



Shopping in Covent Garden



London mixology at its finest



The Millennium bridge

A LESBIAN IN LONDON

Finally! You're in London! Whether it's for World Pride or the Olympics or just to have fun, you know it's one of the most expensive capitals in Europe, but you want to rock it anyway. Here's how to live like a London lesbian, even on a lavender budget.

Gay culture (not to mention a date) is easy to find anywhere in this city, but the Theatre District in Soho, and particularly Old Compton Street, is Queer Central. Beyond Candy Bar (the only real lesbian hangout, but famous enough to have its own reality TV show) and G.A.Y. and Heaven (both mostly for men, and kind of intense), London offers a panoply of historic, artistic and architectural attractions that will appeal to just about everyone.

THE ROYAL TREATMENT

Fans of the regal lifestyle can swan around several palaces: the recently renovated Kensington Palace; a perfectly preserved miniature palace, Queen Anne's dollhouse at Windsor Palace; and old-reliable Buckingham Palace for its Changing the Guard Ceremony, a must-see. Summer 2012 is the Queen's Diamond Jubilee, so stock up on "60 Years a Queen" memorabilia for your tiara-wearing friends.

LOSING POUNDS QUICKLY

Some of the best shops in England are on narrow pedestrian-friendly streets at Seven Dials in Covent Garden, where rows of boutiques are interspersed with amazing places to eat and drink, such as Hotel Chocolat (buy gifts to take home, so your friends won't hate you). Femmes of size (such as me) will love Base, with its impossibly desirable designer clothes; mothers can get divine things at Irish designer Orla Kiely's retro shop; and tomboys and

Part two of our pre-Olympics travel special tells you what to see, where to shop, and how to drink like a Brit.

By Gillian Kendall

gender-benders will appreciate Tatty Devine, an accessories store with a sense of humor. Even shop-a-phobic butches can spend happy hours getting a shirt tailored to fit exactly right at Wolsey, maker of "men's" clothing since before America was a country. Finally, no one who likes sex can go past Coco de Mer, an opulent adult boutique featuring unlikely looking sex toys and expensive wisps of satin you suddenly, urgently, need.

Also, Seven Dials features every good European shoemaker in Europe—and so what if you spend a month's salary on a pair of shoes at Josef Siebel, Fly, Russell & Bromley or Camper? They'll last you the rest of your life!

CLASS AND CULTURE

World-class museums, many of them free, include the British Museum, the Tate Gallery, the National Gallery (insider's tip: the café under the steps has a lesbian manager),





The Radisson Edwardian Hotel



Lesbian nightclub

and dozens more. Parks are also free, highly civilized, and, like most churches, always open. Be sure to patronize London's last gay bookshop, *Gay's the Word*, at 66 Marchmont Street, a few Tube stops from Soho (a lesbian discussion group meets every Wednesday night).

The West End of London offers theatre on a par with Broadway, and you can get tickets for even the newest shows (including the Olivier Award-winning Best New Musical of 2012, the Royal Shakespeare Company's *Matilda The Musical*, based on Roald Dahl's *Matilda*) at discount ticket booths at Leicester Square.

GREEN VS. PLASTIC

Credit and debit cards in the U.K. all have chips these days, so you can't swipe your striped card everywhere. The good news is that many high-end stores or hotels will charge your card in dollars, saving you currency-conversion fees. Request to be charged in your home currency in shops and hotels; otherwise, use cash from an ATM (known as a "hole in the wall," or a "cashpoint").

BOPPING AROUND

Without a helicopter, getting around London in July 2012 is going to be a bore, a drag, a Sisyphean feat. Don't even consider renting a car. On top of rental fees that start at about \$190 a week for a miniature car, gas at \$95 to fill it,

and insurance (high), you'd have to pay a \$16-per-weekday "congestion charge" for the privilege of having a vehicle in central London. And even at that price you still won't be able to drive, because traffic in London is worse than in L.A. or Atlanta.

Taxis and minicabs are available, but they get stuck in traffic too. Most Londoners use the Tube (the clean, safe, ubiquitous subway system). Buy an Oyster card as soon as you arrive and put about \$10 on it for every day you plan to stay in London, on top of the \$8 deposit. Be sure to "swipe on" and "swipe off" every time you start or end a journey by bus or Tube, and the Oyster will magically calculate the best fare, based on your usage. At the end of your visit, take your Oyster card back to any ticket booth for recycling and get back your £5 deposit, plus any amount you've paid for but haven't used. Saved the stress of buying tickets for every journey, you get to feel as cool as the locals look, casually swiping your blue-sheathed Oyster as you breeze through the turnstiles.

Or not. Already, there are posters all over the Tube advertising that "Delays may occur on some lines during the Olympics," with an oh-so-amusing cartoon of two body-builders trying to shoulder past each other getting out of the Tube, while a flock of hapless non-athletes are stuck behind them.

Walking in London is famously great because there are fascinating plaques, pubs and maps to investigate every few paces. However, the streets are crowded even in the off-season, and navigating around clumps of other tourists—especially the ones consulting guidebooks in the middle of the narrow footpaths—isn't a good use of your vacation time.

The best, most economical option for able-bodied people is to rent a bike from one of the Barclays rental stands that are all over central London. Hiring a bike for up to half an hour costs only \$1.60, and fees go up to \$80 for 24 hours. They're comfortable, well-maintained, and lighter than they look, but it can be difficult to return a bike at your chosen destination if the racks are full and time is tight.

And if your ride takes you near Covent Garden, stop at The Icecreamists ("Liberating the world one lick at a time"), a "fetish" ice cream parlour—PG-rated menu and décor, adult-interest ice cream. What could be better?

SLEEPING WITH THE BEST OF BRITAIN

No one over 21 comes to London to stay at a youth hostel, but good accommodation in London isn't cheap (though there may be some special deals during the week after the Olympics, before the Paralympics).

The Radisson Edwardian, in the center of Seven Dials, has swish, comfortable rooms at reasonable rates, and the cocktails at the Dial Bar are all creatively based on the fruits and herbs of nearby Covent Garden: The golden-colored Garden Pear, with fresh ginger, made us feel particularly jubilant, regal and damn near British. God save the Queen! ■