



Sushi Samba

LONDON *unlocked*

The real joy of London is uncovering her secrets. Former London resident **Norah Casey** shares the treasures of this bustling, fast moving city.



Norah with Rachel Allen

I love London. It was my home for 18 years. The pace of change is fast with new streetscapes, restaurants, transformations of old buildings, dramatic architectural newcomers...There is nothing subtle about London's pace of change. There's a restlessness to the city, a need to constantly

reinvent the old, stay relevant, surge ahead with fearless and edgy concoctions. This is a city where the stale and tired get left behind as a new army of experimentalists surge onwards, whether it's in the arts, architecture, food or fashion. And I'm still at home there. Even though I feel out of the loop despite regular visits. So I relished the challenge of getting back into the swing of London life revisiting old haunts and hanging out with the cool kids on the edgy fringe. Here is my best of the old classics, the crazy new stuff and the wild-but-somehow-it-works secrets of my London.



Corrigan's Mayfair

THE CLASSICS

Back in 1998 myself and small group of Irish women in London began meeting regularly at Richard Corrigan's former restaurant, Lindsay House in Soho. We hatched a plan over many long lunches to launch a Women's Irish Network in London (now WIN), partly because we wanted to create a fun club to connect with other like minded Irish women but also to raise funds for the Irish Youth Foundation. Our first breakfast was at the

Langham and James Dyson was our guest speaker (he was a neighbour of fellow founder and brilliant writer Polly Devlin). It is one of the most amazing women's groups and even though I rented out our house in London back in 2003 I still stay close to all my great women friends in London through WIN. So during this visit I interviewed Rachel Allen in front of a live audience for a WIN breakfast at Richard's flagship Corrigan's Mayfair on Grosvenor Street. I virtually live at Richard's other great restaurant, Bentley's Oyster Bar and Grill in Swallow Street, when I am in town so it was great to reconnect with the plusher and more sophisticated sister. Head to Corrigan's for a special treat, from door to table, the service is impeccable. The clubby Mayfair décor has a hint of quirkiness but best of all you get to sample Richard's stunning gourmet cooking. corrigansmayfair.co.uk



The Wolseley on Piccadilly

A return visit to The Wolseley on Piccadilly reminded me how much I loved it. There was a time when only the rich and famous could bag a table at this classic old car showroom, except for those of us who knew Sean the Irish-born doorman! The food is still wholesome and the people watching even better. We enjoyed Dungarvan Oysters, perfectly cooked steaks and soaked up the buzzy atmosphere of this great haunt. Even better we persuaded the waiter to part with some gossip. Annie Lennox was enjoying dinner over to our left and Blur's Damon Albarn had just sauntered past our table. Our man in the know says that David and Victoria Beckham are regulars. Apparently they usually share a bowl of soup and two glasses of Champagne – so that's the secret to dining out on a diet! Kate Middleton pops in with Will and Harry and they mingle with the rest of the diners, very low key, he tells us. Not like the vulgarity of those American superstars he says scornfully, who bring an entire entourage of security. He laughed when he heard we were Irish and said that Louis Walsh used to come in and one night he nearly got knocked down crossing the road (we weren't sure why that was funny). Make a booking just in case and enjoy equal amounts great food and great people watching. thewolseley.com

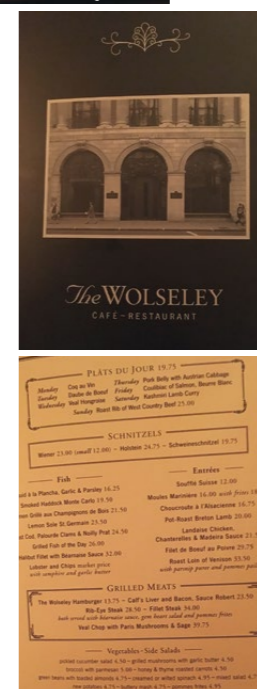
Another classic I wanted to revisit was Roka. I was a fan of the Charlotte Street original which opened about 12 years ago to much fanfare as the brainchild of award winning chef Rainer Becker of Zuma fame. I love Japanese food and I had clearly missed that Roka had opened two new sister restaurants in

Roka Aldwych



Roka Aldwych

Aldwych and Mayfair about 18 months ago. The traffic and crowds of this busy corner of London recede as you enter the Zen-like contemporary interior of Roka Aldwych. Natural stone and wood dominate the entrance with a perfectly aligned display of Saki bottles hinting at the Japanese precision in all things, culinary and otherwise. The pop of bright orange and purple from the statuesque bird of paradise arrangements are stark against the cool grey colourscape. We ate at a table next to a wall adorned solely with precise rows of empty glass jars with muslin caps secured with twine and brown paper tags. If the restaurant is the set, then the kitchen is the theatre with blue-uniformed chefs cooking live with the charcoal robata grill the centre of all the action. We had the set lunchtime menu, the Hayameshi Teishoku for £27 per person. It's a great choice if you want to keep the price down while sampling a selection from the chef – sashimi, some of the robata grilled meats and dumplings. You won't be disappointed. The dishes are impeccable as was the service. (My guest assured me the cocktails were famously good here.) rokarestaurant.com/aldwych



