant addition to Buckingham Palace in 150 years. It exhibits a changing selection of furniture, paintings and objets d’art from the royal collection. In a side chamber there’s a cabinet of Faberge treasures and another exhibiting a small number of royal jewels—including the diadem the Queen is wearing in the portrait reproduced on coins and stamps. Open daily from 10:00 to 17:30, www.royal.gov.uk

Kensington Palace was home to Charles and Diana, the Prince and Princess of Wales, until their separation and remained Diana’s home until her death in 1997. In 2002, a selection of her evening gowns was added to the Royal Dress Collection exhibited here. The display includes 18th century ceremonial costumes, Queen Victoria’s wedding dress and gowns belonging to Queen Elizabeth. Some of the Palace’s State Rooms are open to the public but not the rooms in which Diana lived. Daily March to Oct from 10:00 to 18:00 and November to February from 10:00 to 17:00, www.hrp.org.uk. For those interested in more about Diana, visit Harrods Department Store in Knightsbridge, where the engagement ring that Dodi Al-Fayed allegedly planned to give Diana is part of a memorial to the couple.