



# MarkHitsTheRoad

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## Europe Trip, Visiting Central Europe (E26A-4) England – London Museums and Theatres

The primary purpose of this trip was to visit the central European countries of Hungary, Slovenia and Croatia. But because I would be flying through London's Heathrow airport, I decided to spend a couple nights in London before continuing on, both to minimize the risk of a missed connection (given my past experience with British Airways) and to have a couple days in a favorite city to adapt to the 8-hour time zone difference.

Then, after finishing up in Croatia, I returned to London, this time for a four-night stay. I would have liked to have stayed a few more days, but London has become terribly expensive. Although it is my favorite international city, I've been there a number of times now, so I've seen all the obvious sites, quite a few less obvious sites, and more than a dozen other cities in the region on day trips out of the city. And my favorite club closed in 2019 (but in my mid-60s, I'm probably a bit old for that now).

For my London stays, I mostly stuck around the Soho area where I was staying, checked out some museums and took in a few West End theatre shows. I was hoping to see the revamped Museum of London, which has relocated to the Smithfield Markets and expanded, but it turned out that the new location hadn't opened yet. And for shows, I wanted to see the *ABBA Voyage* production, an ABBA concert with the band members portrayed with holograms. But a decent seat would have cost about \$200, which was more than I was willing to pay for holograms and recorded singing, especially when I could see the live stage production of *Mamma Mia!* again for half that.

I got to my Leicester Square hotel by 1PM, about two hours too early to check in, so I dropped off my suitcase and took a photo walk. This was my 8<sup>th</sup> visit to London, but I was last there in 2019, so although things were mostly familiar, there were some changes.

Leicester Square includes a small park with a fountain as well as sculptures representing assorted movies. Some of the sculptures have been updated to feature movies like *Harry Potter* and *Get Out*.



*Harry Potter sculpture at Leicester Square*



With all the tourists in the Leicester Square area, several famous chefs have opened restaurants nearby, such as Jamie Oliver's Jamie's Italian. Other well-known chefs with restaurants here include Gordon Ramsay, Harland Sanders and Five Guys.



From there I headed over to Trafalgar Square, home to the National Gallery and National Portrait Gallery, both of which I planned to see the next day.



Trafalgar Square is also home to St. Martin-in-the-Fields Church. Burials at the site date back to 350AD, even though the site was well outside the city limits of Roman London, but the current church was built in the early 1700s.



Across from Trafalgar Square at 1 Strand is the world headquarters of RELX, formerly Reed Elsevier, parent company of my former employer.

The National Gallery is a government-owned art museum that focuses on Western/European artists and styles, including works by a number of the “masters”. Entry to the main collection is free (donations are encouraged).



*The Miraculous Draught of Fishes* by Peter Paul Rubens (left); *Bathers at La Grenouillère* by Claude Monet (right)



*Sunflowers* by Vincent Van Gogh (left); *Avenue at Chantilly* by Paul Cezanne (right)

When it comes to art, I'm more of a "I know what I like" viewer, but it's interesting to look at a painting from some distance to take in the whole picture and then get up really close to look at the style, brushwork and how colors may (or may not) be blended.

Next door is the National Portrait Gallery, believed to be the first national public art gallery dedicated to portraits. Subject were often painted, but photos, drawings and other media are used in the collection. Subjects are historically important and famous British people, including a lot of royals.



Princess Diana



Marjorie "Mo" Mowlam, a Northern Ireland politician



Jarvis Cocker, lead singer and songwriter for the band Pulp



Upscale shopping can be found on Regent Street. The lack of traffic was surprising as this was a Friday afternoon.



More boutique-style shopping can be found nearby on Soho's Carnaby Street.



Soho has been the heart of gay London for years, especially along Old Compton Street, although the number of such bars has faded (a changing U.K. nightlife culture has led to the closure of a lot of pubs and clubs across the board in recent years). Several years ago, someone left a bomb at the Admiral Duncan. The explosion killed three people and injured a number of others, resulting in four amputations. But the Admiral Duncan survived that and the pandemic, and continues on for now.



