



The Thames they are a changin'

MARK BURROW EXPLORES LONDON BY SPEED BOAT, USING MARRIOTT'S FIVE-STAR COUNTY HALL HOTEL AS A BASE...

AS the hull of our inflatable speedboat bounced over the wake of a small cruiser near Tower Bridge it struck me that, having only visited the capital a handful of times, I'd been missing out.

From roofless buses and over-priced Black cabs, to umbrella-wielding tour guides, there are a great many ways to see London. But none of these gets the blood pumping and your hair standing on-end in quite the same way as a blast down the Thames on a RIB boat.

The main reason for neglecting my cultural knowledge of London and its inhabitants was that listening to a badly scripted commentary atop a roofless double-decker just isn't much fun.

I do want to know more about how our nation's key city came to take its current shape and what fates befell the monarchs of yesteryear, but somehow, it was made all the more enjoyable watching a clearly hungover guide balance on the front of our speedboat and deftly combine a succinct and entertaining history lesson with the more important task of keeping last night's kebabs down.

London RIB Voyages run trips from the jetty underneath the London Eye. You can choose from two trips, one 50 minutes (£26 for adults, £16 for children) which runs from Westminster down to Tower Bridge and takes in all the history you can absorb on either bank; and the 90-minute Thames Barrier Special (£39 and £24) which goes further down the river. Both are a great way of picking up snippets of history and enjoying an exhilarating race down the river. Hardly, I could see the RIB jetty from my hotel window, as well as the Eye itself and across the water, the majestic vista of Big Ben and the Houses of Parliament. Marriott's five-star County Hall Hotel, my

base for the weekend, occupies the former home of the Greater London Council, and is an imposing feature on the Westminster skyline. But it's what's on the inside that counts and whilst the labyrinthine, timber-paneled corridors of the hotel itself can't compete with the sleek modernity of the city's newer, purpose-built establishments, it's got that accepted level of Marriott quality which guarantees a decent night's kip anywhere in the world. The room itself was as spacious and well equipped as you'd expect but it was the Sunday morning view of the sunshine bouncing off the Thames and over towards the Houses of Parliament which gave a real feel of being in London. I can imagine our friends from across the pond being particularly impressed, not least by the quartet of stereoscopes (belonging to the Star Wars exhibition in the County Hall building) acting as sentries across the hotel's riverside frontage.

Whilst you're in the vicinity, the London Eye is definitely worth a whirl and being tased so close it meant I could keep an eye on the queue and dart straight out as soon as the monstrous attraction began to revolve. Leave it until late morning and the queue seems to have a minimum wait of half an hour. The view from its highest point is wasted on a cloudy day but with clear skies, it's hard to believe how far you can actually see.

There's a lot to be said for staying at this end of the city, with these and numerous other attractions within comfortable strolling distance as well as a smattering of decent bars and restaurants close by. On nearby Whitehall, we were lucky enough to stumble across a little pub-come-restaurant called Walkers. It's a real TARDIS of a place, but well worth discovering, particularly the good old-fashioned English fish and chips!



TRAVEL FACTS:

- London RIB Voyages: For enquiries call 020 7926 2350 or 020 7401 8834 or email bookings@londonribvoyages.com or visit www.londonribvoyages.com
- For more information about the London Eye, visit www.londoneye.com
- You can find out more about Marriott's London hotels including County Hall, by visiting www.marriott.co.uk