

Travel feature – get on down to London

“Come and be my bodyguard.”

I'm not expecting this request as I stand minding my own business with my family enjoying the entertainment, in Covent Garden, one warm summer's afternoon. But this is exactly what happens when Master Yogilaser, a charismatic and physically impressive 60-year-old contortionist and yoga expert, approaches me. What can I say? I'm stunned.

“Yes, no problem,” I mumble quietly, having already eyed a tiny box and open tube – one on top of the other – that form part of his show. Gulp. I look around and suddenly the few people that were watching seem to have multiplied into a massive crowd. Where did they all come from?

This man is incredible, he's walking across the ground in positions that God did not intend, I'm sure. The children are mesmerised and I'm half-expecting Henry (8) to start doing this back in the hotel room. I then start fretting, is the Master Yogilaser expecting me to squeeze into the perspex box? No, thank goodness he isn't, but he wants to teach me how to do some yoga exercises including various pelvic thrusts and bottom shakes. It's great fun and my family are in stitches watching me. It's quite tiring though so I'm glad it stops because I've found muscles I forgot I had. He proceeds to squeeze himself into the box. I don't know how he does it. The Master Yogilaser thanks me for being a good sport and hands me one of his DVDs, which states the “Guinness World Record Holder for the fastest time to cram into a 20 x 17.5 inches box by a male is 5.35 seconds and was achieved by Kenneth Greenaway aka Master Yogilaser (USA) on the set of Guinness World Records Unleashed in Los Angeles on June 27, 2013.”

That's the great thing about Covent Garden, you never know who you're going to bump into.

We find ourselves here after enjoying some exquisite pasta at Pastaio, a restaurant in Carnaby that specialises in creating pasta dishes to perfection. A good restaurant is not just about the food, it's the customer service, the atmosphere and surroundings. Pastaio understands this and scores top marks for everything. From the moment Brittany, our waitress greets us to the time we leave, we feel like valued customers. There's no rush, nothing's too much trouble. Time is taken over producing the food and looking after guests. This is what a restaurant should be. And people come through those doors on a regular basis. It's a finely oiled machine. Sat at the back of the restaurant we can see the chefs working away at the front. Behind us the wall is covered in some bright art work and a design by the same artist features on staff clothing. Art does compliment the dining experience as does music. "What is that music?" Caroline asks Brittany. "Mainly '90s rap." That's interesting, it's not something we would usually listen to but it works well and adds to the experience. Henry's diet is always the great challenge for us but Brittany's winning smile puts him at ease and once he has a Coca Cola he tries some focaccia and crisp bread but doesn't venture to dip it in the olive oil. He'll get there but it's going to take time. It's the chocolate and raspberry sorbet dessert that he really enjoys. He's definitely a dessert person. Shame because he really does miss out on some wonderful savoury dishes. His sisters Harriett (13) and Heidi (11) really enjoy the slow cooked tomato sauce, basil, parmesan radiatori while Caroline's ligurian basil pesto looks delicious and by all accounts, it is. The melon and parma ham starter is just what we need on a hot summer's day. It's such a simple dish but looks and tastes great. The Peroni accompanies it well. My eight hour beef and Ukrainian porcini bolognese is really tasty and the portion's just the right size. This is followed by one of the most enjoyable tiramisus I have had. Two hours

later we emerge from Pastaio and recommend it without hesitation.

Henry is travelling on his scooter, which saves my back somewhat from countless piggybacks. We explore Carnaby and Soho. There's such a great atmosphere in this part of town as we join the throng of travellers from all over the world sharing this experience. Henry spies a Puma shop and drags us in to drool over the football boots.

Eventually, after lots of map reading we check in at Travelodge Waterloo where we stay the night in a family room and a standard bedroom. What I like about Travelodge is that you know what you're getting. It's as reliable a hotel as you could hope for really. The Waterloo site is well designed and decorated. The ground floor, home to the bar and dining area is full of interest. It is here where an unlimited breakfast can be yours for £11.25, which by London standards, I can't see being beaten. Full English or continental. Or both. My only qualm is that apart from the sausages, the full English is not as hot as it could be. This certainly sets us up for the day though. The staff are helpful and friendly and the rooms are clean. The beds are comfortable with crisp white linen and the towels are nice and fluffy. All a traveller needs. Caroline shares with the girls and Henry and I are in the other room. There's little time for relaxing because we have limited time here and want to make the most of it.