London's vibrant Chinatown is located between Soho and Leicester Square.

And that ended my initial London stop. I didn't seem to be making any progress dealing with the time zone differences, so I turned in early Friday night before flying to Budapest on Saturday.

I still had my Oyster Card from my 2019 visit. Basically, you put some money into the card, and then you could touch the card to entrance and exit spots to pay for London's mass transit, such as the London tube (subway system). The tube's Piccadilly line connects Heathrow Airport directly to two stations at or near Leicester Square (Piccadilly Circus and Leicester Square stations) for just a few dollars, if you're willing to deal with often crowded trains for the nearly one-hour ride. But a taxi can cost upwards of \$150 (including tip), and take almost as long. I left London with about 50 pounds still on the card back in 2019, figuring I'd get back to London sooner than I did. After this trip, I still have a bit of money left on the card, so I may have to return to London one more time.

(Since 2019, they've updated things so instead of the Oyster Card you can now touch credit cards and phones with payment apps at transit entrances and exits to pay, although with creative pickpockets hanging out at tube stations, Oyster Cards can be safer bets.)

After several days in Hungary, Slovenia and Croatia, I returned to London on a Monday with plans to stay four more nights before returning home. Although I was tempted to tack on a few more nights to stay the weekend, weekend hotel nights anywhere near the city center would have run as much as \$500/night, and that was just too much to even consider. London is a great city to visit, but nowadays a week-long trip will set you back, especially with airfare and other travel expenses on top of it.

For my three days of sightseeing during this stay, I originally had plans for three museums – the Natural History Museum, the British Museum and the Museum of London, but I found that the Museum of London had not yet reopened at its new location. So, I filled my final day with some routine sightseeing and a show.



But I started most of these days at the Charing Cross train station, one of several stations in and near central London. During past visits, I've taken trains to a number of day trip destinations, including Aylesbury, Bath, Battle, Beaconsfield, Bletchley Park, Brighton, Canterbury, Cardiff, Colchester, Dover, East Molesey, Greenwich, Rochester, St. Albans, Windsor/Eton and even Paris. I had to get to the right station, but then I'd buy a ticket, buy a newspaper to have something to read on the train, stop at the Upper Crust to get a Diet Coke and one of their delicious ham and cheese baguette sandwiches to eat for breakfast on the train, and then board the train. No London day trips planned this time, but one of those ham and cheese baguettes still made for a nice breakfast.



Scrubby, a robotic floor cleaner, was a new addition at the station. I'd watch it making the rounds as I had my breakfast. I like how they anthropomorphized it by design by putting a face on what amounted to a roving garbage can.

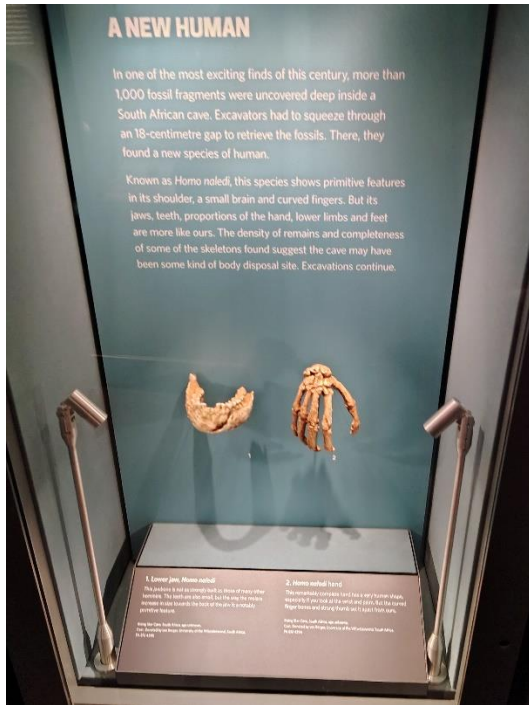
Natural history museums focus on the natural world, including current and past animal life, gems, geological processes and the like. I had heard about a number of interesting fossil and related paleontology finds in the U.K., so I was hopeful that the Natural History Museum would have a nice exhibit on this. No such luck. That and swarms of school kids made for a noisy, crowded and somewhat underwhelming visit.



