

Windsor Castle is the oldest and largest occupied castle in the world. Its Norman Gate was added during the reign of Edward III (1327-1377) and refers to the four Norman Kings, starting with William the Conqueror in 1066 and ending with Stephen in 1154.

Monica Frim

Return to LONDON

No one ever tires of London. Visitors eager for a royal fix of ceremony, pomp and history flock to London's ancient monuments by the millions. One doesn't need to have royal or aristocratic connections to follow in the footsteps of kings and queens that go back a thousand years: many castles and palaces are open to the public, including Buckingham and Windsor. In addition, a slew of museums, churches and galleries teem with royal relics and heirlooms, often with changing exhibits, so there is always something new for repeat visitors to enjoy.

I lived on the outskirts of London for nearly two years and thought I had seen every angle of every castle, church and gallery. But that was 30 years ago, before a wave of gentrification swept the gritty Docklands off the Thames and catapulted cloud-busting glass spires into the sky. Shiny modern buildings with cutesy monikers like Onion, Gherkin and Shard have shimmied in next to venerable favorites like the Tower of London and Westminster Abbey and contorted the landscape into a geometrical configuration of old and new. People either love or hate the combo but still they come in droves—more than 30 million international visitors a year—making London one of the most popular tourist destinations in the world. In fact, TripAdvisor's 2019 Travelers' Choice Awards named London the best destination in the world. With much to see and multiple ways to get there, it can be difficult to streamline the choices.

Then there are the dining options. Thirty years ago no one came to London for the food, which was limited to fish and chips or bangers and mash with a side of mushy peas - unless you had your own private chef who knew how to cook sausages without having

Photography by John and Monica Frim



Long lines of visitors at Westminster Abbey's Great North Door.

Almost a thousand years separate London's most famous towers, the 11th century castle and fortress known as the Tower of London and the glinting glass of the 21st century Shard.



them burst open or “bang” (hence the name).

Now the city ranks among the best in the world for fine dining with an array of Michelin-starred restaurants and an outstanding mix of international cuisines, historic restaurants and quirky eateries where adventuresome diners can have their pick of opera-singing servers, table-top circus acts, flamboyant decor, goofy themes or crazy foodstuffs like python carpaccio or cricket and worm salad. Seriously, there are at least half a dozen restaurants that serve creepy crawlies, so one must presume that, in the hypercompetitive field of food, there's a demand for these alternative sources of protein.

Trying to fit food, transportation and attractions into a defined London stay can be a challenge.

One company has found an innovative way to simplify the process. They feed and lead patrons past the iconic landmarks in one fell swoop, the whole time wining, dining and intertwining stories of the monuments from a beefed up double decker bus! For real, Bustronome London is no ordinary meals on wheels, but a sophisticated multi-course dining experience with wine pairings served under a

glass-domed ceiling that allows for hemispherical views of passing attractions.

We boarded the bus at Embankment on the River Thames and ascended the stairs into an elegant dining room set with tables bearing multiple knives and forks, magnetically held to the placemats, and a special acrylic rack for keeping wine glasses upright. A unique audio pen for listening to commentaries through sensors embedded in a map completed the table setting. Just touch the pen to the icon of any monument on the map, hold it to your ear and, presto, you will hear things you never knew. Here's an interesting tidbit: the popular traffic junction and meeting place, Piccadilly Circus, takes its name from the piccadil, a collar worn during Renaissance and Medieval times.

The bus began its slow amble among monuments and landmarks while the sun danced on the Thames and skittered along streets lined with plane trees. Somehow all the places I had seen umpteen times before—the Royal Courts of Justice, St. Paul's Cathedral, The Tower of London, Westminster Abbey, Buckingham Palace and many of the glorious old arches and towers—took on a whole



Bustronome, a luxury double decker bus, offers refreshing views and high-end dining under a glass-domed ceiling.



At night the London Eye casts a glowing red loop over the illuminated buildings that twinkle along the River Thames.

Tower Bridge is a major crossing of the Thames and one of London's most iconic landmarks.





