

## Want to Get Away? Travel is Affordable Again And London offers U.S. History, Darwin, Ben Franklin and Good Value

The dollar has improved markedly against the British pound and the Euro so, if you've been itching to get away, now is a great time. According to the popular site Visit Britain, the exchange rate is not 2:1 any more. Britain is now around 25% cheaper for Americans than it was this time last year.

For example, in August 2008, when it cost \$2 to buy a British pound, that meant a visit to the Tower of London was costing \$33. Now the price would be \$24.75. Of course, regardless of the pound, theatre tickets are still considerably less. The musical *Avenue Q* costs \$151 for best seats in New York while just \$60 in London. And many museums are still free in London (while special exhibits do sometimes have separate pricing, however.)

London is always a treasure trove of activity, but this past election piqued so many American interest in history. So here are some suggestions with U.S. history in mind.

Bet you didn't know Ben Franklin had a house in London and that it still stands and receives guests (though its ebullient owner is long gone). It's a smallish, modest home perhaps fitting for what was then a fledgling democracy to have its ambassador living in.

The Benjamin Franklin House as it's called, opened in 2006 on what would have been his 300th birthday. It's the only remaining Franklin home and is located just steps from Trafalgar Square.

**“When truth and error have fair play, the former is always an overmatch for the latter.” —Ben Franklin**

Franklin, scientist, diplomat, philosopher, inventor and founding father, lived in this home for nearly 16 years from 1757 to 1775. It was not a second home as in a vacation home. Franklin worked hard to mediate between Britain and the U.S. in a failed attempt to avoid war.

You start the tour in the basement and begin on a ghoulish note. Over 1200 human and animal bones were excavated from the site because the building was the one-time location of Hewson's Anatomy School. These schools were common back then and the remains are from dissections carried out by students which were, undeniably, then put aside.

Franklin's landlady's son-in-law ran the anatomy school and you can just imagine what the witty Franklin could have done referencing dead bodies and politics.

The rest of the tour takes you through each of the rooms and you pause and hear reenactments of dialogue while images are projected on to the walls. It's worth visiting and will leave you plenty of time to explore the neighborhood.

If you're hungry and still interested in basements, you must visit Gordon's Wine bar—the oldest in London. Don't be turned off by a door on a building that looks like nothing. Open it and proceed down a very narrow flight of stairs to a dark, cavernous place that is very funky.

The brick walls suggest a sealed off underground water system or an offshoot of a tube station. It's neither—just a quirky underground wine bar where you'll see kids along side pin stripes enjoying the escapism. You can get nibbly type food at their buffet and hang out as long as you wish—no one seems to mind. But watch those stairs! It was like going down into an old boat.

And, if it's science or the history of science you like, be sure to visit the Natural History Museum. It is, after all, Charles Darwin's 200th birthday this year and the 150th anniversary of the publication of his *Origin of Species*.

On display at the Museum (where the admission is free) you can see their new, contemporary artwork in the mezzanine gallery

ceiling behind the Museum's Central Hall.

The 17-metre-long TREE installation was created by artist Tania Kovats from a 200-year-old oak in Longleat forest to commemorate Charles Darwin's bicentenary in 2009.

TREE is a permanent addition to the Museum and was selected from 9 other short-listed artists' work in the Darwin's Canopy project in 2008.

If you're planning a fall visit, you'll be there as they unveil their new Darwin Centre, an eight-story building which completes the Darwin Centre's development and is the most significant expansion at the Museum since it moved to South Kensington in 1881.

The new Darwin Centre will be a state-of-the-art scientific research and collections facility that will be used by the world's leading scientists. It is also a new public space for visitors to explore the natural world in an innovative way.

The first of the 20 million Natural History Museum specimens are now being unpacked in their new home at the Darwin Centre. They'll join 17 million entomology and three million botany specimens. There are also many valuable and historic specimens at the Museum, such as the cocoa plant collected by Sir Hans Sloane in Jamaica in the 17th century and malaria-carrying mosquitoes collected in 2008.

If you like eclectic, consider getting into the history of gardening — the English obsession. The Garden Museum (formerly the Museum of Garden

History) aims to become the leading national venue for exhibitions and debate on gardens and garden design.

