

Magical London Moments: Cathy Stephen's Family Adventure

UK travel Planning podcast helps you plan your perfect UK vacation

Tracy: 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 m cosmopolitan cities to quaint villages, from historic castles to beautiful islands, and from the picturesque countryside to seaside towns.

Cathy Stephens shares her unforgettable London trip report with UK travel planning podcast

Hi and welcome to episode 123 of the UK travel Planning podcast. In this episode, I'm delighted to chat with Cathy Stephens who shares her unforgettable London trip report. Cathy and her husband recently took their eleven year old granddaughters on the trip of a lifetime to London. Planned with the input of her granddaughters, this eight day adventure was packed with memorable experiences. From witnessing the changing of the guard and touring the historic Tower of London to enjoying a show at the theatre and having a vip day at Harry Potter studios, Cathy and her family truly made the most of their time in the city. They even took a day trip to Windsor, had professional photo

shoot and shopped for jelly cats. What made this trip even more special was the preparation Cathy did with her granddaughters beforehand. Cathy created a reading list and a book club with the girls to learn all about London before their arrival, including reading the London Eye mystery which added an extra layer of excitement to their ride on the London eye.

Kathy Stephens and her husband planned a trip for their grandchildren in 2023

I started our conversation by asking Cathy to introduce herself and share where she's from.

Cathy Stevens: My name is Cathy Stephens. My husband John and I live in Edwardsville, Illinois, which is in the southern part of the state, about across the river from St. Louis. And our daughter and her family, three children, live near us and then our son and his family live in Chicago, which is about 4 hours north of us. So John and I are the grandparents of five grandchildren and we're hoping to take each one of them on a special trip when they're around ten or eleven. The oldest two are the will be twelve at the end of this year. So Mia and Shreya chose to go on their trip together instead of separately. And me and Shreya are cousins so we talked together with them quite a while ago when we began the trip planning to see where they wanted to go and our only parameters were we didn't want to go somewhere that their family wanted to take them and we didn't want to go somewhere that we've gone as a big family like Disney World or we've been lucky enough to do a lot of beach vacations. So we asked them to just choose somewhere a little different that they'd be interested in. So they were deciding between New York and London, and quite early on, they decided that they

really wanted to go to London. So, I would say it was about, let's see, our trip was in June. We were in London for eight days. we didn't go anywhere else in the UK. We stuck strictly to London, did a couple day trips that I'll talk about. But we began our planning last August of 2023, and we kicked it off with a book club and a tea party at our house. And we got dressed up, and the girls got dressed up, and we had little finger sandwiches and treats, and we introduced the books that we would be reading together in a book club to learn more about London. And they were super excited to be involved in the planning. They both loved to read. I'm a retired reading specialist, and so I work reading in any way I can. And because we live 4 hours apart, it made sense to do a Zoom book club during the times that we couldn't be together. So I'll be giving you a list of the books, Tracy, in case anyone would want.

Tracy: Please do.

Cathy Stevens: Please do. Yes, I'll send those to you.

How did you choose which books your girls would read for London trip

Tracy: I have to ask you, Cathy, how did you choose which books you were all going to read? How did you kind of go around doing that?

Cathy Stevens: Sure. I started with getting, an overall good guidebook that was, you know, child oriented, for lack of a better word. City trails. I think it's, Oh, it's by Lonely planet. And they do a series of books about different cities. So I chose the London one. We didn't read it cover to cover. We use that as a resource, and that was good for them

on their own to look through and pick things that seemed of interest to them, where they wanted to go. I based it on their interests. they both love cats. So

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Cathy Stevens: we, I found a book called Fire Cats of London, which wasn't as much about the London fire. It touched on it somewhat, but it was more about these little cats that managed to escape. they both like mysteries, and I chose the London eye mystery. So I did most of the choosing with their input, based on their interests, and I wanted a nice mix of fiction and nonfiction so we could dwell on different aspects. my husband and I had both been to London previously, but it had been several years, so we had some familiarity with the underground system, reading the map for that and getting around, and we'd been to some of the major sites like Tower of London. So we had done some of that on our own, but it was all new seeing it through their eyes, which was really fun for us. So at some point early in our planning, because of course I was doing research on my own and I like to go to websites and different, you know, groups on the Internet. And I came across your UKTP site on Facebook, and I found the Facebook group way before I found the website. And I know you are really good about explaining all the resources, but I kind of stuck with a Facebook group because it's such a wonderful community. People are so quick to answer questions and I didn't feel the need to branch out of that. But then as you posted more itinerary ideas or how to see the Tower of London on the website, then I began using the website as a resource. And then it was after that that I discovered the podcast. And we find ourselves in the car a lot, traveling from where we live up to Chicago to see the other grandchildren. So I would just put a podcast on, especially if I was by myself. Sometimes they weren't even podcasts of things that I thought we'd be doing, like taking the train anywhere. But I just listened because I found it really interesting. And all of your guests have been really

interesting to listen to their perspectives. And so I really appreciated getting to know more resources from all that you provide. So that was great. Then I started really putting the pieces of the trip in place, reserving XFA cars with Riz to pick us up at the airport. I reserved discover London black cab tour to go to Windsor for the day. So it was like a puzzle going together with what the girls wanted to do and how we needed to make that happen the easiest. So finally our day to travel approached and our granddaughter Mia, from where we live, and my husband and I traveled up to Chicago and met up with our granddaughter Shreya, spent the night with her family, and then we left out of O'Hare the next day. And I specifically wanted a nonstop, flight. And that's pretty easy to do from Chicago. So we had a six, 30 in the evening flight. The girls did great, they slept and you know, we were pretty prepared for the time change. I believe it's 6 hours. So when we landed the next morning in heathrow, we were maybe an hour late with just some minor things that had happened in O'Hare. Right away I got a message from Riz and from the driver letting me know they tracked our flight exactly where we'd be. I mean, the communication was unbelievable and I've heard so many people say this on your website and Facebook group. It's just, you know, I've used driver services in other places and this was just beyond anything I've experienced as far as a photograph of, exactly where the driver would be standing and, you know, just constant communication with us through texting. So we never felt like, what are we going to do? Where do we need to be? It was just all really well laid out for us, so we greatly appreciated that. So, Shabazz was our driver. He, met us exactly where he said he'd be, got in his car, easily, helped us with the luggage. we did not have checked bags. And because the girls are over ten, we were able to use the, I can't remember what it's called, adhethro, but you're able to electronically get through customs instead of needing to go and have, you know, the longer line.