City Hall is one of several modern glass and steel structures that have redefined London's traditional architectural landscape.

new splendor when viewed through the glass ceiling of a mobile dining room in between bites of mackerel ceviche or venison in chocolate sauce. The presentation was as beautiful as the monuments—classic French savoir faire but with English fixings.

With each new morsel, the world outside took on a penumbral glow until it splintered into billions of lights that winked and shimmered as water, land and sky seemingly melted into each other. Once the lifeblood of London, the Thames meandered east and west, its banks aglow with architectural relics of a gilded past that somehow resigned themselves to sharing a futuristic world of crystalline architectonics. By nightfall, London's lodestar tower, the sky-piercing Shard, stood like a giant inverted icicle thrust into a galaxy of stars.

As we crossed the Thames at Tower Bridge, the Tower of London loomed in a resplendence that belied its history as a formidable fortress and ghastly prison. Now a repository for the Crown Jewels and other royal relics, it is one of London's most visited attractions. A thousand years ago, it was a trailblazing piece of architecture,

the first stone castle and most important fortress in England, - possibly as radical to early Norman sensibilities as today's monoliths of glass appear to die-hard retrophiles. But who could deny the beauty of City Hall at night, its bulbous crystalline orb reflected in the obsidian surface of the Thames like some diaphanous planet floating in space? Or that of all the other pulses of light that glinted under the vigilance of the centrally located London Eye? At night, this giant observation wheel cast a dramatic red circle into the sky, looking to the entire world like a giant abstract piece of art.

Bustronome succeeds

in doing the seemingly impossible: serving up a moveable feast (with apologies to Hemingway) while simultaneously compressing a thousand years of London's finest moments and mementos into three hours. London is like that—a taster's menu of bite-sized morsels to be savored in one go or a fulsome feast that can go on for as long as you like. Weeks? Months? For me, two years of living there were not enough. The city still holds many bucket list attractions that I hope to see before I leave this planet.

While architectural attractions run the gamut from stately castles to sky-strung crystals, there's no doubt that it's London's internationally beloved royal family that elicits the most interest. For all the days I spent strolling through royal parks and castles when I lived within commuting distance, I couldn't believe I missed Kensington Palace, the childhood home of Queen Victoria and one of the city's most accessible royal residences. But that was before the Duke and Duchess of Cambridge (William and Kate), one of the world's most idolized royal couples, made it their prime residence and fortuitously heightened Kensington's public appeal.

While none of Kensington's royal residences (extended members of the royal family occupy the neighboring

apartments) are open to the public, visitors can walk in the footsteps of royalty in certain historic chambers where the opulent décor and valuable artworks offer a glimpse of the aestheticism of bygone monarchs. In the King's Gallery and the Queen's Apartments the spirit of William and Mary lives on in the venerable Oriental furnishings, paintings of the royal family and period costumes.

There is scarcely a visitor to London who has not seen Buckingham Palace or witnessed the Changing of the Guard, a uniquely British experience that's as famous as the Queen herself. During the summer, when the Queen is not in residence, the palace opens the doors to all 19 State Rooms and parts of the garden. From the grand staircase with its gilded balustrade to the chandeliers and magnificent artworks, the palace oozes with an expected majesty that somehow still manages to astound.

If you are unable to visit in the summer, take heart. In any season royal grandeur unfolds at a number of sites scattered throughout the city. As part of the Buckingham compound, the Queen's Gallery presents a changing exhibition of Her Majesty's vast collection of artworks. Nearby, the Royal Mews houses the royal carriages including the diamond-encrusted Diamond Jubilee Stagecoach and the Gold Stage Coach that was built for



The Gold Stage Coach is one of several royal carriages on display at the Royal Mews.

George III in 1762 and used in every coronation since 1821. This coach is so heavy it requires eight horses to pull it.

A short walk away, the Household Cavalry Museum is dedicated to telling the story of the Queen's mounted guard. The Household Cavalry is the British Army regiment that serves as the Queen's official guard. Outfitted in colorful jackets and plumed hats, and riding shiny black horses, these soldiers are charged with escorting the

Cavalrymen strike a ceremonial pose during the Guard Inspection at the Household Cavalry Museum.



