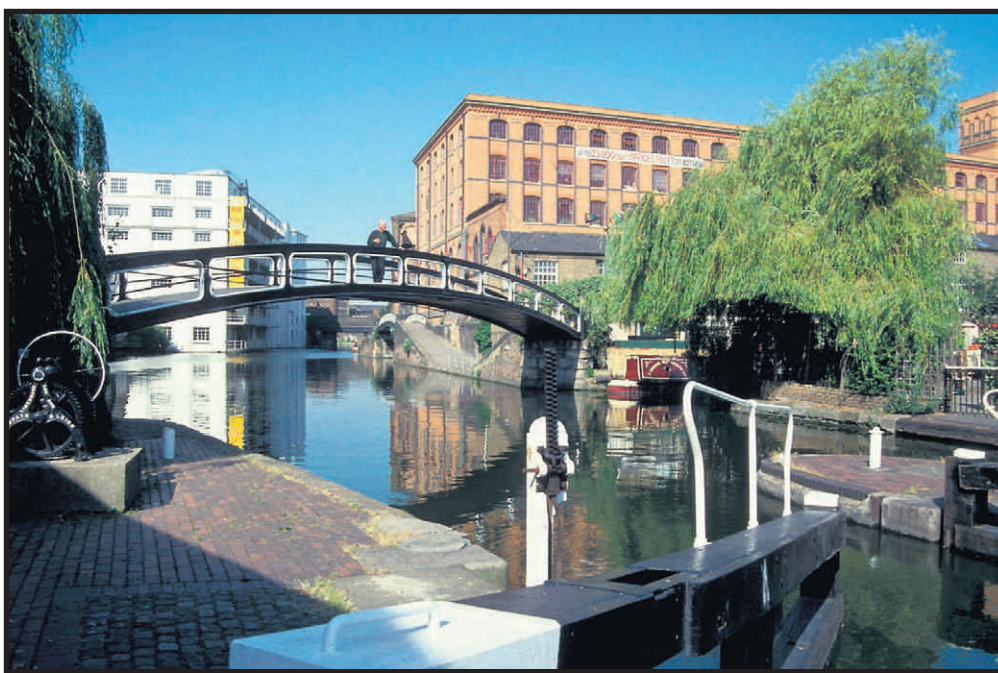


The Tube is one of London's best-known icons – but it's not the only way to get around the city. **James Goffin** explored the capital's waterways and found a number of ways to mess about on the river.



Taking to the river and waterways is a great way to see London. Above, an exciting high-speed trip on a rigid inflatable boat and, below, Camden Lock is at one end of the waterbus trip.

'Water' way to see city



WHEN I GO TO LONDON, I SELDOM THINK OF GOING THERE TO RELAX.

It's the headquarters of busy businesses, stuffed full of bustling commuters and tourists all trying to get somewhere quickly, all packed sardine-like on the Underground.

It's a city that never sleeps, not somewhere to be sleepy. But it doesn't have to be like that.

Hidden among the tourist traps and city skyscrapers, there's a relaxing waterscape there for the taking with once industrial canals now dominated by pleasure craft.

Even if you do want to visit the more obvious attractions of the capital – from the newly-revamped Millennium Dome to the more stately surroundings of Parliament – you can get there via a network of river buses that are a million miles from the forced armpit-sniffing world of the subterranean trains.

A good place to start your weekend away from it in the thick of it is Little Venice.

Nestling just behind Paddington station, this picturesque part of London sits astride the Grand Union Canal, which stretches from Birmingham down to the Thames and across to Hertford.

At its heart is Browning's Pool, named after Victorian poet Robert Browning who lived nearby and christened the area, with the canal lined by plane trees and Nash houses.

Just a short stroll away is the delightful Colonnade Hotel. Formed from two mansion houses – one the birthplace of Enigma mathematician Alan Turing – it's a great base for a pampered weekend in London, with each room individually designed but with a common touch of luxury throughout; many of the rooms feature four-poster beds. Personalised 'in residence' calling cards offer a deliciously nostalgic note, and the service is wonderfully attentive.