Tracy: It's like a fast track.

Cathy Stevens: So that's what we did and that saved us a lot of time. I mean, we were with Shabazz and I don't, I want to say maybe 30 minutes at most from when we got off the plane. So that was great. We had reserved ahead of time. I really struggled with where to stay, not so much location wise. I knew that if we stayed anywhere within a five minute walk of an underground station, we were good. I mean, within central London, we didn't

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Cathy Stevens: want to be outside of central London. But, you know, when a person says a short walk, you know, to me, 15 or 20 minutes is a short walk, but it's not if it's 10:00 at night and you're getting back and you're tired. And so I really kept it to a five minute rule in my mind. That's, that's all I want to be walking because thinking of the end of the day and tired kids and tired grandparents, and that's so important.

Tracy: I'm just gonna, I'm just gonna interject there, Cathy because that is so important. And I think I repeat that, often and say, yes, it sounds like a great idea when you've got a 1520 minutes walk back to your accommodation, you know? Yeah, yeah, great. Except when you've been walking and you've done 20,000, 25,000 steps in the day.

Cathy Stevens: Exactly.

Tracy: Believe me. And I think I've said this on a couple of podcasts, I just want to get off the tube, off the bus and into my accommodation because you retired. So that's absolutely perfect that you did that.

Cathy Stevens: Yes, it was, it was. I'm sure I heard that advice from you. It was great

advice because, like you say, first thing in the morning, it's great. Go for your 20 minutes walk and get on your transportation, but not so much at the end of the day. So I checked various hotels, which I won't go into all the details of that. You've put some great resources on the website, but in the end, I just decided a hotel was probably not for our group of four on this trip. In fact, a lot of hotels don't allow more than three in a room. Some cannot guarantee you a connecting room. So then, you know, we obviously don't want to split up or have, you know, never have kids in their own room. So we ended up going through a local agency, a place like Home. I think they've been in business about 35 years. And I felt, you know, nothing against Airbnb or any of the other agencies. We've used those in the past. But I felt good about my communication with this company. Nick was who I communicated with, and I said, we want a two bedroom apartment within five minutes of an underground station. And so he had a lovely apartment in Mayfair. It was very near the Green Park station, just right down the street from the Ritz hotel. And I had known where that was, so it was great. The girls had their own bedroom with twin beds. We had a, you know, full kitchen, which we didn't make huge use of, but it was great for snacks and a washing machine. I hadn't used the all in one washer and dryer. That was totally new to me to have an appliance that did that. But I don't know, it worked better than we thought. My expectations were super low, and it was, you know, great to just do some odds and ends throughout the week. So we were really happy with our accommodations.

The girls got settled in. We had paid for the night before we arrived

The girls got settled in. We had paid for the night before we arrived so that we would be able to go right from our, you know, ride with Shabazz to the apartment. Somebody met us there and we were in the apartment, I'd say, by ten in the morning.

Tracy: Perfect.

Cathy Stevens: And, you know, it's a splurge. It's, you know, part of me is like, oh, my gosh, we're paying a night for a place we're not sleeping in. But it was worth it because we didn't have to worry about what to do with our suitcases. We could all get freshened up. The plan was to not spend a lot of time there because we didn't want to fall into wanting naps or that kind of thing.

Tracy: Ah.

Cathy Stevens: So it worked out great for us to do that. I had this plan from resources online. I'm sure some of your, people who've chimed in with their great ideas in the Facebook group that we would do this walking tour and we'd see all the main monuments after we left the apartment. And priority number one being learning how to use the underground for the girls get their oyster cards, which we did that because they're eleven. They fall into the half price group on oyster cards. So you have to see an attendant at the underground station that can set that up for you. So it does whatever they need to do with their cards to make them be half price on their.

Tracy: Yep.

Cathy Stevens: So we did take care of that at Green park. They were very helpful. My husband and I decided to use our credit cards to tap in and out and there's so many opinions on that and I will just say it worked fine for us. So.

Tracy: Absolutely. You know what, I don't know what it is about the oyster card versus contactless debate that seems to get so many backs up. And I kind of go like, like

you're saying, cathy, you choose what works for you and go for it. And both methods work really well. We never ever, ever would say do this or do that. We give you the information, the pros and cons, and then you decide and it's like there's different ways. Whatever works for you is the way to go.

Cathy Stevens: Right? Yes, I totally agree. And we have to do what's comfortable

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Cathy Stevens: and you know, it's easy to be as far away as we are and sit and imagine all the things that could happen if you're a, grandparent trying to pull your credit card out of your bag and you know, use it at the point of entry, but then we get there and the reality is we're prepared before we even go into the station. And the girls were too. It was a really good travel lesson for them. They wore their belt bags everywhere. They took care of their own oyster cards. They knew to have them ready before we got into the hustle and bustle of the station. Not that I was worried somebody was going to grab it out of their hand, I never got that feeling. But just to keep the flow of traffic going because there's so many people, they're in a hurry to get to work or hurry to get where they're going and so we need to move. And so they picked up on that very quickly. we had a system, not just for the underground stations. But pretty much anywhere we walked, one, of us, either John or myself, would lead the way. The girls sandwiched in the middle and the other one behind. So, you know, at the underground station, it didn't put the girls in a position of getting to the other side of the turnstile without one of us there. So just some basic things that made them feel comfortable about our plan and stuck with that. So that morning, after we had, you know, gotten settled at the apartment, we went to Green park, took care of that. But my plan to go walk and see all these lovely monuments totally fell apart because the girls had a different idea. And

what they really wanted to do was go on a hunt for jelly cats. I don't know if you're familiar with jelly cats.

Tracy: No, I'm not.

