

# A POUND-WISE GUIDE TO LONDON

TWO SEASONED TRAVELERS SHARE HOW TO GET THE MOST DAZZLE FOR THE AMERICAN DOLLAR IN PRICEY LONDONTOWN

BY JACKI LEVINE AND ALAN AGRESTI

“**H**OW EXPENSIVE WOULD LONDON have to be before we’d stop going?” We ask each other that question on our every visit, aghast anew at the price of everything from a short taxi ride to a cup of coffee. Once upon a time, you’d translate prices by imagining a dollar for every British pound. Today, make that two dollars. So if you’re not in love with the city already, you might just decide this isn’t the year — the decade, the lifetime — to go.



A NIGHTTIME VIEW OF  
PARLIAMENT AND BIG  
BEN FROM ACROSS  
THE THAMES RIVER.

VISITLONDON.COM

But the truth is, London is magical to us, a truly global village so historic and contemporary, so brimming over with things to see and experience, that we'd likely stow away on a steamer and pitch a tent in a park before we'd give it up.

Instead of letting it come to that, we've taken it as a challenge to see how far we can stretch the pound and still make the most of every moment there. So come along on our personal pence-pinching journey through the city of which 18th-century writer Samuel Johnson famously declared: "When a man is tired of London, he is tired of life."

## BEFORE YOU GO

Your first — and worst — case of sticker shock will likely come when you book a hotel room. Even the least costly rooms are roughly twice the freight of their U.S. equivalents. But we've found some satisfying bargains on Lastminute.co.uk, the British website that features enticing discounts, with better deals closer to the date of arrival. You'll find some rooms at as little as half the price of the hotel's own "rack rates." You can pay as little as 60 pounds a night for a three-star hotel and 80 pounds for a four-star hotel. (Do check to make sure the price includes the 17.5 percent VAT — value added tax — and breakfast.) Another site that often has good hotel bargains is www.hotel-assist.com.

## LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

While an out-of-the-way spot may save you money on the room, it will cost you in travel time and fares. Two of our favorite central areas to stay: South Kensington, close to a myriad of museums and royal attractions, such as Kensington Palace and Gardens and the shopping icon Harrod's, and the West End/Covent Garden area, the heart of tourist London, where



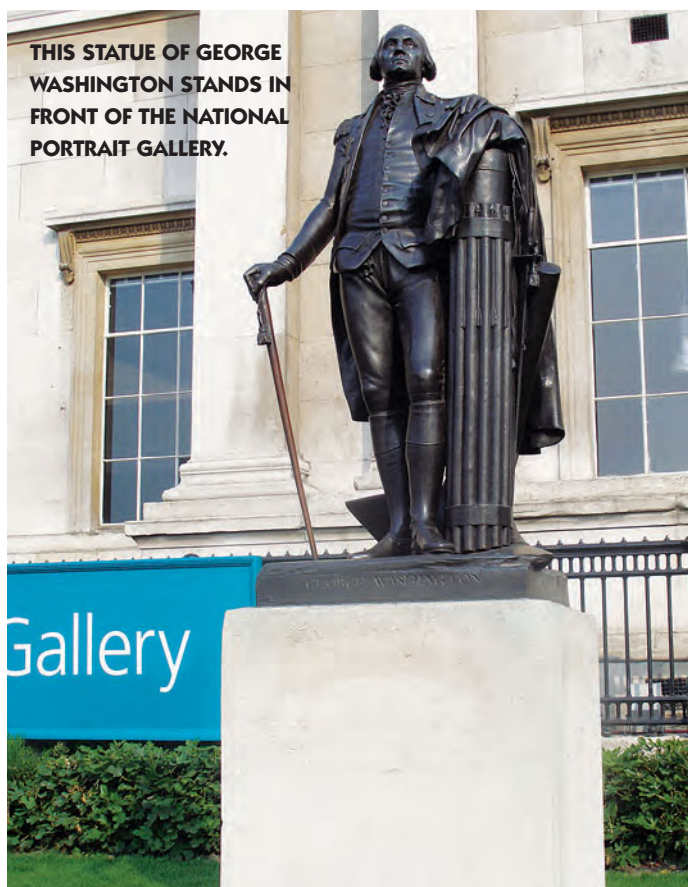
VISITLONDON.COM

everything from theater to art galleries to Parliament and Big Ben are within walking distance. Both areas have convenient "underground" and bus links to everywhere in London you might want to go.

