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# The Definitive Guide to London

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With a population of just under eight million, London is Europe's largest city, spreading across an area of more than 620 square miles from its core on the River Thames. Ethnically it's also Europe's most diverse metropolis: around two hundred languages are spoken within its confines, and more than thirty percent of the population is made up of first, second- and third-generation immigrants. Despite Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish devolution, London still dominates the national horizon, too: this is where the country's news and money are made, it's where the central government resides and, as far as its inhabitants are concerned, provincial life begins beyond the circuit of the city's orbital motorway. Londoners' sense of superiority causes enormous resentment in the regions, yet it's undeniable that the capital has a unique aura of excitement and success - in most walks of British life, if you want to get on you've got to do it in London.

For the visitor, too, London is a thrilling place - and since the beginning of the new millennium, the city has also been overtaken by an exceptionally buoyant mood. Thanks to the lottery and millennium-oriented funding frenzy of the last few years, virtually every one of London's world-class museums, galleries and institutions has been reinvented, from the Royal Opera House to the British Museum. With the completion of the Tate Modern and the London Eye, the city can now boast the world's largest modern art gallery and Ferris wheel; there's also a new tube extension and the first new bridge to cross the Thames for over a hundred years. And after sixteen years of being the only major city in the world *not* to have its own governing body, London finally has its own elected mayor and assembly.

In the meantime, London's traditional sights - Big Ben, Westminster Abbey, Buckingham Palace, St Paul's Cathedral and the Tower of London - continue to draw in millions of tourists every year. Monuments from the capital's more glorious past are everywhere to be seen, from medieval banqueting halls and the great churches of Sir Christopher Wren to the eclectic Victorian architecture of the triumphalist British Empire. There is also much enjoyment to be had from the city's quiet Georgian squares, the narrow alleyways of the City of London, the riverside walks, and the quirks of what is still identifiably a collection of villages. And even London's traffic pollution - one of its worst problems - is offset by surprisingly large expanses of greenery: Hyde Park, Green Park and St James's Park are all within a few minutes' walk of the West End, while, further afield, you can enjoy the more expansive parklands of Hampstead Heath and Richmond Park.

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You could spend days just shopping in London, too, hobnobbing with the upper classes in Harrods, or sampling the offbeat weekend markets of Portobello Road and Camden. The music, clubbing and gay/lesbian scenes are second to none, and mainstream arts are no less exciting, with regular opportunities to catch brilliant theatre companies, dance troupes, exhibitions and opera. Restaurants, these days, are an attraction, too. London has caught up with its European rivals, and offers a range from three-star Michelin establishments to low-cost, high-quality Indian curry houses. Meanwhile, the city's pubs have heaps of atmosphere, especially away from the centre - and an exploration of the farther-flung communities is essential to get the complete picture of this dynamic metropolis

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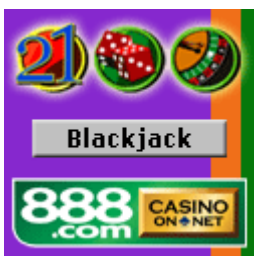
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### Introducing the City

Stretching for more than thirty miles at its broadest point, **London** is by far the largest city in Europe. The majority of its sights are situated to the north of the River Thames, which loops through the city from west to east. However, there is no single predominant focus of interest, for London has grown not through centralized planning but by a process of agglomeration - villages and urban developments that once surrounded the core are now lost within the amorphous mass of Greater London.

One of the few areas that you can easily explore on foot is **Westminster and Whitehall**, the city's royal, political and ecclesiastical power base, where you'll find the National Gallery and a host of other London landmarks, from Buckingham Palace to Westminster Abbey and Big Ben. The grand streets and squares of **St James's**, **Mayfair and Marylebone**, to the north of Westminster, have been the playground of the rich since the Restoration, and now contain the city's busiest shopping zones.

East of Piccadilly Circus, **Soho and Covent Garden** are also easy to walk around and form the heart of the West End entertainment district, containing the largest concentration of theatres, cinemas, clubs, flashy shops, cafés and restaurants. To the north lies the university quarter of **Bloomsbury**, home to the ever-popular British Museum, and the secluded quadrangles of Holborn's Inns of Court, London's legal heartland.

**The City** - the City of London, to give it its full title - is at one and the same time the most ancient and the most modern part of London. Settled since Roman times, it is now one of the world's great financial centres, yet retains its share of historic sights, notably the Tower of London and a fine cache of Wren churches that includes St Paul's Cathedral. Despite creeping trendification, the **East End**, to the east of the City, is not conventional tourist territory, but to ignore it entirely is to miss out a crucial element of contemporary London. **Docklands** is the converse of the down-at-heel East End, with the Canary Wharf tower, the country's tallest building, epitomizing the pretensions of the Thatcherite dream.

**Lambeth and Southwark** comprise the small slice of central London that lies south of the Thames. The South Bank Centre, London's little-loved concrete culture bunker, is enjoying a new lease of life thanks to its proximity to the new Tate Gallery of Modern Art in Bankside, which is linked to the City by a new pedestrian bridge.

The largest segment of greenery in central London is Hyde Park, which separates wealthy **Kensington and Chelsea** from

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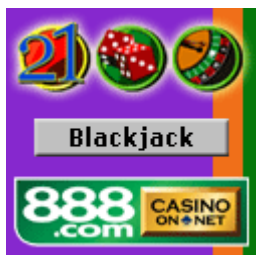
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the city centre. The **museums** of South Kensington - the Victoria & Albert Museum, the Science Museum and the Natural History Museum - are a must; and if you have shopping on your agenda, you'll want to check out the hive of plush stores in the vicinity of Harrods.