Cathy Stevens: Well, jelly cats are these very lovely stuffed animals that were originated in London by two brothers who started the Jelly cat company 25 years ago. This is their 25th anniversary. So part of the girls research was finding the best places to find jelly cats. And some of them are unique to London. And so they had their eye out for a couple they wanted to look for. So it was one of those, like, it is totally fine that we're not going to go look at Buckingham palace today. We are going on a jelly cat hunt because they have figured this out. They know where they want to go, and we knew how to get there. And so it was a really great day. I mean, they. We found that Selfridges has by far, the best selection of jelly cats, and that gave us a nice chance from Mayfair to, you know, use the underground, make our way to Selfridges, get out, figure out where we needed to go, and did our little jelly cat hunt. And they were as happy as could be. They each found a couple things they wanted to buy and bring back with us. So, it just ended up being a perfect first day. We made our way back closer to our neighborhood, went to Fortnum and Mason, and went to the parlor for an ice cream sundae.

Tracy: Very nice.

Cathy Stevens: That was nice. Nice way to end the afternoon. And Waterstones, bookstore is right on that same street, Piccadilly. And they also have a good selection of jelly cats that we had heard from someone else. So they talked us into one more stop for jelly cats. You know, it was just a. It was a great first day. Not what we intended, but that that was our mode for the whole trip. It's like, we can have our plan on paper and

even a plan that they've helped put together, certainly. And then if things don't go according to plan, that's fine. I mean, that's all part of travel, no matter what age you are.

Tracy: Yeah, absolutely.

Cathy Stevens: It was, you know, good lesson for them. And as far as food, I mean, we had one dinner reservation, at Deshum, later in the week. But we just pieced together what we did. We, you know, m and s was right down the street from us. We'd pick up things, bring it back to the apartment. So, an intense planning of where we were going to eat was not at all a part of our trip because that wasn't a priority. So we never starved and we always had good food, but it wasn't always pre planned way in advance of.

We took a tour of Buckingham palace for changing of the guards

So, the next morning, we did, this will go more into the tours. We took a tour, for changing of the guards. John and I had been to changing of the guards many years ago, where we just went with the crowd and stood as close to the gate as we could and watched what we could see. I just didn't think that was probably, ideal for our group of four. And I know that we could have done what we did on our own, but there were just different parts of the trip. I just didn't want to figure it out. I figured out enough things and I just thought, I'm just going to leave this to a tour. It was a pretty reasonably priced tour with fun London tours, where we started at

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St. James palace, saw the inspection of the new guards. there's a little ceremony. the

band played a song, and then our guide, there were maybe 25 in the group. He got us very quickly up to the mall so that we could kind of march alongside, so to speak, as the guards went to Buckingham palace. And it was. That part was not crowded at all. we ended at Buckingham palace, and the guide took pictures of, you know, for everybody if they wanted that. So it gave the girls a taste of the ceremony. They got to see Buckingham palace, but yet we didn't have the long wait by the fence and all the tall people in front of them, m so they couldn't see. So it worked out well for us. There are many companies that do those kinds of tours, so that's something to think about or just, you know, come up with your own plan of how you can do it on your own without paying for a tour.

Tracy: Yeah, we've got a guide to where to stand on what to do and where to go.

Cathy Stevens: Exactly.

Tracy: On the website.

Cathy Stevens: Yes. So it's very easy to do it with no expense. Just sometimes, then the next day, we did go to the London Eye, and you and I talked about that a little bit in the Facebook group. I absolutely love the London Eye. me too.

Tracy: Me too. Cathy, I'm so glad you say this. So happy to. Seriously happy to. Because I've heard people online, go, don't go. It's just a tourist trap. Don't go.

Cathy Stevens: I love it. I've heard that so many times. And honestly, if it hadn't been for the girls and reading the London Eye mystery, which gave them a lot of information about the London Eye, woven within the mystery, that there are 32 pods to represent

the 32 boroughs of London, things that I didn't know until I read the book along with them, we probably, if it had just been John and me, we probably would have just walked on by and thought, oh, yep, there it is. You know, it's, you know, but they really wanted to do it and, I wanted to do it the easiest way, which became kind of a theme for this trip. But I wasn't quite sure of what our schedule would be. And, I wanted to wait to know that we had a pretty clear day and we had absolutely gorgeous weather the whole time. I can't complain at all about the weather. I decided to do a flex ticket, which you can get online, and it also, it's flex and skip the line, so it costs a little more than just skip the line. But we didn't have to be tied down to a time, and that was going to work perfectly for our day to nothing have to do that. because I knew we had the changing of the garden in the morning. I wanted to kind of base, you know, food and rest stops or whatever based on what the girls needed and not have to be tied to the time. It worked perfectly. Went right up to security. I mean, I think the whole. The ride itself is 30 minutes. It maybe took us 40 minutes total. I mean, it was just so smooth, so beautiful, nice people in the pod offering to take pictures. It was just a really nice day, you know, fun for the girls to see London from the air, and.

Tracy: And you get fabulous views as well, you know, and people go, oh, I go, I've been up the charter, or I've been, up the sky garden, which is great. They're great views, but they give you a different view of a different part of London, is what I keep saying. It's like, if you want to see Big Ben in the House of parliament, like, you will never see them. That's the way to go. And do it, because that's the only way you're ever going to see them from that viewpoint. And they're amazing.

Cathy Stevens: It's so true.

Tracy: The Thames itself. Just the Thames. Fabulous.

Cathy Stevens: Yes. And the boats going up and down. And it was. Yes, it was beautiful. And I had thought about reserving sky garden, and, in the end, I didn't, because I thought, you know, probably for the girls, having one lovely event to see a beautiful view is enough for them. I'm more one like every day I could go see a beautiful view, but I don't need to. And so we were happy with London eye as our choice, and then it didn't, you know, tie up another time where we had to be somewhere at a certain time. So that worked great. we also had a tour, again, not necessary, because the beefeaters do a wonderful job at the Tower of London. And I've been on a befeater tour before, but for various reasons, us wanting to keep the pace to what we wanted it, and not being mixed in with a crowd that can get a little large. I ended up in advance, of course, hiring a guide through tours by locals. And her name was Isabel. She did a wonderful job, met us, sent us right off to see the crown jewels on our own to start with, and then gave us a tour of the highlights of the Tower of London. And the girls had readdez a book that's nonfiction from a great series, and it's where is the Tower of London? So they had a lot of background knowledge, knew about the ravens, so they had fun looking for a raven. And we were there maybe an hour and a half after we had seen the crown jewels.

