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Welcome to the UK Travel Planning Podcast. Your host is the founder of the UK Travel Planning website, Tracy Collins. In this podcast, Tracy shares destination guides, travel tips, and itinerary ideas, as well as interviews with a variety of guests who share their knowledge and experience of UK travel to help you plan your perfect UK vacation. Join us as we explore the UK from cosmopolitan cities to quaint villages from historic castles to beautiful islands and from the picturesque countryside to seaside towns.

[00:00:37.100] - Tracy Collins

Hi, welcome to Episode 81 of the UK Travel Plan and Podcast. This week I thought I would talk about some of the free things that you can do in London.

[00:00:46.790] - Tracy Collins

As you're aware, London is a fairly expensive, really very expensive city to visit. If there's any ways we can actually save a bit of money when we're visiting, I think it's always useful to do so. There are actually quite a lot of free things to do in London that you may actually not be aware of, which would be useful to incorporate into your itinerary. If you're a budget conscious traveller, certainly many of these things you can add into your itinerary.

[00:01:14.150] - Tracy Collins

Actually, some of these places that I'm going to talk about actually must cease for visitors really and feature on many bucket lists. You won't be missing out if you add some of these free things into your itinerant anyway. Really a good mix of free and some of these attractions will... Some of the attractions at charge will certainly help to make a visit to London more affordable. I'm also going to include some of the things in this list which are free things to do in London with kids as well.

[00:01:39.710] - Tracy Collins

If you're visiting with younger family members, it's good to know that there are plenty of fun, free things to do in London and that you can choose from. There's basically five categories that I'm going to talk about free things. I think it roughly comes out to about 32 free things to do in London. I have got an article on UK TravelPlanning which goes through all of the free things that you can do, but I thought I would summarise them into five categories and give you some ideas in this podcast.

[00:02:09.070] - Tracy Collins

Say, even if you choose one or two out of each category to include, you'll find that you're going to have quite a decent itinerary from this and add in some of the things that you do have to pay for in London and you're going to have a pretty full itinerary. Let's start with the first category of free things to do in London. That is some of the attractions that you can see in London that aren't going to cost you anything, which is always good to know, isn't it? There's certainly lots of things that people want to do when they go to London and I'm sure you have an idea in your head or written a list out of things that you want to do and see.

[00:02:47.480] - Tracy Collins

Obviously, you can see a lot of buildings from the outside. You don't actually have to go in. One of the most famous one is actually Big Ben. I will say Big Ben is actually the name of the bell, which is located in the Elizabeth Tower at the north end of the Palace of Westminster. The tower, with its four-faced clock, is probably the most iconic symbol of London. I know everybody who wants to go and see that. The bell was installed over 160 odd years ago and rings on the hour every hour and it's the largest of the five bells in the tower, the one called Big Ben. Obviously, the tower itself, because all been renovated, it was all covered in scaffolding until recently. Since the unveiling, I have to say it's spectacular. One of the nice things is that you don't actually have to pay to see the Elizabeth Tower. Obviously, if you want to go and see Big Ben itself, as in the bell, you would have to pay and try to get tickets for that is extremely difficult because I've been trying. But you can see the actual Elizabeth Tower, you can see the clock face for free because you can see that from outside.

[00:03:58.510] - Tracy Collins

There you are. That's one of the first attractions. If you jump on a bus and you can take one of the red

double decker London buses, you can go around and you'll pass Big Ben, or if you're walking around, you'll be able to see Big Ben and that's free. Second thing that you can attraction that you can do and experience in London for free is the changing of the guard. The change in of the guard outside Buckingham Palace lasts about 45 minutes. The ceremony is really an iconic example of pomp and pageantry and really should be a feature on every first time visitor's itinerary, to be honest. It is something to see. It doesn't occur every day, though, so you need to check on the official website before adding it into your itinerary. Make sure you arrive in plenty of time because it is very, very popular. Alternatively, you can head to St. James's Palace, Clarence House, which is a smaller, shorter ceremony at 11:00 am daily. I think it's 10:00 .am On some days, but that's not as well known as the change of the guard at Buckingham Palace. Therefore, I'm going to say it's less crowded, but actually when I was there, and I think it was May time, June time, it was still really busy, but definitely include a change in the garden experience into your itinerary.

