

the **Improper** *Bostonian*

TRAVEL

London Calling

Take a tour of the famed city's neighborhoods

By Jonathan Soroff | April 6, 2018



To the unfamiliar, London can feel overwhelming—a monolithic and somewhat monotonous metropolis of seemingly endless white Georgian squares, rows of mews houses and a maze of streets that seems to follow no discernible pattern.

Like all major cities, though, it's better understood as a vast collection of neighborhoods, and one way to experience them is by staying at the three London properties owned by the Doyle Collection—a Dublin-based chain of luxury boutique hotels.



Photo Credit: Simon Brown

For the museum buff, the Kensington Hotel is an ideal base, housed inside one of the aforementioned ubiquitous white Georgian mansions. It's opulent yet comfortable, like staying as a guest in the home of some chic, young, unimaginably rich couple. The rooms are large and lavishly appointed with mohair-upholstered furniture and deep claw-footed tubs that you have to hold onto the sides of to avoid drowning, and the bar is a superb place to hide from inclement weather.

Just off the Old Brompton Road in South Kensington, it's within comfortable walking distance of Exhibition Road, where you'll find the Victoria and Albert Museum and its hodgepodge of collections, the Natural History Museum—which houses Charles Darwin's life work—and the wonderfully interactive Science Museum. The Royal Geographical Society, Kensington Palace and the Design Museum are also nearby, and just a short tube ride away are the shopping meccas of Knightsbridge—Harvey Nichols, Harrod's and Sloane Street.



While the Doyle Collection delivers luxe experiences across the board, it's surprising that the properties all have the same designer: a daughter of the company's founder who is enigmatically referred to as Mrs. Gallagher. The vibe couldn't be more different between the Kensington and the Marylebone, located in the heart of the W1 postcode neighborhood. Housed in a late-20th-century building, it has a much more contemporary feel, with strong art deco elements, sleek and expansive common areas and a folding wet bar straight out of a James Bond movie. The superb 108 Brasserie is a popular neighborhood hangout that makes its own gin, while the penthouse suites boast something virtually unheard of in London hotel rooms: large outdoor entertaining spaces.

The hotel is spitting distance from the boutiques and galleries of Mayfair and the swarming retail scene of Oxford Street, where Mr. Selfridge fans can get lost in the vastness of his eponymous department store. Rambling through the quieter and less commercial shops on or near Marylebone High Street rewards visitors with out-of-the-way cafes, chic wine bars, specialty shops and stores selling the work of emerging designers. One of London's most vastly overlooked and underrated museums, the Wallace Collection is a mere 4-minute walk, while the decidedly kitschier but still entertaining Madame Tussauds and Sherlock Holmes Museums are less than 15 minutes by foot.

More high-minded literary pilgrims will want to pay homage to Virginia Woolf and the Bloomsbury Set with a stay at the Doyle's third London property. The Bloomsbury is the most architecturally important of the three, built into the landmark 1928 YWCA building designed by Britain's leading early-20th-century architect, Sir Edwin Lutyens. Having recently undergone a multimillion dollar facelift, the building on Great Russell Street is also the most charming and whimsical of the set. The Dalloway Terrace, with its seasonal tea service, is a welcome riot of color, while the Club Bar is a sophisticated, subterranean pub, and the cozy Living Room features a Lutyens-designed fireplace, important portraits of Woolf and her circle and wallpaper that beautifully recalls the Arts and Crafts movement. However, the undeniable design highlight is the Coral Room, a high-gloss, high-glamour, two-story lounge with walls painted a delicately precise shade somewhere between orange and pink. A collaboration with the white-hot Martin Brudnizki Design Studio, the stunningly dramatic room has custom Murano chandeliers and original artwork by English illustrator Luke Edward Hall, and it's worth stopping by for a drink, regardless of where you're staying.

The Bloomsbury neighborhood is characterized by large garden squares surrounded by elegant homes, treasures like the British Museum—which, contrary to whatever “A Foggy Day” says, has never lost its charm—and points of interest to history buffs, such as the homes of Charles Dickens and Benjamin Disraeli. It's also incredibly easy to escape to Soho and the West End—ideal for theater lovers who want to be somewhat removed from the fray.

The 18th-century literary giant Samuel Johnson was wrong in saying, “When a man is tired of London, he is tired of life.” London can be exhausting, even when you skip the more touristy spots like Buckingham Palace, Whitehall and the Tower of London. But when you explore it one neighborhood at a time, it reveals itself as the collection of unique villages it grew out of—and as the unequalled world capital that it is. ♦

The Kensington Hotel, the Marylebone and the Bloomsbury, doylecollection.com

Traveler's Check

– While food and shopping can be pricey, London's a culture glutton's dream. Entrance to most major museums is free, and tickets to most plays in the West End, as well as a variety of other performances, are a fraction of the cost of Broadway or even Boston.