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Cathy Stevens: That was the right amount of time for our group of four. I know some people go and spend four or 5 hours, and that would be great, too. But, you know, we had just the right amount of time. So, that worked well for us. we ended at the Millennium bridge, and, then our guide went on her way. And then I made one of my mistakes of the trip, which I tried to keep those at a minimum, but I thought, you know, where we ended up, we were not that far from the british museum. I had had the british museum down to do at a different time, and I thought, you know, I'm just going to get on my phone, see if I can get tickets, which I did. There's not a charge for them. It's just a

timed entry. Could save you some time. So we decided to stop and do that before we headed back to the apartment. And it did not end up being a good decision. I love the British Museum, but we'd already done a lot that day, and the girls were a little tired. It was incredibly hot. It was one of those days in June. We arrived on the 25th, so this was probably the 27th. I think it was 85-88 Fahrenheit that day. And I know the museum is air conditioned.

School groups were in field trip mode at the British Museum

I think the parts we were in were not. And there were lots of school groups. That was another thing that surprised me. Of course, being a teacher, I know that schools take their field trips in, you know, the end of the year. So here I'm thinking we're maybe beating crowds because the schools aren't on summer holiday yet, but in fact, they were in field trip mode. And, you know, which is great. I'm glad that the kids do that for our kids. I had printed off scavenger hunts for the different galleries that the museum has online, which are wonderful tools, but we just lost steam. So it was one of those just, we know that this isn't working. And we saw the Rosetta Stone, and they saw a few statues they wanted to look at, and then we left. And I think it's probably the world's shortest visit to the British Museum. But you know what? It'll be there when they go back.

Tracy: Exactly. Exactly. And, you know, when you're traveling with kids, you just have to have that flexibility as well, because, what we can do compared to what, a 1011 year old? I mean, I traveled with my daughter up until. I mean, she'd still travel with me now if she could, and she's 28, but I traveled everywhere with her all over the world. And, you know, you just. Sometimes what we want to do, what we can manage, is just not what

they can do. so I think the british museum can be pretty overwhelming and hot and busy and the best of times. So I think, yeah, I think you did the right thing. Pull the plug in, and as you say, it will be there.

Cathy Stevens: Yes. Yeah, it was fine. I mean, they've been there, and they can certainly go back some other time, and so will we. I mean, we'll go back on a future visit.

You had a photo session with Domi last year and Nottingham

The next day, we had a photo session scheduled with your favorite photographer, which I've seen all of her pictures. I've listened to the podcasts, I think. Have you had two or three sessions with Domi?

Tracy: Oh, four, I think now, yes, four, I think I've had three with Doug, and my favorite session, I hope he doesn't listen to this episode. My favorite session was the session that I had with Domi last year and Nottingham, I absolutely loved it. And I've got better at posing and more relaxed about it. The first time I was like, as tense as, oh, I don't know about this. And Domi's really good at making you feel relaxed. But that Notting hill one, honestly, I felt like a model. I was like strutting around. It was just, and they are my favorite photos I have ever had taken of me. And I don't normally, you know, I'm not one of those people go, I've got amazing pictures. But she just, she just really captured me that day. Just the laughter that it was just a really fun day. And I know you had a great time, didn't you?

Cathy Stevens: We had a great time. She is so wonderful to work with. And I'm not just saying that because she's your affiliate, she is just such a sweet, genuine person. And

our communication ahead of time was so smooth. I said, we're not going to change outfits. We want to be at traditional London sites. We're looking for the red phone booth and big band that, you know, this is what we want. And we might get a little weary at some point in the session. So when we're done, we're done. the girls did great. Dami had us meet near the tower bridge along the water, so she could do bridge photos. And then shad Thames with the cobbled streets and the walkways in the air, the aerial walkways between the warehouses. I've never been there, even though I've been to the tower bridge. you know, that's just one street over and I'd never been there. It was just gorgeous. And, our session started at

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Cathy Stevens: ten in the morning. And when we look at our pictures, you'd think we had a 07:00 a.m. session because there are no people in the background. She was a master of getting us from one location to another. It was incredible. after we finished in that area, we did some red photo pictures which, you know, by then the girls had loosened up. They were having fun with her and doing fun poses in the phone booths and it was just really sweet to see. Then we took the underground with her to a, very small park with Big Ben in the background. You probably know where it is. I mean, the sidewalks are crowded, crowded, crowded. And we turn and get into this little park where there's maybe six people on park benches and us, and that's it. And it was just great. She related so well to the girls. They were having so much fun. They wanted to do silly shots at the end, which she indulged and got cute pictures of them in their London sweatshirts jumping off of the park bench. And it was just a whole lot of fun being with her. I have to say that I, this was totally my mess up. But she sent the images very quickly. Within the 48 hours, I'd say I had the images, very clear instructions on downloading them and the deadline to get them downloaded, etcetera. So I'm looking

at them, I'm downloading. Oh, I love this one. I love this one. Sending it home to the parents of the girls, you know, what we had taken, and then I got away from it and I didn't get the rest of them downloaded. And then, you know, the trip goes on, and then we're getting the girls back home, and we had another thing to go on to when we got back home. And it was like, oh, my goodness, it's past the deadline for downloading these photos. So in a panic, I'm reaching. I am texting her. Like, I am so sorry, but is there anything I can do? Is there? And she's like, just relax. You know, let me, you know, don't cry, because I said, I feel like crying. I just don't even know what pictures I don't have. You know, I was, like, in that. Luckily, I wasn't talking to her. It was all by texting. And so, she said, I can help you through this, and, let me get back to you later today, which she did. She said the photos were no longer in her computer, but she could use a service that could retrieve deleted images and for a very reasonable fee, which I happily paid, she had it done, and the images were restored and crisis averted. I was so thankful. I told her, I said, I still haven't written a review for you, but I'm going to sing your praises to Tracy because I just so appreciated getting, you know, in the end, I had downloaded many of them, but not all of them. So, you know, it was worth the retrieval fee, and I greatly appreciated her helping us through that.