[00:05:11.960] - Tracy Collins

Say you can do that for free. Another excellent experience in London to have for free is to go to the Sky Garden. The Sky Garden is central London. It's located in the Walkie Talkie building, and it's described as London's highest public garden. But it's like a sky high atrium. It's amazing. It's like just windows, observation deck, open air terrace, there's cafes, there're a restaurant. It's free to visit, but tickets are highly sought after, so you have to book as early as possible.

[00:05:44.700] - Tracy Collins

Booking is open three weeks before, so make sure that you book your reservation, your tickets, so that you can actually get to go to the sky garden, because quite often this is one of the most popular places that people miss or they forget about and it's free. Seriously, book your tickets for the Sky Garden. Make sure you go on the website three weeks before and reserve them. I think from four onwards are the most popular. If you can't get on there, just go earlier on the day. If you're really lucky and it's a beautiful, clear day, you're going to get absolutely fantastic views. Another of my favourite places actually to go, which is free, is the Queen's House in Greenwich.

[00:06:25.620] - Tracy Collins

That's located in the gardens of the National Maritime Museum. The property was, as the name suggests, formerly a Royal residence and was designed by Inigo Jones. It houses an internationally-rowed art collection. There's lots to see and do there. It's all free. Don't miss the iconic tulip stairs. You will want your camera handy to take pictures of that. Also it's absolute delight to see the Painter's seal and the Queen's presence chamber. Really just head, make sure that you're going to Greenwich anyway. Some of that I highly recommend. We have an article on an itinerary for Greenwich for the day and you'll enjoy the views from the House of the old Royal Navel College, the Thames. It's just fabulous, absolutely fantastic. Again, somewhere free to go. Trafalgar Square, the iconic square and the City of Westminster are often seen during public demonstrations and rallies in the capital. That's somewhere you might see things going on. In the centre you'll see Nelson's Column, a monument to Admiral Horatia Nelson who died at the Battle of Trafal in 1805 and that's surrounded by four stone lions. They're known simply as the Landseer Lions, after the artist who created them.

[00:07:40.220] - Tracy Collins

Then you'll find four plinths that mark the corners of the square with three bearing bronze statues. The fourth print is used to showcase contemporary artwork. Take a look then and see what artwork is on show there. There's a few places that are free. For Harry Potter fans, I'm going to add in their platform, Nine and Three-quarters at Kings Cross Station, because if you're a fan of Harry Potter, then a trip to Kings Cross train station is going to feature in your itinerary. Unfortunately, if you want to have a professional photo taken between 9:00 and 9:00 PM, there's somebody there who can take your photo or you can take your own photo, which obviously then you can do for free.

[00:08:21.870] - Tracy Collins

Obviously, if you're wandering the shop, it's probably going to cost you something because there's some fantastic things to buy in there. But you actually can go and visit that. So if you're a Harry Potter fan, head to platform nine-three-quarters at Kings Cross Station. If you like street art, there's some great examples of street art to enjoy in London, obviously free. Popular areas to street art include

Brick Lane, Shoreditch, and Camden. And a hidden gem, often overlooked by visitors, and actually because I was staying in the area in April, are the Leake Street tunnel, which is near Waltham Station, which is a 300-metre tunnel which is completely covered in street art.

[00:08:58.420] - Tracy Collins

So again, free. Those are just some of the attractions that you can see in London that aren't going to cost you anything. That's the first category I looked at. The second category I'm going to talk about are museums. Of course, London is world famous for having some of the most fantastic museums in the world. You'll be pleased to know that quite a lot of them are actually free. Yeah, free, I think that came in, I don't know, under a Labour government a while ago.

[00:09:26.590] - Tracy Collins

I think it was decided that a lot of the museums would give free access so everybody could go and visit. Honestly, some of these museums are extremely popular with British people as well. You'll find everybody go to these museums. In fact, I remember going to the Natural History Museum with my daughter a few years ago and seeing a couple of famous faces there. The first museum that I will talk about is actually the Natural History Museum. If you've got kids, this is an absolute must. It's just bursting at the seams of the exhibits and specimens of all sorts of creatures, great and small. Perfect place to go with children.

[00:10:06.860] - Tracy Collins

Honestly, if you've got kids, go to the Natural History Museum. It's the museum that I would say every British kid goes to at least once in their childhood. I used to take my daughter there a lot. You can spend a whole day there, honestly. It's fantastic. The dinosaur exhibition, brilliant. I remember going with my father in the 1970s. As I say, it's a very, very popular museum to go to. Another museum which is very popular with visitors is the British Museum, which is the most visited museum in London. I guess over six million visitors a year.

