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THRICE AS NICE

Three fab ways to tour London

SUSAN KUROSAWA

DRIVING MISS DAISY

Tootling about England's capital with the smallcarBIGCITY bunch in a restored Mini Cooper with "leading lass" Sam Sherratt or one of her equally lively cohorts at the wheel is enormous fun.

Sam can spin that little vehicle on a sixpence. She knows all the best byroads and detours and can somehow spot a potential traffic snafu a mile away. It's not so much a matter of mind the gap as find the gap. Design your own itinerary, take a themed tour or, as we do, zoom off from Covent Garden for a quick look at a specific district. The fleet of smallcarBIGCITY's 10 cars, all girls apparently, have names such as Betty, Lulu and Dot. But ours this fair April morning is Daisy, as pretty and pale as early springtime; she's a white 1992 Rover Mini Cooper with a black top and "full-length Webasto sunroof", confides Sam, as proudly as a new mum.

We bustle in and out of the bafflingly huge fresh produce palace of Borough Market in Southwark, pausing for what Sam calls "Aus-sie-strength" flat whites from Monmouth Coffee Co and a remarkable donut dripping with sea-salt caramel from Bread Ahead. Whoosh, off again, and now to take a look at Leake Street Tunnel near Waterloo Station and learn about the history of the Necropolis Railway, a funeral train service that took coffins and mourners on a short journey to Woking, Surrey. The service closed when road travel became more popular and now the tunnel is daubed with ever-changing street art.

At the enormous "shopping destination" of One New Change in the City financial district, we take the best close-up pics of St Paul's Cathedral from the rooftop terrace. Other discoveries come but the ride is the thing, with that generous sunroof open and Sam's lively patter adding to the adventure.

TIP: Daisy and her sister Minis seat four and I am Sam's front-seat passenger, but it's pretty squeezey for two in the back.

■ smallcarbigncity.com

IN THE KNOW

In a world first, Qantas has commenced non-stop Dreamliner services between Perth and Heathrow; the flights take just over 17 hours. Its A380 services now stop at Singapore, not Dubai, between Australian ports and Heathrow. Check the airline's Global Deals for best seasonal fares, including return economy ex Perth from \$2126.

■ qantas.com

SmallcarBIGCITY's Mini Coopers, main; Hampstead Heath, above; the Holly Bush pub in Hampstead, below right; and a Chirton Grange people-mover outside St Paul's Cathedral, below



LOLL IN LUXURY

Chirton Grange's Kevin Willis, son Chris, and their band of expert chauffeurs can take you around London and beyond in maximum comfort. Whether airport transfers or a customised day tour, this is the royalty or rock-star treatment, all tinted windows, free Wi-Fi, bottled water and black leather seats. But the cost is affordable, especially if you have a few friends in tow to share, say, a seven-seater Mercedes Viano people-mover or eight-seater VW Transporter. I have travelled on multiple occasions with the award-winning Chirton Grange team around the Cotswolds, to coastal Kent, and along the motorway to and from Heathrow in a Mercedes E Class or BMW 7 Series. It's a family-run firm, drivers send confirmation texts that also advise of any traffic delays that could affect a pin-sharp departure, and I wouldn't use any other firm. **TIP:** The Willises have also introduced a cruise transfer service to and from ports such as Southampton using people-movers with loads of luggage space. The transfers can be combined with sightseeing around, say, Windsor, Stonehenge or Dover.

■ chirtongrange.co.uk



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MORE TO THE STORY

- If tackling London by public transport, pre-purchase a swipe-as-you-go Oyster Visitor Card, from about \$38, valid for the Tube, trains and buses, and with 50 per cent off Thames riverboats. Prices vary according to time of day and city zones.
- If you are going to be moving about every day, then a seven-day Travelcard allows unlimited travel across the public transport network, including Docklands light railway, with no restrictions; \$64.50 for 16 years and over; \$32.50 for 11 to 15 years; under 11s, free. One-day Travelcards are also available, priced according to zones. If including Heathrow transfers, buy Zone 1-6; \$34.50/\$17.50.
- The London Pass covers the capital's top attractions, such as the Tower of London and Kew Gardens, with options from one to six days, and the viewing platform at The Shard is latest to the mix. The pass is valid for hop-on and hop-off sightseeing buses. One day is \$130.50 for 16 years and over; \$93, five to 15; under fives enter free at most attractions. Best value is a three-day pass; \$210/\$155.
- All London travel passes, plus heritage, BritRail and sightseeing passes across Britain, can be pre-purchased in Australian dollars at Visit Britain's online shop.
- visitbritainshop.com/australia

LISTEN AND LEARN

I almost knock over Ricky Gervais on Hampstead Heath, try to peep through the window of Jamie Oliver's one-time home and gawp at a mansion that Ridley Scott sold for a gazillion pounds. But the other famous people of the parish I encounter, from John Constable to D.H. Lawrence, are via entertaining tales from my guide and historic blue plaques on their former residences. London Walks has a diverse program of escorted strolls, mostly of about two hours, across neighbourhoods from gritty to grand, and with themes covering just about everything from Harry Potter film locations to haunted London.

My escort is US-born architecture and literature lover David Tucker who has long left Wisconsin and is the keenest of advocates for his adopted city. With a stout walking stick that would do Gandalf proud, and a booming, actorly voice, off he strides from Hampstead Tube Station on our Hampstead Heath and Villages walk and I scurry to keep pace, including across a portion of the hilly parkland heath, which covers a great green ridge of about 320ha.

We are in NW3 and Tucker calls the district London's "penthouse" with good reason. The elevations from many points, such as along Holly Mount, are among the highest in the city and from which you can see the odd-shaped towers of central London on a clear day. We clomp along cobblestoned defiles, past flat-fronted Georgian villas, and have a lovely wander around the walled gardens, full of daffodils and apple trees, of the National Trust-listed 17th-century Fenton House, which would look much more at home in, say, Gloucestershire than northwest London.

We peep into Tucker's favourite pub, The Holly Bush, in a Grade II-listed building and tinker with the idea of a pint of Fuller's London Pride and a Sunday lunch plate of grilled plaice, tartare sauce and new potatoes. But it is at the tour's end that we finally pause, back near the station at The Flask, a haunt of Peter Cook and Dudley Moore in the 60s. You have to love a pub that serves sweet "pudding wines" but it's a Young's malty ale for us and by the time we take our drinks from the bar, a crowd has formed outside in the pedestrian alleyway known as Flask Walk, which does indeed weave a trifle drunkenly towards the High Street.

It's Sunday, the Morris dancers are out, smashing sticks and fluttering their hankies, and it is truly, madly marvellous.

TIP: From May 1 to October 31 each year, there's also a Saturday night pub walk of the precinct.

■ walks.com

Susan Kurosawa was a guest of Visit Britain and Qantas.