Once we started traveling with the grandchildren, then it was more prevalent that photographers

So if anybody has any doubt as to which photographer to hire when they go to London, I'd say, dummy is the person for you. And, you know, it's not something we did when, we vacationed with our own children. We never had a family photo professionally taken, ever. And, but once we started traveling with the grandchildren, then it was more prevalent that you could find photographers in vacation places. It was like, well, we

need a family picture. Taken, you know. And so now we do that whenever we are, family of eleven. When we're, excuse me, on a trip, we always have a photographer to mark the moment. They're not always perfect shots. It's okay, you know, but definitely with the grand girls it was like, we're getting some pictures professionally done. It's just so much, you know, in the big picture it costs a fraction of what the trip costs and yet it's the best souvenir to take home.

Tracy: Absolutely. Got those memories forever.

Cathy Stevens: Exactly.

Tracy: And for the girls as well. It's.

Cathy Stevens: Yes.

Tracy: Perfect. Yes, perfect mementos.

Cathy Stevens: Yes, it was wonderful. So that was a really fun day. We were dressed up for photos. And then, that night we went to Harry Potter and the cursed child, which the girls had chosen. They're both Harry Potter fans, Mia, a little more than Shreya, but they both love Harry Potter. And so I thought, you know, as long as we're dressed, not that being dressed up is a thing anymore necessarily, but, you know, for me it's still a thing to, you know, get dressed up a little nicer and go to the theater. And I wasn't really sure how they would do with the, you know, it's still in two parts here. Now that it's moved on to the US, they are, they cut about an hour out of it and it's only one part in New York. It's a three hour production instead of two, two and a half hours, two and a quarter, whatever it is in London. But oh my goodness, it's so wonderfully done. I ordered the

tickets pretty far in advance to get good seats and the time just passed so quickly. Then we had the break for dinner and went to seven dials so everybody

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Cathy Stevens: could get what they would like. had ice cream at utterlicious because that was another goal of the girls to have try lots of ice cream places. And we did.

Tracy: Yeah.

Cathy Stevens: And then back for part two. And you know, equally stunning, the second part of the play. And I mean, it just captivated all of our attention the whole time. And my husband's probably the only one in the group that hasn't read any of the books, but he'd seen, the first few movies, so he's definitely familiar. The girls had both read the script for the story because it was not put out in a traditional book form, but the script has been published as a book. So that was very helpful for them to know that the story takes place 19 years after the final book. So they gave Papa a little tutoring before we went so he wouldn't be totally lost as far as what was going on. So, you know, highly recommend. It was a wonderful theater experience and that was the only theater we went to, but we were really glad that we had done that. So it was a lot of fun. The next day was going to be our kind of sleep in day. after a later night at the theater, we had reservations later in the day to go to Java Whiskers Cat cafe. And that was a choice of the girls. And luckily we all like cats, so that was fine. We went to the one in, Marylebone because that was more convenient to where we were staying. And they have another location, I can't recall where it is, but if you're ten or over you can have time in the kitten lounge and then if you're six or older you can be in the cat lounge. They don't want the real little kids in the kitten lounge just for safety reasons. And it's a

wonderful adoption service. You know, they take in strays, get them their shots, nurse them back to health if needed and then try, to adopt them. No, one can just walk in and adopt one on the spot of. But you can begin the process and then after a person is vetted then they can make a match and let you go home with a kitten. And we knew that we couldn't do that. But they still had fun. but they wanted one more trip back to Selfridges before we went to the cat cafe because by now we've seen every jelly cat store in London. Many I haven't even mentioned and I won't. but they weren't convinced they had seen everything or they had some favorites they wanted to go back and have another look at. And so it was like, well, we'll have to get up a little earlier than planned. Oh, we'll do it. We'll do it. So that was a great motivator. And then we went into John Lewis, which we hadn't been to before. I'd never been in that store, right across the street. And they also have jelly cats. So, they got a chance to have another look for jelly cats and then on to the cat cafe. And I had reserved the tea at the cat cafe as well. I wasn't sure what our eating situation would be. And that might be the day that we went to. Oh, that was the day we went to dissum for lunch. So I knew we had one meal taken care of. In hindsight, I probably wouldn't do the tea at the cafe. It was fine. The food was good. but as much of a cat lover as I am, it was a little bit much for me to have the cats on the table, which, you know, you're not supposed to pick them up, and I understand that. And you can gently nudge them away. And it wasn't terrible, it wasn't awful, but it maybe wasn't quite as relaxing as a traditional tea would be, I guess would be the way to say it. And one of the little granddaughters who probably loves cats the most is actually allergic. So she was, you know, doing a little bit of sneezing and all that, but I mean, it was fine. I would definitely recommend supporting their business because it's wonderful. And, you know, on a future trip, I'd probably just have a cup of tea and enjoy the kittens. but yes, it was really good.

Tracy booked a deluxe tour of Warner Brothers Studios with Riz

So we headed back home, because the next morning we were headed to Warner Brothers Studios, and that was going to be an early morning. And this was another occasion that I had booked with Riz in advance because this was probably definitely our biggest splurge of the trip. We bought the deluxe tour tickets, which include breakfast and a guided tour of the studios, as well as many other perks. And the breakfast was, we were supposed to be there at 1015 to start. And I just wasn't confident enough about my knowledge of getting from a to b that I could make that happen on our own, or, we could make that happen on our own. And I wanted to give the girls a little longer to sleep in and not, you know, we have to leave 2 hours early for this, you know, 45 minutes trip just because I'm not sure about it. So I was really glad that, we had booked with riz. Adar was

