



EYE SPY LONDON

Roger Wheeler visits the big smoke

It's said that travel broadens the mind, but does it ever change it? Maybe not but let's take our, usually jaundiced, view of London. Overpriced, noisy, grubby, crowded with tourists and basically not somewhere you really want to spend much time unless you have to. All of these views are quite common and some that I share, but recently we had a young, 13 year old, nephew to stay with us for a few days. How do you entertain a teenager these days? was a question I asked my friends; "you can't" was the usual answer, teenagers have the reputation of being easily bored and stubbornly morose.

After we had exhausted all the possibilities of Brighton Pier, a day in London seemed like a good plan. He'd been there before and regarded the prospect with world weary sighs but, failing anything else, went along with our plans. He liked travelling on the tube he said; little did he know that tube travel was not on the agenda.



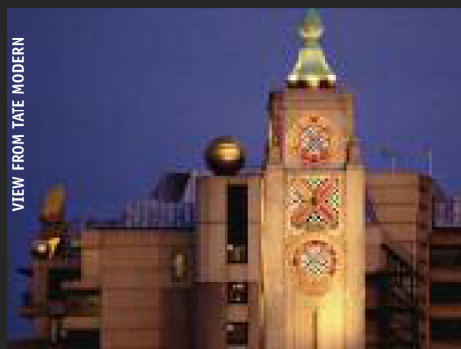
Arriving at Victoria Station on our Southern Daysave tickets, now £12, a 20% increase but still good value, we walked, yes walked, down Victoria Street pointing out the interesting sites; **Westminster Cathedral** (boring), **Westminster Abbey** (ditto), the **Houses of Parliament** (yawn), and then over Westminster Bridge to the **London Eye** (well yes that was relatively interesting) and we're going on it. Okay.

The Eye is the biggest tourist attraction in London, which makes it the biggest in the country. It gets in the region of 3.5 million visitors a year so the horrendous queues at peak times are no surprise. We booked in advance and were able to fast track and only had about a 15 minute wait. Nephew Paul was actually interested and almost excited. It was the third time for us but it is still quite a

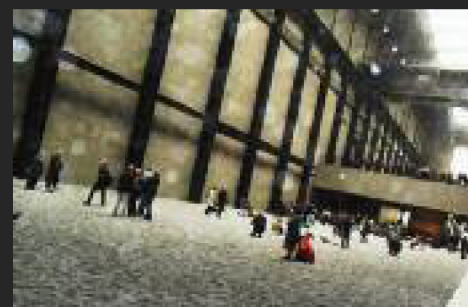
thrill. The 'flight' takes 30 minutes and costs £17 for adults and £8.50 for under 15s if booked online. The Eye is owned by Merlin Entertainments who seem to run just about every attraction in the country, including the SeaLife Centres, Madame Tussauds, Legoland, Alton Towers and many others. Evidently, there's money in leisure. After our 'flight' we went on their **Eye Cruise**; a perfectly pleasant cruise down as far as Tower Bridge and back, great for tourists and there were a lot. The young tourist we were escorting did actually doze off during the cruise; looking at some of the most famous sites in the world was tiring.



The **South Bank** of the Thames has undergone a total makeover over the past few years and is now quite a revelation. The **Riverside Walk** is one of the most pleasant walks you can have in the capital. There are usually more street entertainers than you can wish for. Wander past the **National Theatre**, the **Hayward Gallery**, The **British Film Institute**, The **Imax Cinema**, **Royal Festival Hall** and on to the **Oxo Tower**. A little known fact is that you can take the free lift up to the top of the Oxo Tower - you don't even have to go to the restaurant, but just walk past the smiling staff and go to the public terrace and it's a great view.



Paul hadn't noticed that we were still walking and so, having refuelled at one of the dozens of decent places to eat, we pressed on to what is, in my opinion the star of the South Bank, **Tate Modern**. Much to our amazement he was wowed by the building and the current exhibition in the Turbine Hall of Chinese artist **Ai Weiwei's** installation of 100 million porcelain sunflower seeds in particular. We walked all the way up to the terrace on level seven for another fantastic view of the London skyline. This time **St Paul's** was centre stage. It's free to visit any of the Tate Galleries, so this is a real bargain.



TATE MODERN

Still walking, we crossed the famous **Millennium Bridge** to St Paul's and then walked down Ludgate Hill and up Fleet Street to Aldwych and on to **Covent Garden**. By now we had been walking for almost four hours, apart from the 40 minute river cruise. We were all just a little tired, so we took a rest in one of London's hidden treasures, the lovely garden of St Paul's Covent Garden. Known as the actor's church, this tiny oasis of calm is right in the middle of one of London's busiest tourist spots.



GARDEN OF ST PAUL'S

On to the **British Museum** and even more interest was shown by our hitherto bored teenager. Can this be true, we had promised dinner in **Chinatown** but he seemed reluctant to leave the Samurai exhibit. Dinner was eaten and then we took a gentle stroll through **Soho**, **Piccadilly Circus** and across **St James's Park** with a nod at **Buckingham Palace** and back to Victoria. The whole day went by without once taking any public transport.

We'd shown him some of London and despite his previous standard teenage angst he'd thoroughly enjoyed himself. Although he didn't admit that until he returned to his rural home when he announced that he had had the best time, ever. Mission accomplished.

www.londoneye.com
www.britishmuseum.org
www.southbanklondon.com
www.tate.org.uk/modern