## FIRST THINGS FIRST

You've arrived, now before you leave the airport, pick up a copy of *Time Out*, London's weekly listings magazine. This lively and irreverent guide really is invaluable. As you peruse it on your way into London, you'll find all you need to plan your visit, including music and theater events, museum exhibits, walking tours, bargains and free readings by everyone from the hot novelist of the moment to celebrities hawking their biographies.

And here's the best reason to buy *Time Out* before you leave the airport — its two-for-one coupons often include discounts for train rides into central London. If you're landing at Gatwick Airport and can't find a coupon, forgo the pricey Gatwick Express for the better value of the



JACKI LEVINE

Connex South Central. It will add only a few minutes onto your journey to Victoria Station in Central London, but save you five pounds per ticket. Arriving at

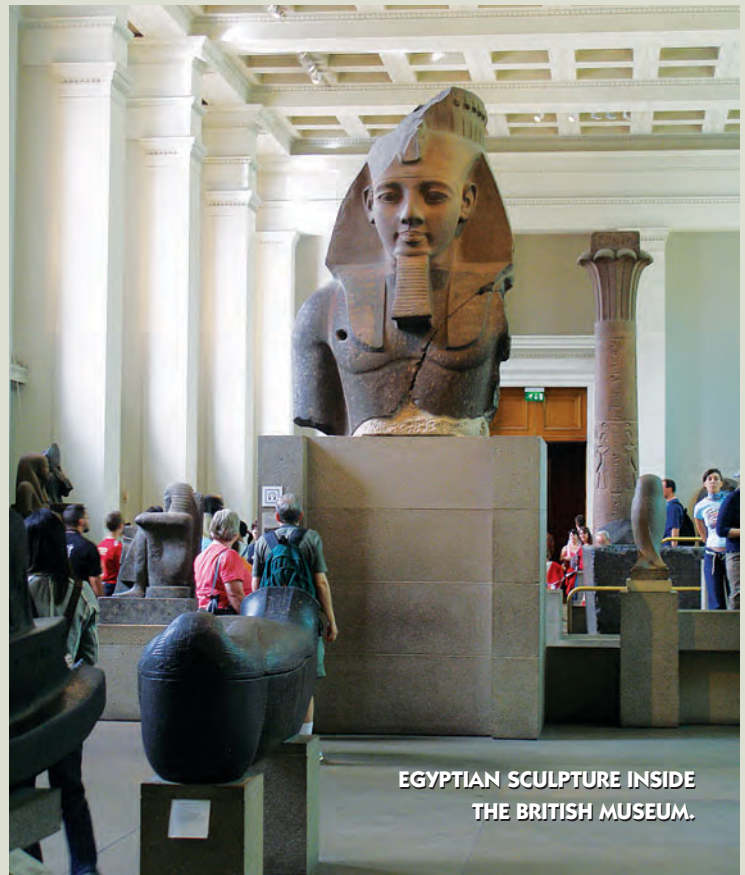
Heathrow? Take the Picadilly underground line directly into central London, your most economical option of all. What better way to start your trip!

# IT'S YOUR FIRST TRIP: 10 THINGS TO SEE ON A BUDGET



VIEW FROM ONE OF THE 32 CAPSULES OF THE LONDON EYE.

ALAN ACRESTI



EGYPTIAN SCULPTURE INSIDE THE BRITISH MUSEUM.

JACRI LEVINE

## 1. THE ORIGINAL LONDON SIGHTSEEING TOUR

([www.theoriginaltour.com](http://www.theoriginaltour.com))

An easy way to get your bearings and see the capital's major sites, including the Houses of Parliament, Buckingham Palace, Westminster Abbey, the Tower of London and St. Paul's Cathedral, from the open top of a double-decker hop-on hop-off bus. £16.50 per adult and £11 for a child between the ages of 2-15.

bank of the Thames as a part of the millennium celebration. It's now part of the permanent landscape and visited by 3.5 million people a year. There's no better view in London. £13.50 for adults; children 5-15, £13; under 5, free; disabled or 60 or older, £10.

## 2. BRITISH MUSEUM

([www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk](http://www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk))

Free. Trace the history of human existence, from pre-historic to modern times. Long on crowd-pleasing mummies. Join a free tour of various areas of the museum's collection or, for £8, join the highlights tour.