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the driver. He picked us, you know, up in plenty of time to get to the studios, you know, dropped us right off at the front door, and then everything went from there. It was just a fabulous day. It was a wonderful breakfast in the great hall. Not the great hall, but the food hall. on white tablecloth, order off the menu. Our group for our tour was just the four of us and another couple. So it was just six people with a wonderful guide who loves what she does and has a wealth of knowledge about the studios and about Harry Potter. And it was just great to be able to go around with her to explain things instead of us trying to figure things out. And the girls would have helped us figure things out because they have a pretty good background, but it was fun for them to hear from an expert, too. So that lasted about two and a half hours. she took us to the back lot, and that's where our tour ended. But then we could go back in and make the loop as many

times as we wanted after that. So we had our butterbeer and butterbeer ice cream, and then went back in, did the green screen shots, which, as part of the deluxe tour, you don't have to wait in line for those. You're wearing a lanyard that they see that and get you to the front quickly to get those done. And so it saved us a lot of time to go that route. And then I didn't ask for Riz to have anybody pick us up because I knew at the end of the day, we could figure out how to get home. Actually went on your website and you answered, or on your Facebook group, you answered right away because I knew I'd seen it. Like which shuttle to which train to which what, you know, I just need to have it, and then I'll know what to do once I get there. And you answered right away. And it was super easy. And in hindsight, we could have done it in the morning, but I'm glad we didn't because it was just a treat to be taken there by Adar and this wonderfully clean car and friendly driver. so we were happy with that. We definitely didn't want somebody waiting for us all day because we didn't know, are we going to be here, you know, 3 hours or 6 hours? And in the end, we were there over 6 hours. So it was good that we just did our own transportation home. So that worked well. And definitely when we talked afterwards, you know, highlights of the trip, because every day we'd talk about favorite things of the day, which somehow jelly cats always got into the conversation. But now you're going to have to go look for them, Tracy. I am.

Tracy: you know that.

Cathy Stevens: but no, definitely, the whole day at the Warner brothers studios was a highlight for everybody. I mean, it was just a really great day. we did do, I had talked about the kitty cafe. We did a tea there, but we did do more of a traditional tea that the girls chose. That was part of their research, to choose where they wanted to go for afternoon tea. And they chose the science tea at the ampersand hotel, which was a whole lot of fun. I mean, it was not, I don't know what you'd call it. It's more traditional

than a tea with cats, but it's not a tea at the Ritz. So it's somewhere in between.

Tracy: We could do the traditional afternoon tea or the themed afternoon teas. That's. And I love trying both. I like my traditional. But also I think the themed ones are so much fun and there's some amazing ones to choose from as well.

Cathy Stevens: There are. And we, you know, I would have had a harder time had I been making the choice. They pretty much zeroed in on this right away. I was very interested in Bridget's tea bus and I thought that looked like a whole lot of fun, but one of the girls can get a little, you know, carsick kind of thing. And so I think it's good that they didn't. Not that I've ever heard of anybody getting sick on that, but they made a very good choice for themselves. And John and I ordered an adult tea and split it, which, again, I think I read, in your Facebook group that that's an okay thing to do because we don't know, is that like being, you know, like, not polite or something? But they were completely fine with that, so. And the food was good, you know, and the girls had such fun with their little experiments to make the drinks and, you know, do things with the food. And the setting is so relaxed. So pretty. Such a pretty hotel. And it's in the drawing room of the hotel. So I would definitely recommend that they have a different themed one. I think it's a dinosaur themed one at the same hotel. Does that sound familiar?

Tracy: That sounds familiar. Yeah, maybe it is at that sound. Yeah. I think there's so many. Honestly, I try to keep up with all the different ones. I'm trying to choose for my own trip back, thinking, oh, which ones am I going to do this time? And honestly, I struggle. I'm like, we did the Peter Pan one myself and Doug once at the shard, which we really enjoyed.

Cathy Stevens: Oh, that sounds fun.

Tracy: Yeah, it was fun. It really was. But the science one sounds good.

Cathy Stevens: Yes, it is good. And, you know, our girls, like I said, are going on twelve. They still thought it was fun. I'm sure younger kids would enjoy it as well. So, you know,

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Cathy Stevens: and I don't even remember what things cost, but in the big picture, it didn't seem to be out of the ordinary for what teas cost. And the service was great.

We hired discover London black cab tours to take us to Windsor for the day

So definitely recommend that the next day we had hired discover real London black cab tours to take us to Windsor, for the day. And this was for me. I have never been to Windsor. I love knowing all about the royal family. I just really wanted to see where Queen, Elizabeth and Prince Philip had been laid to rest. And the girls were happy to go along, but they're seeing it through a different, you know, view than my husband and I, you know, Queen Elizabeth was the queen our whole entire life, so it's just a different perspective, I guess, I'd say. But they were happy to go along. Andrew was our driver, did, a great job driving us through, Eton College, explaining things along the way. He was real clear that once we got into Windsor Castle, he's not allowed to guide because they don't want to step on the toes of the official guides who are in the castle. But he said it's okay if I point out some of my favorite things. And he did that, and it was, you

know, a really great tour. He had pointed out that the line for Queen Mary's dollhouse was relatively short, that if we wanted to do that, we should go get in line, so.

Tracy: And absolutely worth doing.

Cathy Stevens: Yes, it was. And I was glad that he had mentioned that because, you know, we had a year to plan this. Some things I delved very deeply into the planning for, and others, became, I'm just going to have to get there and let somebody else help me with that. And so, you know, that's what Andrew did. So I went, not knowing a whole lot about what we were going to see or do, other than I knew that we would see the St. George's chapel, which is beautiful, where the grave sites are of, Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip. So it was a lovely day. Andrew suggested a couple places we might try in town for lunch. And he left us on his own while he had some other things to do. So we had a quick lunch. We had a reservation at Doctor Chuck's Windsor chocolate factory, I think is the name of it. for a chocolate, making class for the girls. And by class it was like a 15 minutes session, but there'd been a mix up with the scheduling and they actually had a school group in the entire day as they rotated kids in for their lessons so we could tell things weren't quite, the way we would expect them to be. But the owner was very sweet, came out, apologized. Of course, our money was refunded. The girls ended up getting chocolate one way or another anyway, so it was, you know, they, it was just another one of those good travel lessons. Sometimes you just have to roll with what we thought was going to happen is not what happened. But that's okay. We'll just you know, move on. So it was fine, then headed back. Andrew was a great driver. Never had a bit of worry about, you know, traffic or anything. Got us safely back to our apartment and at this point, we just had one more day left in London. It was like, how could this have gone so quickly? And we really did keep the last day open for what the girls want, what your last minute things to do. We had the feeling jelly cats would sneak into that

last day and that's fine. my husband's a big Lego fan, does a lot of Lego builds, so he definitely wanted to go to the Lego store, of course, and they wanted him, papa, we have to go to the Lego store for you. And it's a wonderful store. I mean, we've been to a much smaller Lego store in Chicago, but, the London one is quite remarkable. It's, you know, very amazing to see the things that are built out of legos. James Bond's car and all the London landmarks and even Queen Elizabeth out of legos. It's like.

