

London's vibrancy spills forth on every streetcorner

By Susan Wood

LONDON – It's only fitting England's largest city hosts the 204 nations that make up the family of the 2012 Summer Olympic Games.

London is a city of vast diversity – given its multicultural atmosphere. The many languages and ethnicities heard and seen on the streets and in the “tube” are as varied as a visitor's choices of things to do, food to eat, beverages to consume, neighborhoods to scour and places to stay.

Among them, the Shepherd's Bush neighborhood is what's termed the West End, where theater is king, the BBC broadcasts, a menagerie of city blocks of Georgian architecture stand and even the history includes a different Olympic time.



Kensington Palace's gardens are full of color. The gardens are free to roam, while there is a fee to tour the palace. Photos/Kathryn Reed

As the only city to host the Games three times, London's first was staged in Shepherd's Bush's "White City" in 1908. Britain ended up winning 56 medals. White City eventually became home to greyhound racing on the speedway.

Today, a modern, hip neighborhood thrives – as reflected by the four-star K West Hotel & Spa on Richmond Way. The decade-old boutique hotel may be all glass at its front entrance, but it's all eco-friendly green in principle – a gold member of the government-sanctioned Green Tourism Business Scheme among its four notable associations. Little touches can be noticed in the spacious executive double room – including two types of trash cans for waste, dimming recessed lighting and a perfectly-fitting narrow bathtub so there's no waste of water for those who bathe as sport. And the towels are nicely oversized for drying off.

Downstairs, a luxurious, full spa awaits a robe-clad guest who wants to make the most of the water lounging experience for an additional 25 pounds a day. (Check the exchange rate to budget accordingly because the dollar is most often worth much less.)

Steps away from a massaging foot bath is the hydrotherapy hot pool that is equipped with metal chaise lounges to accommodate anyone of any height. (It's much more comfortable than it sounds.) Across from it, the "water fountain" works on the shoulder muscles. If the spa visitor becomes overheated from the steam room or sauna, a unique Snow Paradise room with the simulated white stuff can bring the body temperature down. It's hard to do more than a minute. For longer-lasting relief, a collage of treatments is available for an additional fee.

From the lobby, the K West Lounge is fun and inviting – especially with bartender Carlos at the helm. He goes out of his way to make sure the guest gets what she wants. Upstairs, the Kanteen restaurant serves breakfast, lunch, snacks and dinner at reasonable prices. (Recommended: sweet potato fries and a raspberry crème brulee in the evening with Wimbledon on

the “tele” make a good room picnic until starting the next day with a filling full English breakfast in the Kanteen restaurant.) A guest can either opt for a hot breakfast there or the continental version served in the lounge downstairs for an extra room charge.

After the Olympics in September, K West rooms run from 127 pounds a night for a junior double to 177 pounds for an executive double or 268 for a suite.

With cushy seats and rectangular, rock fireplace in the lounge as well as piped-in jazz and mood-enhancing colored lighting throughout the hotel, the comfortable, relaxing K West offers subtle and blatant amenities that make a guest’s stay so comfortable one may not want to leave if not for the city of London calling.

Stepping out for the day highlights the new and the old

When venturing outside with the chirping birds, K West Hotel is an ideal launching pad for inviting walks around Shepherd’s Bush or hopping the London Underground metro to see the varied sites.

The West End touts some of the best theatrical performances in the world. For one, there’s the captivating “War Horse” that started in the National Theater and moved over to New London Theatre. Walking through the Piccadilly Circus neighborhood is a carnival experience. Pedestrians jam the sidewalks, lights are flashing at night and the place is electric with activity. There and farther east to Covent Garden where the pub crawl is the scene, street performers try their hand at entertaining pedestrians with either gravity-defying feats or statuesque displays.

At a slower pace, a meandering stroll from Shepherd’s Bush down the bustling, shop-lined Bayswater Road and historic High Street of Kensington can lead a walker to the ornate Kensington Palace and colorful Gardens, where the late

Princess Diana lived with her sons William and Harry. About a 15-minute walk from the palace, a visitor can see where she is honored at the Diana Memorial Fountain on the corner of Hyde Park. It's a circular wading pool that brings out all ages.