## 5. COVENT GARDEN

([www.covent-garden.co.uk/](http://www.covent-garden.co.uk/))

Hang around and soak up London at its liveliest at this piazza.

## 3. GO TO THE THEATER

([www.Londontheatre.co.uk](http://www.Londontheatre.co.uk))

The productions are arguably the best in the world. Remember, there's no reason to pay full price if you're willing to line up for half-price tickets at Leicester Square or for £10 day seats at the National Theatre.

## 6. FOR A GLIMPSE OF PURE ROYALTY,

visit Kensington Palace, a working royal residence for more than 300 years, whose occupants have included Queen Victoria and Princess Diana. The State Apartments and the Royal Ceremonial Dress Collection, including dresses worn by Queen Elizabeth II and Diana, Princess of Wales, are on display. £11.50,

adults; £7.50, children between 5-16; students and seniors, £9.

## 7. KENSINGTON GARDENS

Even if you don't want to spring for a view inside the palace, take a saunter around the lovely Kensington Gardens and the nearby neighborhood of Kensington. Princess Di's old stomping ground is royal London at its classiest. Free.

## 8 . TRAFALGAR SQUARE AND ITS MUSEUMS

(National Gallery, [www.nationalgallery.org.uk](http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk) and National Portrait Gallery, [www.npg.org.uk](http://www.npg.org.uk)).

Sample the museums and then people-watch in bustling Trafalgar Square or have a snack in the crypt of St. Martin-in-the-Fields church. Free.

## 9. CROSS THE THAMES

at the pedestrian bridge below Charing Cross station and walk along the South Bank to the Tate Modern. Free.

## 10. GO TO THE OPERA

at Royal Opera House ([www.royalopera.org](http://www.royalopera.org)) or a concert at a historic church or the Royal Festival Hall ([www.rfh.org.uk](http://www.rfh.org.uk)).



KENSINGTON PALACE.

VISITLONDON.COM

VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM BRIMS WITH THE BEST OF THE WORLD'S DECORATIVE ARTS.



VISITLONDON.COM

## HAVE MORE TIME AND WANT SOMETHING OFF THE TOURIST TRACK?

1. TAKE A WALKING TOUR OF THE EAST END, stopping at the colorful Bengali-Bangladeshi textile street market on Brick Lane, and going on to the Geffrye Museum of Historic English Interiors ([www.geffrye-museum.org](http://www.geffrye-museum.org); £2. for adults; free for children under 16), followed by a meal at a Vietnamese restaurant. (For more information on London markets: [www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/data/discover/data/markets.cfm](http://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/data/discover/data/markets.cfm))
2. EXPLORE THE PORTOBELLO ROAD SATURDAY MARKET in Notting Hill and take a peek in England's attic. Free.
3. VISIT A TOWN ON THE OUTSKIRTS OF LONDON, such as Greenwich (home of the National Maritime Museum and the Royal Observatory) or Richmond. Free.
4. SAMPLE THE MUSEUMS OF SOUTH KENSINGTON. Within a block of one another, you can explore the world's decorative arts at the Victoria and Albert Museum and immerse yourself (and your kids) at the interactive and highly engaging Science Museum and the Natural History Museum. Free.
5. WALK AROUND THE LOVELY NORTH LONDON VILLAGE OF HAMPSTEAD and its Heath and take a guided walking tour of its pubs.

## GETTING AROUND

One more "must-have" and you'll be ready to go. You'll save money, and just as importantly, avoid lines, with a London Travelcard (they come in one-, three- and seven-day versions) for instant access to the Underground and buses. If you think you'll be sticking close to inner London, purchase the Central Zone Travelcard. Pick up the card at any underground station or tourist office or buy it online ([www.londontravelpass.com](http://www.londontravelpass.com)).

## GETTING YOUR BEARINGS

You are spoilt for choice in London, so much so that figuring out what you want to do and when and how you'll fit it all in can be overwhelming. Buckingham Palace? Tower of London? Westminster Abbey? If it's your first visit to London, you may want to invest in a 24-hour hop-on, hop-off bus tour with a company such as the The Original London Sightseeing Tour ([www.theoriginaltour.com](http://www.theoriginaltour.com)). You can pick and choose among 90 attractions as you take in the view from the comfort of an open-topped red double decker bus. If you book online, you'll save a couple of pounds per ticket — £16.50 per adult and £11 for a child between the ages of 2-15. It's an investment, but probably worth it since it will allow you to take in a

lot of sites in a little time. They also throw in a free river cruise.