But back to the canals. The easiest way to explore is via the waterbus, which runs from Little Venice to Camden Lock.

The journey takes in Regent's Canal, which skirts the edge of Regent's Park, and was opened in 1816. The original plan had been to take the canal through the centre of the park, but the Crown Commissioners were concerned that rough barges and boatmen would disturb the genteel atmosphere – there's no chance of that today.

Instead the trip is pleasingly soporific, taking you down to a gentle pace that offering a chance to enjoy the surroundings and the plentiful wildlife that inhabits the area.

For more exotic animals, the waterbus also stops off at London Zoo. Like many zoos, London is changing and trying to provide more natural environments for animals. The latest change is the new Gorilla Kingdom, which features western lowland gorillas. You could easily spend a day here, and arriving by canal is a great way to ease you in to the strolling mood that will make your visit more enjoyable.

need to know

► Canteen – telephone 0845 686 1122 or visit the website at www.canteen.co.uk

► The Colonnade Townhouse Hotel – bed and breakfast rates from £147 per room, per night, for two people sharing. Telephone 020 7286 1052 or log on to www.theetoncollection.com
London Marriot Hotel – bed and breakfast from £146 per room, per night, for two people sharing. Telephone 020 7093 1000 or visit www.londonmarriottwestindiaquay.co.uk

► London Rib Voyages – London Eye to Canary Wharf, lasting about 50 minutes and costing £26 for adults, £16 for children. Telephone 020 7928 2350 or visit www.londonribvoyages.com

► London Waterbus Company – canal boat trips from Little Venice to London Zoo cost £16.50 adults, £13.50 children including zoo admission charges. Telephone 0207 482 2550 or visit www.londonwaterbus.com

► Tourist information including events, hotels, maps and guides – www.visitlondon.com

There are more modern sides to London's waterways too – the most striking being the transformation of the Docklands and Greenwich peninsula. Striking new hotels include the Marriott at West India Quay, with its seafood-based Curve restaurant, which is convenient for both Canary Wharf and the new O2 dome. The rooms offer impressive views over London, with 22 suites featuring glass walls on two sides.

Although dominated by office buildings, Canary Wharf also has a good range of shops and restaurants and is even worth a visit for its architecture, which includes the UK's tallest building in One Canada Square.

Just across the Thames – best done by river bus, but the Jubilee Line also gives fast, and by Tube standards, civilised access – is the O2. Once the often ridiculed, but seldom visited, Millennium Dome, the O2 hosts a major arena, a smaller arena, an exhibition space, a cinema multiplex and dozens of restaurants and bars.

The main arena is impressive, retaining intimacy despite seating more than 20,000 people and until September 21 is playing host to Prince on an exclusive 21-day run. In November the O2 will host King Tutankhamun exhibition, the first time in 30 years that the golden artefacts of the boy king have left Egypt.

Staying in Docklands also gives you the chance to journey in to central London across the Thames on one of the regular river buses.

These give you easy access to some of the city's most popular attractions and some unusual views of them in to the bargain. There are pontoons along the river, with stop-offs near the London Eye, the South Bank, the Tate and more.

The South Bank in particular is well worth a visit. The recent renovation of the Royal Festival Hall has also triggered a renaissance of the surrounding area, with a smattering of new restaurants. One particularly to look out for is Canteen, which has been named as both the Observer's best UK restaurant and Which's London restaurant of the year. Its take on traditional British food is worth sampling, and the large terrace area is a wonderful place to relax and people watch as you dine.

But if you can't cope with visiting London without a little high-octane excitement, pop along the river to the London Eye and catch a speed-boat tour on the river. Not for the faint-hearted, these exciting trips see you bouncing along the water in a rigid inflatable boat – and possibly getting a little wet too. ■

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