

LIVING LONDON

The best way to work is to squeeze in a little play, whether in a central city location or a neighborhood you want to explore. Mixing business with pleasure during a single trip requires comfort, cossetting and amenities to suit both a professional and a traveler. London, a collection of villages, is uniquely set to accommodate business and leisure travelers in this way.

Whenever possible, going from the plane to an in-terminal airport hotel before moving on the next day to a central or neighborhood location makes the transition as smooth as possible. The Sofitel London Heathrow, Terminal 5 is a one-year old hotel quite rightly named "one of the five best airport hotels" in the world by British Air's *Highlife* this March. Rolling luggage straight from customs to the hotel is a winner and Sofitel welcomes guests with a stunning entrance. The magnificent lobby has an Antarctic theme, with spectacularly dramatic cascading water onto a glacial, blue, floodlit block of ice. The staff is personable, engaging and accommodating—room service makes the best club sandwich known to a jet-lagged traveler (with the addition of avocado to English bacon and impeccably fresh tomato on wholegrain bread), and cheerfully delivers it at the requested time, enabling the weary traveler to wash off the "jet sweat."

A spacious and peaceful Zen garden (one of three interior gardens) is nothing short of a decompression chamber after a long plane ride, with a David Harber water feature's gently lapping waves. Travelers in need of additional help relaxing will find that next door to the 24-hour gym, the spa has a variety of "jet-lag busting treatments." For those seeking a more social entrance, the Sphere Bar & Lounge and the Library Bar both welcome joyful congregants. Breakfast includes a luscious fruit platter that runs the gauntlet from exotic to familiar, a delight in addition to a traditional English breakfast.

The lively neighborhood Earl's Court, is near the more expensive and staid Kensington (to its north) and South Kensington (to its southeast). A central daytime draw of Earl's Court is its proximity to South Kensington's Museum Row. The hotel base2stay, offers easy access to Earl's Court tube around the corner; High Street Kensington tube, Gloucester Road and South Kensington tubes are all short walks away.

Base2stay creator Robert Nadler's concept is simply genius: focus on making luxurious rooms and providing "edited service" ideally suited to a 24/7 urban society. This approach is especially attractive in Ear's Court with its pubs, restaurants, wine bars and cafes. Based upon a lifetime of business and personal travel experience, Nadler created a list of what underused hotel products contributed to high overhead and edited them out.

Base2stay's rooms compare favorably with standard luxury rooms, adding a mini-kitchen cleverly hidden in a closet (and the additional suite layout with bunk bed rooms next to doubles, for family trips). So comfortable are the beds that I suggest a wake up call (or two or three) be arranged to keep from falling back asleep and luxuriating in the restful beds. Two separate room service delivery menus are in each room. The hotel also provides discount coupons to a delightful bistro called Balans and for pizza, as well as Greek and Japanese restaurants. Within a block are nail salons and high street shops. Free in-room WiFi access saves travelers from the perils of carting around laptops (or, in my case, laptop crashes). After a stay, guests are invited to complete an impressively detailed exit survey designed by General Manager Nassar Khalil, who then implements guest suggestions.

It is best to choose one or two museums on Museum Row on any given morning or afternoon. A traveler may visit "Hats: An Anthology by Stephen Jones," at the Vic-



toria and Albert Museum (until May 31, 2009). The V&A Museum shop is one of the best in London, if not the world, and certainly worth a look. The Darwin exhibition (until April 19, 2009) at the Natural History Museum is an intriguing special exhibition that recalls the February 2009 edition of *National Geographic*, with the author David Quammen suggesting that "Darwin hadn't signed on the *Beagle* as its official naturalist, he was a 22-year old Cambridge graduate pointed rather indifferently toward a career

as a country clergyman, invited on the voyage as a dining companion for the captain, a mercurial young aristocrat named Robert Fitzroy." Rounding out an afternoon is the "Wildlife Photographer of the Year," a joint enterprise (until April 26, 2009) between the Natural History Museum and *BBC Wildlife Magazine*.

Marylebone

Known primarily as a London bedroom community, Marylebone is north from Oxford Street and the Marble Arch, south of Regent's Park, northeast of Hyde Park and west of Fitzrovia. It offers easy access to Madame Tussaud's wax museum and the Baker Street of Sherlock Holmes, as well as being walking distance from Regent's Park open-air Summer Theater.

To take advantage of the local London bedroom for studying or meeting preparation, try the corporate duplexes at Cramer House, run by The Apartment Service. Just off Marylebone

High Street, this serviced apartment is near stores and eateries. The tub seems large enough to swim laps in, and another benefit is the magnificent view of London sunsets across the road over the Gunmaker Pub. On Sunday morning, local farmers quietly arrived with their goods and set up stands for the Marylebone Farmers' Market. This scene en plein air lures people away from morning papers and breakfast, only to return laden with treats for a Sunday lunch. ▶

Posh Knightsbridge, just to the south of Hyde Park, is the city's ultimate shopping district, anchored by luxury department stores Harrods and Harvey. At the same time, it is an easy walk to Sloane Square and The Royal Court Theatre.

In Knightsbridge, Jumeirah Carlton Towers is jubilant extravagance, while its sister hotel Jumeirah Lowndes is intimate elegance. The Rib Room, a duly named Zagat favorite for London chophouses, also has a vegetarian menu, and time in the fashionably elegant Gilt Champagne Lounge is decidedly guilt-free. The Peak Health Club and Spa has a following among travelers and locals alike. For a change of pace, the more intimate boutique Jumeirah Lowndes, offers Mimosa Restaurant, which specializes in modern European cuisine and has a new tapas menu. Guests at the Lowndes are free to use the Peak and the Business Center at the Carlton Towers, while enjoying an extraordinary level of personal service.

A lunch meeting at the Brasserie Roux in the Sofitel London St. James, is a superb break in a meeting day. Chef Albert Roux has created a wonderful twist on the three-course lunch—a RouXpress meal, in which all three courses (plus a bonus appetizer) are simultaneously served. Thus, in 45 minutes, one might be able to enjoy two appetizers (especially the celeriac soup), a choice of main course, and, in lieu of a sweet dessert, a French and English cheese plate. All of this is in the former banking hall of Cox's and King's, which has a playful décor complete with a cheery cockerel and egg theme.

The Royal Academy of Arts mounts comprehensive exhibitions, like the recent Byzantium 330-1453. The museum's Piccadilly location is proximate to Brown's Hotel



on Albemarle Street, where the Albemarle Room has two- and three-course lunches and pre-theater diners. Friendly waitstaff serves inventively prepared meals that focus on local ingredients. The Albemarle Room itself is a study in contradiction, with dark wood paneling, elegant green banquettes, and a collection of (sometimes haunting) photographs by Hubertus von Hohenlohe.

An evening at the theater is a great way to relax when traveling for business. The Royal Theatre Haymarket is one of London's prime theatrical locations. The theater's new production of *On the Waterfront* is

stellar. Inspired by the 1954 movie, the language is distinctly more Mamet, although penned by original Oscar-winning writer Budd Schulberg with Stanley H. Silverman. What Oscar-winning director Elia Kazan would never have anticipated is the way in which Steven Berkoff takes the Brooklyn docks and stages them as a Greek tragedy, complete with a chorus of men who play everything from cooing pigeons to rumbling cars, and who enact balletic fight scenes in slow motion. In May, the theater presents *Waiting for Godot*, starring Patrick Stewart. ■