## THESE WALLS CAN TALK

The Beatles are on the balcony, and we're on our way to take a look. We've just arrived in London, and we're fighting off jet lag in the way we usually do, with a quick visit to the National Portrait Gallery at Trafalgar Square, our favorite first stop. Behind its stone facade, British history meets *People* magazine in an enlightening and entertaining fusion of portraits in every medium. Here you can look Royal Britain in the eye — from King Henry VIII to Prince William — and rub shoulders with commoners from Shakespeare to Jane Austen to the Beatles.

But what keeps us coming back year after year are the ever-changing exhibits that give this 100-year-old gallery a sense of immediacy. On this day, for example, we wander through a show of Beatles photographs — many by the late Linda McCartney — and album covers, including *St. Pepper's Lonely Heart's Club Band* and the controversial and quickly pulled "butcher" cover.

The National Portrait Gallery, like most of London's museums and galleries, is free, which makes it easy and guilt-free to pop in without devoting hours to any one visit.



ONE OF THE LIONS OF TRAFALGAR SQUARE WITH ST. MARTIN-IN-THE-FIELDS CHURCH IN THE BACKGROUND. THE SQUARE IS A HUB OF ACTIVITY, DAY OR NIGHT.

VISITLONDON.COM

## LONDON'S MUSEUMS ARE LIKE LONDON ITSELF

Vivid, lively, and with a surprise around every corner. And did we mention free?

Here are some of our other tried-and-true favorites: The Victoria and Albert, home to the best of the world's decorative arts of the last millenium, from the gigantic great Bed of Ware, hand carved in 1590, to the latest in British fashion; the two Tate Galleries, the original Tate Britain, with its impressive collection of British masters, including the world's most extensive Turner collection, and its super cutting-edge younger brother, the Tate Modern, ensconced in an old power station on the South Bank of the Thames.

The British Museum is one of the great museums of the world, and if you'd like to take an afternoon's tour of human history in three dimensions — from Egyptian mummies to the sculptures of the Parthenon — don't miss it. If your taste runs to classic European painting, you can treat yourself to the genre's greatest hits, from Rembrandt to Van Gogh, at the

National Gallery, next door to the National Portrait Gallery on Trafalgar Square.

## FEELING OVERWHELMED? HERE'S THE GOOD NEWS

Almost every one of these museums offers a free or low-cost tour of the highlights. And they all have cafes for a light meal or an inexpensive cup of tea or an apple crumble. The National Portrait Gallery's Portrait Café extends an added bonus: a spectacular view across Trafalgar Square to the Houses of Parliament.

## FOOD, GLORIOUS FOOD

British food has long been the Rodney Dangerfield of world cuisine, but its bad reputation is so last century. It could be a happy by-product of the British spending so much of their holiday time in France and Italy, but the standard has risen significantly. Today, London's restaurants are world-class with prices to match. But there are still some budget opportunities. One quirky favorite of

ours is the cool, dark crypt beneath St. Martin-in-the-Fields Church in Trafalgar Square for a quick lunch, cappuccino or typical British pudding.

In a city of 300 languages, it's no surprise that ethnic food is everywhere, and still the best bet to save money. Noodle bars, like the sleek and very cool Wagamama chain, are popping up all over the city. (Look for a half-price coupon for Wagamama in *Time Out*.)

Combine a walking tour in London's East End, which over the years has been the home to a succession of immigrant communi-

ties, with a meal at one of the dirt-cheap but delicious Vietnamese restaurants on Kingland Road, such as Song Que.

Indian food is ubiquitous and of high quality, due in part to Britain's colonial past. And it's usually a good bargain. Some reasonably priced Italian chains, such as Carluccio's Café and Strada, are all over London, as is the chain Pizza Express.

For a quick, inexpensive bite at lunch, stop at a Pret a Manger, purveyor of creative (tandoori chicken, for one) sandwiches, fresh salads and even sushi. It's taken London by storm in the last decade.

If you're up for some quintessentially British fare, try a pub lunch or a traditional restaurant such as Porter's in Covent Garden, which serves hot pies such as steak and kidney or lamb and apricot.