[00:10:38.230] - Tracy Collins

Obviously, there's some very popular things to see at the British Museum. Sutton Hoo, Ship, Burial, Helmet is probably the most famous. But there are obviously some controversial things that are also housed at the British Museum. There's the Rosette Stone there, there's the East Isle and the Statue, there's Egyptian mummies and treasures, and a lot of Greek antiquities, including the Parthenon marbles at the moment. If you're going to go to the British Museum again, plan a long visit because it will take you a few hours or in fact, plan ahead so that you know actually what you're going to go and see because things like the Rosetta Stone are always incredibly popular.

[00:11:22.480] - Tracy Collins

Another museum that's again free, Imperial War Museum, has got six floors of exhibitions covering both World Wars, Heavy Weapons, Special Forces and COVID operations. Plan to spend at least three hours exploring this historic museum. The busiest time in that museum is from 11:00 AM until 4:00 PM. Weekends and public holidays are always busy so just be aware of that. I'm going to mention... Obviously, there are other free museums in London, but I've gone for the most popular ones. My favourite personally is the V&A.

[00:11:56.760] - Tracy Collins

I absolutely adore the Victorian Albert Museum. For me, it's a must visit. It was founded in 1852 by Queen Victoria and Prince Albert. It's the world's largest museum of applied and decorative arts. Fabulous. Honestly, the cast courts, I can spend hours, in fact, I have, in the cast courts. Fascinating. You can see fashions through time. Head to the cafe. Cafe is absolutely gorgeous. Art Deco was the first museum cafe in the world. Definitely go to the V&A Museum. Head to the cafe. Go and enjoy the cocktails. Have a wander around the museum. I always spend at least two or three hours there. Every time I go to London, it's hugely popular, wonderful museum, a fantastic shop as well, I should say.

[00:12:41.570] - Tracy Collins

Definitely add the V&A ensure to put into your itinerary. The next category are art galleries. If you enjoy art, obviously there's lots of possibilities in London in terms of art galleries. For art lovers, there

are just so many free art galleries to visit. There are some special exhibits may have a charge. It's the same at museums actually. You do have to check if there's something in particular like a special exhibition, they generally are chargeable and you have to buy tickets. Same with art galleries. If there's something special and you may have to purchase a ticket. So art galleries, National Gallery located in Trafalgar Square, it houses over 3,000 paintings.

[00:13:26.000] - Tracy Collins

The gallery's collection includes works of art from 1300 to the early 20th century. You'll see artists featured there include Van Gogh, Constable, Canaletto, Monnet, and da Vinci. The gallery also holds exhibit focus on particular artists or themes. So say these exhibits will be a small charge for non-members if you're not a member of the National Gallery, but entry itself to the National Gallery is free. Right next door to the National Gallery is the National Portrait Gallery, which actually just opened in 2023. Fabulous, I have to tell you.

[00:14:03.270] - Tracy Collins

I went to visit in, I think, June. Gorgeous. Absolutely gorgeous. It houses the most extensive collection of portraits in the world. Absolutely, go and visit... Go and visit. Really, it's beautiful and a beautiful building and it's been extremely well done. They're on Trafalgar Square. You've got the National Portrait Gallery and the National Gallery of Trafalgar Square. Two more galleries that I'd recommend are Tate Modern. You'll find art treasures from 1900 to the present day. It's a former power station, so it's not the prettiest building in the world, located in Bankside, but it's home to masterpieces by some of the most famous artists in the last century, including Picasso, Dalí, and Clee. There are also a variety of temporary exhibitions held throughout the year, but you will have to pay a small fee for those. Tate Britain. At the Tate Britain, you'll find British art from the 1500 to the present day. As you've noticed, there are quite a few art galleries, Tate art galleries in the UK. There's Tate Modern and Tate Britain in London. There's Tate Liverpool, which obviously in Liverpool, and there's a Tate St Ives in Cornwall. Those you can discover artworks from British artists such as David Hockney and William Blake at the Tate Britain.