They opened in 2008 having undergone a dramatic transformation. While the historic exterior structure remains untouched, there's a newly designed interior with a sequence of individual spaces for exhibitions, the permanent collection, education, café and shop. In the words of their Director, Christopher Woodward, their aim is to capture “the garden zeitgeist.”

The discovery of the tomb of 17th century plant hunters, the Tradescants, in the churchyard of St. Mary at Lambeth led John and Rosemary Nicholson to save the church from demolition and found The Museum of Garden History in 1977. While the building is one of great beauty, its original purpose was not to house an historic collection and as the 20th century wore on, St. Mary's struggled to work as a modern museum.

In October, 2007 a competition for the design of a new interior was organized. The winner devised a freestanding timber structure to create a contemporary space, including the first gallery in Britain for exhibitions in garden design. The Garden Museum explores and celebrates British gardens and gardening through its collection, temporary exhibitions, events, symposia and garden.

Situated on the South Bank of the Thames, opposite the Houses of Parliament, the Museum's home in the former St. Mary-at-Lambeth parish Church is one steeped in history and has some interesting stories to tell.

You can see the tomb of the John Tradescants, gardeners to Charles I in the Museum Garden. They introduced many of the flowers, shrubs and trees they grow today. The centerpiece of the garden is a 17th century style knot garden that is planted with the plants that the Tradescants grew, and offers year-round interest to the visitor as well as a calm oasis away from the hustle and bustle of London.

I also noted another notable Britain's tomb: that of Captain William Bligh of the famous ship *The Bounty*.



Location, location...so important in a hotel, too. So is quiet and lots of amenities at a great rate. The Haymarket Hotel has it all.



There's also plenty for contemporary gardeners, too. The Museum's Potting Shed offers practical seasonal gardening advice, and the Museum offers many garden-related events and activities. Best to check ahead to see what's on for when you plan to travel.

Their gift shop offers a range of items for those who love gardens and The Garden Café serves freshly made vegetarian food. “There cannot be a prettier outside table in Central London,” wrote Giles Coren of *The Times of London* so mark this is a great place to dine al fresco.

The Garden Café is open Monday to Saturday from 10:30 to 4:45 and offers delights such as yellow split pea, ginger and carrot soup; fennel braised in apple juice with chervil; roast shallots and jersey royals with smoked garlic; Puy lentil, toasted seed and spring onion; Quinoa and curry leaf; beetroot, celeriac and dill yogurt; Jerusalem

artichoke and cauliflower in fresh turmeric root dressing. You get the idea: you can truly get into the garden experience at this Museum.

Finally, while it may not be everyone's cup of tea, this newspaper publisher made a sojourn to the Women's Library for an exhibit on, appropriately enough, women's magazines. “Between the Covers: Women's Magazines and their Readers” is a great exhibit if you want to get into women's history as seen and covered in “ladies” magazines. It's free and runs until August 29.

“Between the Covers” charts the evolution of women's magazines from the 17th century to the present day, showcasing some of the most influential and innovative titles and telling the stories behind their success.

Sections devoted to love and relationships, looking good, house and home, and the wider world reveal how magazines have responded to

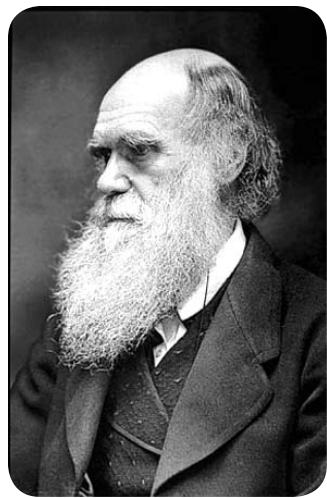
women's changing aspirations.

You can also view a specially commissioned film capturing the voices and opinions of contemporary magazine readers in east London, as well as listening to behind-the-scenes gossip from women who have worked on magazines.

Finally, there are all sort of historical sites in London, many with an American angle. Grosvenor Square is where the American Embassy is situated. It has long connections with the U.S. ever since John Adams lived there while First American Minister from 1785 to 1788. That house still stands in Grosvenor Square on the corner of Brook and Duke Streets. The house is marked by a plaque erected by the Colonial Dames of America in 1933.