A rather large exhibit space dedicated to dinosaurs had relatively few artifacts. I've been more impressed by small town museum dinosaur exhibits in Tucumcari, New Mexico and Dickinson, North Dakota.



One of a handful of small displays in the limited Fossils from Britain exhibit that appeared to be shunted off to some obscure corner of the museum. It was the only exhibit in the museum that I had to myself.

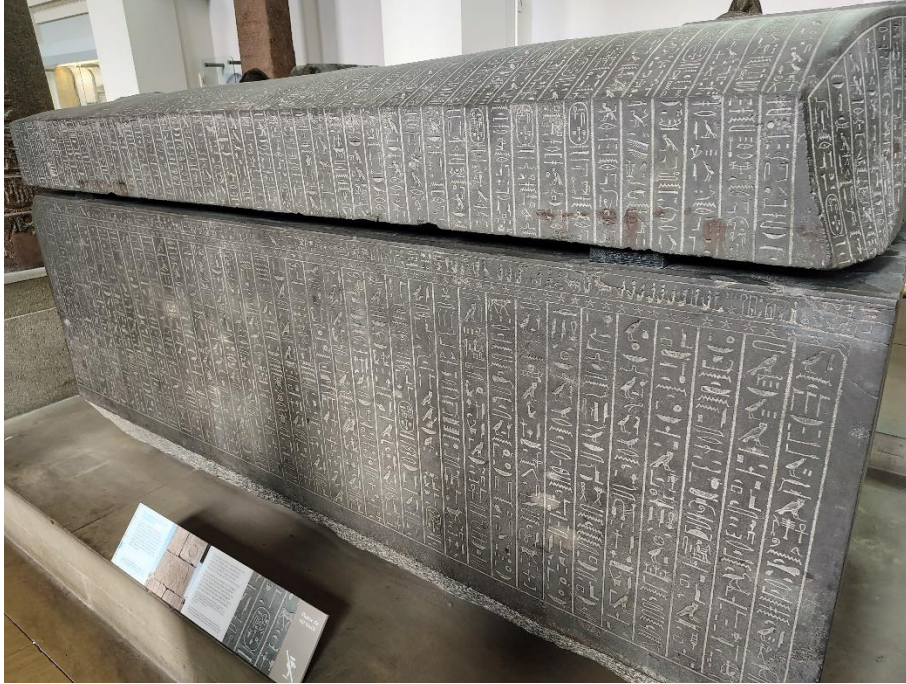


The Natural History Museum did have a good exhibit on hominins, including evidence of another recently discovered species. All in all, though, I thought this museum was a bit disappointing.

