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## Turn up the '60s hits on a swinging way to see the sites of the English capital, writes **Sarah Nicholson**

**I**T'S not unusual for the traffic in London to grind to a standstill. Chances are that roadworks to get the capital ready to host the 2012 Olympics will be the reason, with stop-and-go men leaning on traffic signs from one side of London to the other as diggers make holes and dump trucks queue to refill trenches.

But that's not always the reason. It could be that a thoroughfare is closed to let through an official convoy — carrying royals, politicians or diplomats — or an incident with emergency-service vehicles is clogging one of the main arteries that carry traffic through the city.

Whatever the reason, until now London hasn't been the best city to explore on four wheels.

A couple of years ago three mates, who also happen to be Mini Cooper enthusiasts, joined forces to establish a boutique tour company that takes visitors around the busy streets of the English capital in little cars that are the perfect size to zip along alleys and lanes and make sudden detours around any traffic congestion.

Small Car Big City opened for business on August 26, 2009 — the 50th anniversary of the day the first classic Mini rolled off the production line. Now the vintage vehicles are attract-

ing attention all over again, with people stopping to snap photos when the cars are sitting at the lights.

My Mini tour started in Conduit St in the smart suburb of Mayfair.

I had lunch in The Parlour at Sketch, a quirky restaurant with a bathroom that's one of the most interesting in the UK — check out the futuristic, egg-shaped cubicles. Then my driver Robert Welch, who is also the company's managing director, put the car in gear and we shot off towards Regent St.

It was one of those perfect summer days, with a flawless dome of blue covering the city that straddles the River Thames. We wound down the Mini's windows to let the breezes cool the car as 1960s hits floated from the speakers.

We dashed along Regent St, before diving back into the lanes of Mayfair to pass some of the famous shopping addresses on Savile Row, and buzzed down St James St to look at stores that have been supplying the royal household with goodies for generations.

When we came across a spot of congestion, Rob flicked the blinker and dashed down an alley, explaining the tours were flexible so routes could be changed to avoid busy boulevards.

As we scooted along one Soho

avenue, I looked back along the side streets to see a main road clogged with red double-decker buses.

"It's just like shooting around on a bike," Rob said as we bolted for another secret thoroughfare.

"We know all the back roads and how to get where we want to go by using them; we try to make the tours as bespoke as possible, and guests will be serenaded by retro beats and hear some of the more quirky stories about London as we go."

**I**T WAS the Small Car Big City's A Bridge Too Far excursion, a two-hour jaunt around London that takes visitors past all the famous tourist attractions, and we zoomed across five of the capital's most scenic bridges while following the curves of the Thames.

We saw Downing St, Westminster Abbey, Big Ben and the Houses of Parliament, the London Eye, Buckingham Palace, The Mall and Admiralty Arch, Nelson's Column and Trafalgar Square, Fleet St, St Paul's Cathedral, and each attraction came with an anecdote from our knowledgeable guide.

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# Mini swing through London

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When we were crossing Westminster Bridge, we saw smoke rising from a building somewhere between the Strand and Victoria Embankment, and could see flames dancing from the top floors.

So Rob changed his plan for the rest of the journey, knowing the traffic moving around the Thames would halt when the fire trucks arrived.

We darted away from the river, headed north, and explored the neighbourhood known as Little Venice before roaring up Abbey Rd

to see the crossing made famous by The Beatles, past Paul McCartney's house, and then through the leafy streets of St Johns Wood.

Rob was going to drop me back at my hotel beside St Pancras Station.

But when I said I planned to spend the afternoon shopping in Oxford St, he let me out just across from the Marks & Spencer store on the corner of Orchard Rd.

And so, in only 120 minutes, I felt I had seen more of London from the passenger seat of that zippy little Mini Cooper than during all of my previous visits combined.

## THE DEAL

**What to do:** Small Cars Big City ([smallcarbigcity.com](http://smallcarbigcity.com)) offers a collection of "retro tours" around the English capital in classic Mini Coopers, from a quick 30-minute hop through the city on the Royal London tour to The Italian Job, which takes 90 minutes, and The Great Escape itinerary that lasts three hours.

## MORE

**For more information on planning a stay in the English capital, see [visitolondon.com](http://visitolondon.com)**



Likely lads: The tours were started by Mini Cooper enthusiasts.