Tracy: I know, it's amazing, isn't it? I've actually got my eye on at the moment because I'll be in the UK a little bit longer than Doug on this next trip, so he's coming back. So I'm going to buy him, a Lego red phone box to make. I spotted that at the Lego shop beside us. I thought, well, that'll be really cool. We might as well start on all the UK themed stuff. So.

Cathy Stevens: Yes. Oh, that. Yes. You need that collection for sure.

Tracy: Absolutely, absolutely.

Cathy Stevens: so, of course, we had to pop into the m and m store for a little snack because it's right across the street there. And we did that. went to Harrods, went to Hamley's, you know, things that were in that area just to, you know, I had gone to Harrods years ago. One of the girl's dads had been to London as part of a high school trip. He had brought me a coffee cup and saucer back from Harrods. So, it's like, we need to go to Harrods. And it looks the same to me. I don't know if it is or not, but I've never spent a lot of time there. But it's just beautiful and just, you know, we didn't see anything other than the toy department and the food hall.

Tracy: well, I remember

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Tracy: even as a child going to London in the mid seventies with my father and I remember Harrods and I remember, it's funny what you remember, is Piccadilly Circus. I remember Piccadilly Circus because we had a meal there and, a little place and, you know, it was all the black Forest ghetto time. So I remember having. It must have been about eight, I think. Anyway, I'm a black forest ghetto and going to Hamley's and those are the. And I don't think they've changed. Harrods. The nice thing in Harrods these days, if you. I've not been up to the toy store for a long time, is the food halls are all redone and I can spend hours wandering around looking at the food. Yes. I can't afford to buy any of it, but I can look at it.

Cathy Stevens: Well, maybe one little chocolate, you know. Yeah.

Tracy: I think the croissant last time was about eight pound, I think. Well, I was like, how much?

Cathy Stevens: Wow. Well, it's beautiful. It all looks wonderful. But, So it's just a nice, relaxed way to spend the day, because that night we had tickets for ceremony of the keys that I had booked through walks. The girls were excited to go back to the Tower of London and excited to see it at night. And, it is such a different experience being there at night, which my husband and I did. We. I want to say 1980. We went to the ceremony of the keys back when, you sent a letter requesting the date that you wanted to go. I don't think there was any charge. But then you got the tickets in the mail. You know, it's going back decades here. Of course, it's all different now.

The public can buy tickets for the Tower of London for five pounds online

And for the public can buy tickets. Is it for five pounds at a certain amount of time in advance?

Tracy: Yeah. You have to go online at a certain point to be able to buy the tickets.

Cathy Stevens: Right.

Tracy: I think the five pound, if you do it that way.

Cathy Stevens: Yeah, yeah. And, you know, we preferred to go with walks. I didn't want to worry about getting online at the right time, getting the tickets. I wanted a chance to be in a smaller group tour, which we were. There were only 17 of us, and, warder never met us and he was a wonderful storyteller. Just had the kids in stitches about some of the terrible things that have gone on at the Tower of London. But he tells it so with such a sense of humor that it didn't make it seem as bad as it was. So, they loved that. It was just, you know, even though it's still. This was July 2, it's still daylight, quite late. There was definitely a twilight coming over the tower.

Tracy: It's amazing, isn't it, to be there?

Cathy Stevens: It's just beautiful. And our pictures didn't do justice to how peaceful and beautiful it was. And to know that the beefeaters and their families are living in apartments right there on the grounds, which I hadn't known until this trip. I never thought about what all those other buildings were, I guess, but. Oh, yeah, he told us

about the pub that's on site. And, then we went into the chapel, which is just beautiful. It's such a sweet, peaceful chapel. He said anyone can attend services there on Sunday. And it was a wonderful tour, and he paid ours. Two were the only children in the group of 17, and he happened to also, ah, have a daughter who is eleven. So he related really well to the girls and drew them in and, you know, made them definitely feel a welcome part of the group. That was awesome. I had communicated with you about the part that surprised me, which, to see the actual ceremony itself. Other groups are coming together at that point when it's time for the ceremony to start, and I don't remember, we were with the warder neve for maybe an hour. I don't know. You've done this tour, so if that sounds great. And then we go to see the actual ceremony of the keys. And so the people who bought their tickets online come to that group. And our particular night, there were two other pretty large groups. One was a fundraising group because they were all dressed up in their ball gowns and tuxedos. And then there was another group. And so at that point, it became a little bit of jostling to get where we needed to be to see the ceremony. And I'm not complaining, it was not the fault of anyone. It's just I didn't ever think about that. I didn't ever think about being any more than our 17, plus the 50 who, you know, of course, public who bought the tickets. It worked out they had asked children to come forward so they could see the ceremony. And, because it was such a large group, we weren't comfortable sending them forward on their own. So John and I moved up just along the side so we could see the girls in the front and not be blocking anyone else that needed to be up front. So we stood pretty far off to the side and it was fine. And they thought it was really interesting. And, you know, now that the tower's locked up, how are we going to get out of here? And, you know, the cut open part of the door to escape. That was all very exciting. So it was a beautiful evening. It was a wonderful evening. But I would just say,

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Cathy Stevens: just keep in mind it's for the ending part. It's not going to be your own little group.

