

# INTRODUCING LONDON

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Sprawled endlessly along the magical banks of the Thames, London has been a beacon for people around the world for centuries, seamlessly absorbing their colourful influences while remaining quintessentially British.

It's a trick not every city can pull off and yet London has been excelling at the same game for almost a thousand years. Immigrants, the city's life blood, continue to pour in, providing London with a constantly self-renewing source of energy and dynamism, while the increasingly confident Mayor of London continues to give a much needed local focus to solving the city's problems, something he's been doing with not inconsiderable success.

As the British capital gears up for the Olympics being held here in 2012 there's everything to play for and the city has rarely felt so exciting and full of reasons to visit. Whether it's the history, art, fashion, music, food or nightlife that attracts you here (or a heady mixture of all the above), it's hard to imagine you'll come away feeling cheated.

Of course, London is so huge as to be almost overwhelming to the first-time visitor. The dazzling core sights alone can take a week to see, but with distractions in the form of all the great shopping, pubbing and clubbing to be had, you ideally need far more time than that. The good news is that whatever you do and wherever you stay, you'll not be bored for a second: London remains one of the world's great cities and it's high time you came to join the party.

## LONDON LIFE

Even Londoners have been surprised by the changes the city has seen in recent years – from the rise of art from a minority interest to a mass national pastime (helped enormously by the superb Tate Modern, now London's most-visited sight) to the resurgence of London's music scene, with new talent from the capital bubbling over after a surprisingly long post-Britpop lull. The city became infinitely more progressive during the Blair years, which saw Cool Britannia, massive redevelopments of forgotten inner-city areas, a slew of millennial projects and of course the city's crowning glory, winning the Olympics.

The massive projects that are already under way in the Lea Valley in preparation for the games currently form the biggest construction site in Europe and an entire industrial wasteland is set to be utterly transformed in the coming years. Londoners have already become somewhat cynical about the Olympics though, worried as they are about the financial drain and local tax hikes the future games have caused, but they remain quietly proud that London will be the first triple Olympic city in history and will happily shrug off any doubts from outsiders.

This is all rather typical: Londoners love to gripe about their city, but if you join in with anything other than gentle fun-poking they're likely to get quite annoyed with you. After all, as they'll almost certainly remind you, this is the greatest city in the world...

Denied self-rule by the Conservatives for 14 years because of the loony-left tendencies of the leaders it invariably elected, London finally got its own mayor and Assembly in 2000 and has been addressing its myriad problems with admirable chutzpah ever since. Mayor Ken Livingstone has introduced a punishing but popular congestion charge on all cars entering the city centre, massively increased the provision of bike lanes and buses and is still trying to sort out the oldest, most dilapidated underground system in the world. Many of his critics disagree with his methods, but few can doubt that he is slowly getting results and may even have turned the corner with the tube.

In recent years London has replaced New York as the world's centre of international finance and the city skyline reflects this confidence in Brown's Britain today. Whether it be the already iconic London Eye and Gherkin or the newer Shard of Glass or Broadgate Tower, London is being transformed, with many more skyscrapers planned for the future.

Other bugbears have also been sorted: London has undergone a food revolution in the past decade and nowhere is this more obvious than at the organic farmers' markets and cutting-edge restaurants of the capital. Add to this newly liberalised drinking laws, a roundly welcomed smoking ban and a fantastic music scene and London makes for one of the best places for a night out on the planet. Take a deep breath, close your eyes and prepare to fall in love with the British capital.

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# GETTING STARTED

London is a very straightforward destination and little forward planning is required, with the glaring exception of accommodation, which is always best booked in advance, and even then will take up way more of your budget than you'd ideally like. The city is a year-round destination where you'll always find more things to do than your time will ever allow.

## WHEN TO GO

You might imagine that in a country with such a temperate and mild climate as England, the weather is not much of a topic for conversation, and yet, like their middle-England cousins, Londoners are relentless weather-watchers and every rise or fall of the mercury will provoke smiles or gloom respectively. It's good therefore that London is not a city where fun depends on the weather – do as Londoners do, expect overcast skies and rain (even in summer) and then be elated when the sun comes out.

While summer is a great time to visit (and recent years have seen some very Continental heatwaves), spring and autumn are also good times to come, when the crowds are far thinner and sights less crowded. Winter's all cold, wet and dark, although if you're after outdoor pleasures, you'll have them largely to yourself.

