



L'Wren Scott's London

The designer gives Avril Groom her picks for capital culture, couture and country retreats – all without leaving the city. Portrait by Richard Grassie

“I have been coming to London for years, and I have never known it to be as culturally vibrant as it is today. One always thinks of New York and Paris as the great cultural cities, but London is just way ahead right now. If you take particular inspiration from the visual arts, the great galleries are putting on so many brilliant exhibitions at the moment. You can plot a whole day going from one to another; you may get exhausted, but there is so much to soak up that it's well worthwhile.

For many years I practically lived in Claridge's when visiting London – it is many people's favourite hotel. The little, private-feeling Fumoir bar is very stylish and a great place for tea with a bunch of girlfriends, or to have a drink. The door is usually shut, so it's easy to walk past without noticing it, but then you will have missed a treat. The hotel beds are supremely comfortable and the service is impeccable – the staff can't do enough for you. And it's a lovely place to stay in any season – the atmosphere is always right. You have to think how long you're

going to stay anywhere – the restored Oliver Messel suite at the Dorchester, with its 1950s-style theatrical flamboyance and wonderful terrace with views across London, is very special if you need the space and are staying a while. For shorter stays, the smaller, intimate hotels that are less formal and more personal may be more appropriate: Brown's has a very cosy feel to its modern-traditional tearoom and restaurant, especially in the winter, while The Halkin has a distinctive, very calm style. It also has the advantage of Nahm, an extremely good Thai restaurant where the Australian chef, David Thompson, has been winning many awards.

A good long-weekend agenda in London is to immerse yourself in the art scene. Good places to buy are Sadie Coles and the Gagosian Gallery, both of which have interesting exhibitions – often of artists who may not be familiar unless

you are a serious aficionado. A good place to start is at Tate Britain, taking in whichever exhibition is on – the recent one about Picasso's influence on British art was very interesting and instructive. Always take a peek at the Turner rooms, because his colours and atmospheres must be some of the most

inspiring ever painted. It's then not far to move on to the National Portrait Gallery; there is a little restaurant above it – The Portrait – with a fantastic view across Trafalgar Square and down to the Houses of Parliament, which is great for a light lunch (best to book) or a drink. The food is excellent, modern-British style.

Another place with the same youthful spirit is the Donmar Warehouse, an intimate theatre that has thought-provoking and often unconventional productions. There is also a whole arts scene at beautiful Somerset House, which has frequent exhibitions and is a favourite hangout for British fashion designers. On a different level, if you enjoy good rock music it's definitely worth going to the Brixton Academy – it's a really good venue, comparatively civilised, and still gets some very cool British and international bands. Unlike many people in the fashion business, I enjoy shopping and



Top: L'Wren Scott at Tate Modern with St Paul's in the background. Left: The Fumoir bar at Claridge's



wearing other designers' work. Browns is a specialist store with a mix of designers and top-level, handworked items, while Matches has a different, slightly edgier aesthetic, which runs through it like a thread even though it has several branches. Couturelab is special, a destination boutique in a little mews off Hyde Park Corner with made-to-order and one-off pieces, and items from big brands that are often highly decorative, never intended for larger scale production. Shops like these have their own viewpoint and buy from designer brands in their own way, so the same labels seem very different in each store.

London has certain areas that are great for browsing – the Chelsea Farmers' Market is good for wholesome produce and things like stone-ground flour and organic pizzas, and is next door to a fantastic Vietnamese takeaway that goes by the unfortunate name of Phat Phuc but does wonderfully fresh noodles and salads, very reasonably priced. It's in a little courtyard where you can stay and eat on sunny days. From there you can

walk to John Sandoe and indulge another of my passions, books – it's small, quaint, individual and has knowledgeable and helpful staff. Another favourite is Sotheran's for rare and beautiful vintage books on everything from art and architecture to historic travel in India. Antiques enthusiasts will love wandering the Piccadilly Road and stores like Gallery 25 and Rose-Uniacke. If you look hard enough, even in SW1 there are bargains, though you have to be prepared to dig, study and restore. When you need a break, have a coffee and healthy snack at Daylesford, an organic food and homewares emporium with a great café.

London's culinary scene is as vibrant as the art scene; the way food is prepared illustrates interesting fusions. One



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particular favourite of mine is Dinings, an ostensibly Japanese restaurant in Marylebone that does great Japanese classics like wagyu beef and duck tataki, but also uses lovely South American fruit salsas. It's tiny so you must book. Also very exciting is the cooking at Petersham Nurseries, which has changed for the even better under the new chef, Greg Malouf. He is bringing in Middle Eastern and Persian influences to make interesting dishes – the chicken liver terrine has Egyptian spices in it and the lamb is cooked with Persian aubergine and spinach. The Nurseries is a favourite place for anything to do with gardening, too; it's such an example of the ideal – how we'd all love our gardens to be but which we so rarely achieve. I also find

garden inspiration in out-of-doors London, which is unique for its many beautiful parks. A wonderful example is a long walk in Richmond Park, especially through the Isabella Plantation, which has huge trees and exotic flowers all year. It's in the suburbs, but feels like you're losing yourself in a quiet bit of country. To get to Richmond, take a river boat from Westminster Pier – it passes by some of London's prettiest areas. Another good walk is along the Thames from Putney to Richmond – though it's even better on a bike: take the boat to Putney and hire one there. St James's Park is one of the most picturesque, designed to give those long vistas of Buckingham Palace but with intimate corners too, and the daffodils along Birdcage Walk in the spring are uplifting. Hyde Park allows you to be a little bit healthy – mix exercise with art and follow a walk with a visit to the Serpentine Gallery, especially to see the summer pavilion installation, commissioned each year.