Cicchetti

Every now and then I go somewhere I wished I had discovered sooner. A friend had been to London recently and suggested I try Cicchetti, a small plate Italian restaurant in Piccadilly with a menu created by chef genius Aldo Zilli. Cicchetti are typical of Venetian bars where small plates are served to share.



Cicchetti

I liked the place from the moment I entered. It's bright and stylish with sleek Italian marble tabletops centre stage to contemporary yellow leather chairs. It's bright and fun with Italian meats hanging from hooks, oversized melons on display and a bright red tomato adorning each table. While a Venetian-styled marble bar dominates one side of the dining room, a wall of horizontal, gravity-defying wine bottles adorns the other. And along the top runs a ticker tape of scripted menu morsels listing the likes of risotto zucca, gamberoni piccante – all to whet the appetite even further. The backdrop of the open kitchen and wood burning oven at the end of the dining room grounds Cicchetti in its Italian roots with oodles of London style. The menu is traditional Italian with a nod to most regional dishes. The small plate concept is so much better if you want to have a leisurely evening eating as much or as little as you want.

We enjoyed some fine Italian staples, bruschetta, Sicilian gamberoni, pumpkin risotto with saffron, pepper and black truffles, lamb cutlets with rosemary and thyme and sea bass with fresh clams and homemade gnocchi.

There's a lot of style and Italian flair about the interior and the staff, from the warm welcome to the charming and engaging chats over choices and between courses.

Cicchetti is part of the Manchester-based, Italian-owned San Carlo Cicchetti group. Cicchetti expanded from its House of Fraser Manchester base to locations in Covent Garden, Piccadilly and overseas in Bangkok. It's open all day, friends say the breakfast is great and while we were there on a bustling weeknight it would be best to book in advance. sancarlocicchetti.co.uk



Cicchetti



The Hospital Club

THE CLUBS

The Hospital Club, Covent Garden

This is the media hub of London's club scene and was founded by two unlikely partners: Dave Stewart, of Eurythmics, and Paul Allen, co-founder of Microsoft. Its purpose was to create a collaborative, creative space for the film, theatre and television industry. The spaces are pretty packed when I visit so it's doing something right while essentially getting it wrong. Membership is pricey but the Club boasts a TV studio, a cinema, and art gallery as well as a restaurant and bars. It's pretty cool, as you can imagine, and way more upmarket and grown up than some of the other media haunts. You can book one of the 15 bedrooms and enjoy all the Club facilities including any of the multiple events, talks and gigs hosted in the many function rooms. And if that doesn't convince you then the seventies inspired bedrooms come with an an erotic minibar from Holloway Smith Noir with very swanky nipple tassels and tie cuffs. Oh, and a barman visits the bedrooms at 7pm to make your favourite cocktail from his trolley. Now that's service. thehospitalclub.com

The Dead Dolls House

The Dead Dolls House in Islington is a London club with a difference. Great cocktails, jazz, live DJ and eclectic décor across three floors and membership just involves an online form in advance. Even better, it stays open until 4am. thedeaddollshouse.co.uk



The Dead Dolls House

The Groucho Club



The Groucho Club

I've been a member of the Groucho Club for years and now the bedrooms are all refurbished, along with the rest of the Club, it is my base in London. The only problem is you never get to bed because the bar is full of fun and people I know. But it's a lot tamer now than it used to be. The Groucho follows no rules except a line from its namesake Groucho Marx who allegedly said: 'I don't want to belong to any club that will accept me as a member'. So ironically those who strive to be members are more likely to be rejected. Money won't buy you access and neither will fame. You have to be a Groucho kind of person to fit in and that makes for a mix of strange bedfellows.

