THE VILLAGES OF LONDON

A PEEK INSIDE

BY CAROLYN O'NEIL | ILLUSTRATIONS BY LUCY YOUNG

London is a thriving hive for global business, government, education, entertainment, and tourism. But wander away from the urban throngs and major attractions—perhaps down a little lane on the other side of a tiny park—and you'll find the quiet side of London's quaint in-town neighborhoods. Whether you're a seasoned traveler or a first-time visitor to the British capital, choose to discover the lovely and lively villages of London. With their charming shops, gourmet markets, historic pubs, and exquisite gardens, these are the enviable areas Londoners call home.

From the double-decker buses scooting along Knightsbridge's busy shopping streets to the glittering crown jewels in the Tower of London and the Changing of the Guard parade at Buckingham Palace, the iconic sights of London attract millions of visitors. History buffs, theater fans, food lovers, fashion followers, antique collectors, art admirers, and royal watchers are all drawn to London for a jolly good time.

However, one of the strongest trends in travel skips the usual stops on the tourist map and seeks local character. Escaping the hubbub of central city hotels, many travelers prefer more intimate lodging near the everyday charm of corner pubs, quaint cafés, and locally owned shops.

London is happily ready to roll out the welcome mats in the character-filled neighborhoods that make up its exciting tapestry. Whether you choose your base of operations near a park to fit in a morning run or a few steps from a favorite museum, the friendly folks at small luxury hotels are poised to hand you an umbrella if it looks like rain, pour you a cup of tea, or stir up a handcrafted cocktail.

Here's a trip through a trio of very different villages of London, featuring the unique hotels of the Doyle Collection.

KENSINGTON: ROSES AND ROYALS

Designated the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, this is the home of Prince William and the Duchess of Cambridge, who live with their little royals in Kensington Palace on the edge of Kensington Gardens. The palace is open for public tours of its regal rooms, lovely sunken gardens, and a memorial playground built to honor Diana, the late Princess of Wales. Keep walking as you smell the roses and you'll enter Hyde Park with its horseback riding trails and boat rentals on the Serpentine, a forty-acre lake.

South Kensington is known for stately rows of white townhouses on the main thoroughfares and its hidden lanes that lead to wine bars, cute boutiques, and rose-scented gardens. The Doyle Collection's chic Kensington Hotel on Queen's Gate fits right in with the elegance of the area. The lobby drawing room, where you can settle into comfortable couches with a morning paper or afternoon tea, makes you feel as if you're living in an ultraluxurious private home. The contemporary yet cozy Town House restaurant is the heart of the hotel, serving from full English breakfasts to à la carte dinners featuring a delicious range of seasonal choices, including a superfoods salad with grilled organic salmon and a dry-aged beef fillet with peppercorn sauce. Need a pick-me-up? Don't miss the special menu of fresh smoothies and juices. Or maybe you'd rather just look for the "hidden" whiskey bar.

The spacious guest rooms at the Kensington are sunlit through tall Victorian-style windows by day and glistening crystal chandeliers by night. Footed tubs invite a relaxing soak after a busy day of museum hopping or serious shopping. On the edge of Kensington, the legendary London department stores, Harrods and Harvey Nichols, are in walking distance.

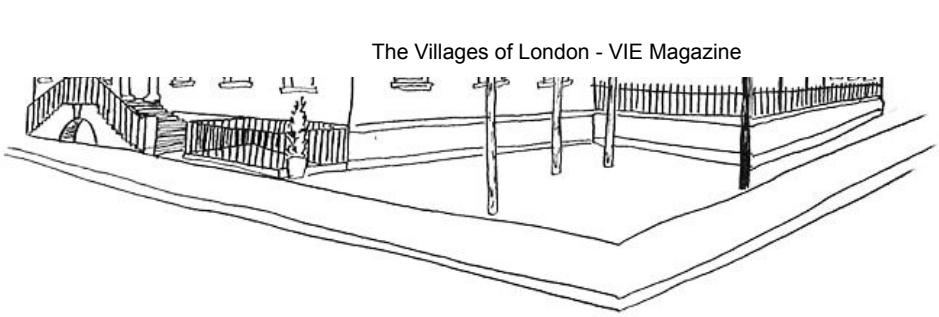
The Kensington's Town House is ideal for events, with three interconnected drawing rooms perfect for holding meetings, luncheons, dinner parties, wedding receptions, and more. Photos courtesy of Doyle Collection

OTHER KENSINGTON MUST-SEES

The Victoria and Albert Museum is world-renowned for its inspiring collections focusing on art and design. Free admission. Don't miss the sparkling exhibit of jewelry through the ages. VAM.ac.uk

The Natural History Museum is full of everything from butterflies to dinosaur bones. Free admission. You'll find mineralogy, entomology, and every "-ology" on display—but avoid the long lines on Sundays. NHM.ac.uk

The Royal Albert Hall glistens with a gold leaf interior and is considered one of the greatest concert venues in the world. Make sure to check the performance schedule and book ahead. RoyalAlbertHall.com



BLOOMSBURY: DICKENS AND DYNASTIES

Just north of the neon marquees of the noisy West End theatre district, the area called Bloomsbury quietly holds the title of London's literary village. Great writers who called Bloomsbury home include *Peter Pan* author J. M. Barrie, poet William Butler Yeats, novelist Charles Dickens, and writer Virginia Woolf, a member of the free-thinking Bloomsbury Set. Dickens fans can take a deeper dive by visiting the Charles Dickens Museum, the house where the prolific novelist penned *Oliver Twist*. All over London, circular blue plaques on the exteriors of buildings indicate where and when famous scientists, writers, politicians, and other notables once lived.

