



**Span ballet:** London's skyline may be changing, but Tower Bridge stands steadfast.

48 HOURS

## London Blitz

It'll take Olympic stamina to experience all that the British capital has to offer. Have a go. | **By RACHEL HOWARD**

**L**ONDON'S landscape changes faster than pundits can come up with nicknames for the city's ever sprouting skyscrapers. Joining the Cheesegrater, the Gherkin, and Walkie Talkie, the **Shard** is the most conspicuous recent addition to the skyline. When it opens next year, Renzo Piano's 1,016-foot-tall triangular tower will contain restaurants, residences, and a Shangri-La hotel. Visitors can admire the views from the observatory on the 68th to 72nd floors.

These high-rise upstarts have dwarfed historic landmarks such as the **Monument**. But huff up the 311 steps inside this giant column, built to commemorate the Great Fire of 1666, and the vista from the old City of London to the new financial district of Canary Wharf still exhilarates. After a sensitive restoration, the Monument remains a testament to the British capital's capacity for reinvention.

**WHAT TO DO** The **Museum of London** houses the earliest known map of the city, dating from 1558. From suffrage banners to punk bondage gear, the collection reflects London's extraordinary variety.

The wide-ranging arts center at the **Barbican** celebrates its 30th birthday next year, with an all-star lineup featuring Cate Blanchett, Philip Glass, and Winton Marsalis. Sip a gin and tonic at the glamorous Barbican Lounge, with its terrace overlooking the medieval church of **St. Giles' Cripplegate**, where the poet John Milton is buried.

With five million visitors a year, the **Tate Modern** has transformed a derelict power station into a powerhouse of modern art. Its soaring industrial spaces hold crowd-pleasing works by the likes of Gerhard Richter and Tacita Dean. (The new wing under construction—an angular stack of perforated bricks—promises to be just as spectacular.) Like most of the capital's public museums, entrance to the permanent collection is free.

In fact, notoriously expensive London offers a wealth of pleasures that cost absolutely nothing. From Tate Modern, cross the Millennium Bridge to **St. Paul's**, which has scrubbed up nicely after a 15-year restoration. Every afternoon, a male choir fills the cathedral with heavenly music during choral evensong. Alternatively, stroll along the **South Bank** to the

**Mediatheque** and delve into the British Film Institute's archives, catch live jazz and upbeat world music in the foyer of the **National Theatre**, or track down lost poems at the **Poetry Library**.

Savvy Londoners avoid the exorbitant Underground (and extortionate black cabs) by hopping on a "**Boris Bike**." Nicknamed after London's blustering mayor, Boris Johnson, these rentable bicycles are stationed across central London. There's a one-pound (\$1.61) 24-hour access fee, but 30-minute rides are free.

For sightseeing without breaking a sweat, take a riverboat down the Thames. A flotilla of a thousand vessels decked in Union Jacks will commemorate the Queen's Diamond Jubilee next June. This floating parade won't make it as far as Greenwich, but you should. During the 2012 Olympics, **Greenwich Park** will be closed to the public for the equestrian and pentathlon events. So go leap across the prime meridian line while you can.

**WHERE TO EAT** Mark Hix championed seasonal British ingredients, such as Dorset crab and gooseberry, long before it was fashionable. In the basement at **Hix**, one of his four restaurants, Soho bohemians knock back Hix Fixes (Morello cherries in Somerset eau-de-vie topped with sparkling wine) at the zinc bar. But Hix achieves the smoothest service at the wood-paneled Hix at the Albemarle in **Brown's Hotel**, one of London's oldest hotels. The daily changing set lunch is a good value at 25 pounds (\$40) for two courses, 30 pounds (\$48) for three. Off



Blooms at Borough Market.



Soho's Secret Tea Room serves a vintage tea (above); the restaurant at St. Pancras hotel (right) tweaks old English recipes.



duty, Hix eats at **Cay Tre Soho** and its sister restaurant **Viet Grill**, on Kingsland Road, a strip of inexpensive Vietnamese canteens. “Soho is an eclectic melting pot of everything London has to offer,” says Hix. “I love to be surprised, and London is a great place for that. Nip into Chinatown at two o’clock in the morning and let your nose guide you.”