The Queen Victoria statue in front of Kensington Palace was sculpted by her daughter, Princess Louise.



Queen to the State Opening of Parliament and other special events. If you're not in London at the time of a parade, you can still catch a moment of pageantry and ceremony during their Daily Guard Change.

Twenty-two miles from London, Windsor Castle is Queen Elizabeth's weekend retreat. It's been the home of kings and queens for almost a thousand years, making it the oldest and largest occupied castle in the world. Its sumptuous State Apartments are open every day except December 25 and 26, unless there's a special event (like Prince Harry and Meghan's wedding in 2018) or a state function taking place. This is, after all, a working castle, and closures can happen at short notice.

Windsor Castle is its own small town comprising 13 acres and 1000 rooms. One of the most glorious buildings on the premises is the Chapel of St. George. During services the chapel is closed for tours, but anyone may attend a service, which is how I found myself sitting in the quire for Evensong in one of the stalls of the Knights and Ladies of the Order of the Garter. This is the oldest and most senior Order of Chivalry in Britain, with the Queen as Sovereign of the Order and St. George as its patron saint. King Edward III founded the Knights in medieval times, reputedly inspired by tales of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table. As I followed the program that I had been handed upon entry, the reverberating cross-rhythms of the organ and the beautiful contrapuntal harmonies of the choir filled the chapel with breathtaking music, truly fit for a Queen. That I was sitting where centuries of royals had sat felt oddly surreal. When the service ended, I tried to sneak a furtive peak at the marble slab that marks the burial of Henry VIII, one of ten monarchs buried in the chapel. Alas, the worshippers politely swept me up in a coordinated exit, ensuring that any exploration of the chapel would have to take place during a subsequent visit.

While Windsor Castle was one of Henry VIII's principal residences, his greatest pleasure palace was at Hampton Court. Visitors can wander through the palace's Great Hall where theater, dance and feasts took place against a backdrop of gold- and silver-threaded tapestries, and look for abstruse details such as Henry and Anne Boleyn's monograms tucked subtly among the high cornice scrollwork. So stocked is the palace with reminders of Henry's wives (he had six), that one could trace the history of the palace simply through his wives. There in the gilded ceiling of the Great Watching Chamber is the personal badge of Jane Seymour... there, under the life-size painting of Henry VIII in the Processional Gallery,



the ghost of Catherine Howard is said to run through the hallway ... and there, in the Privy Closet, the intellectual Catherine Parr became Henry's sixth and final wife...

Subsequent monarchs have added their own decorative flourishes, most notably in the impressive waterworks and formal gardens. Charles II dug the canal known as the Long Water and lined it with lime trees. Queen Anne planted yew trees alongside the three straight paths in the Great Fountain Garden that lead to the canal. The fountain is the only remaining one of 13 installed during the reign of William III and Mary II. The Orangery also owes its existence to Queen Mary, who had it built for her extensive collection of exotic plants. The gardens also include a Royal Tennis Court, the Great Vine (grapes),

Windsor Castle serves as the weekend home of Queen Elizabeth.