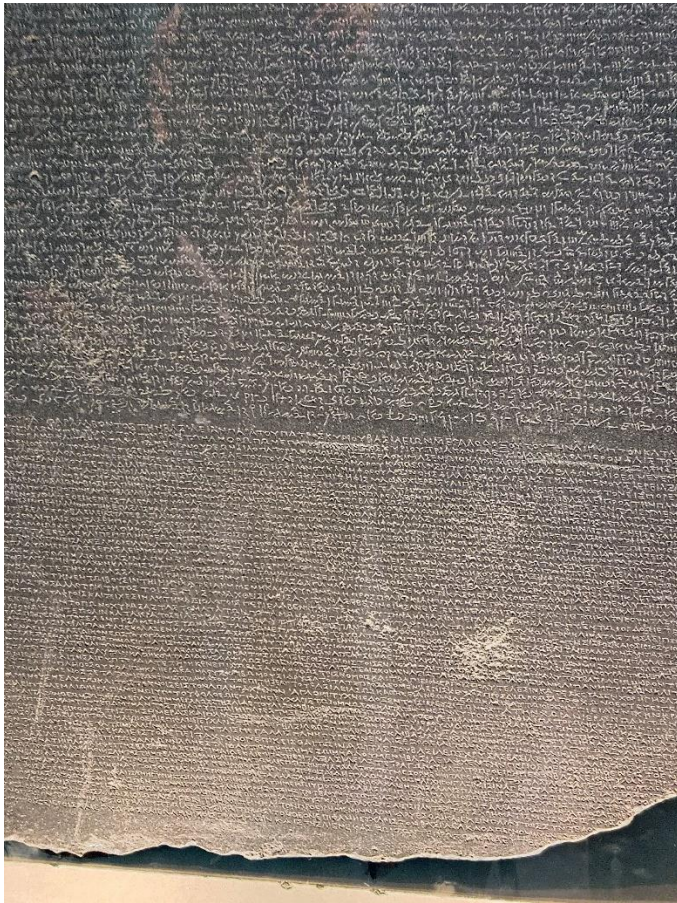
The British Museum is almost overwhelming in scale. With a permanent collection of more than eight million items, and with a heavy focus on the early Assyrian, Egyptian, Greek and Roman Empires, and with a strong focus on Western Europe, there was a lot to see. One could easily fill a whole day there – even in my case where this was my third visit over the years. A tremendous amount of their collection is on display with usually very good signage.



Displays in the Grenville Room offered a bit of everything, but that soon gave way to culture and era-focused exhibits.



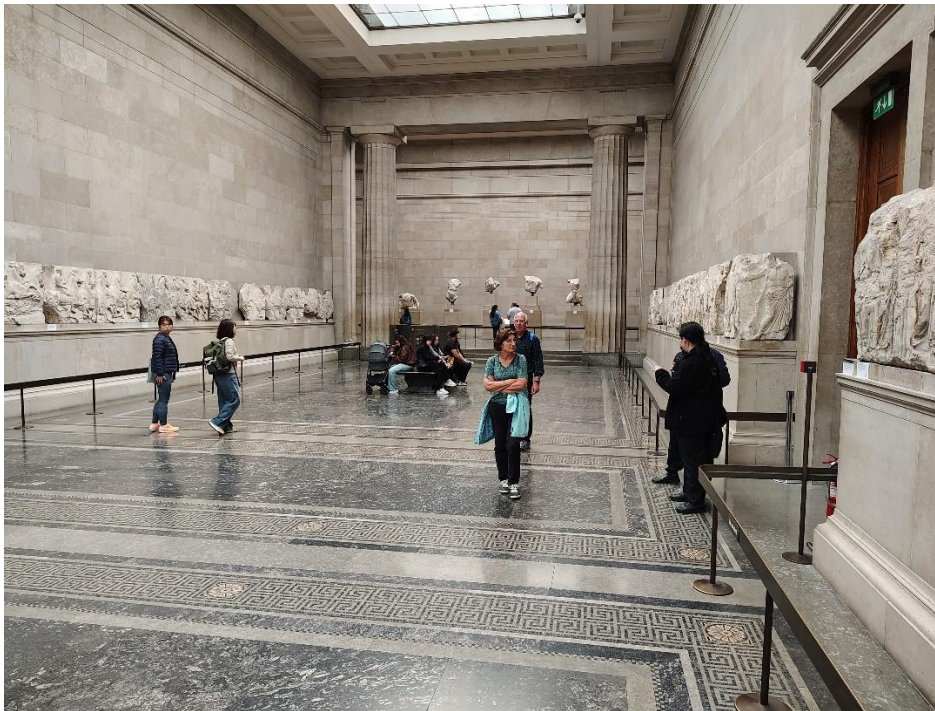
Try your hand reading the hieroglyphs on Egyptian sarcophagi.



