

Secret West End architecture

Start Oxford Circus Tube
Finish Bond Street
Duration 90 minutes

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The **Liberty of London building (1)** (completed in 1924) is really two buildings, the stone building and the timber one. The latter is redolent of the Tudor style, with wood taken from redundant men-of-war ships. Look up at the stone building on Regent Street: the frieze is one of London's sculptural marvels. Notice that there are three figures above it, who appear to be leaning over the balcony and looking down.

Linking the stone and wooden buildings is a bridge. When you cross, it is like entering a different world, with an opposing style of architecture – one is modern and airy, the other like an oriental bazaar. The bridge also has a little-seen feature, a mechanical astronomical clock of St George and the Dragon.

Head to **Regent Street (2)**. In the 1820s, the Prince Regent was acting king because George III was confined to Windsor with what we now think was porphyria. The Regent was an extravagant man who loved grand buildings. He lived in Carlton House – where Carlton House Terrace now stands on the Mall – and planned to build another palace in the countryside that is now Regent's Park. He commissioned John Nash to design a road to link the palaces. The way in which Regent Street heads eastwards, round Piccadilly Circus, and then curves north, is considered a brilliant piece of town planning. There were many landmark shops on the street, which is carefully managed by the Crown Estate, including Hamleys (Nos 188-196). The money earned from the land pays for the Civil List. The Apple store (No 235) has beautiful restored Salviati mosaics – the building was previously the Salviati London HQ.

After the Great Fire, when the West End started to grow, aristocrats started to rent out land, developing the leasehold/freehold system. Out of this grew the architectural feature of the London square, originally the front garden of a rich man's house. **Hanover Square (3)** is an example. Here also is St George's (consecrated in 1725). In the mid-1700s, this was the fashionable church, and society would go to Sunday service in their finery to see and be seen. Handel had his own pew and played the organ there.

Handel lived at **25 Brook Street (4)** for most of his time in London in an eighteenth-century house (the



ROB GREIG; SCOTT WISHART; ANDREW BRACKENBURY



shop appeared in 1905). Jimi Hendrix lived next door for a short time in the 1960s. If you go down the adjacent alleyway, you'll see a fine example of the cobbled mews that used to be behind every house in London. These were originally where gentlemen kept their hunting birds, and later became stables.

North of Hanover Square, **Oxford Street (5)** was the last journey for some people, as it was the route from Newgate Prison to the Tyburn gallows at Marble Arch. At the end is the John Lewis building. It is post World War II – a very clean-lined, modern store – and has a sculpture by Barbara Hepworth on one side. Further up the road we can see the other extreme, the building with the great colonnades – Selfridges, which opened 100 years ago.

Blue Badge guide David Thompson (interviewed by Peter Watts) David is hosting a walk to mark the 1,415 collective milestone birthday years being celebrated by key West End names this year (including Selfridges, 100; Hamleys, 250; Oxford St Christmas Lights, 50). David's free walks run for the next two weeks from 11am – book at www.westendlondon.com/walks.

Places to saunter

You don't always want a set route – here are a few choice London destinations for getting lost in the sunshine...

Alexandra Park

The 196 acres around Alexandra Palace is a great place for a morning wander. The Grade II-listed palace itself was built in 1873, as north London's answer to the Crystal Palace. Now used as an exhibition space, you're likely to stumble across a steam engine convention or a celebration of Turkish culture (complete with kebab stall). Down the bottom of the hill you'll find plentiful kite-flyers and dog-walkers. *Alexandra Palace rail.*

Marylebone

The High Street may have a slightly manufactured air about it (with posh butchers, bakers and delis aplenty), but the streets round about are wonderful to explore. Look out for the old fire station on Chiltern Street, St James church on George Street and the former Central Institute for Swedish Gymnastics (we'll let you find that one). *Marylebone rail or Baker Street tube.*

Notting Hill

It might not boast much in the way of greenery, but there's plenty to see, hear and taste on a tour of this patch of west London. The shops and stalls around Portobello Road are always worth a browse, and there are refreshments on offer to suit every taste – from tatty boozers to swish bars, and from elegant restaurants to builders' caffs. *Ladbroke Grove tube.*



The City

Head into the financial heart of the capital on a weekend and you'll find a deserted world where fascinating historical architecture nudges up against the modern metal and glass. There are ancient churches and synagogues, hidden parks, remnants of the old London Wall and the imposing stone architecture of old financial institutions that have probably seen happier economic times. *Moorgate tube.*

South London Commons

On a baking hot day, enjoy a stroll between Wandsworth and Clapham Commons – taking in the ponds (Long, Eagle, Mount and Cock), Battersea Woods, the bandstand and probably an alfresco pint outside the packed and cavernous Windmill pub. *Wandsworth rail or Clapham South tube.* For even more walking routes around London, go to www.timeout.com/walks.

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