Coffee Shop Hopping in East London:

Three Perfect Spots to Take in While in the City

London is a place where there’s not a shortage of anything, much less coffee shops. The Starbucks are aplenty, but the true Londoners know that where there’s a mass produced White Chocolate Mocha, there’s likely a much better locally roasted option right around the corner. If you’re lucky enough to be in London, as I was over the summer, one of the best things you could do would be to spend a day wandering from coffee shop to coffee shop enjoying the atmosphere of the vibrant city and its lively shops. Finding hidden gems within this bustling city can be a bit of a challenge, but you just need to know where to look to find a great coffee house. And if you’re very lucky, you might snag a cozy corner to spend the day and quietly feed your caffeine addiction.

In May of 2015, I had the opportunity to participate in a two week long art history study tour in central London, England. Throughout the week, the six other students and I were guided through London’s top museums by our professor. The Tate Britain, The National Gallery, Victoria and Albert Museum were among the few that served as our classrooms as we were able to see the artwork in person that we had spent so much time studying in textbooks. Seeing Van Gogh’s “Portrait with a Bandaged Ear” (1889) in the Courtauld Institute of Art was enough to move me to tears. The coffee shops in the museums and galleries quickly became my
sanctuary as they served as a place for me to stop and realize that these paintings I’d studied for years were now right in front of me. We would visit several museums a day, making us appreciate those moments when we could sit and enjoy the artwork that we’d flown across an ocean to see.

On weekends, we were given free reign over the city. I set about to see as much of London as possible, and in the process, to drink as much coffee as humanly possible. I tried practically every variation of the classic coffee beverage. Visiting the countless galleries and museums within London was also a great way to get a taste of coffee as well. From the Courtauld Institute to the White Chapel Gallery, almost every museum offers some sort of cafe where one is able to take a break, enjoy an espresso, and revel in an atmosphere that only London could provide.

The three coffee houses that I’ll be discussing quickly became my favorites over countless others I visited during my time in London. The coffee was some of the best I’ve tasted and the charm of the individual shops made want to stay on the well-worn couches forever. However, don’t be afraid to completely ignore these suggestions and just pick a stop on the Underground map and go exploring. The most important aspect of coffee shop hopping is to just experience as many different shops as possible, not to complete a checklist.
TomTom’s Coffee House

Address: 114 Ebury Street, London SW1
Underground Stop: South Kensington or Sloane Square
What to Try: Mocha (they roast their beans locally)
What’s Nearby: ‘Peggy Porschen Cakes’ and the Institute of Contemporary Arts

TomTom’s Coffee House (114 Ebury Street, London SW1) took a bit of searching to find, but was definitely worth it.

As it turned out though, it was only a few streets east of our apartment in South Kensington. This particular coffee shop is only open for breakfast and lunch making it the perfect choice for a late brunch, which is exactly what I and a few other students did. The small bistro offered picturesque outdoor dining on their busy street corner; a perfect spot to spend the morning people watching. TomTom’s Coffee House sits on a street corner, allowing you to take in as much of the view as possible.

The interior of the café is small, but nearly all the patrons chose to sit outside and enjoy the overcast Saturday, and we did the same. Their standard mocha (an espresso and milk with chocolate flavor added, £2.90) was the perfect companion to a leisurely day of walking around the area. I opted for any extra shot of espresso (for a total of 3 shots) and I’m glad I did as we walked over six miles that day.

People have good reason for to Ebury Street not just for TomTom’s coffee, which they roast themselves and sell to the public in small batches, but also for the well-known cupcakes
that are found in the bakery across the way. The brightly painted bakery, officially known as Peggy Porschen Cakes, sees a steady stream of customers filtering in and out of the pale pink building each day.

Ebury Street is nestled in the district of Belgravia, one of the wealthiest districts in the world so when you visit TomTom’s, it’d be wise to not wear your ‘I heart London’ sweatshirt. The district is close to Buckingham Palace, as well, so you’re able to comfortably walk to the residence if you keep up with the royals.

The Institute of Contemporary Arts, or the ICA (The Mall, London SW1Y 5AH) is a ten minute cab ride away if you aren’t in the mood to walk.

**Brick Lane Coffee**

- **Address:** 157 Brick Ln E1 SB
- **Underground Stop:** Aldgate East
- **What to Try:** The Fat Wife* (Flat Wife)
- **What’s Nearby:** ‘Biegal Bake: Brick Lane Bakery’ and ‘Rough Trade’ Music Shop

Outsiders view Brick Lane in East London as a part of town that’s “roughing it”, those in the know realize that it’s one of the best places in the city. You have to know where you’re going to even find it, but once you do, you’ll never want to leave. The grungy streets provided a stark contrast with the lively and crowded shops Complete walls are covered with tattered posters peeking out behind newly placed ones advertising small concerts and shows as you make your
way to the aptly named “Brick Lane Coffee” (157 Brick Ln, London E1 6SB). It’s around two miles from the Aldgate East Underground station, but the atmosphere along is completely worth the hike.