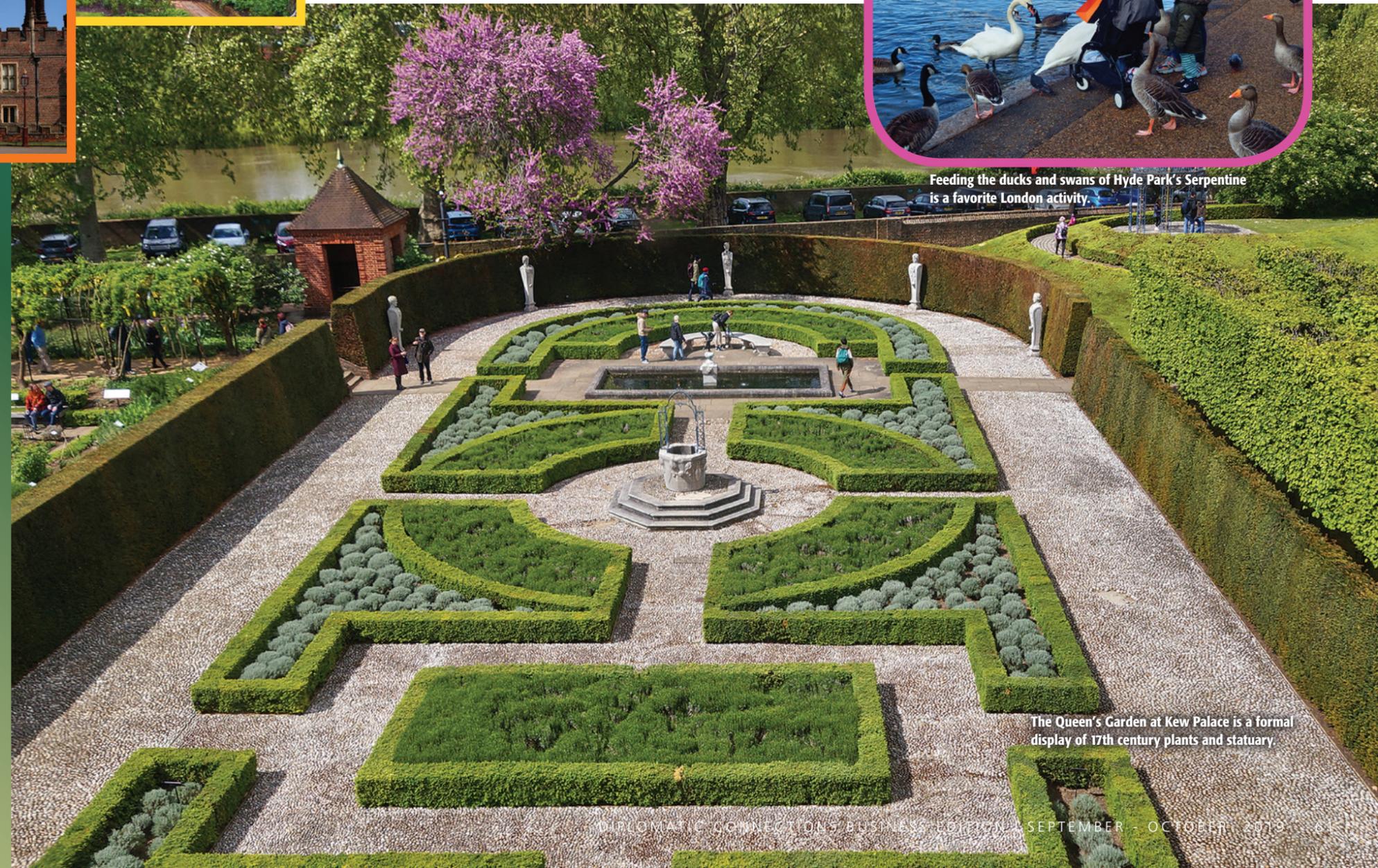
Hampton Court Palace is most associated with the reign of Henry VIII (1509-1547), the king known mainly for his six wives, legendary girth and the Reformation.

a Rose Garden, Kitchen Garden and a Maze that's as confusing today as it was 300 years ago.

If the extravagance of Hampton Court Palace leaves you breathless and craving simplicity, rest assured there's a palace that offers a rare look into the quiet side of 19th century regal domesticity. Surrounded by London's most famous botanical gardens, the red-bricked Kew Palace—royalty's smallest—is easily missed by most people who come to Kew specifically for the flora and art. The fact that Kew Palace was once the country retreat of George III (the



Feeding the ducks and swans of Hyde Park's Serpentine is a favorite London activity.



The Queen's Garden at Kew Palace is a formal display of 17th century plants and statuary.