For a full list of events in and around London, look out for Visit London's bimonthly *Events in London* and its *Annual Events* pamphlet. You can also check the website at [www.visitlondon.com](http://www.visitlondon.com).

## COSTS & MONEY

London can be a wincingly expensive experience, but doesn't necessarily have to be. The main expense any visitor will have to bear is that of accommodation. To make your life easier, try hard to befriend a Londoner who has a spare room, otherwise you'll need to budget an absolute minimum of £25 per night for a hostel dorm, rising sharply to at least £60 for a room of your own almost anywhere, and further to £120 for a room you're actually likely to want to spend any time in. Booking in advance is always a good plan, and most hotels will offer reductions on the room prices if you're staying for more than a few days. Most hotels also do excellent web deals that dramatically undercut their rack rates, and websites such as [www.lastminute.com](http://www.lastminute.com) filter out the very best of these.

Money is an issue in other aspects as well, with the general cost of living in London being far higher than anywhere else in Britain and, unless you're Norwegian or Japanese, probably higher than where you've arrived from.

Eating out can be done on a budget, with plenty of good cheap eats to be had in every neighbourhood (see p236). However, even at the cheapest of the cheap, it's no trifle – a decent sandwich will cost you around £3, and you're unlikely to get much change from a tenner for a sit-down meal. London's fashionable eating scene is a huge draw in itself, and it's not cheap. A good meal for two with wine is usually around the £80 to £100 mark, jumping rapidly to more than £150 for any of the city's leading establishments.

Getting around London can also be expensive. One obvious step to save cash is to get yourself an Oyster card immediately upon arrival (or even order one at home before you travel, see [www.visitbritaindirect.com](http://www.visitbritaindirect.com)), as this will dramatically decrease the cost of using the public transport system (see p390).

Entertainment is likewise not cheap: cinema tickets in the West End have long since crossed the £10 threshold and many cinemas in further out areas are following, meaning seeing a film for under a tenner is becoming a bargain, although art-house and independent cinemas do still offer much more competitive prices. The big-name gigs are also fairly expensive, usually starting around £20 and going up to £150 for a superstar at Wembley or Earl's Court. Clubbing is a mixed bag: a Saturday night at Fabric (p300) will set you back £20 just for entry, while some of the best clubs in town are free or very cheap, it's just a question of research. Flyers with discounted entry rates are available all over the West End in music and fashion stores.

One surprising boon for such an expensive city is that all state-funded museums are free, meaning you can quite happily spend days in some of the world's best exhibition spaces and galleries for absolutely nothing, although it's always good to make a donation to each

## ADVANCE PLANNING

The trick in London is either to book very early, or to try at the last minute and hope you get lucky.

**Three to six months before you go** For big-name restaurants, such as Gordon Ramsay in Chelsea (p251), you need to get organised six months ahead. Saturday-night performances of big West End shows (eg *Billy Elliot*, *Spamalot*; see p320) sell out three to six months ahead.

**Two to three months before you go** Check out sites such as [www.ticketmaster.co.uk](http://www.ticketmaster.co.uk) and [www.seetickets.com](http://www.seetickets.com), and think about bigger rock-music gigs. Also read [www.guardian.co.uk/reviews](http://www.guardian.co.uk/reviews), [www.whatsonstage.com](http://www.whatsonstage.com) or [www.timeout.com](http://www.timeout.com) before booking good Saturday-night tickets for serious theatre (eg Kevin Spacey performing at the Old Vic).

**Two weeks before you go** Sign up for an email newsletter, such as *Urban Junkies* at [www.urbanjunkies.com](http://www.urbanjunkies.com), and double-check review sites. Two weeks is also usually ample time to get into trendy, interesting restaurants such as Les Trois Garçons (p256).

**A few days before you go** The latest blockbuster exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts (p70), Tate Modern and Britain (p129 & p103) or the Victoria & Albert Museum (p139) can usually be booked a few days beforehand; actually, we've gained entry to the best with just a few hours' wait.

space to help keep them free (£3 is usually the standard suggested amount). Other sights are variably priced: some may balk at paying £16 for the Tower of London, but you can spend the most part of a day there and see one of the UK's top attractions, while a big commercial attraction such as Madame Tussauds is just plain overpriced at around £20 per person.