Or sniff out **Soho's Secret Tea Room** in Clerkenwell, where vintage-clad glamour-pusses serve scones while swing plays on the soundtrack. The **French House** in Soho, a bar much loved by artists and actors, has a “no music, no machines, no mobile phones” policy. Linger here while you wait for a table upstairs at **Polpetto**. Small plates like soft-shell crab in Parmesan batter make the wait worthwhile. Go for lunch or go early, as they don’t take reservations in the evenings. The same rule applies to **Morito** in Islington, where the chef whips up tapas such as *jamón* and chickpea croquettes. Along the same street, on pedestrian-only **Exmouth Market**, locals graze on Bangladeshi samosas and

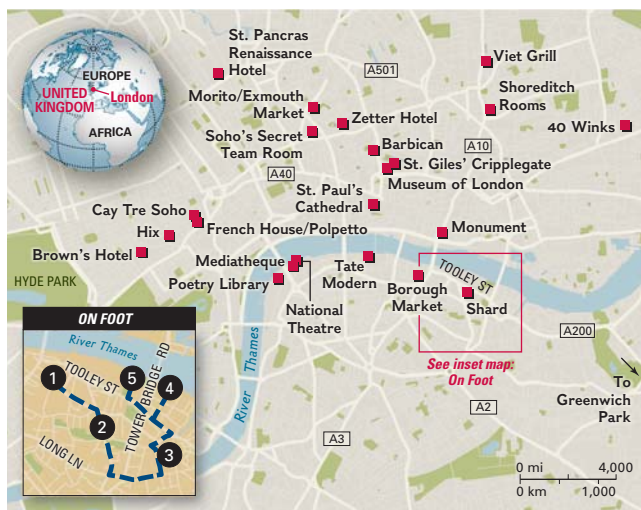
fajita burritos from the food stalls that start sizzling every weekday around noon.

To avoid the Saturday crush at **Borough Market**, visit on Thursday or Friday to sample pork pies and stilton.

**WHERE TO STAY** London has seen a flurry of five-star openings in the run-up to the Olympics. The splendid **St. Pancras Renaissance** (from \$445), in a restored High Victorian Gothic landmark, epitomized the golden age of rail travel when it opened in 1873. Original features abound in the public areas: gold-leaf ceilings, granite columns, and vaulted arches.

Affordable lodgings are elusive in London, but townhouse hotels offer a cozy alternative to corporate chains. Curiosities cram the **Zetter Hotel** (from \$331): Old-time radios adorn antique dresses; headboards are salvaged from fairground carousels. Free bicycles stand ready for exploring Clerkenwell’s Dickensian back streets. In genteel South Kensington, **Number 16** (from \$210) has colorful, clashing interiors and serves afternoon

tea in a tucked-away garden. Attached to a hip members’ club, **Shoreditch Rooms** (from \$137) is surprisingly unpretentious. But when it comes to bijou lodgings in offbeat neighborhoods, **40 Winks** (from \$153) wins hands down. You’ll have to fight for a reservation at interior designer David Carter’s eclectically furnished two-room home in gritty Stepney Green. ■



[ ON FOOT ]

## BRILLIANT IN BERMONDSEY

*This neighborhood walk uncovers coolest Britannia.*

The developers of the Shard have rebranded this neighborhood London Bridge Quarter, but it will always be Bermondsey to Londoners. This post-industrial district has come a long way since Charles Dickens set *Oliver Twist* in its Victorian slums.

### 1 OLD OPERATING THEATRE >

Britain’s oldest surgery displays instruments for cupping, bleeding, and trepanning, a practice of perforating the skull to “alleviate pain.” Built in the days before anesthetics, its location in the garret helped muffle patients’ screams.

**2 BERMONDSEY STREET >** Once known as London’s Larder because of the density of food processing factories, this now vibrant boutique-lined street is protected by law for its historical



interest. The Fashion and Textile Museum sits at one end of the street, Bermondsey Square Antiques Market (Friday mornings only) at the other.

### 3 MALTBY STREET MARKET >

Serious foodies head to this cluster of Saturday-only stores under the railway arches to sample pale ale at the Kernel Brewery, obscure cheeses at Neals Yard Dairy, and chemical-free Gergovie Wines paired with seasonally changing nibbles at 40 Maltby Street.

**4 DESIGN MUSEUM >** This riverside shrine to fashion, furniture, and graphic design also boasts an arty gift shop for quirky souvenirs, such as embroidered cloud brooches to remind you of the London weather.

**5 CITY HALL >** Dubbed the “Glass Gonad” by Mayor Boris Johnson, this bulbous building contains the London Photomat, a collage of hundreds of aerial images of London printed onto the ground floor. The project took three years to complete, but now you can walk all over the city in seconds.