A Right Royal Stay in London

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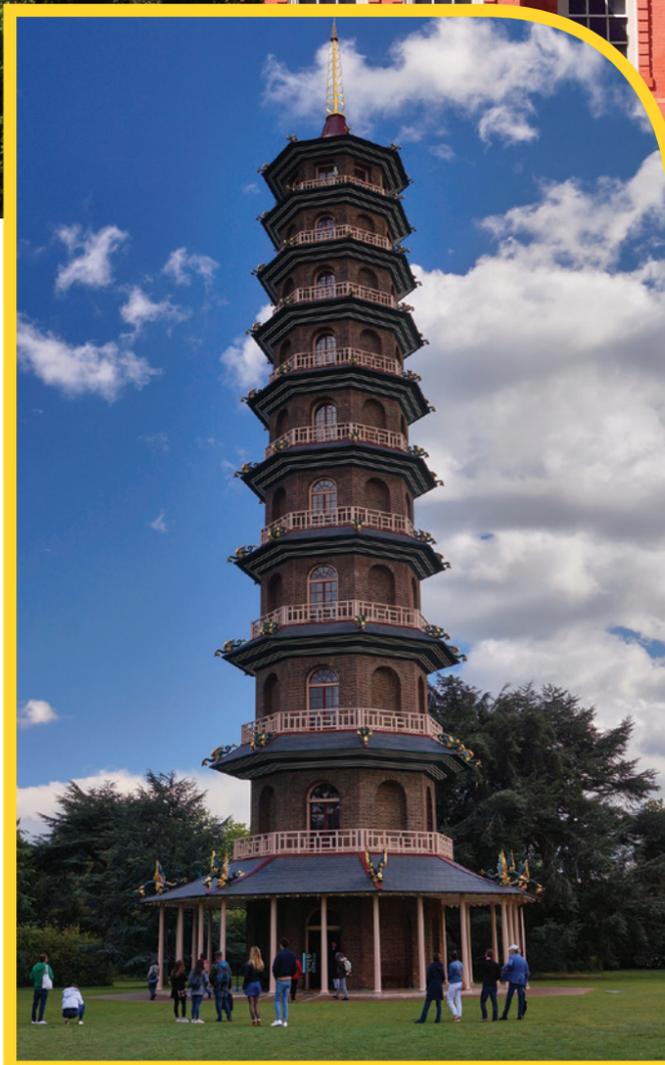
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I have always considered food to be an integral part of travel and have never shied away from trying a new culinary experience, whether for taste or visual appeal. At Dans Le Noir, with the visuals gone, my taste buds went into overdrive. Was that a pumpkin mousse or a cheese soufflé? Asparagus or artichoke? Custard or cheesecake? I knew only that I had opted for vegetarian fare (the other choices were meat or fish) and that at the end of the meal, which in true French style turned out to be superb, I would discover what had been hidden in the dark via pictures in an upstairs room. Meanwhile, I found myself paying close attention to the conversations around me and trying to guess at the appearance of my tablemates. For all I knew the person next to me could have been sitting there in a bathrobe... or top hat and tails. It was pitch black, after all, and the restaurant does not enforce a dress code.

For a brief moment you can break from decorum. You can sniff your food, eat with your fingers, lick your plate and talk with your mouth full, knowing that no one is watching. Everyone needs a good diversion from royal fever once in a while. ■

St. Paul's Cathedral is located on the highest point in the City of London. Designed by Sir Christopher Wren after the Great Fire of London in 1666, the Cathedral has been the site of many royal weddings and state funerals.



Kew Palace was the country home of George III and Queen Charlotte. It is one of the most intimate royal homes in Britain. The Great Pagoda at the southern end of Kew Gardens was built for the royal family in the 18th century.

"mad" king) was reason enough for me to seek it out. But when I gushed over its historical significance to a native Londoner, she responded with, "There's a palace at Kew? I've lived here all my life and I've never seen it." Her loss. The palace with the princesses' bedrooms upstairs and the king's time-rusted bathtub in the basement kitchen was a splendid repository of Georgian customs and design. If anything, I learned that the crazy king had a kindly side. Reputedly he took his bath in the kitchen so the servants wouldn't have to carry his water.

