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Introduction to London

London's history spans two millennia. Ever since the Romans set up camp on the banks of the Thames in AD 43 this great city has sprawled along the river in both directions, up and down residual Roman roads and over the intervening fields and countryside, swallowing up disparate villages whole. This is London's essence: its complex, complicated, convoluted spread.

London is the seat of the British government as well as the British monarchy and as a consequence is rich in tradition, pomp and ceremony. By 1800 London was the largest and most important city in the world; throughout the 19th century the Victorians built on these advantages and London became the nucleus of the vast British Empire.

London is a global financial centre as well as a cultural capital. In London you will find four World Heritage sites, internationally famous attractions and some of the best art, theatre, music, entertainment and shopping in the world. London has hosted the Olympic Games three times in its history and is still riding high from the successes of 2012. London is also a food-lovers paradise and has over 60 Michelin-starred restaurants. It has numerous parks and green spaces and its river and waterways are open for boating, walking and cycling. It has one of the most extensive public transport systems of any modern metropolis as well as the world's busiest international airport. Here too you will find the finest taxi drivers, who have passed the rigorous and celebrated 'Knowledge' exam, which demands an intimate acquaintance with London's complicated street layout. London cabbies pride themselves on being able to pick you up and take you anywhere you want via the best route.

London has formulated and distilled many great inventions: penicillin, fire insurance, the daily newspaper, canned food, traffic lights, the electrical generator, the first television, the Internet—the list is impressive. London is so proud of its luminaries that buildings are riddled with plaques proclaiming the great and the good who have once lived in them.

Today, London is truly a stimulating, cosmopolitan and thoroughly modern metropolis. Over eight million people live here. Thousands of daily commuters work here. Foreign visitors arrive here as both tourists and expatriates. London is always busy, always crowded, always buzzing. Londoners seldom conform to stereotype: they rarely form an orderly queue for the bus, never wear bowler hats and generally prefer coffee to tea; but what they excel at is adapting to change. As the modern city strives to accommodate its burgeoning population and update its infrastructure, London is constantly evolving and transforming itself. Geographically, London may not be in the centre of Europe, but in terms of diversity, it is at the centre of the world.