Bloomsbury is also home to the mind-blowingly expansive British Museum, established in 1753 as the world's first national public museum. It's filled with Egyptian mummies, Grecian marbles, and other priceless antiquities collected from across the globe, and visitors can choose tours that range from one to three hours and are designed to hit the highlights of human history.

The Dalloway Terrace at the Bloomsbury hotel is an elegant English garden named for Virginia Woolf's character Mrs. Dalloway and fittingly set in London's literary capital. Photo courtesy of Doyle Collection

Hotels can preserve history, too. The Doyle Collection's Bloomsbury Hotel on Great Russell Street blooms brightly after a wonderful renovation to its neo-Georgian building, originally constructed to house the Young Women's Christian Association. Queen Mary dedicated the cornerstone of the foundation in 1929. Today, guest rooms are newly appointed with 1930s-era glamour, and a plush lobby bar welcomes guests with craft cocktails and, of course, afternoon tea. Pre- or post-theater meals are terrific here, just steps away from smash hit stage performances at the Dominion Theatre.

MARYLEBONE: BUTTONS, BOWS, AND BAKER STREET

London's fashionable village of Marylebone is fun and friendly. Small specialty shops thrive here, including such go-to boutiques for buttons and bows as The Button Queen and VV Rouleaux. Fine leather goods from passport holders to billfolds are monogrammed to order at Aspinal of London.

There are two historic must-sees in Marylebone. The Wallace Collection in Hertford House has a dizzying array of privately collected paintings and porcelains and a goosebump-inducing walk through rooms of medieval arms and armor. Sherlock Holmes fans should march straight to 221-B Baker Street where the museum re-creates the fictional living quarters of Holmes and Dr. Watson.

Marylebone dates back to the days of dueling, but today it's more about dining at celebrity-filled hot spots such as the Chiltern Firehouse where there's heated competition to get a reservation. Are you ready for this? The menu's top sellers include Southern fried chicken and bacon cornbread.

A stylish breakfast or afternoon tea at 108 Pantry inside the Marylebone hotel is a must-do when staying in the charming Marylebone neighborhood. Photo courtesy of Doyle Collection

Other culinary meccas in the area include Paul Rothe & Son for café lunches and gourmet foods, as well as La Fromagerie. Located within walking distance to

just about everything is the Doyle Collection's Marylebone Hotel, with sleek modern rooms and the chic 108 Bar and popular 108 Brasserie. If you want to take your trip over the top, book a rooftop suite, which comes with a spacious deck—complete with outdoor fireplace—overlooking the rooftops of London. Call down to the bar to order a fine bottle of bubbly such as Nyetimber Blanc de Blancs, grown and bottled in Sussex, England. Toast to the Queen. She drinks it, too.

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Visit DoyleCollection.com (http://DoyleCollection.com) to see these and other magnificent hotels, and book your trip to explore London's villages.

Carolyn O'Neil is an Atlanta-based food and travel writer and a graduate of Florida State University. A special note for FSU supporters visiting London: the Florida State University London Study Centre is located on Great Russell Street in Bloomsbury and is a haven for future literary greats.

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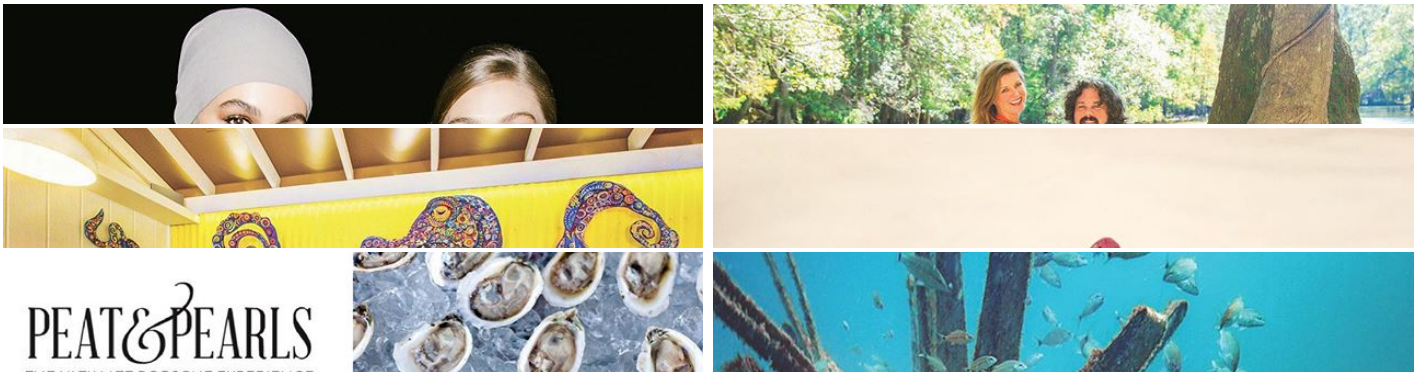

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