London is so vast and so rich in history that one really can live there for years and never run out of new things to see. London can also be about what you don't see. Or so I concluded as I ended my stay sitting in total blackness in a quirky little restaurant called Dans Le Noir, where all the waiters were blind and patrons literally stabbed in the dark for their food without having a clue of what they were about to put into their mouths.





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Location. Location. Location. Yes, the real estate mantra is a cliché, but if you've been invited to a royal event at Buckingham Palace, you might want to stay as close as you can. The Rubens at the Palace is directly across the street from the Royal Mews of Buckingham Palace, popular with royal guests, or anyone eager to revel in the regal ambience and perhaps catch a glimpse of the royal carriages leaving the Mews.

But even if you missed out on an invitation to Buckingham Palace, The Rubens at the Palace is a marvelous place to stay. Recognized by its Edwardian façade and gigantic living wall, the Rubens is one of six London-based hotels in the award-winning Red Carnation Hotel Collection. The Rubens' Westminster address places it within walking distance of some of London's most iconic landmarks. St. James Park, Trafalgar Square, Downing Street, the Houses of Parliament, the Royal Banqueting Hall, Westminster Abbey and Big Ben are all nearby.

Imperial motifs and services abound—from the red-tunicked doormen outside to royal-themed afternoon teas or gin and tonic tastings. It happens that gin and tonic is one of Queen Elizabeth's favorite libations. In tribute, the Rubens offers a plethora of gin-inspired cocktails served in spaces with regal names like Cavalry Bar and Palace Lounge.

You can dine like a royal in the English Grill with white-glove service and roasts carved tableside while you peer into a glass-walled open kitchen to watch the preparation of classic British dishes like Cornish plaice or chicken pot pie. Other venues offer international twists: sushi and jazz in the Leopard Bar, gin and snacks in the New York Bar, and some of the best Indian food on the island in the Curry Room. I am thrilled to report that I found the tasters' menu, with its combo of curried chicken, prawns, lamb and beef, divine.



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There's fierce competition among the exclusive hotels of Mayfair, one of London's most affluent areas bordered by parks and studded with museums, galleries and elegant Georgian-style houses. With its primal address—One Park Lane—the InterContinental lets you know right from the get-go that this hotel stands at the forefront of excellence and singularity. Overlooking Hyde Park and Wellington Arch, and within sight of Buckingham Palace and Apsley House, the InterContinental also boasts royal connections. It was built on the site of Queen Elizabeth's former childhood home before her father assumed the throne as King George VI and the family moved into Buckingham Palace (1937). During World War II, the house fell victim to the Blitz and was replaced in 1974 with a hotel befitting its royal history and location.

Grandeur and finesse run through the InterContinental's traditional furnishings but with nods to modern comforts and style. In the Wellington Lounge the traditional afternoon tea takes inspiration from the travels of the Queen. Along with conventional British scones, served au fait with Devon clotted cream and strawberry preserves, other food stuffs are staples of commonwealth countries: Canadian maple syrup, Caribbean jerk chicken, Indian mango mousse and other imported aliments.

