

WEST END WALK

*From Leicester Square to
Piccadilly Circus*

The West End, the area just west of the original walled City of London, is London's liveliest neighborhood. It's easy to get caught up in fantasies of jolly olde England, but the West End is where you'll feel the pulse of the living, breathing London of today. Theaters, pubs, restaurants, bookstores, ethnic food, markets, and boutiques attract rock stars, punks, tourists, and ladies and gentlemen stepping from black cabs for a night on the town.

Most of this book's walks and tours focus on history, art, and museums. But this walk is about appreciating the London lifestyle: the entertainment energy at Leicester Square; the thriving popular hum of Covent Garden; the rock-and-roll history of Denmark Street; the bohemian, creative, hedonistic groove of Soho; and the bustling neon hub of Piccadilly Circus. Use the walk to get the lay of the land, then go explore—especially in the evening, when the neon glitters and London sparkles.

Orientation

Length of This Walk: Allow two hours to lace together these highlights.

When to Go: Take your pick—sightseeing by day, or nightlife after dark. Early evenings are ideal, since most pubs and squares are carbonated with locals enjoying a post-work pint. After that, join the bustle of people who should probably be grabbing a cab home.

Getting There: Take the Tube to the Leicester Square stop, which is a block from the square itself.

Finding Your Way: A more detailed map than the one provided here may help you find your way more quickly through the maze of irregular streets.

The Walk Begins

• Start at Leicester Square. Stand at the top of the square and take in the scene.

1 Leicester Square

Leicester (LESS-ter) Square is a small park surrounded by glitzy cinema houses. This space was modernized and spiffed up in anticipation of the 2012 Olympics crowds. It sits smack in the middle of the theater district—ground zero for London’s enticing offerings of flashy musicals, intimate plays starring big-name actors, and much more (for details, see the Entertainment in London chapter). Here, at the entertainment center of London, a statue of Shakespeare looks out, as if pondering the quote chiseled into his pedestal: “There is no darkness but ignorance.”

The square’s **movie theaters**—the Odeon (Britain’s largest cinema), Empire, and Vue—are famous for hosting red-carpet movie premieres. When Bradley Cooper, Benedict Cumberbatch, Keira Knightley, or Jennifer Lawrence needs a publicity splash, it’ll likely be here. (Search online for “London film premieres” to find upcoming events.) On any given night, this entire area is a mosh-pit of clubs and partying teens in town from the suburbs.

