

Esther's London Adventure

May 6 to May 19, 2015

The primary focus of this month-long trip was to visit Sardinia and Corsica. But the opportunity to spend time in London was too good to let pass. I spent four days on my own (May 6 to May 11th) at the Soroptimist Club aka Hotel 63, (you should have received an email after my visit to Richard III with British friend Joan P.) then joined Road Scholar's ten day "The Best of British Theater — the West End and Beyond" (May 11 - 19, 2015) program.

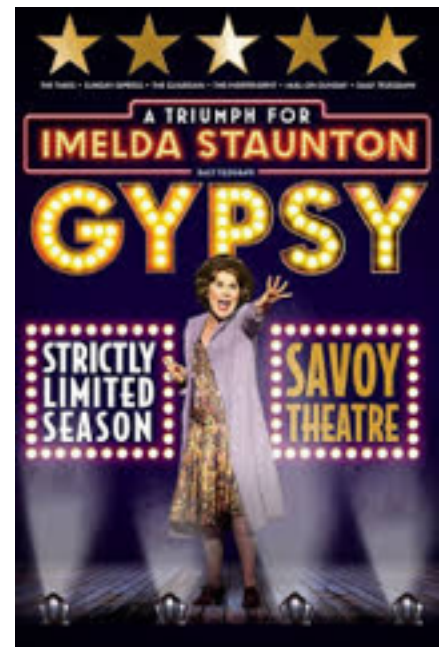


There were just 13 participants in the group - which was a small enough number that everyone felt comfortable participating in discussions with both guides, speakers and with each other.

Let me say a bit about this program before I go on to Sardinia and Corsica. Bottom line ... it was excellent. Our leaders were Malcolm Jones (director, professor and manager of the V&A Theater Museum for 10 years) and John Garrod, a Blue Badge guide. Between the two, all questions concerning London and theater were answered in a instant.

The selected plays and activities were:

- Oppenheimer by Tom Morton-Smith
- Matchbox Theater: An Evening of Short Entertainments by Michael Frayn
- Gypsy by Arthur Laurents and starring Imelda Staunton
- Hay Fever by Noel Coward
- lectures on and reviews of the above plays
- backstage tour at the Palladium Theater
- workshop in the Rehearsal Room of RADA (Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts)
- visit to the Theater Exhibit at the Victoria and Albert Museum
- visit to the Globe theater (where the guides were on strike and their signs had Shakespearean quotes, i.e. "Alls Well that Pays Well" and "The P(L)ays the Thing!")
- and a "Sunday Morning Coffee Concert" with lunch at Wigmore Hall where we were treated to the music of Saint-Saens and Mozart



It turned out to be a varied itinerary filled with good experiences. Private transportation to each venue was a plus, and the speakers were excellent. In addition Kate Bassett,

the theater critic for the (London) Times, Simon Geal, a Shakespearean actor spoke to us on the difficulties and joys of doing The Bard on stage. His readings were wonderful and he has the kind of voice that would make a grocery list sound like poetry.



Sylvestra le Touzel

Sylvestra (r) as Margaret Thatcher



Our most exciting speaker, however, was Sylvestra Le Touzel, who plays Margaret Thatcher in “The Audience” — a series of sketches about the Prime Minister’s weekly audience with the Queen. She is a friend of Malcolm, our resident lecturer, and visited with us the morning after we saw her performance. This was big-time as she is well known in British theater circles and has a long list of impressive credits with the Royal Shakespeare Company, numerous London Theaters including the Old Vic, National Theater, Strand, Almeida, Aldwych, and more. She was wonderful giving us insight into how she gets in to “character” for her performance. We also gained awareness of a bit of theater magic as during the play, the “Queen” played by Kristin Scott Thomas, makes numerous split-second costume changes, and Sylvestra regaled us with insight into how this is staged.



“The Queen” with her Prime Ministers

In our group of 13, everyone was in pairs and then there was me. The advantage of this is I was generally seated next to John and Malcolm during the performances. What a treat -- I had my very own blue-badge (highest level) guide to talk to, and my very own theater critic/historian to reminisce with about long ago plays.