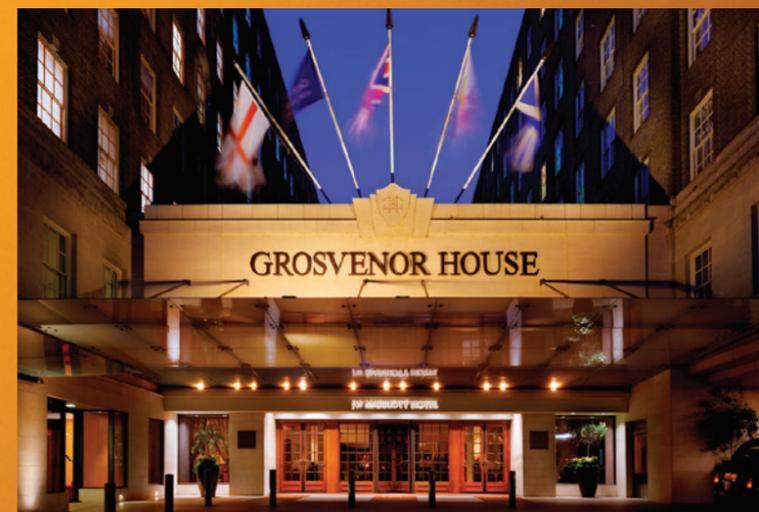
Culinary creativity manifests itself in the hotel's restaurants as old conventions give rise to novel percepts. High coffee now parallels high tea, but with open sandwiches and savories paired with specialty coffees like salted caramel espresso martinis. Modern Mexican dishes in Ella Canta contrast with rustic Italian fare by Chef Theo Randall, and special gin cocktails and all-day menus are available at the Arch Bar. The hotel's veins may be British, but its epicurean heart is the world.

The Colony Grill Room at The Beaumont Hotel
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One doesn't need to be a guest at the Beaumont Hotel—although I'm sure the experience would be lovely—to enjoy fine dining at the hotel's Colony Grill Room. The restaurant is popular for locals and visitors alike—from casual strollers to event attendees and West End theater goers. This gem of 1920s and 1930s inspiration is tucked into a small five-star hotel at the edge of a raised garden square. Its pride is its intimate atmosphere and old world elegance near, yet shielded, from the buzz and whir of Mayfair's renowned Oxford Street.

As I slid into a burgundy leather banquette overhung with jazzy lampshades to match, the retro décor reminded me of a New York art deco restaurant, but with sport-themed murals and caricatures of 1930's celebrities by San Francisco-based John Mattos.

The American connection extends to the food, reminiscent of sophisticated New York Grills. The menu's 36-ounce tomahawk steak was a dead give-away. But the restaurant also offers fish and seafood, and British comfort food like shepherd's pie and chicken pot pie. Other hearty dishes have roots on both sides of the Atlantic, which is what makes this place so universally appealing. Be forewarned: the portions are large and the desserts are to die for. I almost had to be rolled out at the end of the meal.



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The name Grosvenor is practically synonymous with Mayfair. Through marriage the Grosvenor family acquired vast rural lands in the 1600s then developed them into upper-class housing. JW Marriott Grosvenor House stands on the site of Gloucester House, the home of the Duke of Gloucester, brother to King George III. After the Duke sold the house to Robert Grosvenor, it became known as Grosvenor House. The house was demolished in 1928 but the name lived on in the extravagant hotel that opened in 1929—the largest in Britain and the only hotel at the time with a bathroom for every bedroom and a swimming pool. Today's Great Room was originally an ice rink, where Queen Elizabeth skated as a child.

Extensions and refurbishments have culminated in a synthesis of British history and contemporary elegance. The latest renovation, completed in 2019, incorporates elements of Hyde Park—butterfly wall art, leafy carpet patterns and floor-to-ceiling windows—along with travel-related artwork evocative of early 20th century London, New York and Paris.

As befits the hotel's brand as a JW Marriott flagship property, American flourishes are integrated into decidedly British traditions. Visitors can sip on single batch bourbon in the popular Bourbon Bar or partake of creative gin cocktails in the intensely hued Red Bar; order prime cuts in the JW Steakhouse or nibble on traditional scones and dainty pastries during afternoon tea in the Park Room.

Whatever your indulgence, know that you're in good company. Kings and Queens have danced in the Ballroom, Queen Elizabeth and the Queen Mother among them. Churchill parleyed with Eisenhower in the Great Room, and the Beatles performed in the Ballroom. Eminent American guests, from first ladies Eleanor Roosevelt and Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis to entertainers Ella Fitzgerald and Sammy Davis Junior laid their heads on Grosvenor House pillows. A list of all the international and British-born dignitaries and celebrities who graced these rooms and corridors would stretch from one end of England to the other. Just don't ask the hotel staff about any juicy tidbits. Discretion is their decree.