

8. heaven on earth

Once it was simple; London, like all of England, was staunchly Catholic. Then King Henry VIII fell in love with Anne Boleyn and realised that breaking with Rome would give him the divorce he craved. Protestantism – or the Anglican Church, with the monarch rather than the Pope at its head – came in, Catholics spent the next few centuries being persecuted and every other religion was regarded as sheer heresy. Luckily, the last 300 years or so has seen London become a much more tolerant place, in which all sects are accepted – and practise their faith openly and with the full blessing of the British government. Being the capital, London takes the lead in almost every area of religion in the UK. And the churches, mosques, synagogues and other buildings created for the city's worshippers are a glorious reflection of that spiritual eminence.



Start point: Wembley Park tube

End point: St Paul's tube

Duration: 5 hours

● Come out of **Wembley Park tube**, cross Bridge Road and turn right. Catch the southbound **206** from the **Wembley Park Station** stop and get off at **Swaminarayan Temple**. You will find yourself right outside the stunning **Shri Swaminarayan Mandir** (better known as Neasden Temple), which was built in the 1990s as a focal point for northwest London's Hindu communities. Constructed from nearly 5,000 tonnes of limestone and marble, and created in India by a huge team of craftsmen, the building was then shipped to the UK in pieces. It is the largest Hindu temple outside India. To visit its sumptuous interior, which includes seven separate shrines as well as an adjoining cultural centre and exhibition space, you need to enquire at the reception desk inside the main entrance. But – be warned – though the temple claims to be open 365 days a year, you may arrive (as this writer did) to find all gates securely closed and no sign of anyone to admit you.

● Cross the road and catch the southbound **206** or **224** from the **Swaminarayan Temple** stop down to **Knatchbull Road**. Walk back up to the junction, cross the main road and turn right to catch the eastbound **18** from the identically named **Knatchbull Road** stop on the A404. After the bus passes alongside the Westway – a raised section of motorway that leads into central London – get off at the **Edgware Road Station/Bakerloo Line** bus stop.

● Walk back and turn left down Edgware Road (going under the bridge) then, after a few minutes, turn left into Old Marylebone Road. Cross over so

that you're on the same side as St Mark's Church and walk along to the **Edgware Road** stop. Catch the westbound **27** and take it to the **Queensway** stop. Once you've disembarked, continue walking down the road then turn left into Queensway. After five minutes or so, turn right into Moscow Road and walk along to **St Sophia's Greek Orthodox Cathedral**. This domed building – constructed in the late 1870s to serve Bayswater's prosperous Greek community – may look magnificent from the outside, but its interiors are truly lovely. Décor is sumptuous and lavish, with gilded frescoes and saintly mosaics featuring prominently. As the Greek government spent World War II in exile in London, St Sophia's became the de facto centre of the Greek Orthodox Church and it remains hugely significant to Hellenic Christians today.

● Once you leave the cathedral, head straight down St Petersburg Place (situated directly opposite the main entrance), where two glorious Victorian religious centres eye each other across this quiet, leafy road. On the right is **St Matthew's Church**, built in a Gothic Revival style in 1882 and displaying some wonderful stone carvings on its exterior; on the left is the Grade I-listed **New West End Synagogue**, which dates from 1879. One of the oldest synagogues still in use in the UK, it has been described by English Heritage as 'the architectural high watermark of Anglo-Jewish architecture' – and its interior, which incorporates a beautiful raised Torah ark, is simply gorgeous.

● From St Petersburg Place, turn left into Orme Lane – which runs alongside the synagogue – then turn right down Orme Court. Turn right at the bottom and catch the eastbound **148** from the **Orme**

Square stop. This bus rounds Kensington Gardens and Hyde Park, and heads across the back of Buckingham Palace Gardens. Just after it passes Victoria Station, look right to see the Neo Byzantine **Westminster Cathedral**, which is the centre of English and Welsh Catholicism. The cathedral – which contains a glorious set of Arts & Crafts-style mosaics, as well as some wonderful gilded ceilings – was built in 1885, just over 50 years after the Roman Catholic Church was officially restored to the country three centuries after King Henry VIII and the architects of the Reformation, Thomas Cromwell and Thomas Cranmer, split from Rome and established the Church of England with the monarch as its spiritual leader. The cathedral is home to the Archbishop of Westminster, who oversees Catholicism in all London boroughs north of the River Thames, as well as several surrounding counties.