It's there you'll also see the Roosevelt Memorial which was funded in 1946 entirely through the sale of a souvenir brochure to the British public. This was the brainchild of The Pilgrims, a society dedicated to the enhancement of friendship and understanding between Great Britain and America. So enthusiastic was the public response to the subscription that the total sum required was reached and exceeded in a mere six days from the day that British Prime Minister announced the opening of the appeal on the radio.

On April 12, 1948, the statue was ceremonially unveiled by Eleanor Roosevelt and dedicated by U.S. Ambassador Lewis W. Douglas in front of an audience including the Royal Family, the Prime Minister Clement Attlee and the Leader of the Opposition Sir Winston Churchill.



**“There is grandeur in this view of life ... that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved.”**

**—Charles Darwin 1859**

In the same area, the Eisenhower Statue, dedicated January 23, 1989, stands just across the road from the buildings that General Eisenhower occupied as Commander in Chief of the Allied Force (June–November 1942) and Supreme Commander, Allied Expeditionary Force (January–March 1944). During World War II Grosvenor Square was the nerve center of the American Armed Forces in Great Britain.

If you're out shopping in the Bond Street area, you might also spot Franklin Roosevelt on a park bench. The bronze statues of Roosevelt and Churchill sitting “talking” together is where Old Bond Street meets New Bond Street. This statue is called ‘Allies’ and was a gift from the Bond Street Association to the City of Westminster to commemorate 50 years of peace. It was unveiled on May 2, 1995 by Princess Margaret. You can sit between them for a priceless photo.

In keeping with the history theme, why not stay in a hotel with lots of history such as The Haymarket Hotel? All hotels are buildings with a history but this is one hotel that can kiss and tell because it has such a fabulous history—prior to its hotel life that is. The hotel is at One Suffolk Place, London, which is a quiet, one way street which means a quiet setting so sleeping will not be a problem, deciding what to do first will be.

The hotel offers a restaurant, a dramatic indoor pool (which is available for private hire should you want beach blanket bingo indoors) and lovely sitting areas throughout. Outside, you're one block away from the National Gallery,

St. Martins in the Fields and Trafalgar Square. In the other direction are theatres, Bond and Jermyn Streets and the Fortnum & Mason department store.

The color scheme/hotel motif? It beckons Lilly Pulitzer, Vera Bradley. It's the kind of motif where you look and admire the bravery to choose such bright colors and unusual bits of furniture and mix them all together and make it work. “Contemporary and classical references,” says the brochure.

The hotel's ground floor is a series of spacious rooms each with an individual look. The lobby is designed in black, white and yellow with a large sculpture by Tony Cragg and a dramatic London landscape by John Virtue.

For lounging, there's a conservatory and library that also have more original artwork sitting alongside an eclectic collection of contemporary and antique furniture and accessories.

The hotel's Shooting Gallery was historically used for shooting practice in the 1800s by country men visiting town, hence its name. There were several located in London. This vast room is 60 feet long with 18 feet high ceilings. It's furnished with an eclectic collection of furniture including 1970s lucite tables and lamps and artwork by Oliver Messel. It can be transformed from a private dining room to a cocktail party or launch venue.

The Haymarket is hot—as in popular. Last year *Forbes* magazine named it one of its top new business hotels—the only one it chose for London

noting the rooms and suites as being “among the largest in London.”

The hotel comprises 50 individually designed bedrooms and suites, fully equipped gym, beauty treatment room and an 18 metre swimming pool. The Haymarket also has an exclusive four-level, 2 to 5 bedroom townhouse with its own entrance on Suffolk Street.

Brumus is the hotel's restaurant and bar. Brumus (so named for the owner's dog), is situated on the corner of Haymarket and Suffolk Place, next to the Haymarket Theatre Royal. Its raspberry color motif is both daring and charming. They serve up meals and light bites all day.


In addition to The Haymarket Hotel, Firmedale has several other equally charming boutique hotels including The SoHo Hotel (Condé Nast 2009 Gold List), Covent Garden Hotel, Charlotte Street Hotel, Knightsbridge Hotel and Number Sixteen. Choose according to where you want to be in London or what motif you like best. Or, as I did, enjoy popping into the other hotels for a look-see, a meal or a drink. The SoHo Hotel has a very cool bar and it was packed—a very good sign.

You'll find these hotels on many book and magazine hot or “in” lists and for good reason. Interestingly enough, they are very popular not only with tourists but with business people.