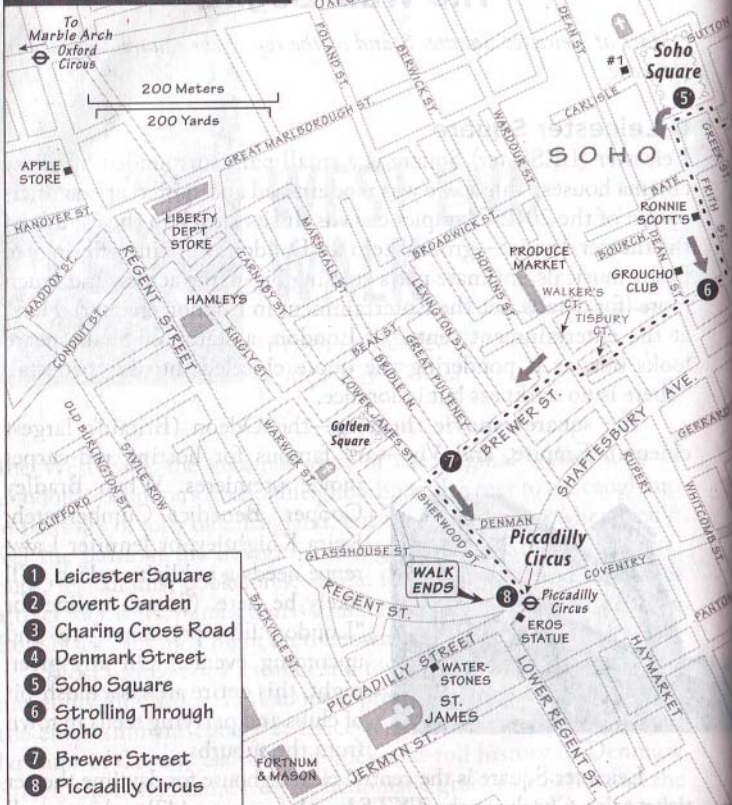


Leicester Square is the central clearinghouse for daytime theater ticket sales. Check out the **TKTS booth** (see page 447) and ignore all the other establishments that bill themselves as “half-price” (they’re just normal booking agencies). It’s often cheaper still to buy tickets directly from one of the theaters we’ll pass on this walk.

Global Studios, former home of **Capital Radio London** (next to the Odeon), played a role in rock-and-roll history. Back in the 1960s, the British Invasion was in full swing—Beatles, Rolling Stones, The Who—but Brits couldn’t hear much of it. The BBC was the only radio station in town, and it was mostly talk and Bach, with only a smattering of pop. Rock fans had to resort to “pirate” radio stations, beamed from Luxembourg or from ships at sea. Capital Radio was one of the first commercial stations allowed to play rock and roll—and that was in 1973! Ironically, within a few years, Capital had



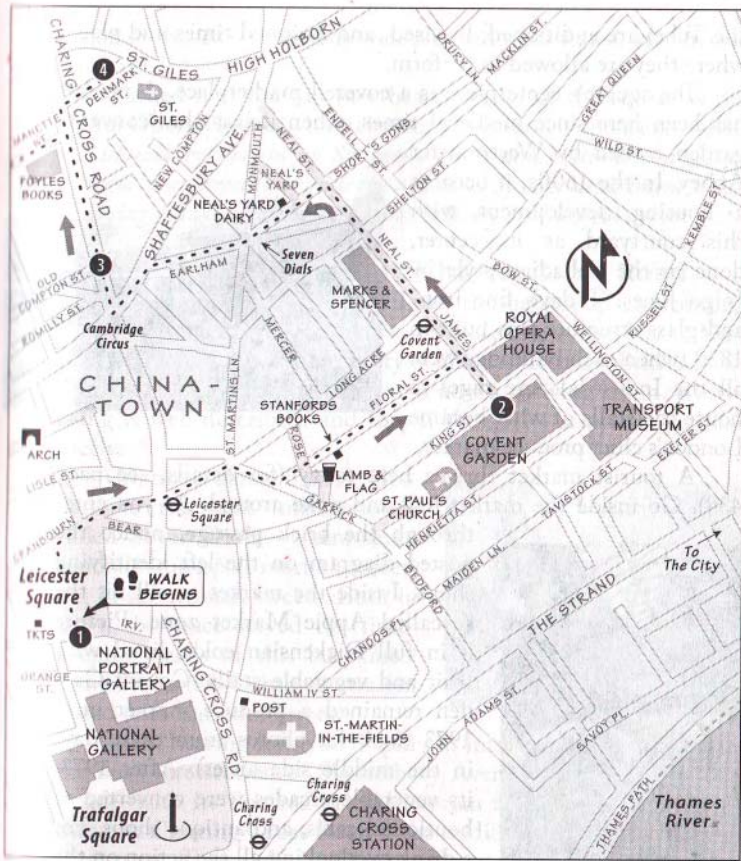
West End Walk



itself become mainstream. (The Clash struck back with their song "Capital Radio," which starts, "Yes, it's time for the Dr. Goebbels Show...") Today, Capital is owned by Global (a British radio conglomerate) and FM 95.8 carries on as a major top-40 broadcasting power.

• Exit Leicester Square from its top corner, heading east (past the Vue cinema) on Cranbourn Street. Cross Charing Cross Road and continue along Cranbourn to the six-way intersection.