The capital's most hectic weekend market takes place around Camden Lock in **North London** . Further out, in the literary suburbs of Hampstead and Highgate, there are unbeatable views across the city from half-wild Hampstead Heath, the favourite parkland of thousands of Londoners. The glory of **South London** is Greenwich, with its nautical associations, royal park and observatory (not to mention its Dome). Finally, there are plenty of rewarding day-trips along the Thames from **Chiswick to Windsor** , most notably Hampton Court Palace and Windsor Castle.

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### When to go

Considering the temperateness of the English climate, it's amazing how much mileage the locals get out of the subject - a two-day cold snap is discussed as if it were the onset of a new Ice Age, and a week in the upper 70s starts rumours of drought. The fact is that English summers rarely get hot and the winters don't get very cold, though they're often wet. The bottom line is that it's impossible to say with any degree of certainty that the weather will be pleasant in any given month. May might be wet and grey one year and gloriously sunny the next, and the same goes for the autumnal months - November stands an equal chance of being crisp and clear or foggy and grim.

As far as crowds go, tourists stream into London pretty much all year round, with peak season from Easter to October, and the biggest crush in July and August, when you'll need to book your accommodation well in advance. Costs, however, are pretty uniform year-round

	°F AVERAGE DAILY	°C AVERAGE DAILY	Rainfall AVERAGE MONTHLY INCHES MILLIMETRES	
January	42	5	2.1	54
February	43	6	1.6	40
March	46	8	1.5	37
April	51	11	1.5	37
May	56	14	1.8	46
June	62	17	1.8	46
July	65	18	2.2	57
August	65	18	2.3	59
September	60	16	1.9	49
October	54	12	2.2	57
November	48	9	2.5	64
December	44	6	1.9	48

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## Arrival

London's international airports are all less than an hour from the city centre, and the city's train and bus terminals are all pretty central, and have tube stations close at hand.

### Airports

Flying into London, you'll arrive at one of the capital's five **international airports** : Heathrow, Gatwick, Stansted, Luton or City Airport.

**Heathrow** , twelve miles west of the city, has four terminals, and two train/tube stations: one for terminals 1, 2 and 3, and a separate one for terminal 4. The high-speed **Heathrow Express** trains travel non-stop to Paddington Station (every 15min; 15-20min) for £12 each way or £22 return. A much cheaper alternative is to take the slow Piccadilly **Underground** line into central London (every 2-5min; 50min) for £3.50. If you plan to make several sightseeing journeys on your arrival day, buy a multi-zone One-Day Travelcard for £4.70. There is also **Airbus #2**, which runs from outside all four Heathrow terminals to several destinations in the city (every 30min; 1hr) and costs £7 single, £12 return. From midnight, you'll have to take **night bus #N97** to Trafalgar Square (every 30min; 1hr 10min) for a bargain £1.50. **Taxis** are plentiful, but cost at least £35 to central London, and take around an hour (longer in the rush hour).

**Gatwick** , thirty miles to the south, has two terminals, North and South, connected by a monorail. The non-stop **Gatwick Express** train runs day and night between the South Terminal and Victoria Station (every 15-30min; 30min) for £9.50. Other options include the **Connex South Central** service to Victoria (every 30min; 40min) for £8.20, or **Thameslink** to King's Cross (every 15-30min; 50min) for £9.50. **Airbus #5** runs from both terminals to Victoria Coach Station (hourly; 1hr 30min) and costs £8 single, £10 return. A taxi ride into central London will set you back £50 or more, and take at least an hour.

**Stansted** , London's swankiest international airport, lies 34 miles northeast of the capital, and is served by the **Stansted Express** to Liverpool Street (every 15-30min; 45min), which costs £12 single, £22 return. **Airbus #6** or **#7** also runs to Victoria Coach Station (hourly; 1hr 15min), and costs £8 single, £10 return. A taxi into central London will cost £50 or more, and take at least an hour.

**Luton** airport (tel 01582/405100; [www.london-luton.com](http://www.london-luton.com)) is roughly thirty miles north of the city centre, and mostly handles



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charter flights. Luton Airport Parkway station is connected by **rail** to King's Cross and other stations in central London, with **Thameslink** running trains every fifteen minutes, plus one or two throughout the night; the journey takes thirty to forty minutes; the single fare is £9.50, returns are £16.90. **Green Line** (tel 0870/6087261) buses run approximately every hour from Luton to Victoria Station, taking around an hour and a half, and costing £7.50 single, £12 return. A **taxi** will cost in the region of £70 and take at least an hour from central London.

London's smallest airport, **City Airport** , is situated in Docklands, nine miles east of central London. It handles European flights only, and is connected by shuttle bus with Canning Town (every 5min; 5min), and Canary Wharf (every 10min; 10min) for £2, plus Liverpool Street (every 10min; 25-35min) for £5. A taxi into central London will cost around £15 and take half an hour or so.

Train and Coach Stations

Eurostar trains arrive at **Waterloo International** , south of the river. Trains from the Channel ports arrive at **Charing Cross** or **Victoria** train stations; boat trains from Harwich arrive at **Liverpool Street** . Arriving by train from elsewhere in Britain, you'll come into one of London's numerous main-line stations, all of which have adjacent Underground stations linking into the city centre's tube network. Coaches terminate at **Victoria Coach Station** , a couple of hundred yards south down Buckingham Palace Road from the train station and Underground.

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