Study the Rosetta Stone if you need some help deciphering the hieroglyphs.



In the Assyrian exhibit, perhaps you will find clues that could come in handy at the Bridge of Death.



The museum displays several pieces taken from the Parthenon on the Acropolis in Athens, Greece with the permission of the Ottomans, who governed Greece at the time. Greece for obvious reasons would like them back, especially now that it has a museum focused on the Acropolis. I had visited that museum back in 2011, and was disappointed by how little from the Acropolis was on display, not realizing at the time that the British had so much of it.



Items used in daily life in the Roman Empire



Artifacts from England's Anglo-Saxon period

With the Museum of London not open, and with mid-afternoon theatre plans, I decided to take a walk around some of London's more touristy sites Thursday morning, places I had seen a number of times before, so my heart really wasn't into it.



Buckingham Palace and the Queen Victoria Memorial



Westminster Abbey



The Palace of Westminster is home to the British parliament and the Big Ben clock tower. When I was in London in both 2018 and 2019, Big Ben was undergoing maintenance, and it was shrouded with scaffolding. So, this was the first time I had a good look at Big Ben since I was in London in 2013.

Recall that the design of the Hungarian parliament building was inspired by the Palace of Westminster.



The British police agency that is commonly referred to as Scotland Yard got that nickname when its headquarters' main public entrance opened up onto this London street called Great Scotland Yard.



Covent Garden's shops and restaurants make it popular with the tourists, but I've usually just given it a pass, pretty much for those reasons. I only passed through it on this trip because it was between where I saw my final show of the trip and the restaurant where I planned to get my traditional final London night bangers and mash dinner – and sticky toffee pudding for dessert (and yes, for dinner I finished the meat; you can't have any pudding if you don't eat your meat).



The first show I saw in London was *Oh, Mary!* at the Trafalgar Theatre. *Oh, Mary!* was a comedy that centered on Mary Todd Lincoln as it reimagined the circumstances leading up to the assassination of Abraham Lincoln. Did I mention that it was a comedy? It was pretty funny, with enough plot twists to keep you guessing where it was heading.

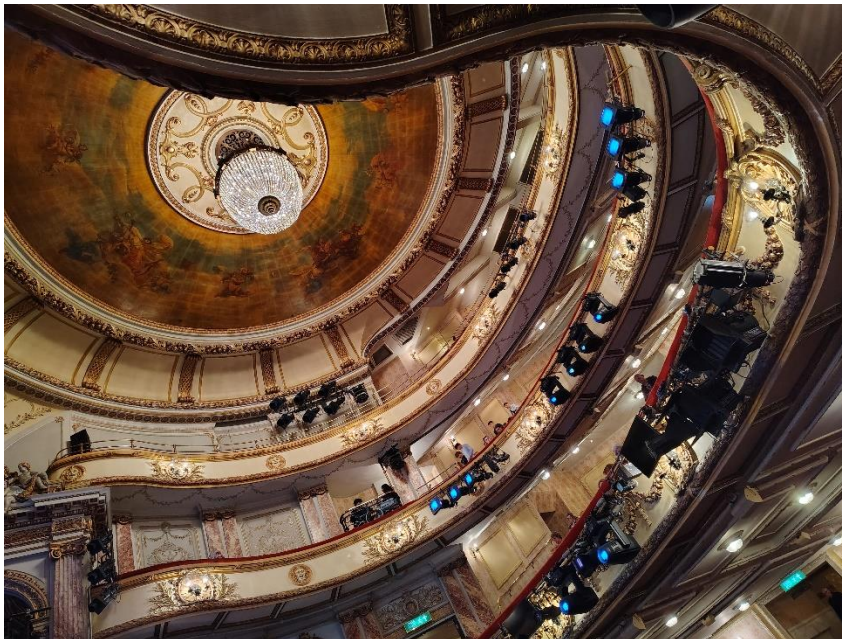


Even funnier was *Titanique*, playing at the Criterion Theatre. In this musical, a slightly deranged Celine Dion intercepts a group of tourists at a museum's exhibit about the Titanic and tells them what really happened on that ill-fated ship based on her recollections from having been aboard the Titanic, told through reenactments and Celine Dion songs and other songs that she covered. One song exception – the actor who portrayed Tina Turner portraying the Iceberg did so to Turner's version of *River Deep, Mountain High*, not Dion's cover. Originally a U.S. production, several American pop culture references were replaced with British pop culture references when the production moved to the U.K.