Pause here to notice two things: traffic and chain outlets. London's "Congestion Zone" pricing fights downtown traffic by charging regular vehicles big bucks to enter the center. Sure there's still lots of traffic, but it could be far worse. The traffic you do see is limited to residents, taxis, service vehicles, city buses...and those willing to pay that fee to drive here. Also, take a moment to survey the various eateries. London keeps countless restaurants busy, and the vast majority are chains. Most places that look like one-offs are just chain outlets dressed up to look like one-offs. In our globalized, corporate



world, the economy of scale is hard to compete with, and London's food scene (like its hotel scene) is brutal on the mom-and-pop shop. If you don't factor in the intangible social issues, they have simply a better economic value.

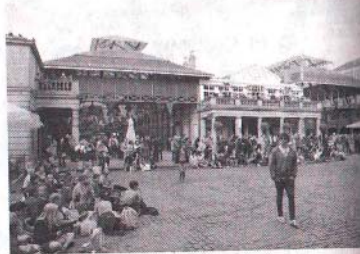
• Now, angle right onto Garrick Street. Shortly afterward, turn left onto calm, brick-lined Floral Street. Soon you'll see (on the left) the back door of Stanfords, an excellent travel book and map shop—pop in (see page 19). A few steps farther, across the street and down the tiny lane called Lazenby Court, is the convivial old Lamb & Flag pub. Farther along Floral Street, you'll be immersed in a scintillating array of fashion boutiques. When Floral Street opens onto traffic-free James Street, turn right and head for...

② Covent Garden

Covent Garden (only tourists pluralize the name) is a large square teeming with people and street performers—jugglers, sword swallowers, and guitar players. London's buskers (including those in

the Tube) are auditioned, licensed, and assigned times and places where they are allowed to perform.

The square's centerpiece is a covered marketplace. A market has been here since medieval times, when it was the "convent" garden owned by Westminster Abbey. In the 1600s, it became a housing development with this courtyard as its center, done in the Palladian style by Inigo Jones. Today's fine iron-and-glass structure was built in 1830 (when such buildings were all the Industrial Age rage) to house the stalls of what became London's chief produce market.



A tourist market thrives here today (for details, see page 438). Go inside the market hall and poke around. As you enter through the brick passage, notice the posted diagram on the left identifying shops. Inside the market, you'll hit the so-called Apple Market zone. Picture it in full Dickensian color, lined with fruit and vegetable stalls. Covent Garden remained a produce market until 1973 (look for photos from these days in the middle side aisles). After 1973, its venerable arcades were converted to boutiques, cafés, and antique shops. For a drink overlooking all the action on the square below, The Punch & Judy pub has a view terrace on the rooftop.



Back outside, across from the west end of the market hall, stands **St. Paul's Church** (not the famous cathedral), with its Greek temple-like facade and blue clock face (irregular hours, pay WCs just to the left). Known as the Actors' Church, it's long been a favorite of nervous performers praying for success. To go inside, pass through one of the gates on either side of the facade, and find the entrance around back. If the gates are closed, you can duck down the streets on either side of the church and look for the passage leading to the tranquil churchyard—a nice escape from the busker bustle on Covent Garden. Inside, the walls are lined with memorials to theater folk, some of whom (Chaplin, Karloff) you might recognize.

At the bottom (southeast) corner of the square is the **London Transport Museum**, which gives a well-presented look at the evo-

lution of this city's famously well-planned mass transit system (see page 54).

Tucked into the top (northeast) corner of the square is the **Royal Opera House**, which showcases top-notch opera and ballet.

• *Backtrack two blocks up St. James Street and continue straight up narrow Neal Street (alongside the Marks & Spencer department store), browsing your way northwest along the lively and colorful streets.*

3 From Covent Garden to Charing Cross Road

Two blocks up Neal Street, you'll pass through an up-and-coming shopping zone. Turn left on Short's Gardens, where Neal's Yard Dairy (at #17) sells a wide variety of cheeses from the British Isles. This is the original shop of what is now a thriving chain. Everything is well-described, and they'll slice off a sample if you ask nicely.

Continue along Short's Gardens to the next intersection—called **Seven Dials**—where seven sundials atop a pole mark the meeting of seven small streets. Built in 1694, this once served the time-keeping needs of this busy merchants' quarter. Continue straight ahead onto Earlham Street.



