



The Best Things to Do in London's West End (Besides the Theater)

London's West End is known as the city's famed Theater District. While you should most definitely see a production (I highly recommend *Les Misérables*!), there is so much more to experience beyond the stage curtains.

The West End isn't confined to a specific boundary, but generally refers to the western part of central London. It includes some of the city's most beloved neighborhoods, such as Westminster, Soho, Mayfair, and Covent Garden. From famous landmarks to hidden alleyways, here are the best places to go and things to do in London's West End.

The Best Places to Go and Things to Do in London's West End

Big Ben & Palace of Westminster

If you're planning to visit all of these sites in one day, I recommend starting at Westminster and working your way north. Westminster can easily be reached by Tube or even by an Uber boat on the Thames.

Big Ben and the Palace of Westminster are two of the most recognizable landmarks in London. For one of the best views, walk across Westminster Bridge and take a photo from the other side of the River Thames, particularly through the arch by the Memorial Wall.

Most visitors admire these landmarks from the outside, but did you know you can actually take a tour inside Elizabeth Tower and the Palace of Westminster?

Contrary to popular belief, "Big Ben" is not the name of the clock tower or even the clock itself. It is the nickname for the 13-ton bell inside Elizabeth Tower. You can [book a tour](#) to climb the tower, stand behind the clock face, and see Big Ben up close. Tickets are released

on the second Wednesday of every month at 10 a.m. (London time). They sell out quickly, so set a reminder!

You can also [reserve tickets](#) to take a guided or self-guided audio tour of the Palace of Westminster. This massive 1,100-room 19th-century Gothic Revival building is home to the UK Parliament. Highlights of the tour include Westminster Hall, the House of Commons, and the House of Lords.

Westminster Abbey

Westminster Abbey is one of the most breathtaking and historically significant churches in the world. This stunning Gothic church was built in 1245 and is the site of many important royal events throughout history.

It has hosted 16 royal weddings over the centuries, including that of Prince William and Kate Middleton in 2011. This was also the site of Princess Diana's funeral.

It was also fascinating to learn that every royal coronation has taken place at Westminster Abbey since its construction in 1245.

Notice the Cosmati pavement mosaic that was laid in front of the altar in 1268. This is the exact spot where monarchs are crowned. You can even see the coronation chair where every royal has been crowned since King Edward in 1308.

The Abbey holds more than 400 tombs and monuments, including 30 royal burials. King George II was the last monarch to be buried in the Abbey in 1760. Windsor Castle became the royal burial site after that. Other notable figures buried here include Charles Dickens, Geoffrey Chaucer, and Charles Darwin.

Admission to the Abbey is included with the London Pass. Your ticket also includes an audio guide where you'll learn so many interesting historical details about the church. If you want to experience the Abbey without the crowds, book tickets for the [Abbey Unlocked](#) private tour.

Churchill War Rooms

There is something unexpected hidden underneath London's HM Treasury Building in Whitehall.

This is where you'll find the Churchill War Rooms and Museum. This maze of hallways served as an underground bunker and Churchill's headquarters during WWII.

Many of the rooms remain almost entirely untouched since they were abandoned after the war. It's as if time has stood still for the past 80 years.

You can see how the armrests on Churchill's chair have been scratched and worn away during tense meetings with the War Cabinet in this room.

You can see Churchill's personal living quarters, the room where he delivered his wartime broadcasts, and even the concealed closet used to speak with the U.S. President through a top-secret hotline.

More than 500 people worked in these cramped quarters around the clock. Higher-ranking personnel had their own rooms, while the rest of the staff slept in cots in a dingy sub-basement.

Being here in person, you can imagine how the tension and stress would have been palpable in the air. The decisions made in these rooms altered history and the trajectory of the war.

It's a fascinating place to visit, with so many original artifacts and an in-depth audio guide. If you're a history buff, you won't want to miss it!

Buckingham Palace

After touring the War Rooms, stop by the Horse Guards Parade. This space is used for royal ceremonies and is considered the official entrance to Buckingham Palace. This is where you can see the mounted King's Life Guards and even watch the Changing of the King's Life Guard Ceremony on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays at 11 am.

From Horse Guard Parade, take a stroll through St. James Park, a 57-acre Royal Park that leads directly to Buckingham Palace.

Buckingham Palace has been the monarch's official London residence since 1837 when Queen Victoria was first moved here. Notice the flagpole in front of the palace. If the royal standard flag is raised, then the king is home. If the Union Jack is raised, then the king is out on royal business or staying at one of the other two royal residences.

During the summer (typically July–September), visitors can [book tickets](#) to tour the lavish State Rooms. You can also plan your visit around the [Changing of the Guard Ceremony](#) held most Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays, and Sundays at 11 a.m. Check the website for updated times.

Trafalgar Square

Trafalgar Square is one of London's most famous public spaces. At the center of the square, you'll find 2 large fountains, 4 lion statues, and the towering Nelson's Column. These were all built to commemorate Britain's victory in the 1805 Battle of Trafalgar.

The square is surrounded by historic buildings, restaurants, shops, and government offices. You'll even find Britain's smallest police station tucked into one corner.