I could write a book about some crazy nights at the Groucho over the past 20 years – I had my 'Welcome to London' party there and my 'Farewell to London' party there and in-between I learned many life lessons. James Nesbitt and a few other Irish expats including myself hit upon an idea to leave art paper, charcoal and paints behind the bar and persuaded almost every celebrity at the club to draw a picture or do a painting to raise funds for a great charity in Northern Ireland. Amazingly we got nearly 200, from some amazing pieces by the talented Damien Hirst and Tracey Emin to the strange squiggles of rock stars. Anything could happen at the Groucho and mostly it did. Back in the day you were as likely to bump into Bono as Princess Diana and Bill Clinton. Rod Melvin has played the piano at the Groucho forever and on occasion we persuade him to do a stint for Bloomsday or the like. He's played for all the greats with great patience during those all-nighters. The new Groucho has shades of the old. I don't get lost any more so they must have connected the corridors better, it has a lift and the décor isn't pretentious – it still has incredible art and a down-to-earth restaurant which still serves the best fish and chips. And you don't have to be a member to stay and enjoy that. thegrouchoclub.com



LONDON'S STREETS

EXMOUTH MARKET

Take a walk on the wild side and sample the retro bars, restaurants and shops on Exmouth Market. I used to think Marlyebone High Street would be my favourite place to live if I returned to London but it seems tame by comparison to the edgy vibe of Exmouth Market. About ten years ago the street re-energised its foodie heritage and brought back the street market which in turn attracted all manner of café bars and restaurants.

Coffee at **Caravan**, which roasts its own coffee, is unmissable as much for the windows that offer the perfect vantage point to marvel at the theatre of regulars who frequent the market. caravanonexmouth.co.uk

Right next door you'll meet a sandwich board encouraging you to head down to the **Dirty Bar** also the home of Soho House-owned **Dirty Burger** serving 'sinful shakes, cheeseburgers, and dirty bacon'.



Some of the strangest and compelling windows are those of **Macellaio RC**, a hybrid Italian butcher and restaurant that boasts Damien Hirst-style suspended frozen tuna in one window and shanks of meat hung in the other with two blood red leather chesterfield sofas offering outside seating. macellaiorc.com

Spanish and Middle Eastern cooking comes courtesy of **Moro** at 34 Exmouth Market (Moro.co.uk) and next door its walk-in tapas-style sister restaurant **Morito** (Morito.co.uk). If you fancy some East End grub then head for Clark's which serves jellied eels with pie and mash. Clark's, 46 Exmouth Market; Tel: +44 20 7837 1974

If football is your thing then enjoy some table footie at **Café Kick** (Cafekick.co.uk). **Coin Laundry** on the corner at number 70 (Coinlaundry.co.uk) is a retro gem serving chicken kiev amidst kitsch seventies memorabilia. More traditional but great Sunday lunch can be had at the heart of the market at **The Exmouth Arms** (Exmoutharms.com) – look out for the Irish element! Award-winning goldsmith David McCaul and his brother Barry were born in Portmarnock but 56 Exmouth Market is now home to their contemporary bespoke jewellery business (Mccaul.com).

THE STRANGE AND THE BEAUTIFUL

Some of London's more weird and wonderful discoveries

Digital dining

Head to **Inamo** in Soho or Covent garden for Asian food with a difference. The menu is projected onto the table top and using touch screen technology you can order food, drinks and order your taxi home. inamo-restaurant.com

Underground supper

For something completely different why not have supper in a 1967 London underground carriage. You can book your own supper club on the tube or book one of the public underground supper clubs at the Basement Galley in Walthamstow. basementgalley.com

Dine in the dark

Dining in the dark is one of my all time great experiences and there is nowhere better than Clerkenwell-based **Dans Le Noir**. Here you will be served in total darkness guided and served by blind people designed to create awareness along with a unique culinary experience. danslenoir.com

Sex shop/speakeasy

Enter a sex shop in Soho and discover **La Bodega Negra**, great Mexican food (street-, beach- and free-style) and a very cool vibe loved by the likes of Kate Moss and Lily Allen. labodeganegra.com

Sacramental cocktails

The Catholic guilt thing could make for a bit of discomfort but **Communion Bar** is a basement ecclesiastically-themed cocktail bar complete with lots of iconography, sacramental wine and communion wafers.

Your granny would kill you! communionbar.com

Jeans at the Ritz

I used to have a heart attack if someone suggested meeting at the **Ritz** because the dress code is tougher than Ascot so I was delighted to hear that the newly refurbished and infamous **Rivoli Bar** has ditched the dress code but not the magic. The cocktails aren't cheap but as a special treat you can't beat it. theritzlondon.com



Panorama dining and drinks

For drinks with a view head to the **Sky Pod Bar** in what Londoners call the walkie-talkie building at Fenchurch Street in Bank. The dress code is stylish (to match the contemporary, glass-fronted space) but the waiting list for cocktails and dinner with the best views open 30 days in advance – so book ahead. skygarden.london

The great outdoors

I have never mastered the art of being relaxed at **Sushi Samba** but it is the most spectacular location for dinner and the highest outdoor dining terrace in Europe. And it has plenty of wow from the enormous orange tree sculpture at the heart of the bar to the open bamboo ceiling with floating lights. I guarantee you will have never experienced anything like it. sushisamba.com



Communion Bar

WHERE TO STAY

London was my home for so long I still find it hard to find somewhere that replaces my own house. Now I think I have found just the place, only it's better.