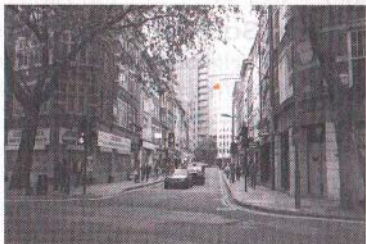
Then, bearing left, you'll spill out into **Cambridge Circus**—the busy intersection of Shaftesbury Avenue and Charing Cross Road—with its fine red-brick Victorian architecture and classic theaters. **Charing Cross Road** is the traditional home of London's bookstores. Turn right up Charing Cross and walk two blocks to reach one of the biggest, **Foyles Books**, which puts on free events several nights a week—from book signings to jazz in their gallery (usually around 18:00, bookstore is on left at 107 Charing Cross Road, café and WCs, www.foyles.co.uk).

• *A few steps up from Foyles, turn right onto...*

4 Denmark Street

This seemingly nondescript little street is a musician's mecca. In the 1920s, it was known as "Britain's Tin Pan Alley"—the center of the UK's music-publishing industry, when songwriters here cranked out popular tunes printed as sheet music.

Later, in the 1960s, Denmark Street was ground



zero for rock and roll's British Invasion, which brought so much great pop music to the US. Regent Sound Studio (at #4, half a block down on the right, now a guitar store with a similar name) was a low-budget recording studio. It was here in 1964 that the Rolling Stones recorded the song that raised them from obscurity, "Not Fade Away." Other acts that recorded on Denmark Street include The Who ("Happy Jack"), The Kinks (who wrote a song called "Denmark Street"), the Beatles ("Fixing a Hole"), David Bowie, and Black Sabbath (who made their first two records here—including the track "Iron Man"). Today, Regent is a music store, and the former studio's walls are lined with a wonderland of guitars.



The storefront at #20 (on the left, now Wunjo Guitars) was formerly a music publishing house that employed a lowly office boy named Reginald Dwight. In 1969, on the building's rooftop, he wrote "Your Song" and went on to become famous as Sir Elton John. In the 1970s, the Sex Pistols lived in apartments above #6. The 12 Bar Café at #25, on the left (now closed), helped launch the careers of more recent acts: Damien Rice, KT Tunstall, Jeff Buckley, and Keane.

Today, Denmark Street offers one-stop shopping for the modern musician. Without leaving this short street, you could buy a vintage Rickenbacker guitar, get your sax repaired, take piano lessons, lay down a bass track, have a few beers, or tattoo your name across your knuckles like Ozzy Osbourne. Notice the bulletin board in the alley alongside the 12 Bar Café (through doorway #27). If you're a musician looking for a band to play in, this could be your connection.

• From Denmark Street, go back across Charing Cross Road and head down Manette Street. After a short block, on the right (down the lane called Orange Yard) you'll see The Borderline, where R.E.M. and Oasis have played. Continue down Manette Street and under the "Pillars of Hercules" passage, then turn right up Greek Street to...

5 Soho Square

The Soho neighborhood is London's version of New York City's Greenwich Village. It's a ritzy, raffish, edgy, and colorful area. Because of its eccentric 1970s landlord, porn publisher Paul Raymond, the Soho district escaped late-20th-century development. So, rather than soulless office towers, it retains its characteristic charm. And because the square has no real through-roads, it's al-

most traffic-free—strangely quiet and residential-feeling for being in the center of such a huge city.

Soho Square Gardens is a favorite place for a nap or picnic on a sunny afternoon (pick up picnic goodies from nearby shops). The little house in the middle of the square is the gardener's hut. History plaques at each entrance tell the area's story, which dates back to 1731. Originally a "key garden," this was once a yard shared by the wealthy people who lived on this square. And speaking of wealthy people, at #1, on the west (left) side of the square, the MPL building (McCartney Publishing Limited) houses offices of Britain's richest musician, Sir Paul McCartney.



• At the bottom of the square, wander down Frith Street (which runs parallel to Greek Street).