● At the entrance to Parliament Square, look first to the left for the **Methodist Central Hall** – built in a French Renaissance style at the beginning of the 20th century to commemorate the centenary of the Christian movement’s founder John Wesley’s death. Lovely though this building is, it is overshadowed – literally and metaphorically – by its 13th-century neighbour **Westminster Abbey**, one of the two major Anglican seats of worship in the capital. Unlike almost every other church in England, it holds the status of Royal Peculiar and is overseen directly by the monarch rather than a bishop. This unusual position in church hierarchy is a direct result of King Henry VIII being unwilling to dissolve the abbey in Tudor times as it contained the tombs of his father and other descendants. It continues to serve as the place in which British kings and queens are crowned; and, most recently, it was the wedding venue for Prince William and Kate Middleton.

● After crossing Westminster Bridge and passing Lambeth North tube, the bus goes along the back of the Roman Catholic **St George’s Cathedral Southwark** – seat of the Archbishop of Southwark, who oversees Catholicism in Kent and all London boroughs south of the River Thames. Get off at the **Elephant & Castle Station** stop, which is situated opposite the impressive **Metropolitan Tabernacle**, centre for the capital’s Reformed Baptists since 1861 and once the largest non-conformist church in the world.

● Cross the road and catch the northbound **40** from the **Elephant & Castle** stop right outside the tabernacle and take the bus up over London Bridge. Look left just before crossing the river and you will see **Southwark Cathedral** (parts of which date back to the 13th century), the Anglican mother church of Southwark Diocese, which includes pretty much all London boroughs south of the River Thames, plus parts of Surrey.

● Get off the bus at the **St Botolph Street** stop and walk back across Houndsditch before turning right up Duke’s Place. Walk on for a couple of minutes then look left for **Bevis Marks Synagogue**, the oldest synagogue in the UK, which was built by London’s Sephardic Jewish community in 1701 – less than 50

years after Oliver Cromwell lifted the ban on Jewish worship in England. A slightly austere building typical of the period, it occupies a somewhat discreet, tucked-away position for a religious centre of its stature. Judaism may have been allowed back into the country 350 years after it was expelled from the kingdom in the 13th century, but Cromwell expected the Jews to know their place. All synagogues, he dictated, had to be built away from main roads. This didn’t affect Bevis Marks’ influence. It has been the spiritual and administrative heart of Judaism in the English-speaking world for centuries.

● Retrace your steps to the **St Botolph Street** stop and catch the eastbound **254**. This bus takes you out of the old City of London and into Whitechapel. Though the district was known for being a Jewish enclave as late as the early 20th century, it is now home to a huge Bangladeshi population. The dominant religion here is Sunni Islam and the enormous **East London Mosque**, which you can see on the right, can hold around 5,000 devotees. Built in 1985 as a focal point for the Bengali community in the borough of Tower Hamlets, it continues to expand. The London Muslim Centre, which provides facilities for the community and local businesses, opened in 2004.

● Get off the bus at **The East London Mosque** stop, then cross the road and catch the westbound **205** from the identically named stop on the other side. After passing through the City, disembark at the **Old Street Station** stop and walk back down City Road to **Wesley’s Chapel** – a Grade I-listed Georgian building that was built by Methodism’s founding father John Wesley in the late 1770s. Still an operational chapel with daily services, the building is also home to the Museum of Methodism. Just across the road lies **Bunhill Fields** – London’s largest non-conformist cemetery from the 1600s until Victorian times – where poet William Blake is buried. It reveals much about the attitude of London’s authorities to outsider religions that both this graveyard and Wesley’s Chapel are situated on the fringes of the City – well beyond the old walls and as far out of sight of the populace as possible.

● Walk up to Old Street roundabout and turn left down Old Street. Walk along for a few minutes then turn right up Goswell Road. Catch the southbound **4** or **56** from the **Clerkenwell Road** stop, and take the bus down to the **St Paul’s Cathedral** stop. It’s a cliché to describe **St Paul’s Cathedral** – London’s other major seat of Anglican worship, rebuilt after the Great Fire of London in 1666 destroyed most of the ancient City – as Sir Christopher Wren’s masterpiece. But it is. The sheer scale of the building, which is covered in intricate carvings from both the celestial and natural worlds, was no doubt enough to remind 17th-century Londoners of the power of God alone. But the beauty of its Neoclassical architecture and the purity of colour in its stonework take it to another level altogether. Take time to explore it properly. Aesthetically at least, it’s the absolute pinnacle of London’s rich religious world.