[00:15:17.820] - Tracy Collins

Again, absolutely free. Next category are London parks. If you enjoy the outdoors, take a walk through some of London parks because it's absolutely free. It doesn't matter what time of the year it is, if the weather is good, if it's dry, there's nothing more beautiful having a walk through some of those London parks. It also gives you a bit of a break from the hecticness of London itself. Hyde Park, first one, largest of the four Royal Parks, and it's the go-to place for London is to take a jog, walk the dog, just get some fresh air. It's been the site of massive demonstrations and epic concerts like the Rolling Stones, Paul Simon, Eric Clapton. If you look for the famous Marble Arch, which is a former entrance of Buckingham Palace that was actually to Hyde Park in 1851, you'll find lots of restaurants in the park and there's bicycle boat rentals. There's also a lovely memorial to Princess Diana that shouldn't be missed. So put on your walking shoes, plan to spend a peaceful day enjoying all that the park has to offer. Next park worth considering, Hamstead Heath. It's just four miles from Trafalgar Square.

[00:16:21.030] - Tracy Collins

You'll find Hamstead Heath, which is one of the largest, most comprehensive green spaces in the city. Open, 365 days a year, very popular. Obviously you've got the Don't Miss the Zoo, Butterfly Garden and the restored Edwardian Garden, Hamstead Heath. Also climb Parliament Hill for a snapshot worthy view of the city. If you want to take a walk, there's a six mile circular walk that goes all the way around Hamstead Heath. Next is Primrose Hill, which always comes up when people talk about where you can get beautiful views of London. That's on the north side of Regent's Park. Take a picnic, if the weather is good, and enjoy the views. Take a look at 256 feet up, Primrose Hill. Spread a blanket out and enjoy the views. This gorgeous piece of land used to be Henry Yates hunting grounds. Now it's known for spectacular panoramic views and you can see many famous landmarks like the London Eye, St. Paul's Cathedral. Again, it's a favourite with locals, it's very peaceful and you can enjoy a sunset from Primrose Hill. Richmond Park is the largest of London's Royal Parks. Created by Charles I, is a deer park in the 17th century and still remains one today.

[00:17:40.180] - Tracy Collins

You'll see a deer wandering around, which is lovely. Often you can actually forget that you're on the outskirts of London. You can have a walk, enjoy, just enjoy you're looking around the lovely woodland as you walk around. Honestly, gorgeous, lovely park to have a walk around. Regents Park, if you like wildlife and its natural habitat, then a trip to Regents Park would probably be a wonderful go-to. Open to the public in 1835, it's one of the Royal Parks and covers 410 acres. If you like birdwatching, it's a great place to go to. There are at least 200 species of birds that call Regent's Park home. Are the creatures to spot as well? When you look around, maybe you'll see some squirrels. So just have a look around when you have an astral around Regents Park and see what you can spot. Some parts of Regents Park have been left to grow wild. Other sections like Queen Mary's Gardens have formal rose beds that are very precisely manicured. Throughout Regents Park, you'll find sports pitches, formal gardens, water features. So again, you can spend a long time walking around. In the spring, it's beautiful for cherry blossom on the trees in Regents Park.

[00:18:59.140] - Tracy Collins

So Kensington Gardens, I actually used to work back and on to Kensington Gardens. There you'll find the Diana Memorial playground, Albert Memorial, statue of Peter Pan, and of course, Kensington Palace. Kensington Gardens were once the private gardens on the palace and are actually now one of the Royal Parks of London. St. James's Park, another of London's Royal Parks, is surrounded by famous landmarks including Buckingham Palace, Whitehall, and Clarence House, which was the former home of the Queen Mother. The Mall and horse guards parade are included within the boundaries of the park. This is the setting for many of the ceremonial events such as the annual trooping of the Colour. See if you can spot the resident, penguins, that would be interesting, pelicans, and enjoy views of the lake and Tiffany Fountains as you scroll around. For a little fun fact, the jet of the fountain can reach a height of eight metres and is aligned to the balcony of Buckingham Palace. If you head to the Blue Bridge, you'll get spectacular views across towards Buckingham Palace, Big Ben and the London Eye. Category five, markets and stores. I don't know about you, but I love markets and I also love some of the shops.

[00:20:13.370] - Tracy Collins

London has some fantastic markets and some fantastic shops. Obviously, Brie, you just be careful you don't spend too much money at some of these places. But I will mention some of the most famous markets and shops. Portabella Market. If you've seen the movie Notting Hill, then the Portabella Road Market will look familiar. Hugh Grant sawn us through the market on the way to his bookshop, dazzling moviegoers with his self-deprecating charm. But he missed out on some spectacular deals. The Portabella Market is one of the most famous street markets in the world, known for its lively sellers. On weekends, countless stores lie on the streets, sell antiques, hot food, secondhand treasures, clothing and whatever else one wants to buy. Very busy. It's absolutely wonderful. Have a walk around Notting Hill as well because obviously beautiful, beautiful area of London. Gorgeous, the beautiful coloured homes. Another market to go to is Borough Market. This is one of the oldest and largest food markets. The only thing that you can go there, I guarantee it won't be free because it will be impossible to resist the temptation to taste some of the delicious produce on sale. But it's free to go.