THE NATIONAL GALLERY WITH ST. MARTIN-IN-THE-FIELDS CHURCH IN THE BACKGROUND.



HOUSED IN WHAT WAS ONCE A POWER STATION, THE TATE MODERN BOASTS CUTTING-EDGE ART.

JACKI LEVINE

TATLONDON.COM

GREAT ESCAPES

A VIEW OF THE SOUTHWESTERN SIDE OF PICADILLY CIRCUS, FEATURING THE SHAFTS-BURY MONUMENT MEMORIAL FOUNTAIN, TOPPED BY THE WINGED NUDE STATUE POPULARLY KNOWN AS "EROS."





VISITLONDON.COM

If you really want to save money, grocery stores such as Sainsbury's or Tesco and the food section of department store Marks and Spencer's offer some tasty prepared offerings. You'll be surprised at the variety and the quality. These are also good bets for inexpensive gifts to bring friends, such as tins of tea and jars of jam.

## LONDON UP CLOSE

Explore London on foot and be entertained and educated while you're doing it with a guided walk offered by The Original London Walks tour company. There are hundreds of them — everything from pub crawls to Beatles walks to Charles Dickens' London to the authoritative Jack the Ripper walk, led by the "world's foremost expert" (£6 for adults; £5 for seniors or students). No need to book ahead, just check the schedule online ([www.walks.com](http://www.walks.com)) or pick up a London Walk pamphlet and meet the group at the designated underground stop.

## LONDON'S STAGES

If you love theater, London is simply nirvana. Check [www.londontheatre.co.uk](http://www.londontheatre.co.uk) before you go if you want to book ahead for hard-to-get tickets. (We recently scored the last few seats for a performance of Noel Coward's "Hay Fever" with Dame Judy Dench by booking in advance.) Most days, we simply check the boards at the Society of London Theatre's TKTS ticket booth in the middle of Leicester Square (pronounced "Lester"), near Covent Garden, to see what's on offer for half-price. Expect to pay about £25 a

JACQUELINE



LONDON IS A METROPOLIS MADE UP OF DISTINCT VILLAGES, NOWHERE IS THIS BETTER ILLUSTRATED THAN IN THE NORTH CENTRAL NEIGHBORHOOD KNOWN AS "LITTLE VENICE." THE HOUSEBOATS LINING THE CANAL SERVE AS HOMES TO LONDONERS.



JACKI LEVINE



THE TKTS BOOTH IN LEICESTER SQUARE IS THE OFFICIAL HALF-PRICED TICKET LOCATION FOR THE SOCIETY OF LONDON THEATRE.

ticket for a seat in the first few rows of the theater. (For the best deals, make sure to go to the official booth in the middle of the square, and not the commercial vendors on the side streets).

Many believe that some of the finest acting in the world takes place at the National Theatre on the South Bank of the Thames. There you can queue early in the morning for inexpensive "day seats" for £10 held for the day of show for all their productions. During special seasons many ordinary tickets at the National Theatre are only £10.

If you're a music lover, don't forget to check *Time Out*. You may well be able to catch a favorite while you're there. This year, for example, we saw both Jackson Browne and Nanci Griffith. But any night you can find reasonably priced and even free performances, such as classical music

THE NEW YORK TIMES

concerts at historic churches and jazz and folk music in back rooms of pubs.

## PLAYING REAL GOOD, FOR FREE

So much of the best of London entertainment is free. On any given day or night the venues on London's South Bank, the Royal Festival Hall and National Theatre host music, speakers, art and photo exhibits and even high-wire acts. The South Bank promenade that begins at the Royal Festival Hall and continues past the new Shakespeare Globe Theater and Tate Modern offers more than simply wonderful views of the Thames: it has emerged from a ramshackle past to a lively present with new restaurants, book stalls, art galleries and street life.

