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WESTMINSTER - EXPLORING THE ROYAL 'HOOD

MOST Australians who visit London head for Westminster but few venture beyond the main sights of Buckingham Palace, Big Ben, Whitehall, Westminster Abbey and the royal parks, and neither do most other nationalities. On a recent visit to London I was walking to the Tate Britain from the Houses of Parliament on a Sunday morning, and once I passed Lambeth Bridge I was the only person in sight even though the crowd surrounding Westminster Abbey seemed to suggest that another Royal wedding was in progress.

You won't find too much of a crowd at Berry Bros & Rudd, either. The premises of the world's most famous wine merchants at 3, St James's St look much as they did when Widow Bourne opened the doors in 1698. The Fine Wine Reserves Room is a wine lover's wet dream, filled with more than 20,000

house was the first de facto American Embassy in London and Franklin lived there for 16 years.

As you would expect, Westminster is also awash with historic blue plaques attached to houses and hotels, indicating that a famous person once lived or worked there. Close to 300 of these famous Doulton-made ceramic discs are scattered through the area, honouring famous figures as disparate as Lawrence of Arabia, Handel, Karl Marx, Sir Isaac Newton and Emperor Napoleon III (for a full rundown go to www.english-heritage.co.uk). London Walks (www.walks.com) offers some of the best itineraries that feature Westminster as a hub. If you are travelling with the family, the choice that will get you the most brownie points is Harry Potter on Location in Londontown which sets off every Saturday afternoon from Westminster tube station.

notorious prisons, the striking 19th century Byzantine structure looks as if it would be more at home in Italy. The 83m-high bell tower isn't only beautiful to look at; it also offers one of the most panoramic views of London from Crystal Palace to Buckingham Palace on a clear day.

There seems to be a branch of Pret a Manger, the UK's ubiquitous sandwich chain, on every prominent street corner in Westminster and quick-bite tourist restaurants are similarly plentiful. But there are several restaurants worth a foodie's close attention when you feel like a splurge. Quilon is a Michelin-starred Indian restaurant in toney Buckingham Gate. The decor may be Western but the three-course set lunch for \$33.50 is a steal for south Indian delicacies such as dakshini chicken and Goan-style prawns. The Cinnamon Club, housed in the National Trust-listed Victorian splendour of the old Westminster Library, beats its Indian rival hands-down for atmosphere, though, and its hard to go past such interesting combos as rabbit tikka with mustard and garlic chutney and roast saddle of venison with fenugreek and onion sauce. The Goring, which shot to global fame as the hotel where Kate Middleton spent her last night as a single woman, considers itself to be a bastion of modern English cooking from the expertly made steak and kidney pudding to fresh Cornish sardines. Michel Roux Junior, son of the Michelin star-studded chef of the same name, has extended the family empire at Roux at Parliament Square, housed in another historic pile designed by Alfred Waterhouse, architect of London's Natural History Museum. The menu is very French, with starters and mains such as foie gras parfait with orange puree and cassoulet of organic cod cheeks, chorizo and black beans.

Caxton Hall, close to St James tube station, was the main celebrity-wedding

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of the planet's most revered bottlings. It's no hype, either, when BBR claim that its Whiskies and Fine Spirits Room boasts one of the finest range of spirits in London. No wonder the Royals have shopped here for three centuries.

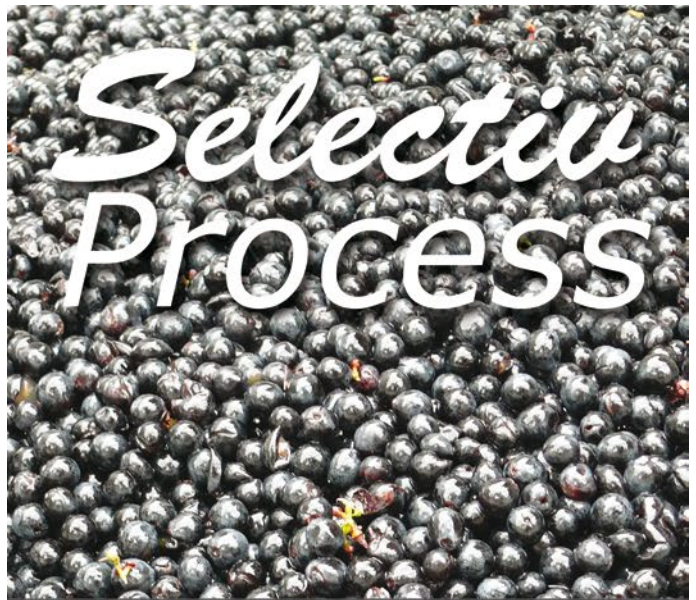
If you're strolling up nearby Pall Mall to Trafalgar Square, it's a good idea to know the location of the Benjamin Franklin House (www.benjaminfranklinhouse.org), in case you're bailed up for directions by an American tourist. It's also a smart decision to go there yourself. Located on nearby Craven St, the "world's only remaining Benjamin Franklin home" was opened to the public seven years ago and remains a bit of a hidden gem. The circa 1730 Georgian

As well as the usual suspect sites such as Big Ben and 10 Downing St, you'll also be shown the building that stood in for the Ministry of Magic and the flight path of the Death-Eaters from *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*. Other walks that include Westminster as a backdrop are the Royal Wedding and Old Westminster Walks. The last one is a real eye-opener into a past when the area was more famous for slums and crime and the boys at the Bluecoat School had to wear yellow socks to keep the rats in the classroom at bay.

Everyone knows Westminster Abbey but it's only a short 10-minute walk up Victoria St to Westminster Cathedral, the Mother Church of British Catholicism. Built on the site of one of Westminster's once

venue in London throughout the 1960s and '70s. Ringo Starr, Orson Welles, Joan Collins, Elizabeth Taylor, Peter Sellers and Yehudi Menuhin are just some of the famous names who tied the knot in this grand neo-Gothic building redeveloped as luxury apartments and offices in 2006. The adjacent St Ermin's Hotel (www.sterminshotel.co.uk) has also been given a new lease of life and re-opened two years ago following a \$46 million renovation. Originally built as St Ermin's Mansions in 1889, the imposing red-hued building with its Art Nouveau flourishes and rococco-style plasterwork was turned into a hotel only a decade later. During WWII it served as an espionage hub with Churchill's Special Operations (SOE) occupying the fifth floor and MI5 working on the floor below. The hotel's famous bar, with its still operational Division Bell, has long been a popular political watering hole for MPs and peers because it's only a five-minute dash up the road to the Houses of Parliament.

The latest revamp of the heritage-listed hotel has made the St Ermins more attractive for those looking for style and pampering, rather than subterfuge and politics. Fifty-six new rooms have been added after the owners bought the adjoining office blocks to restore the horseshoe-shaped of the original mansion block. The sense of drama created by walking up the long walkway is more than matched by the sumptuous lobby and the library where guests can enjoy pre-dinner drinks. The Caxton Terrace also offers afternoon tea, craft beers from Meantime, the award-winning Greenwich-based micro-brewery, and an impressive line-up of malt and blended whiskies. For lunch and dinner, the Caxton Grill mainly follows the field-to-table philosophy of menu ingredients being sourced from within a 90km radius. Middle White pork belly with roasted scallops and baby onions anyone? 



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