Firmedale Hotels' husband and wife owners, Tim and Kit Kemp, believe that “hotels should be living things, not stuffy institutions.” Kit has designed all of the interiors in a fresh

contemporary English style. Her mixture of color and texture, modern and antique together with an impressive art collection.

Firmedale Hotels won the Queen's Award for International Trade in 2000 and 2006. Kit Kemp was awarded the Andrew Martin International Interior Designer of the Year for 2008.

By the way, Firmedale's next project is the Crosby Street Hotel due to open in New York's SoHo in September 2009. It'll be exciting to see this company's unique touch brought to the heart of SoHo. Judging by what they've done so far, it should be a real winner. 

—Louise Bruderle

## Accommodations

### Haymarket Hotel

1 Suffolk Place, London  
www.firmedalehotels.com  
Sample rates from their website:  
September 1-7, 2009 start at  
@\$365/night for a superior  
double room.

## Attractions

### Benjamin Franklin House

36 Craven Street, London  
www.BenjaminFranklinHouse.org  
Tickets: @\$10

### Garden Museum

Lambeth Palace Road, London  
Admission Charges (includes garden and temporary exhibition entrance)  
Tickets: @\$9

### Natural History Museum

Cromwell Road, London  
Free admission. www.nhm.ac.uk

### Women's Library

London Metropolitan University  
Old Castle Street, London  
Free. Exhibitions are open Monday to Friday, 9:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Saturday hours, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Exhibit runs to August 29. Best to check ahead of time for any specials closures or schedule changes as this is located in a university.

## Dining Out

■ **Brumus** at the Haymarket Hotel (so named for the owner's dog) has a street view and lovely raspberry furniture.

### Gordon's Wine Bar

47 Villiers Street, London  
The oldest wine bar in London.

## Books

### City Secrets London

By Robert Kahn. Publisher: Little Bookroom.  
ISBN-10: 1892145073.  
This book is great. It has lots and lots of undiscovered, uncrowded, unique place to visit. It's small and will fit in your purse or pocket.

## Entertainment under \$15:

From the travel site VisitBritain.com London...

■ Tower Bridge—Admission: @\$8. The Monument and Tower Bridge offer a joint exhibition, admission: @\$9.50. www.towerbridge.org.uk

■ The Fan Museum—Admission: @\$5. www.fan-museum.org

■ Clink Prison Museum—Admission: @\$7.25. www.clink.co.uk

■ Westminster Abbey—Admission @\$8.50. www.westminster-abbey.org



*The Benjamin Franklin House in London is where he lived and worked from 1757-1775*

■ St Paul's Cathedral—Admission: @\$13. www.stpauls.co.uk

■ Queen's Gallery—Buckingham Palace  
Admission: @\$11  
www.the-royal-collection.com

■ Tour of the House of Lords and the House of Commons—Admission: @\$10.  
Make sure that you book your tickets several weeks in advance from your Embassy or High Commission in the UK. www.parliament.uk

■ Tour of the Lord's Cricket Ground—  
Admission: @\$11.50. www.lords.org

## Value-smart tips

■ Get the best flight deals to Britain by using aggregators like kayak.com and sidestep.com to see all fares in one place. More and more low-cost carriers are serving routes from the U.S. to Britain, such as Fly Globespan (www.flyglobespan.com).

Once in Britain, hop on the frugal British jet setter's best friend, Ryanair (www.ryanair.com). Frequent promotions mean that you take a short hop around Britain or Europe for free—as long as you pick up the taxes and fees...

■ VIP Pass—Passes that cover multiple attractions in a city or region are an excellent way to pack in the most sites, while getting a chance to skip the queues. The Great British Heritage Pass, the London Pass, the Scotland Explorer Pass are just a few of the passes you can buy in advance of your trip through the VisitBritain Online Shop (www.visitbritain.com/onlineshop).

■ Look out for prix-fixe menus year-round in Britain. At Arbutus (www.arbutusrestaurant.co.uk), which recently was awarded a Michelin star, you can order a pre-theater, three-course meal for just about \$34!

■ Take a walk—The Original London Walks (www.walks.com) are an economical and enjoyable way to get to know London. The company has more than 300 walks through London each costing approximately \$12, as well as Explorer Days, one-day sightseeing tours to Bath, Cambridge, Canterbury, Cotswolds and Oxford, Hampton Court, Stonehenge and Salisbury.