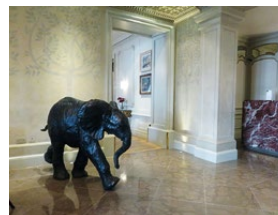
I've worked as a consultant with hotels in the past to help reenergise teams and inspire innovation and intrapreneurship.

One of the exercises I use is to remove everything from the room and to ask them to imagine that a stranger is going to knock on the door and ask to stay the night. Where would they start if faced with a blank canvass. If I was to do that exercise myself I would imagine a place like The Kensington. It's the kind of home you wish you always lived in, grand, stylish and witty. There's a reason why The Kensington has achieved that all too elusive emotional connection which is beyond the reach of most high end hotels. I suspect it's the secret to the success of the Doyle Group's €200 million refurbishment of their flagship hotels. I felt it when I stayed at the Dupont Circle in Washington and more powerfully at the newly reimagined Kensington. When I asked about the eclectic art and collectables the staff told me that it was down to the Chairwoman of The Doyle Group, Bernie Gallagher – we don't know each other but we are kindred design spirits. And it's the personal touches that make the difference at The Kensington, even though some world class design talent came on board to help.

The transformation is immediately apparent as you enter the pristine, white columned façade of The Kensington. The classic grandeur of the tree-lined Queen's Gate in the Royal Borough of Kensington gives way to a cool contemporary space cleverly curated to bring some of the outside in while hinting at the surprises to come. A statuesque and beautiful ornamental tree is mirrored by delicate trees painted on yellowed walls. A pile of shiny red apples

looks incongruous on a rosewood table bracketed by an art deco sofa and chairs of forest green. The muted tones are relieved by bright pink cushions plumped to perfection. The dramatic deep red, marble-fronted reception desk is a bold statement. In the minutes it took to walk towards that desk I thought I had sussed the design theme. And then I spied a three-foot bronze elephant striding towards me. As I came to realise during my stay...it's that kind of place. You are as likely to see a giant polar bear as a stuffed pheasant. Contemporary art shares walls with classic landscapes. While sitting in the elegant drawing rooms with crystal chandeliers you might catch a glimpse of a basket filled with logs reminiscent of a hunting lodge. I passed a Barrie Cooke as I strolled to the restaurant and felt even more at home (his work also graces my walls). And elephants abound. I lost count of how many. One little fellow is set to charge at the elevators, I was sitting having afternoon tea and noticed one behind me. I love elephants, my house is full of them, so The Kensington has instantly become a little more special to me.

My own quarters were divine. I had only 20 minutes to unpack and get changed for an appointment and I spent most of them wandering from sitting room to bedroom to the gigantic bathroom spotting something different each time. The Knightsbridge Suite was refurbished over the past year and it's very special. The temptation to linger was strong, especially when I opened the imposing art deco lacquered drinks cabinet and discovered a sparkling array of crystal glasses and decanters of port and sherry. The beautiful fireplace and gilded chairs



said 'sit here and sip that sherry and forget about rushing around to make that appointment'. The marble bathroom was the most tempting of all but the spa tub and flatscreen TV sadly had to wait. The bedroom featured an enormous comfortable bed and a statement velvet circular day bed where I wanted to curl up and unwind with a good book. The lovely touch of a daily tray complete with a glass teapot of dried whole chamomile flowers and a flask of hot water resulted in an addiction to that daily treat back home!

The Town House is the newly refurbished restaurant where I had lunch with a friend one day. An hour of blissful serenity in a book-lined space where the same regal and confident colours of reds, purples and subtle duck egg blues are married with gold-edged mirrors and clean, white fireplaces. The surroundings and the food were impeccable; crispy pig cheek with mustard crème fraîche, Dorset crab on Guinness bread with watercress and apple and sea bass with samphire. The menu also has some classics like roast pheasant with chestnut stuffing and coq au vin. The restaurant is a series of three drawing rooms, The Library, The Study and The White Room. The fluidity of the rooms and the ambient changes create an intimate more personalised space, very unlike a hotel restaurant. It adds to the townhouse feel of The Kensington. And for something completely different, step into the new K Bar where subtle lighting, leather armchairs and wood panelling creates a space more like a gentleman's club.

The Kensington has everything you would expect from a five-star hotel in one of the most exclusive London locations. And the trademark Doyle Group excellence in service is evident from the charming General Manager Simon Maguire to all of the staff I met during my stay. This is a place where style meets substance. Sleek elegance that manages not to feel oppressive and playful surprises to catch the eye.

It's a beautiful place to call home, if even for just a few days. doylecollection.com/hotels/the-kensington-hotel