The National Gallery is a world-class art museum that sits on the north end of the square. This free museum is home to over 2,600 works of art, including masterpieces by Van Gogh, Monet, and more.

Cafe in the Crypt

Just steps away in the northeast corner of Trafalgar Square is St. Martin-in-the-Fields Church. This church was built in 1726, long before Trafalgar Square was built, and is one of London's most significant historical and ecclesiastical buildings.

It is also home to one of the most unique cafes in London. If you go to the left of the church, you'll find a glass entrance and a staircase. Take the stairs down, and you'll find a cafe located inside the 18th-century crypt in the basement of the church!

The dimly lit Cafe in the Crypt features the original brick vaults above, and centuries-old gravestones embedded in the floor beneath your feet. It is such a unique experience to dine with the ghosts of the past within the walls that were once filled with graves!

The cafe has been serving up fresh dishes in this subterranean catacomb for 30 years. Before it was a cafe (and after the bodies were cleared out), the crypt was also used as a homeless shelter, an air raid shelter during the war, and a club for the troops.

The food is served cafeteria style with a rotating selection. We honestly weren't super impressed with the food, but it does have good reviews on Yelp, so it might have just been what we ordered. Their cakes and desserts looked really good, though!

Goodwin's Court & Cecil Court

Goodwin's Court is a hidden alley located in the heart of London's West End. It's rumored to have inspired Knockturn Alley in the *Harry Potter* films.

The street dates back to 1690 and was almost demolished after the area fell into slums. Thankfully, it was preserved and still features the original Georgian architecture with gas lamps and bowed shop windows. It really does feel like you're walking down the streets of Diagon Alley!

A few blocks away is Cecil Court. This beautiful narrow street is lined with Victorian storefronts and about 20 secondhand bookshops! It is known as "Bookseller's Row" and is also said to have inspired Diagon Alley.

Covent Garden

Covent Garden is the beating heart of London's West End. This is where you'll find some of the best theaters in the city, including the Royal Opera House and Theatre Royal Drury Lane.

It is also home to popular museums such as the London Film Museum and the London Transport Museum.

We also love checking out the shops and food stalls at Seven Dials Market and Apple Market. Bens Cookies and Humble Crumble are two of our favorite spots in the market for sweet treats!

Be sure to check out Neal's Yard, a colorful hidden courtyard tucked away from the main streets. You'll find a handful of local shops and cafes, try Homeslice or 26 Grains if you're looking for a bite to eat.

Chinatown

The original Chinatown was located in the Limehouse docklands and was home to the Chinese sailors and their families who immigrated to London in the late 1800s to work on the docks. After many of the docks were destroyed during WWII, Chinatown was relocated to the current Soho area in the 1950s.

Today, London's Chinatown is a vibrant neighborhood with streets illuminated by neon lights and red lanterns strung above.

If you're visiting Chinatown, you'll want to come hungry! Lanzhou Noodle Bar near Leicester Square is our favorite place to go for hand-pulled and knife-shaved noodles. The shop is tiny with only a few tables, but it's worth the wait!

The Chicken Shop is our go-to for Taiwanese-style popcorn chicken. It tastes just like the popcorn chicken you can find on the streets of Taipei.

For dessert, head to Bubble Wrap for a decadent ice cream creation wrapped in a warm bubble waffle.

While you're in the area, stop by Leicester Square to see the statues of beloved film characters, such as Harry Potter, Mr. Bean, Mary Poppins, Paddington Bear, Bugs Bunny, and more.

Picadilly Circus is also nearby and is one of the most famous squares in the city. It is like London's miniature version of Times Square in New York, with a giant flashing billboard, tourist shops, and an electric energy in the air.

Mayfair

Mayfair is one of London's most elegant and upscale neighborhoods. It's my favorite neighborhood to wander the streets, window shop, and tuck into a cozy cafe.

Oxford Street, Regent Street, and Bond Street are three of London's top shopping streets that can be found close by. My favorite place to shop is the historic 6-story Selfridges department store that has been around for over a century.

A highlight of the neighborhood is Mercato Mayfair, a stunning food hall housed inside the former St. Mark's Church.

The Greek revival church was built in 1820 and features around 40 international food vendors. Once you order your food, you can grab a table on the balcony, on the floor of the former church nave, or even down in the old crypt!

It was hard to decide what to order, but we tried the bao dumplings from Steamy & Co., and they were so flavorful and perfectly chewy.

We also shared a Neapolitan pizza from Fresco's, and it was just as good as the pizza we had in [Naples, Italy!](#)

We visited on a chilly fall day, and a mug of pistachio hot chocolate from Badiani's hit the spot!

If you like food halls, you'll also love Borough Market. It's one of the largest and oldest food markets in London. Click the link for the [best foods to try at Borough Market](#).

Final Thoughts:

I hope this guide helps you discover the best things to do and see in London's West End. It is such a fun and vibrant part of the city, filled with some of London's most popular attractions, hidden gems, and beloved landmarks.

We were able to visit all of these places in a single day by following these locations in the order they are listed in this guide. I have also created a [map](#) with all of the locations marked to make planning easier.

Enjoy your time in London, and happy travels!