It is easy to plan a grown-up London weekend, but if you're in town with children you must view the city in a different way. On a sunny day, Hyde Park works for them too and, silly though it sounds, taking a pedalo out on the Serpentine really is great fun. And everyone loves the London Eye, which, if you book ahead and there's good visibility, is a great experience – once (though a little slow for some). If the views are not good, walk down the South Bank to the IMAX cinema and catch the latest 3D action movie – the kids will be ecstatic and you, like me, may find yourself enjoying it more than you ever expected. London culture comes in so many impressive forms, and this is just another example of its scope.

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THE HIT LIST

HOTELS

Prices are based on a double room per night with breakfast.
Browns, Albemarle St, London W1 (020-7493-6020; www.brownsotel.com), from £375.
Claridge's, Brook St, London W1 (020-7629-8860; www.claridges.co.uk), from £370.
The Dorchester, Park Lane, London W1 (020-7629-8888; www.thedorchester.com), from £437.
The Halkin, Halkin St, London SW1 (020-7333-1000; www.halkin.com), from £320.

RESTAURANTS AND BARS

Prices are for a three-course meal for one with half a bottle of wine.
Daylesford, 44B Piccadilly Rd, London SW1 (020-7881-8060; www.daylesfordorganic.com), £38.

Dinings, 22 Harcourt St, London W1 (020-7723-0666; www.dinings.co.uk), £40.
Hix at the Albemarle, Albemarle St, London W1 (020-7493-6020; thealbemarlerestaurant.com), £56.
Petersham Nurseries Café (pictured below), Church Lane, off Petersham Rd, Richmond, Surrey TW10 7AG (020-8940-5230; www.petershamnurseries.com), £60.
Phat Phuc, 151 Sydney St, London SW3 (020-7351-3843; www.phatphucnoodlebar.com), £19.



Portrait Restaurant, National Portrait Gallery, St Martin's Place, London WC2 (020-7312-2490; www.searcs.co.uk), £42.

GALLERIES, MUSEUMS, VENUES

Brixton Academy, 211 Stockwell Rd, London SW9 (020-7771-3000; www.o2academybrixton.co.uk).
Chelsea Farmers' Market, 125 Sydney St, London SW3.
Donmar Warehouse, 41 Earlham St, London WC2 (0844-871-7624; www.donmarwarehouse.com).
Gagosian Gallery, 17-19 Davies St, London W1 (020-7493-3020; www.gagosian.com).
IMAX, 1 Charlie Chaplin Walk, London SE1 (020-7199-6000; www.bfi.org.uk).
London Eye, Minster Court, London SE1 (0871-781-3000; www.londoneye.com), opens 10am, closes 8.30pm-12am during year.
Sadie Coles, 69 South Audley

St, London W1 (020-7493-8611; www.sadiecoles.com).
Somerset House, Strand, London WC1 (020-7845-4600; www.somerset-house.org.uk).
Tate Britain, Millbank, London SW1 (020-7887-8888; www.tate.org.uk); 10am-6pm, till 10pm Fri.
Tate Modern, Bankside, London SE1 (020-7887-8888; www.tate.org.uk); 10am-6pm, till 10pm Fri-Sat.

SHOPS

Browns, 24-27 South Molton St, London W1 (020-7514-0016; www.brownsfashion.com).
CoutureLab, 32 Grosvenor Crescent Mews, London SW1 (020-7499-7082; www.couturelab.com).
Gallery 25, 26 Piccadilly Rd, London SW1 (020-7730-7516; www.gallery25.co.uk).
John Sandoe, 10 Blacklands Terrace, London SW3 (020-7589-9473; www.johnsandoe.com).

Matches, 87 Marylebone High St, London W1 (020-7487-5400; www.matchesfashion.com).
Rose Uniacke, 76-78 Piccadilly Rd, London SW1 (020-7730-7050; www.roseuniacke.com).
Sotheran's, 2 Sackville St, London W1 (020-7439-6151; www.sotherans.co.uk).

LESS THAN AN HOUR AWAY

Blenheim Palace (www.blenheimpalace.com) is an ideal day trip, as is the nearby town of Woodstock with good lunch spots such as **La Galleria** (www.lagalleriawoodstock.com).

WHEN TO VISIT

To beat half-term and tourist crowds, visit in late April or early May when the parks are fresh and flowery, or late October, once the big exhibitions have started but the Christmas rush hasn't.