And because I was too cheap to go to *ABBA Voyage*, I instead got another helping of the ABBA jukebox musical *Mamma Mia!* at the Novello Theatre.

London's West End theatre district is to the U.K. what Broadway is to New York City and the U.S., so the productions are generally top-notch. Several West End theatres date back 100 years or more, and are rather ornate on the inside – true theatre palaces. This includes the Novello, which first opened as the Waldorf Theatre in 1905.



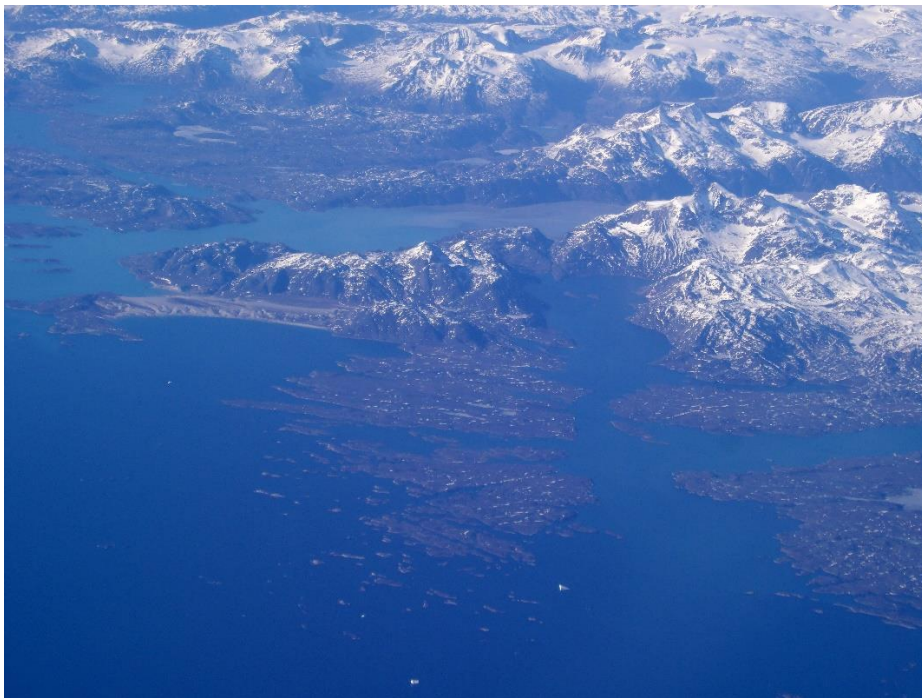
Looking up at the ceiling inside the Novello Theatre



The Novello Theatre before the show. The theatre seats more than 1100 people.

With a late Friday afternoon departure for my flight back to Las Vegas, I hung around the hotel until check-out time, and then took the Piccadilly tube line to Heathrow Airport. Heathrow's Terminal 5 has plenty of restaurants and shops once you get past security, so it was easy to entertain myself until my flight. My choice of seat did give me airline lounge privileges, but the lounges are now open to so many people that they're not worth it. And besides, I usually prefer to walk around the airport before long flights, and ten hours is a long flight.

There were cloudy skies for much of the flight, but they did clear as we flew over western Greenland, so I got some photos. With Greenland rapidly warming, there was definitely a lot more exposed rock than what I saw the last time I got a decent view of the island back in 2018.



West coast of Greenland south of Nuuk

I got home about 9PM Las Vegas time.