Kensington Palace tours cost 12 pounds. (For about 150 pounds, the London Pass with transportation card gives a visitor access to more than 50 attractions and six days of riding the Underground.)

The palace built in 1605 and restored a year ago features the Royal Ceremonial Dress Collection, a Queen Victoria story told through quotes from room to room and a film of Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee celebration of 1897. Queen Elizabeth II's ceremony was set last June, a few weeks before the Olympic Games.

A quick hop and connecting change on the Underground from one of two Shepherd's Bush stations (Hammersmith and City or Central lines) within walking distance from K West Hotel can place a London visitor in the heart of Olympic Park, where Blue Badge Tour guides provided a thorough history and view of the park and surrounding structures in the East London area of Stratford. (Crossing the city only takes between 45 minutes to one hour and is convenient to use.)

From the far east side, visitors have ample choices to backtrack on a sightseeing day – by train from the multitude of stations, bus or ideally on foot to take it all in.

A bridge-to-bridge pedestrian tour on your own over the windy River Thames is highly recommended given their different personalities and views.

The gothic Tower Bridge, one of the most famous in the world, has donned giant Olympic rings for the host city's special occasion. A tour, which is included on the London Pass, costs 8 pounds without and includes a trip to the Victorian engine room that's so immaculate one could almost eat off the

hardware. Either way, it's well worth the trip down London's memory lane and a high-level walkway featuring displays of other famous bridges of the world and past Olympic Games from one end of the bridge to the other.

Across the way, standing on the London Bridge provides a world-class view east to the Tower of London fortress housing the heavily-guarded Crown Jewels and west to Shakespeare's Globe Theatre and Southwark Bridge. Each bridge characterizes a different personality of this exciting city along the River Thames. The waterfront walkways are alive and electric with visitors hitting the famous attractions.

Due southwest of the Tower Bridge is grand central for government – the House of Parliament with Big Ben alongside. The complex may be one of the most recognizable landmarks in London, but it's Westminster Abbey across the street that is a must for sightseers wanting to immerse themselves into the heart of London.

Its history is unsurpassed in terms of grandeur and importance. One can almost feel an apple drop when standing in front of Sir Isaac Newton's memorial. The working church's acoustics are like no other with its high, majestic ceiling and walls adorned with stained glass and soaring vaults to demonstrate its glory to God. The church was designed in the shape of a cross. (No photographs can be taken, but the audio tour provides a long-lasting visual.) Tours cost 8 pounds without the London Pass.

A longer walk over the Westminster Bridge can transport a visitor from the 10th century to the modern age of the London Eye. The ride, which crosses between a Ferris wheel and a gondola, provides the best 360-degree views of the city at 443 feet up. In London, its height is only surpassed by the city's newest skyline addition – the modern-looking, pointed Shard, which opened at more than 1,000-feet high just prior to the 2012 Summer Olympic Games.

An Olympic first

A short, direct tube ride due south of Shepherd's Bush gets a visitor to Wimbledon, home of one of the four tennis grand slams. The All England Club is hosting the venue in the Olympic Games for the first time – something 2012 French Open winner and clay king Rafael Nadal was quoted in the Wimbledon museum as saying “is fitting for the best tennis club in the world” to host. Many tennis greats from Serena Williams and Roger Federer to Maria Sharapova and hometown hero Andy Murray have shown up for the Games.

Like the Olympics, Wimbledon tickets are expensive or hard to come by with a discount – bringing most of the tennis faithful fans to queue. The process requires standing in line in the wee morning hours with thousands of others. Once in the grounds, the lucky fans will find court seats.

All the work is worth the effort, despite the usual threat or reality of rain. New over the last few years has been the premier Centre Court retractable roof and giant Jumbotron screen set up on the front field for grounds spectators to watch the television broadcast.