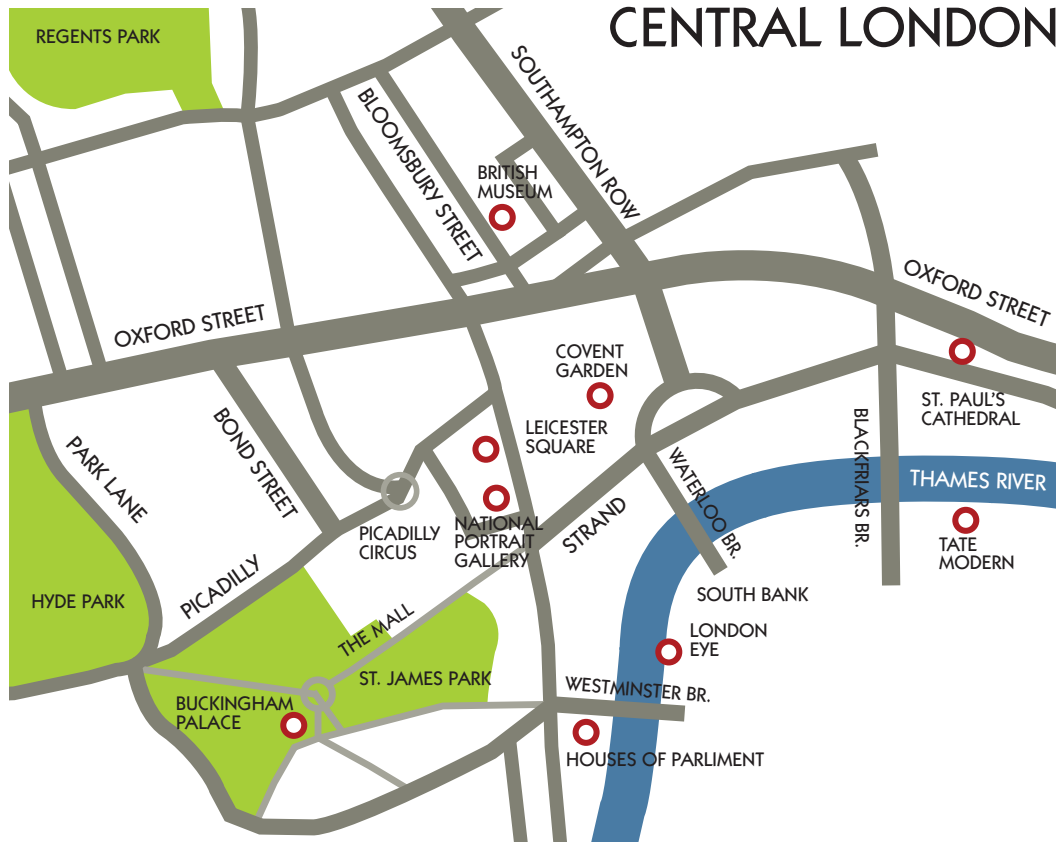
Back across the river, a three-ring circus of street buskers from around the world plays nonstop in Covent Garden, the entertainment and shopping mecca that was once the site of London's famed flower market.

## DISCOVERING FOR YOURSELF

Finally, what draws us back to London again and again costs nothing at all — the sights and the sounds of the city itself.

The largest metropolis in the European Union, with a population of more than seven million, London is a patchwork of villages and parks, each with its own distinctive, diverse personality. We like nothing more than to wander. One afternoon we may visit the state apartments in Kensington Palace, then stroll the royal gardens and later gawk at some of London's most expensive real estate in South Kensington or Chelsea.

You can amble among canals of Little Venice in north central London admiring the flower-bedecked houseboats, then head down nearby Edgware Road and find yourself among the hookah bars and falafel restaurants of the Middle East. Short underground



rides later, you can get caught up in the shopping crowds along bustling Oxford Street, admire the neon of Picadilly Circus or hike the grassy heath of the village of Hampstead.

And for us, there is no urban landscape in the world to compare with the view from the pedestrian bridge crossing the Thames near Charing Cross: to the west, there's Parliament, Big Ben and the Ferris wheel-like London Eye; to the east, the financial district's towering skyscrapers forming a distant backdrop behind St. Paul's Cathedral.

But best of all, we love to venture into new territory — an out-of-the-way neighborhood, a Saturday market, an obscure museum. You simply never run out of surprises in London. All it costs is a willingness to explore — and that's affordable on any budget. 🍷

*The authors have been visiting London together at least once a year for more than 20 years.*



THE STATE ROOMS OF BUCKINGHAM PALACE, THE OFFICIAL LONDON RESIDENCE OF BRITAIN'S SOVEREIGNS SINCE 1837, ARE OPEN TO VISITORS IN AUGUST AND SEPTEMBER.

VISITLONDON.COM