[00:21:25.170] - Tracy Collins

It's located under the arches of a railway via duct and offers a wide selection of food, numerous cafes, restaurants and bars in and around the market offering takeaway, food and drink. Wellworth a visit. Always go to Borough Market. Very popular. Is incredibly popular on a Saturday though, so I wouldn't avoid it if you can. Next market to go to is Camden Market. That consists of six distinct markets which together form then to be known as the Camden Markets. These are probably I would say the most popular markets for visitors to London. At Camden Market, you'll find clothing, accessories, handicrafts, vintage, jewelry, antiques, and more, and fantastic food as well. Really good food stores and restaurants there. The markets are spread out along two streets, Camden High Street and Chalk Farm Road in Camden town. And nearest tube for that is Camden town, Kentish town, Chork Farm. I don't know if you'll be able to say Chork Farm today.

[00:22:21.970] - Tracy Collins

Next market is Common Garden. This is an area in London's West End that has lived many lives. It

was a thriving food and fruit and vegetable market in the 1600s. Went on to become a hub of prostitution, seediness in the late 1600s.

[00:22:37.860] - Tracy Collins

Later in the 1800s, it became a flourishing theatre community. Today it's now a perfectly respectable, culturally-rich and happening entertainment destination. Pedestrian at Piazza at its centre. We can watch a street performance as you decide which of the cafe, shops, market stores and pubs that you want to go to. It's also home of the Royal Opera House, London Transport Museum and the London Film Museum. Really the best way to enjoy a Covent Garden evening is to check out what's playing at theatres, have a fabulous dinner and then finish the evening with a show. That will cost you a bit, but wandering around Covent Garden is free. Wonderful, wonderful area to go to. Now, shops. Again, I'm saying these are free to go to. Where they spend money is up to. Harrods. Okay, so a trip to Harrods is like stepping into a luxury shopping whirlwind. The fashion, the colour, the excitement, it's easy to understand why the largest department store in Europe attracts over 15 million shoppers per year. You've got seven floors, over 330 departments to find. There's lots and lots of things to buy if you wanted to. Personally, I head to the food halls because they are fabulous and they are described.

[00:23:49.380] - Tracy Collins

They really live up to the description of the world's greatest food emporium. You can find any type of food that you desire. Honestly, if you're feeling hungry, you can go to the dining hall, the sushi bar, wine bar, pasta bar, fish bar, the grill, as well as a 26-seater Indian restaurant. You're not going to leave Harrods hungry. Then for the kids, okay, so I'm going to have to say this because this is just such a tradition in the UK, is Hamley's Toy Store. This is a place definitely to take the kids, and big. I visited when I was 11 with my dad and I have never forgotten. That was well over 40-something years ago. If you've got kids, honestly, take them to Hamley's. It's wonderful. It's on Regent Street. It's filled with toys, games. It's the Hamley's flagship store. It's the oldest and largest toy store in the world. Take your time, explore all seven floors. Each are dedicated to different categories of toys and games. Whilst this is a list of free things in London, I'd be surprised if you actually leave Hamley's empty handed. But again, definitely worth a visit. I've covered, in approximately 25 minutes, five categories of free things to do in London.

[00:24:58.680] - Tracy Collins

We've got museums, we've got galleries, we've got parks, we've got markets and shops, and we've got some of the sites and attractions in London. As I said at the beginning, a combination of some of those free things with obviously some of the things that you probably want to pay for, like going to the Tower of London, for example, will leave you with an absolutely fantastic itinerary. After some London itinerary ideas, we have got a variety of different itineraries. We've got itineraries for museum lovers, I've got itineraries for history lovers. We've got a three-day itinerary for first-time visitors to London. We've got various different itineraries if you're planning to visit London. I would check out our London traveltravelplanning.com website and obviously our ukTravelplanning.com website too because we have a variety of different ideas on both of those websites. I want to say a huge thank you for listening to this podcast. You can find the show notes for today's episode, which links to articles which gives more details about the things that I've spoken to you about today at uktravelplanning.com/episode81.

[00:26:12.180] - Tracy Collins

Anyway, that just leaves me to say until next week, happy UK travel planning.