Up-close and personal with television

A 15-minute walk from the K West hotel down Wood Lane invites a sightseer wanting the more unconventional tour to the grounds of the BBC, Britain's primary television network watched by 20 million viewers. The tour lasts up to two hours and costs about 12 pounds.

The complex is shaped in a giant question mark, resembling an ideal motto for the proud, serious network, which tour guide Debbie said differs from CNN's broadcasts that look like footage of “a disaster movie.” The television news operation alone employs more than 2,000 people and is divided between “planned” and “breaking” news. Guests of the tour get a brief view of the busy newsroom.

The BBC Weather Centre cranks out 140 forecasts every day; something a tour guest can try in front of a green screen. The tour is part learning, part interactive and involves waiting rooms and studios where Mariah Carey, the Metallica band and Madonna have sat to go on the air and well-known shows like “Absolutely Fabulous” have been taped.

The BBC will move to Manchester in the near future.

Moving across the city changes the scene

Three Underground station stops away from Shepherd’s Bush off the Central Line opens up the world of London’s largest of its Royal Parks – Hyde Park.

Just on its edge, K West’s sister hotel – the four-star, traditional Lancaster London that started in 1967 – sits steps away from the Lancaster Gate station off the Central Line.

Location, location, location seems to be the mantra here. A guest could spend a whole day in Hyde Park. For three years, the park’s lime trees have been pollinated by the hotel’s 1 million bees that are kept in rooftop hives. Among others, the Lancaster’s efforts have given it the eco-friendly reputation as the Green Hotel of the Year this year from the Considerate Hoteliers Association made up of its lodging peers. In October, the hotel will aptly host the London Honey Show, and at least 500 people are expected.

The 416-room Lancaster hotel serves the honey in its Island Grill, the floor level casual restaurant off the street that’s one of two it runs along with a bar. The Thai eatery, named Nipa, is reasonably priced and boasts tasty dishes.

When the Lancaster London Hotel Company owner from Thailand comes to visit, he makes a point of stopping into the restaurant, according to spokeswoman Alison Hull, who added the city has been “transformed” since the arrival of the Olympic Games. Upstairs, the view rooms provide an awe-

inspiring, picture-window-sized view of the London skyline and tree-lined park. The rooms start at 199 pounds in September following the Olympics.

(Note of caution: opening those windows may serve to save a guest from an inconsiderate one who decides to smoke at all hours of the night on a non-smoking floor. After three complaints, security officers and staff elected to do nothing about it.)

Nonetheless, the view will draw a guest outside for the day.

First on the list, no visit to London would be complete without going to the queen's Buckingham Palace for the changing of the guard by her royal staff. The mid-morning spectacle of mass tourism and pomp and circumstance requires patience and height in a crowd.

But with a 25-minute stroll through one end of Hyde Park to the other, the photos alone are worth the 45-minute presentation. To the delight of the masses who fight tooth and nail for an ideal viewing spot, the guard marches in unison – some on horseback, others with swords and yet more with brass and others with big guns.

The brass guard band covered a song list from the Britain anthem to jazz and even a Billy Joel tune, "Moving Out," before the members did so.

"I can't believe they're playing jazz," one amazed man said in the crowd.

Upon the guard and crowd disbursing, the best of the estimated millions of photos shot can be grabbed. The return from the southeast corner of Hyde Park to Lancaster Gate on the northwest end can be made on foot with an unscheduled trip along the lovely Serpentine channel to watch the birds and boaters. (Recommended: take a stop at the Lido Lounge along the Serpentine for one of England's pub beers to slow things

down on a sightseeing marathon.)

Out the door for a short walk to the Knightsbridge neighborhood down Sloan Street may be just what a shopper is looking for. The exclusive boulevard is home to Harrods, a department store extravaganza. Window shopping alone can be a magical experience. Plus, there is a tribute to Princess Diana and Dodi Fayed.

ngg_shortcode_0_placeholder (Click on photos to enlarge.)