

Ultimate Guide to a Londoner's London

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Now, you've read the same cliches about Londoners: they have no tolerance for slow walkers, they do not smile on public transport and they definitely do not, under any condition, speak to strangers. You remember what your parents told you about strangers? Well, Londoners just took that lesson to heart, several times over. But, it is one of the most marvellous of cities and I am going to share with you a few choice delights, that I have cultivated for over a decade.

These are the places that a good friend would pull you to one side, to curate for your first ever, or 50th, trip to a place that they have lived and breathed for years, and are yet to wither in their admiration for it. It can be the fashionable thing to 'grow out of a city', and I have had my fair share of comments that the pace is intolerable. But I am here, laying down my gauntlet, positing that peace is a place you occupy, wherever you live, and whether in a city or a plain open field, the gems to discover are plentiful.

So, I hope you have your list making devices ready, for I am about to share my five much-courted favourites. Let's get into it!

The Five

Shreeji Newsagent and Tobacconist, Chiltern Street

To quote Tim Walker, a prolifically surreal and exceptional photographer, the 'world is full of wonderful things.' One of these is Shreeji newsagents, a wonderful quaint store, where the name really does not do it justice. From wall to wooden wall, piled high to the ceiling, each surface area is packed with the most exquisitely curated magazines. The coffee is made slow, and I mean, slow. The pastries from Robuchon are delicately placed beneath a little glass dome, quietly beckoning to every passer by. Locals pour out of the store of a chill summer's morning, others sit strewn along the metal red tables, talking the talk, petting the dogs and soothing the little humans who sip on their baby-chinos. The staff are sincere and kind to every person entering that hallowed space. Suffice it to say, I like it here.

St John's Lodge Gardens, Regent's Park

Now, like any sworn in city-dweller, I could have kept this one to myself, but then I know I would be denying you a piece of real magic. And not to mention, a friend led me here first, and then I led another there - the place really is full of invisible breadcrumbs of wonder, trust me. St John's Lodge Gardens may sound grandiose, but the closest way for me to describe the gardens, is by harking back to the Secret Garden. Ensnared amongst a nest of nineteenth century villas, the gardens were designed by Robert Weir Schultz, as a place 'fit for meditation.' The garden is tucked deeply away, reached only through the Inner Circle. Turn a corner and you hear birds gossiping, trees hushing and the every blade of grass basking in the sunlight peculiar to this patch. The city quickly mutes itself, and as you pick your way through the small warren of perfectly manicured hedges and spiralling intertwined arches, your voice naturally drops a few notches of volume. Maybe that's the start of the meditation.

The Grant Museum of Zoology, Bloomsbury

For this tip, I hesitated. My first instinct was to share the museum here. But then the red attired dancing lady of the emoji world popped up on my shoulder, and whispered if I should recommend a place for a little tittle, and a little head bob. To which I said, another time! Now the weird and wonderful is something the Victorians new about, especially when it came to the sciences. The Grant Museum is a tiny version of the Natural History Museum and it is full of obscure naturalist objects. It is a wood-panelled trinket of a museum. Perfect for when it rains, ideal for when you want to dip your toes into culture without committing to getting cultured. That stuff can be contagious. It's highly worth a visit.

Japan House, High Street Kensington

Thankfully London is so large and sprawling that I am able to fade into the crowd. Otherwise the security man there may get suspicious. Can you be called out for stalking an atmosphere? Here congregate some of the best products crafted out of Japan, from the finest calligraphy brushes to facial scrubs and delicate ceramic dishes. The basement hosts a roster of exhibits spotlighting a component of Japanese culture; there is a library that anyone can use, and atop the store, is a restaurant for when the call to sushi becomes too strong. The service is considered and the atmosphere, serene.

Hampstead Heath

At night, when the body is spent but the mind needs a dose of awe, and the timing so happens to work out, for the next meteor show, the Heath is where the heart is. Panoramic views of London in the day are nothing to ignore, either. Take a picnic, or better still several layers and a hot drink - this is hardly the Algarve - a good friend, and do as your ancestors did of old, gaze into to the heavens and quibble over whether that is Neptune or a satellite.

So, there you have my five gems of London. But of course this only covers one percent of the riches beneath but I cannot keep you wrapt here all day long. Please tell me when you next get to one of these spots.

I'll be very happy to bump into you, too, and I promise to smile back.