We have a bite to eat at Chipotle, a Mexican restaurant in St Martin's Lane. Henry is hungry. To my surprise we're able to convince him to have tacos. He has three just with cheese and eats the lot. That's a result. We all go for burritos, wraps with various fillings such as spicy rice, choice of meats or cheese and salad. I go for pork while the girls have rice, beef and guacamole. In contrast to the restaurant experience at Pastaio this is more casual dining. You walk up to the counter, make your selection and are presented with your dish wrapped in tin foil in a bowl. Collect a fork, choose a table

and tuck in. It's tasty and filling.

London is full of sights and sounds, it's a people watcher's paradise. There are such a range of different accents from Polish to that traditional cockney. Our guide on the City Cruises (Tootbus) tour down The Thames has the latter and he's a joy to listen to. He knows everything there is to know about this city. A far better option than listening to some pre-recorded audio guide. We're told about the various bridges and how the pillars that remain beside one are in memory of the great civil engineer Isambard Kingdom Brunel, who built the original. We learn about the fairly unique floating roof on St Paul's Cathedral and how you'd have to travel far to find anything similar. Looking up from our seats we savour the mix of traditional and modern architecture sitting alongside each other. You wouldn't think it would work but somehow it does. There's a lot of building work going on, too. The old ITV building is set to be demolished and replaced with a five-star luxury hotel. Plush apartments abound through London where prices can be as much as £30m for one.

At Shakespeare's Globe Theatre in New Globe Walk beside the River Thames we're treated to The Comedy of Errors, one of his shortest plays at just under two hours long without an interval. It's a fabulous experience. Firstly, we're given cushions to sit on the seats, which we learn are vital as the performance passes the hour mark. The original theatre was destroyed but this version, reconstructed in 1997, has a thatched roof that is partly open above the stage. This is a great idea for summer performances allowing plenty of light onto the stage but does cause issues when it gets very hot for the groundlings (the Globe's standing audience members, who can enjoy a performance at a discounted rate). It is a very hot day and at least one groundling collapses due to heat exhaustion. I can only imagine how challenging it must be for those on stage in all their finery. It's a perfect setting for Shakespeare's plays. Throughout the performance we're treated

to music of the time on traditional wind instruments. The production itself features no scene changes. A large boat that is wheeled on periodically helps to hold the children's attention. This play is a humorous take on the mistaken identity of twin brothers who are reunited at the end. The children have been studying Shakespeare and Harriett is chuckling away at various points. Shakespeare's use of rhyme is another interesting tool for holding the audience's attention.

Leaving the Globe we walk by The Anchor pub where Shakespeare drank and more recently Tom Cruise and other famous people have visited. We walk through South Bank and watch a busker and make our way to the Tootbus open topped hop on, hop off bus tour where we take the yellow route around the capital. Even at this time of night – it's sunset now – there's plenty of traffic for the driver to negotiate as well as various roadworks. We go over Tower Bridge where earlier in the day traffic was halted by a police motorcyclist to make way for a VIP and their police outriders. This is how politicians and Royalty get round the capital. There's an audio guide on the Tootbus but we're so frazzled we just sit back, rest our feet and eat our chips on the top deck, enjoying the wind through our hair and the fine temperature.

We get to London with return travel on the busy Southern Railway service from Southampton Central to London Victoria. A relief driver replaces another who has worked his required hours, which delays the service by quarter of an hour. Despite this, we arrive in under two hours. Heidi (11) and Henry (8) find seats while the rest of us stand. Numerous seated passengers use seats next to them for their bags ensuring that nobody sits next to them. One family of three successfully takes up five seats in this manner shooing other passengers away regardless of the fact that an elderly passenger needs a seat. Human nature really can be quite embarrassing. On our return journey late at night various delays are overcome

including trespassing on the line at Andover, which has slowed the service up all day. It's not a straight run and catching our first train from Victoria at 830pm we finally get back to Southampton Central, after three changes, at 1230am. "I won't get home until 130am," says one of the train staff. "I tried to move my shift because I'm moving house tomorrow." We find that the rail staff are friendly and approachable and quite a few have a good sense of humour, which is necessary when there are so many challenges on Britain's railways.

Having planned our trip beforehand we print out various maps for the children to read. This is a really useful experience for them and helps all of us to understand London's geography – that London Victoria is over the other side of the city from London Waterloo, for instance.

What a great trip.

- More information:
- [instagram.com/yogilaser](https://www.instagram.com/yogilaser)
- [pastaio.co.uk](https://www.pastaio.co.uk)
- [chipotle.com](https://www.chipotle.com)
- [travelodge.co.uk](https://www.travelodge.co.uk)
- [shakespearesglobe.com](https://www.shakespearesglobe.com)
- [tootbus.com](https://www.tootbus.com)