## INTERNET RESOURCES

Unsurprisingly London is big on the web. Wi-fi covers much of the city now, although sadly you'll usually need to pay for it; some great exceptions are all along Upper St in Islington and on Leicester Sq. The whole of the City is covered by 'the Cloud', a service that is free for the first month you use it and then you have to pay, and wi-fi areas will hopefully continue to spread. The following websites are useful when wanting to learn more about London.

**Flavorpill London** (<http://ldn.flavorpill.net/>) A weekly email magazine profiling the best of London's cultural and entertainment possibilities.

**Le Cool Magazine** ([www.lecool.com/london](http://www.lecool.com/london)) A great free graphic email sent to subscribers detailing the better clubs, bars, music and other events in the capital.

**London Underground Guide** ([www.goingunderground.net](http://www.goingunderground.net)) Annie Mole's cultishly popular tube blog, a must for anyone fascinated by the world's oldest underground system.

**Londonist** ([www.londonist.com](http://www.londonist.com)) Our favourite London blog takes a wry look at the odder aspects of London

life, with a large pool of contributors writing about their various interests.

**MayorWatch** ([www.mayorwatch.co.uk](http://www.mayorwatch.co.uk)) A politically neutral site documenting the actions of the mayor of London and the London Assembly, with discussions and regular news updates.

**Streetmap.co.uk** ([www.streetmap.co.uk](http://www.streetmap.co.uk)) A website many Londoners use daily. Streetmap is simply a map of London upon which you can look up any street or postcode. Bizarrely vital.

**Transport for London** ([www.tfl.gov.uk](http://www.tfl.gov.uk)) An invaluable website from London Transport with a great journey planner to help you navigate your way across the city.

**Visit London** ([www.visitlondon.com](http://www.visitlondon.com)) The city's official tourism website is a great resource, with cheap hotel booking, listings of all sorts and links galore.

## HOW MUCH?

Admission to a big-name club on a Friday £15

Adult football ticket £20 to £40

Bus ticket £2

Cinema ticket £10

DVD £15

Guardian newspaper 70p

Pint of lager £3

Three-course meal with wine/beer from £30

Tube ride within zone 1 £4

West End theatre ticket £50

# THE AUTHORS

## Tom Masters



Tom has lived all over London in the past 12 years, although Stoke Newington is now home again after an expensive three-year love affair with Clerkenwell. Tom's fascination with the Big Smoke began during his bucolic upbringing in nearby Buckinghamshire, when teenage Saturdays spent in awe wondering around the West End eventually translated into moving to Bloomsbury to study for a literature degree at University College London. Often to be found exploring the Lea Valley, wandering the City and cycling the backstreets of North London during the weekends, Tom's still as in awe of the capital as he ever was.

Tom was the coordinating author and wrote the *Introducing London*, *Getting Started*, *London's Festivals & Events*, *Background and Gay & Lesbian London* chapters. He also cowrote the *Neighbourhoods* chapter.

### LONELY PLANET AUTHORS

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## Steve Fallon



After more than four years of overly fresh air, monotonous greenery and the deafening tranquillity of rural Essex, Steve raced back to the pollution, concrete and general hubbub of London, one of the world's most vibrant and exciting cities. As always, he did everything the hard way: walking the walks, seeing the sights, taking (some) advice from friends, colleagues and the odd taxi driver, and digesting everything in sight – right down to that last pint. Says he: 'Thank God I'm a city boy (again).'

Steve wrote the *Architecture*, *Eating and Sleeping* chapters. He also cowrote the *Neighbourhoods* and *Drinking* chapters.

## Vesna Maric



Vesna has lived in London for the past 10 years and swears it's the best city in the world and the only one she'd ever want to live in. She came to London from Hull (yes, it's dull) in 1997 and has gone from finding ways to have fun when totally broke as a student/refugee to being able to afford stuff when she started working. She can assure you that London's lovable whatever your budget. Though, obviously, it's more lovable with plenty of cash. She hopes *Lonely Planet* readers will enjoy this fantastic city as much as she does.

Vesna wrote the *Shopping*, *Nightlife*, *The Arts, Sports & Activities*, *Excursions*, *Transport* and *Directory* chapters. She also cowrote the *Neighbourhoods* and *Drinking* chapters.