

Christmas in London

by Joan Zoda Cresci

My "adopted" daughter moved to London, England this past year and since it was her turn to host Christmas, seven of us went there to spend the holiday with her.

Let me start by saying that London is the largest and most expensive city in all of Europe. The exchange rate is 65 pounds for \$100. You try to imagine that the pound is a dollar and not think of the exchange rate. In London most things are almost double the price you'd pay in the U.S. When you are on holiday, you try not to dwell on such thoughts.

The weather in London was cold and damp. It was in the low 40's and 30's during the day and if the sun came out the wind chill factor was in the teens. Most days were overcast and windy, damp and cold like I said. You dress for the weather and plan to remove your outer garments when you go inside because everyone heats the stores and homes to the 70's. You are either freezing or sweltering at all times.

The subway system is called the "underground" or "tube". You purchase a card to get you on all the trains and buses—a card that you can continually add money to. I went through 50 pounds for this form of travel. Londoners are pleased that the price of "petrol" is down now - about \$6.00 per gallon (it hit close to \$10.00 when the prices went crazy). It's best not to drive anywhere, as the roads are very congested.

Let's get on with the vacation part. The first day we went to the Imperial War Museum where we saw many tributes to the U.S. for our help during WWII. Next was the new James Bond exhibit that had just opened two days before. On display here were wardrobes and props from all of the movies, plus a lot of memorabilia donated by Ian Fleming.

Next day we visited the Tower of London to view the Royal Crown Jewels. They were gorgeous with stones the size of eggs. From there we went to St. Paul's Cathedral where Prince Charles and Lady Diana were married. This was a lovely church with many burial places for prior dignitaries.

The following morning we toured the British Museum, home of the original Rosetta Stone and many fabulous exhibits. I photographed all of the jewels and gems through the ages. Since I specialize in buying and selling gemstones, this was a big thrill for me. The museum took up an entire day and so from there we welcomed a stop at the nearest Starbucks (there is one on every corner). We later dined on Indian food (my first) and it was excellent.

Our first stop the next day was the famous Shakespeare Globe Theater. The tour guide explained that in the days of Shakespeare, only men went to the theater in public and that the standing area downstairs—only a one-cent admission—was for the "stinky" people. Back then people never bathed

and they put goose fat on their arms and legs to keep in the heat and following that, layers of dirty clothes. The Queen bathed once a month and therefore thought to be crazy.

From there we went to the Hampton Court Palace. It was an interesting tour of exactly how people lived in "the good ole days". There were fireplaces in every room because that was the only source of heat. The bedrooms had small beds, as the people were a lot smaller 500 years ago. The kitchens were huge with a pot of "stew" always brewing. Leftovers were continually added to the pot and served the next day. These places were so large that you could go for days without seeing the same person twice.

Next we attended the National Ballet production of the Nutcracker. Once you have seen it in San Francisco, you are spoiled, however it was still entertaining. From there (since we were all dressed up) we went to High Tea at Fordham and Mason—the world's most luxurious store, featuring imported goods from all over the world. The aromas were wonderful. We skipped dinner that night as Tea was at 5:30 PM.

Christmas Eve day we went to Buckingham Palace to watch the changing of the guards, but unfortunately they had the day off. So we went to the Queens Museum and viewed many beautiful paintings and more jewels.

Six of us went to Midnight Mass, which was a large production with an orchestra and full choir. The mass, was in Latin and was beautiful. (For the Catholics in our group, this brought back memories of the past.)

Christmas Day was filled with wonderful eating. We cooked for two days and enjoyed a traditional English Christmas dinner. There were 12 of us, so a heated tent was set up in the back yard for the feast. We each had to spend 10 pounds or less on a tacky London item for exchange. We drew numbers and played the swap game. I was lucky to end up with a beaded coin purse of the English flag.

The day after Christmas, everyone goes to Kempton Races. It was one of those rare clear days and so, it was freezing. We had indoor tickets so we watched the races on the TV screen. Only the real hardy went outside to watch the races live. Not one of us cashed a ticket (how do you handicap jumpers?). My horse won one race but he didn't have a rider so he was disqualified. Dinner was leftovers - yum.

Next day we visited the Victoria and Albert Museum. The Russian Tsar Exhibit was very interesting. It was weird to see the clothing from hundreds of years ago—the people were so small then. The women had about a 17" waistline thanks to the corsets. We checked out the other exhibits and more jewels for me.

From there we had to go to Harrods to see what it's all about. It was so crowded that we could hardly move through the throngs of foreigners. The "food court" was extensive and had so many foods—some I had never even heard of. One chocolate display had its own guard because of the prices (I didn't stop there). We did stop at the Gelato Bar for sundaes. Six sundaes cost 59 pounds before the tip. They

were divine. Dinner that night was a Pub for fish and chips (now that I have had it once, I don't have to ever have it again).

Next day we took a two-hour drive through the countryside to Leeds Castle. The castle was purchased by an American/Anglo heiress about 40 years ago. She updated one section of the main building and kept the remainder of the castle like it was years ago. The "village" surrounding the castle also maintained its original character. It was interesting to tour.

The following day we finally got to see the changing of the guards. It was lovely. From there we toured Westminster Abbey and discovered that the main church was quite small. The Abbey had beautiful stained glass and statues and a tribute to the "unknown soldier". It also had one of the most beautiful Nativity scenes in all of London. That evening we went to a production of Peter Pan in a neighborhood theater. It was fun.

The last day of my trip I finally got to sleep in. The trip home was long, but in retrospect, the vacation was one of the best I have ever had. If anyone wants any more information on anything else in London or the suburbs, just e-mail me at jfcresci@aol.com.

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