Tracy: Yeah, yeah, I think that's a good point. I think, I think the magic of that, that ceremony, because I've done it a few times, I'd like to do it again. I keep. That's gonna do it again. My aim is to try and have all the, all the, human warriors take me on a tour. Wouldn't that be amazing? Because they're all so different and they've all got amazing personalities and such amazing stories to tell. And I think, for me, the beauty of that, and I've done it in the summer and I've done it in the winter, is just being able to spend that time with the yeoman warder where you can ask them so much. And they said that. They've both said, I think, two or three times I've done it. They said that they feel that they have the privilege of being able to talk to a few people and answer the. Tell us things that they can't do in the morning when they do the free tours, because you can have a lot of people on those tours and they manage them really, really well. But just that personal side. And also, for me, going in the chapel was so, special. That honestly blew my mind because I just thought, you can go in the chapel on the day, but there's, like, millions of people in there, but you just can't have that. And there's things he was telling us about in there as well. I just. I was just honestly, blew my mind. So that was a fantastic part of it. And I guess, yeah. When you actually see the ceremony, it's not, you don't have that kind of small group. The human order will explain what happens during the ceremony. So you get that kind of. You get that background. But, but, yes, it is a magical experience. And your names will be put down in the book for the Tower of London Fort witnessing the ceremony of the key. So both the girls will have their name in an official tower of London book to witness their historic ceremony.

Cathy Stevens: So it's very exciting.

Tracy: And that was the last night.

Cathy had arranged through Riz to have driver pick us up after ceremony

Wow.

Cathy Stevens: I know. That's, that's when the tickets were available. And I thought, you know, we didn't have a particularly early flight the next day. I think it was 130 in the afternoon. So I had arranged through Riz to have a, driver pick us up after the ceremony because. Just. Because I just thought it would be a good thing to do. And it was. And he was. Adar, who had taken us to the studios, was, the same driver who came to pick us up, and we communicated. It was a little tricky for him because he hadn't done a pickup there, but it all worked out. He knew exactly where to go. We were outside no longer than five minutes before we connected, just because of how the streets are laid out around there. So it was great. He got us back to our apartment, and he knew he would be the driver the next day to take us to the airport. So, that was really nice to be with him, you know, three different times in a row. And, again, everything everyone's heard about Riz is true. It's just so well organized. I never had a doubt that anything would go wrong, and if it had, Riz would have been available to contact. So.

Tracy: And that's great to hear. And I do say, and I've said this in the group, and, I'll say it on the podcast as well, is that, because you can listen to the people that we work with on the podcast, you can meet them in the Facebook group as well, but you can listen to them on the podcast. And that was very important to me, and that's very important to me when I choose who we work with, because I'm really selective about who we

partner with. So, yes, I do have. And I've been asked that, yes, I do have an affiliate relationship, because also, I have to make money to run a podcast and run Facebook group and do all the things that we do on the website, but I am so careful about who I choose. And Riz actually emailed me about three times before went, right, okay, let's meet. And so we met in London, and I went, yeah, yeah, absolutely. And he has not let me or anybody else down right from that moment. Exactly what he said is exactly what he's done. And it's the same for all of our partners, all of our guides, all of the people we work with. Just, they want the best. They are the best. I firmly believe that they are the best. so it's just wonderful to hear, you know, your experiences, Cathy.

Cathy Stevens: Yes.

Tracy: Back that up.

Cathy Stevens: Well, and I'm so grateful to have you doing the vetting of these people, because otherwise I would just be doing a Google search for photographers in London. And it's like, I don't even need to do that. I feel like I know Domi from just, you know, seeing the photos, going to our website, hearing the podcast, and it's like, yeah, that's easy. So, it's great for the travelers that, you know, are part of your community, too. Just a great resource. So, yeah, the next morning, we did what we need to do, needed to do to get out of the apartment, and the door picked us up in plenty of time to get us to the airport. We had a very, very comfortable cushion, and off we went back to Chicago. So, easy flight. And, you know, they were very excited to see their families. Of course, it was, hard to part ways, but we saw each other soon after that, so it was good.

Tracy: And memories. Memories for life. Memories for life, completely. And a wonderful, opportunity for the girls to spend that time together as well. It's so special. I took my

daughter when she turned 18. I asked her where she wanted to go, and she chose New York. My niece, when she turned 21, I said, where do you

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Tracy: want to go? She went, New York. And I went, oh, come and stay in Europe. Anyway, she said, Italy. So I took her around Italy for three weeks. And, you know, amazing. It's just having the ability to do this, and I know there's now a lot of grandparents. I have no grandchildren yet. I'm still waiting. Yes, but my daughter is studying medicine at the moment, so I've got a four year wait before we even get to that point because she's doing her studies. But what an amazing thing to do. What an amazing experience to be able to provide your grandchildren with, to take them, to London. And they say you've got three other ones to take wherever they're going to choose. It'll be interesting, but just the ability to take the two girls together and create memories like that, just fantastic. Amazing. Cathy.

Cathy Stevens: Yes, it was. And I was fortunate enough to take my daughter to London, one of the girl's mothers, to London when she graduated from college. And again, it's fun to relive our experience. We happened to be there when it was tripping the color. Is it tripping the colors?

Tracy: Tripping the color, yeah.

Cathy Stevens: Yes. And they've happened upon that by accident. So we have a lot of memories ourselves, and now her daughter has those, memories that she's made with us, and it's very fun.

Tracy: Oh, well, it's been just wonderful catching up with you today, Cathy You've got a very active member in our group as well. I know you've answered questions and you've pointed people in the direction of our resource, which we always, we always appreciate, but just amazing to talk to you, and I'm hoping you can share some photos of your trip as well. That we can add into the show notes would be fantastic. And that reading list, absolutely, 100% yes, that would be brilliant as well.

Cathy Stevens: Fantastic.

Tracy: But for, this episode. Thank you so much for coming on, Cathy.

Cathy Stevens: Oh, well, thank you for having me, Tracy. It was a delight. And, my husband and I plan to be in London next, year, and so I'll be in contact with your resources then to line our trip up. It's shorter, but we're happy to come back.

This week's episode of the UK travel planning podcast was compiled

Tracy: Thank you for tuning into this week's episode of the UK travel planning podcast. As always, show notes can be found@uktravelplanning.com if you've enjoyed the show, why not leave us feedback via text or a review on your favourite podcast app? We love to hear from m you, and you never know. You may receive a shout out in a future episode, but as always, that just leaves me to stay until next week. Happy UK travel planning.

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