Before you even set foot in Brick Lane Coffee, however, go next door to “Beigel Bake: Brick Lane Bakery” and grab one of the best bagels you’ll ever eat for cheap. More often than not, when you return to Brick Lane Coffee you’ll notice most other patrons with an inconspicuous white bag like yours with a freshly made salmon and cream cheese bagel (Biegal Bake’s most loved menu item) inside. Grab a “Fat Wife” (AKA a flat white, £2.50) from the makeshift counter and a seat in the back corner if you can. The coffee itself is as impressive as the venue. The Flat White offered a good balance between the creaminess of the milk and the bitter taste of the espresso.

The small, narrow shop doesn’t seem like much when you first enter (much like Brick Lane itself) but once you begin to observe your surroundings you see that it’s much more than a simple coffee house. Brick Lane Coffee is a haven — it could be most aptly described as a truly authentic bohemian coffee shop. Countless people drifting through. Most choose to stay a while on the well-worn leather couches. Older gentlemen sit on the bench outside enjoying their black coffees and reliving old times while inside the walls, the newer generation sits on their laptops, typing away at thesis papers (Brick Lane is only a few miles from a prestigious graduate art institute) or checking emails.

After enjoying your coffee and bagel, take as much time as possible to enjoy the sheer atmosphere of the coffee house. Be aware, though, it’s a place where one can easily lose track of time. On your almost two mile trek back out to the tube station, make sure to peek into “Rough Trade”, a renowned music store. Also slip into “Aldgate Coffee House” right across the
A single day trip to Oxford is not nearly enough time to explore the old city and take in the local attractions. However, if you only have one day as I did, make sure to pencil in a stop at Morton’s (22 Broad Street Oxford OX1 3AS). The small, almost cramped sandwich shop offers little in terms of curb appeal, yet what it lacks on the outward beauty it more than makes up for in the baristas’ skill. A single brass espresso machine takes up most of the limited counter space and only to small sets of tables are in the space for those who want to stay in and enjoy their coffee. They only offer one size in the Café Latte (£2.70) as most coffee shops do; however, Morton’s ‘one size’ was quite large. Though I didn’t get to spend much time there, Morton’s does have a “secret garden” through the back of the establishment, with plants climbing the brick walls and flowers in planters blooming without restraint. Morton’s secret garden is the epitome of English charm.

After grabbing a macchiato, head down to “Blackwell’s”, one of the UK’s largest bookstores, because there isn’t a better combination than books and coffee. The several floors would take days to truly get through, but if you have to be quick, make certain you walk through The Norrington
Room which is one of the most famous bookselling rooms in the world. In fact, I sat down with the rather large stack of books I’d picked up throughout the store and proceeded to spend numerous hours reading and sipping my coffee undisturbed. Blackwell’s also has an art and poster shop across from their world-renown bookstore that’s undoubtedly worth a look, They have floors of books of art history and its theories and countless prints of well-known paintings as well as original works by local, contemporary artists. Though Oxford is predominantly known for it’s colleges and schools, the town is not to be underestimated in terms of its coffee and art scenes. There are several museums worth noting, like the Ashmolean Museum (Beaumont St, Oxford OX1 2PH) and the museum is within walking distance of Morton’s as well.

Throughout my short time in London, I was able to experience the artistic culture that I’d traveled halfway across the world for. Not only that, but I was able to level-up my caffeine addiction with the excuse that, “Londoners drink a lot of coffee, and if the Londoners do it, so must I.” Coffee is a universal fixation and is the only thing that allows most people, myself included, to get anything done. To combine the otherworldly goodness of coffee with the rich culture of London was one of the best choices I made on my study abroad. London is a truly magical city and two weeks was only enough time to scratch the surface of what the metropolis had to offer. There couldn’t be a better place to go exploring than in the city of London; the streets seem unending and full of potential. To take a weekend and wander around the city and sample as many coffee shops as possible is one of the best uses of your time in the city, as you’ll see more of the true London than you ever would on the top of a bright red double decker bus.
Shelby Maiden is a graphic design major at East Tennessee State University. She’s a self-professed coffee addict and can’t go without her laptop and a shot of espresso for more than a few days.