I particularly enjoyed the play “Oppenheimer.” At various points during the performance the audience is lectured on the complexities of nuclear fusion. Surprisingly I just about thought I could understand nuclear physics afterwards ... Silly me! The play is the story of physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer’s work from 1939 until the dropping of “Fat Boy” on Hiroshima. It is dialog intensive, with even Albert Einstein making an appearance lecturing the audience on theoretical physics. It spans Oppenheimer’s work at the Berkeley campus and the beginning of the Manhattan

Project to the dropping of the atomic bomb. Luckily, in 1999 I had seen the play Copenhagen by Michael Frayn on the same topic and many of the reviews given to us to read made comparisons.

The conclusion, of course, concerns moral issues and how this brilliant man becomes a tragic hero when he realizes he has helped create a power that can destroy every single creature on earth.

Attending the play was almost exhausting with its theater-lectures and heavy dialogue. I was grateful for a “listening device” and didn’t miss a word of it.

There was a bit of free time worked into our schedule and anyone who has ever talked to me about London, knows I love Hampstead. So during a free afternoon I made my way north to visit some of my favorite spots in this village. I was telling two people in the program about Hampstead and offered to take them up. I gave them a walking tour with no notes, just stories from memory of doing the New Years Day Walk when Community Education Travel had its London Theater tours. Had to go way back into the mental archives for some of the fun village facts!



The ten days went by quickly. Soon I was on the Stansted Express train on my way to spend one night at the Hilton Hotel by Stansted Airport. My flight the next day was at 10am and Easy Jet requests a three hour check-in time. Had I stayed the night in London, I would have had to get up at 4:30-ish.

Hotel Reviews I Posted on tripadvisor.com

Soroptimist Club// Number 63 Hotel
63 Bayswater Road
London W2 3PH

www.number62.co.uk



I love this hotel -- the people are so nice, the rooms are sparkling clean and comfortable (though a bit dorm-room size), the buffet and cooked breakfast is wonderful as well as filling and it is about a one minute walk to Lancaster Gate tube station.

Lighting is excellent for reading in bed and there are ample electrical outlets around the room and in the bathroom.

Wi-fi is complimentary and stable.

The bathroom has a warming rack which is a perfect place to hang things that have been washed out. Water pressure is good and there was never a problem with hot water.

One recommendation is to bring two bars of your own soap if you are staying more than a few days - one for the shower, the other for the sink. The soap provided is minuscule - this is understandable as often guests stay just a few days.

The hotel is in a listed building (historic building cannot be changed without city authorization) so rooms had to be retrofitted. I was in room (single) #311 which faces Kensington Gardens. Though there is air-conditioning available, the rooms facing south may become too hot in summer. Just be aware of this.



Radisson Blu Grafton Hotel
130 Tottenham Court Road
London W1P 9HP

I had a love/hate relationship with the hotel. The staff is exceptionally nice and helpful, the buffet breakfast is generous and plentiful and the room bathroom amenities are nice.

I had room 322 and it was miniscule. I had to ask that two chairs and a small round table be removed. This gave me a little more walking around room. There are no drawers, so I opened the ironing board and used it as a surface. The bathroom was decent size, but badly designed and the only place to hang things that had been washed out was on a rack over the toilet.

The room has two windows that face other windows and a brick wall, so it is necessary to keep shades closed - making the room dark.

There are no electrical outlets near the bed. I visited the Robert Dyas store down the street and bought an extension cord. There are numerous electrical outlets on the desk, though none near the bed.

Housekeeping was very good -- everything was replenished each day.

Wi-fi is complimentary and fast.

I had asked for a quiet area, away from the elevators (this is important), and this room met my criteria. I did see rooms in the newer part of the building and they were larger, brighter and much better designed.

Hilton Stansted Airport Hotel
Round Coppice Road
Stansted CM24 1SF

www.hilton.com/Stansted

There can't be a better choice if you have an early flight from Stansted. I paid 54 GBP for one night and 10 GBP extra for the buffet breakfast which is excellent. If you opt for the buffet breakfast don't be in a rush -- it is worth spending a little time enjoying it.



Reception was friendly and helpful. I requested a room on the top floor and was given 398 - it was a cookie-cutter room, but exactly what was needed for the one night. The wake-up call came exactly on time.

There is a 3 GBP charge for the shuttle bus - which I think should be included for hotel guests - but it is not.

Wi-fi was good at times, errant at other times. But it functioned well enough to send a few emails and do a Skype call.

I would stay at this hotel again if flying from Stansted.

note: it took me 40 min. to get thru security at the airport, be aware of this when planning your arrival