



England IN THE SPOTLIGHT

In this most exciting of years, the country has come alive with royal history and Olympic splendour

BY WENDY AND ROB LINDSAY

Photography, (left) © Tomas Marek/Dreamstime.com; (right, top to bottom) © Speedfighter17/Dreamstime.com; © Chris Lofly/Dreamstime.com; Courtesy London 2012; Illustration, courtesy of Visit Britain

Remember the old song *England Swings (Like a Pendulum Do)*? It seems particularly apropos this year as both the Queen's Diamond Jubilee and the Summer Olympic Games take centre stage.

First up is the Diamond Jubilee, which will be officially celebrated in London from June 2 to 5, during a four-day bank holiday weekend, the highlight of year-long festivities in which members of the Royal Family will visit every Commonwealth realm.

Next, the world will be watching as the Games come to London and vicinity from July 27 to August 12, followed by the Paralympic Games from August 29 to September 9.

If you're lucky enough to be heading over for the celebrations, here's what you need to know.

Royal Revelries

Not since Queen Victoria has a monarch spent 60 years on the British throne. To get a sense of the current Queen's longevity, consider that during her reign there have been 12 British prime ministers, 12 U.S. presidents and six popes.

One of the most spectacular events of the Diamond Jubilee will be a pageant along the Thames River through London on the Sunday of the bank holiday weekend. Plans are underway for the Queen and Prince Philip to ride in an ornate royal barge specially designed for the occasion. It's expected that more than 1,000 other craft festooned with streamers and Union Jack flags will be part of the largest flotilla ever assembled on the river and will include wooden launches; steam vessels; music barges; boats spouting geysers of water; pyrotechnic barges with daytime fireworks and smoke; armed forces vessels; and even a floating belfry. Like most of the Jubilee events, it will be free, with crowds lining the route from Battersea Rail Bridge down to Tower Bridge. There will also be huge outdoor screens set up in parks along the river providing additional glimpses of the proceedings.

The following day, the Queen will

light the National Beacon following the Diamond Jubilee BBC Concert at Buckingham Palace. Britain has a history of beacon lighting in commemoration of important historic events that spans hundreds of years. In addition to the National Beacon, thousands of others will be lit throughout the U.K. and the Commonwealth that day.

Olympic Offerings

On the day that the Queen lights her Jubilee beacon, the Olympic Torch will be travelling between Portrush and Derry in Northern Ireland on the 17th day of its 70-day journey. The torch is expected to be handed off 8,000 times on its way to the opening ceremonies — passing through 1,000 cities, towns and villages, ensuring that at some point 95 per cent of the U.K. population will be within 15 kilometres of it.

Preparations for the Games have been truly Olympian. Although London is a city covering over 1,500 square kilometres with a population of close to 7.8 million, room was ingeniously made to shoehorn in the 200-hectare-plus Olympic Park, housing the new Olympic Stadium, the Aquatics Centre, the London Velopark, the athletes' village and 100 hectares of new parkland. The most distant venue is Hampden Park Stadium just outside Glasgow, Scotland — some 670 kilometres north of London. In addition, nine other sites are spread around the U.K., along with 13 other London venues.

Both Buckingham Palace and No. 10 Downing Street will be in the thick of things. A beach is planned for Horse Guards Parade when it hosts the Beach Volleyball competition; Hyde Park will have Marathon Swimming and Triathlon events; and The Mall itself will feature the Marathon, the Race Walk and Road Cycling.

Even if you don't have tickets to any of the Olympic events, you can still be part of the excitement. Once the Games roll into town, there will be 22 huge London Live screens scattered around the U.K. featuring the latest Olympic information and live coverage. Some of the largest



Top British rider Mark Cavendish completed a successful summer by winning the London-Surrey Cycle Classic, the biggest test event yet to be staged by the London 2012 Organising Committee.



The Gloriana; Queen's barge Thames River Pageant, Diamond Jubilee celebrations.



The Long Walk leading to the majestic Windsor Castle. An official residence of The Queen, it's the largest occupied castle in the world.

sites will be in Hyde Park, Victoria Park and Trafalgar Square. And if you happen to find yourself in Trafalgar Square, consider popping across to Canada House to sign the guest book.

Other Options

And finally, here are a few other options to make any trip to England splendid. First of all, in honour of the royal festivities, may we suggest a traditional British afternoon tea in the elegant London surroundings of Grosvenor House or Fortnum & Mason's Diamond Jubilee Tea Salon. Fortnum & Mason has been the purveyor of fine teas and coffee, scones, cream cakes and biscuits for royalty since Queen Victoria, and one would expect the Downton Abbey kitchen would likely order from there, too.

Other than Big Ben and the Houses of Parliament, the Tower of London is perhaps the most iconic symbol of the city. A UNESCO World Heritage Site, it traces nearly 1,000 years of royal history. The Yeoman Warders, nicknamed "Beefeaters," in their 14th-century scarlet uniforms have become a symbol of Britain and lead humorous yet factual tours of the tower. The armoury is truly amazing and gives a good indication of the physical size of some British monarchs. It feels rather spooky to cross the courtyard where so many famous heads rolled, but the vault holding the priceless Crown Jewels is one of a kind and

not to be missed.

In honour of the Jubilee, more jewels — all diamonds — worn by the Queen and other monarchs over the past 200 years will be on display at Buckingham Palace. Pieces rarely seen will include the small crown encrusted with 1,187 diamonds that was Queen Victoria's favourite, plus the massive coronation necklace and earring set worn by five queens.

The Buckingham Palace tour also includes lavishly furnished rooms containing some of the finest English and French furniture, paintings by Rembrandt, Rubens and Vermeer, sculptures by Canova and Chantrey, and exquisite porcelain collections.

While at Buckingham Palace, squeeze in a tour of the Royal Mews, one of the finest working stables in existence and a must for any horse and carriage enthusiast. The grooms take a personal pride in the mint condition of the vintage coaches and carriages in their charge. You may even get to see the spectacular Gold State Coach up close before it's used in a formal carriage procession on the final day of the bank holiday weekend.

For a historical perspective on the Royal Family, and a break from the crowds of London, take the train south to Hampton Court Palace, the oldest Tudor palace in England. As you walk the halls, you will be passing through 500 years of royal history. A guide once

confided to us that the ghost of the ill-fated Catherine Howard is sometimes seen by night watchmen in the same spot where she pleaded for her life with Henry VIII in 1541. And the medieval Great Hall is where William Shakespeare's company, the King's Men, performed in 1603 for King James I. The beautiful castle architecture covers many centuries, and the gardens are both extensive and magnificent. Depending on your timing, you may even catch some Olympic action, as the Cycling Time Trials will be held on the roads around the palace.

Another castle reachable by train and well worth a visit is Windsor Castle, approximately 40 kilometres west of London. It takes most of a day to tour the opulent rooms filled with gilded furniture, priceless paintings and one-of-a-kind royal memorabilia. And it, too, will be in the thick of Olympic activity when Rowing, Paralympic Rowing and Canoe Sprint events are held on nearby Dorney Lake.

As you can see, whether you're heading to England for the first time or the 10th, there's no time like the present to take in all that the country has to offer. ■

SOURCES

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london2012.com
thediamondjubilee.org
visitbritainshop.com