

London SPOTLIGHT

This issue our Londonphile **Russell Higham** finds five unique ways to travel around London



Russell Higham is a freelance journalist who writes on arts, culture, history, travel, and British heritage

When it comes to getting around the capital, the easiest and most common way is by public transport. London's famous red buses have been that colour since 1933, although the city's very first bus — which ran from Paddington to Bank in 1829 — was painted black and was pulled by a horse. Our underground railway system ('the Tube') is 160 years old and now carries up to five million passengers each day. Together, they're both excellent ways of getting around, for Londoners and visitors alike. Sometimes, though, it's nice to do something a little different, so I've pounded the streets (and air) to find five of the most unusual ways of getting in, around and over the capital.



Fly-A-Spitfire

Maybe not one for the daily commute, but a flight in one of Fly-A-Spitfire's two-seater fighter aircraft from the 1940s might well qualify as the most exhilarating ride of your life. Taking off from Biggin Hill, on the capital's southeastern edges, and reaching speeds of up to 250mph, you'll sit behind a professional pilot who will show you views of the London skyline that literally take your breath away...especially when he flips the aircraft upside down in a manoeuvre known as the 'victory roll'!

You'll even get the chance to momentarily take the controls, as I did when I went up in MJ627, a beautifully restored Spitfire with an illustrious past: just two days after entering service, in September 1944, it shot down a Messerschmitt Me 109 in the Battle of Arnhem, part of Allied Operation Market Garden. Seeing the now peaceful patchwork fields of England's green and pleasant land, over which the Battle of Britain was fought by aircraft such as these 80 years ago, is quite a moving moment in more ways than one.

flyaspitfire.com

Classic Mini Experience

If there's one car that says London more than any other, it's the original 1960s Austin Mini. Driven by everyone from Michael Caine to Mr Bean, it's the best-selling British car ever made and still turns heads as it bounces over the capital's cobbled streets. You'll feel like a film star yourself being driven around in one by a knowledgeable tour guide from Small Car Big City. Ours, Chris, was a true Eastender who knew all the shortcuts to London's top landmarks and where to get the best snaps of them. You can book any of their seven different Minis, with a driver to take you wherever you want in the capital, but be prepared for some attention. Our Mini, named Lilibet and painted British Racing Green, was so cute that when we poked our heads through the soft-top roof to take pictures outside St Paul's Cathedral, everyone swung their cameras round to photograph us instead.

smallcarbigcity.com

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The Singing Cabbie

The drivers of London's black cabs (or 'Hackney Carriages' to give them their proper name) are known for being chatty. Very few of them will sing to you, though, apart from Aiden Kent, London's famous 'Singing Cabbie'. A trained vocalist who has performed at the London Palladium and serenaded stars such as Elton John, Michael Caine, and Elaine Paige, Aiden will croon your favourite song as he whisks you around the capital. His black cab, bedecked in sumptuous ruby leather with a twinkling starlight roof, is also handily fitted with a champagne bucket from which he will serve you, dressed in tuxedo and bow-tie — once he's stopped the cab, of course!

"I got an ex-engineer from Rolls-Royce to turn my cab into a luxurious limo," says Aiden, who has been driving for over 30 years. Passengers often book him for birthdays or wedding anniversaries to take them from a hotel or railway station to the theatre. "The request I get most is *Fly Me to the Moon*," he says, before adding, "I mean the song, not the destination! I dread to think what that would cost on the meter!" singingcabbie.com



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Uber Boat By Thames Clipper

'Old Father Thames', as the UK's second longest river is sometimes known, isn't just a picturesque tourist attraction. It's a proper working river which, as Britain's busiest inland waterway, handles over five million tonnes of goods and materials each year, as well as millions of passengers. Many of these, whether commuters or visitors to London, rely upon the Uber Boat by Thames Clipper network. Using 21 modern, fuel-efficient catamarans — including Earth Clipper, the UK's first hybrid high-speed passenger ferry — the services run at 10–20-minute intervals, stopping at 24 piers across the capital. From Putney in the west, through Millbank (for Tate Britain) and Bankside (for Borough Market, Shakespeare's Globe and Tate Modern; plus, St Paul's Cathedral across the Millennium Bridge), the network extends out as far as Woolwich (for Royal Arsenal) and Barking in the east. Although there are plenty of seats inside each boat, be sure to grab one on the outside deck for some of the best riverside views in London. thamesclippers.com



Walking With A Blue Badge Guide

Sometimes, the best way to get to the heart of a city is on foot. Walking tours have proliferated over the last few years but the cream of the crop are London's Blue Badge guides who have undergone years of training — much like the cabbies with their 'knowledge' — and are regulated and insured by the Association of Professional Tourist Guides. Each has their individual specialism but for an all-round, reliable, and knowledgeable guide to some of London's most historic areas and attractions — including the Southbank, Tate Modern and Victoria & Albert Museum — Ildiko Pelikan comes highly recommended (I've done tours with her myself).

Like many of her Blue Badge wearing colleagues, Ildiko can put together bespoke private tours for an individual or group or offer off-the-shelf packages with other walkers for a sociable and educational day out. guidelondon.org.uk/guides/ildikopelikan

