



EYEING UP LONDON

Warm beer, cool girls and a *Wicked* good time.

By Gillian Kendall

Having the 2012 Olympics in London is like having all our Christmases come at once, as the Brits say. Arguably the most queer-friendly capital in the world, London has plenty of charm: Really, the weather is no worse than it is in Paris, gay culture is up there on a par with San Francisco's and the architecture is better than what you'll see in Sydney. And right now with—no kidding—1 million visitors expected in July, London is toned and fit, coached and prepped, just crouching on the starting line, waiting for your arrival.

But despite the plethora of wall maps and English-speaking guides, and a tourism office on practically every corner, a visitor can easily get confused. Everything in the city is beautiful or fascinating and almost everything is "dear" (or, as we Yanks say, *extremely expensive*). So it's wise to plan a few excursions, as well as accommodation, before you arrive; otherwise, even the most street-smart dyke might spend her vacation wandering from pillar to Parliament to pub...

GET YOUR BEARINGS. For a first-timer in London, two experiences are *de rigueur*: First (early in the trip), you have to see the city from an Original Tour hop-on, hop-off tour bus. A day atop an open-air double-decker convinced me that much of the beauty of London begins at the second-story level, way above what a normal pedestrian would notice. Some of the routes offer low-key recorded commentary; all of them travel through fascinating parts of the city and give you a good overall introduction. Second, no matter what else you miss, make time for the London Eye, a smooth, trippy, slow-motion journey around a huge wheel





The West End production of *Wicked*



Aloft Hotel lobby



Aloft Hotel's WXYZ Bar

set beside the Thames. The trip—one time around—takes about 35 minutes, and though the time goes fast, the pods move slowly, so there's no disorienting sense of motion. In America, the same attraction would probably cost three figures, but the Eye is amazingly only £17 (inevitable upgrades are available, such as a river cruise, champagne and a private capsule). It's the best \$25 you'll spend in London. The only drawback to the Eye is that they make you get out when your capsule comes back to earth, but for consolation you can cross the Thames to the Houses of Parliament and then continue on to the nearest pub, which happens to be the beautifully renovated St. Stephen's Tavern, where you can enjoy real ale, or at least real coffee. Once you've had an Eye-ful, grab a *Time Out* (restaurant and entertainment guide) and a Tube map, log on to allinlondon.co.uk and start planning the rest of your trip.

WHERE THE GIRLS ARE. Sport-dykes heading to cheer on the contestants should stay near the Olympics action at Aloft Hotel at the ExCeL Centre; Aloft is a surreal place that seems less like a hotel that recently opened (October 2011) than one that will appear 30 years in the future. Offering spacious, sleek rooms amid this rather bleak section of the city, it's a good space to recharge between excursions into the overwhelming rest of London. Aloft will also appeal to wheelchair users, because it's ultra-accessible. You don't encounter a single step or stair between leaving the train, registering in the lobby, and entering your room.

On my recent arrival, I knew which was my room because, although the door numbers were not yet in place, my door

was open and the larger-than-life TV screen was scrolling a welcome message for me with my name on it. Needless to say, I was impressed.

Can't get tickets to the events you wanted? No worries: Check out the nonprofessional competition at the Ladies' Pond, Hampstead Heath. This secluded, clean, women-only outdoor bathing area has been hosting mermaids since America was in its infancy. For £2 you can swim in the opaque-but-clean pond, girl-watch or (ha!) sunbathe on the green slopes surrounding the water.

LESBIAN CENTRAL: SOHO. If London is the gay capital of the UK, then Soho is the hub of the capital, and the best place in the universe to take a dinner date. Anyone who can't find a good meal in Soho isn't trying: The rest of us can barely choose between the array of Indian, Japanese, Mediterranean, Middle Eastern, African and oh-yes traditional English eateries, with prices starting in the mid-range (£9 entrees) and going up.

For the second part of your really-big-date night, head to the theater (or theatre! or theatah!). Of the musicals currently in London, the three that might appeal most to **curve** readers are *Billy Elliot*, *Wicked*, and *Les Misérables*, each a fascinating blend of the personal and the political. *Billy Elliot* tells the story of a young boy from a working-class background who wants to be a ballet dancer, despite the attendant stereotypes and discouragement. *Wicked* is about much more than what happened in Oz before Dorothy's arrival: It's about language and labels, female friendship and transgression. It's also beautiful to watch,



Z Hotel courtyard and double room (right)



and unexpectedly hip and funny. Tickets at shops in or near Leicester Square offer half-price or discounted same-day tickets for most shows, most nights—get there early for the best seat selection and shop around—some places sell out before others.

Interspersed between restaurants are most of London's theatres and gay bars, including the only real lezzo stronghold, Candy Bar at 4 Carlisle Street. Lesbians in search of warm beer and cool girls should also venture into the forbidding G-A-Y bar on Old Compton Street, in a subterranean basement called Girls Go Down, but it's gloomy and thick with cruising men. But no matter—all over Soho, dykes and gay boys mingle amiably with the nonqueerish couples and everyone crowds into Molly Mogs for the cheerful, colorful drag and cabaret.

Z Hotel (remember, it's pronounced "zed" in England), an eclectic collection of repurposed townhouses, is slotted into the narrow street between Compton Street (London's version of Christopher or Castro Street) and the musical *Singin' in the Rain*. This prime location keeps you close to the Soho nightlife, and Z also keeps you close to your partner—a double room is not much bigger than the bed. But the fascinating

view out my window—where people strolled and talked day and night—made up for the lack of wriggle room.

GETTING POSH. Walking distance from Soho is the upscale, serene and expensive neighbourhood of St. James's, home to St. James's Palace, Green Park and some of the best (read: most expensive) shops in the UK. A 10-minute stroll from the Eye, The Strand, the Ritz (high tea is an institution, perhaps a cliché) and a zillion other things you want to see is the Cavendish, a warm and gracious old-style hotel that has been open in the same location (under different names) since the 18th century. Rooms aren't cheap, but the little luxuries make it worthwhile—rooms have a swish coffeemaker, and housekeepers will provide extra bedding, bath pillows and salts, special cookies and more.

The Cavendish is on the famous Jermyn Street (where Victorian men kept their mistresses), home to dangerous shopping, including Britain's oldest cheese shop, Paxton & Whitfield; this writer's favorite bootmaker, Russell & Bromley; and some of the best shirtmakers in the world. Butches of all shapes can get exquisite shirts and suits tailor-made—for a formidable price. Don't miss Fortnum & Mason, a stylish department store as good as Harrods and on a more human scale.

SAVING MONEY. Apart from buying an Oyster card for your Tube and bus transportation, there's little you can do to keep the pounds from pouring out of your purse. London is one of Europe's most expensive capitals, where a pint of beer or even a decent cappuccino will set you back about \$5. Rather than complain about the British economy or the weather, just decide that the rainy day you've been saving for has come at last. Buy tickets for *Singin' in the Rain*, be prepared to get wet and figure out how to keep your girlfriend warm. ■

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The Cavendish suite