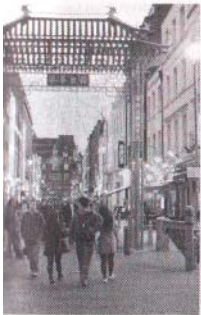
6 Strolling Through Soho

The restaurants and boutiques here and on adjoining streets (such as Greek, Dean, and Wardour streets) are trendy and creative, the kind that attract high society when they feel like slumming it. Bars with burly, well-dressed bouncers abound. Private clubs, like the low-profile **Groucho Club** (a block over, at 45 Dean Street), cater to the late-night rock crowd.

Ronnie Scott's Jazz Club (at 47 Frith Street) has featured big-name acts for more than 50 years. In 1970, Jimi Hendrix jammed here with Eric Burdon and War; it was the last performance before his death in a London apartment a few days later. Even today Ronnie Scott's is *the* place to go for jazz in London. Shows regularly sell out in advance—check at the box office when you pass by or reserve in advance (see page 455 for details).

Frith Street hits **Old Compton Street** at the center of the neighborhood. This street is the center of London's gay scene. Stroll a block to the right on Old Compton Street to take in the eclectic variety of people going by. You're surrounded by the buzz of Soho.

At the corner of Dean Street, look left for the pagoda-style arch down the street. South of here, on the other side of Shaftesbury Avenue, is London's underwhelming **Chinatown**. With Gerrard Street as its spine, it occupies what was once just more of Soho, with the same Soho artsy vibe. In the 1960s, the Chinese community gathered here, eventually dominated this zone, and non-Asian business-



es moved out. The Chinese population swelled when the former British colony of Hong Kong was returned to China in 1997, but the neighborhood's identity is now threatened by developers eyeing this high-rent real estate.

• *Continue along Old Compton Street to where it hits Wardour Street (with a string of enticing restaurants just to the right). Crossing Wardour, Old Compton squeezes down into a narrow alley (Tisbury Court). Penetrate this sleazy passage of sex shows and blue-video shops, tolerate the barkers' raunchy come-ons, then jog a half-block right and turn on Brewer Street.*

⑦ Brewer Street: Sleaze, Porn Shops, and Prostitutes

Soho was a bordello zone in the 19th century. A bit of that survives today in this area. Sex shops, video arcades, and prostitution mingle with upscale restaurants here in west Soho. While it's illegal in Britain to sell sex on the street, well-advertised "models" entertain (profitably) in their tiny apartments. And these days massage parlors that promise memorable endings are harder for the police to bust.

One block north of Brewer Street—up Walker's Court—Berwick Street hosts a produce market (Mon-Sat).

• *Our walk is nearly finished. Continue a few short blocks along Brewer Street, observing the fascinating metamorphosis of a neighborhood from sleaze to gentrification. When you reach The Crown tavern, at the intersection of Brewer Street and Sherwood Street (also called Lower James Street), turn left onto Sherwood Street and walk one block down, emerging into the bustling intersection known as...*

⑧ Piccadilly Circus

London's most touristy square got its name from the fancy ruffled shirts—*picadils*—made in the neighborhood long ago. In the late 20th century, the square veered toward the gimmicky and tacky—look no further than the gargantuan Ripley's Believe-It-or-Not Museum.

The square's center features a statue-on-a-pillar of a tipsy-but-perfectly-balanced Eros. (Actually, scholars say it's Anteros, the love god's brother, but Londoners call it Eros.) Until just a couple of years ago, Piccadilly was a famously busy traf-



fic circle, with cars and big red buses spinning around the statue. Now—though still busy with cars—it's also a packed people zone. At night it's as bright as day—with neon pulsing and the 20-foot-high video ads painting the classic Georgian facades in a rainbow of colors. Black cabs honk, tourists crowd the attractions, and Piccadilly shows off big-city London at its glitziest.

• *Our walk is done. If you're up for more sightseeing, it's easy to connect from here to my "Regent Street Shopping Walk" (page 439). Several of my recommended restaurants are nearby (see map on page 400). If you're ready to move on, the Piccadilly Tube stop is here, and handy buses #23, #38, and #159 stop near here (see page 28). It's all ready for you—you're at the center of London.*

