

17. midweek markets

In London, every day is market day. Though the big weekend markets of Portobello, Spitalfields, Borough and Columbia Road (covered elsewhere in this book) are perhaps the best-known – and, for Londoners, provide as much of a focal point for socialising as they do for shopping – the stalls set up in midweek are just as fascinating and browse-worthy. From bustling early morning produce markets from which the city's shopkeepers and restaurateurs stock shelves and fill menus to haphazard collections of pitches that pull in everyone from bargain fashion hunters to workers looking for a cheap lunch, London's markets are as integral to the capital as the tube network. And, as many of them have been selling their wares in the same location since medieval times, they are an anchor of tradition that no amount of urban regeneration can dislodge.



Start point: Farringdon tube

End point: Liverpool Street tube

Duration: 3.5 hours

● If you want to see **Smithfield Market** at its best, you need to get there before 7.00am. Any later and you'll miss out on the scene that has been enacted on this site in central London for around 1,000 years. Trading at this most famous of meat markets begins at 3am, though you'll have to wait for the first tubes to start running at around 5.30am before you can make your way to **Farringdon**. To get to the market, come out of the station and turn left down Cowcross Street. Walk right to the end and you'll emerge opposite the grand Victorian cast-iron structure that has housed what's officially known as London Central Markets since 1868. This was once a livestock market and, from the 10th century onwards, farmers would walk their cows, sheep and poultry hundreds of miles to sell them for the best prices here. Cattle stampeding through the London streets and the inevitable injuries they caused to anyone standing in their way meant that, in the mid-19th century, the market was forced to change to one that specialised in pre-slaughtered meat. Though the danger of trampling has gone, the market is still an exciting place to visit – and not just on days when you're planning a barbecue for the afternoon. For the ultimate Smithfield experience, join the traders at **The Cock Tavern**, which is situated below the market, for a hearty breakfast of sausages, bacon and other prime meat from 6am onwards.

Until recently, alcohol was served here from 6.30am – making it as much of a post-club hangout as it was a place for bloodied butchers to rest their cleavers while downing a well-earned pint of Guinness.

● Come out of Smithfield Market on the opposite side to which you entered and walk over to the far corner of the square – to the right of St Bartholomew's Hospital. Turn right and walk down Giltspur Street then turn right onto Holborn Viaduct. Cross over the road and catch the westbound **8** or **25** from the **City Thameslink Station** stop. Once the bus moves onto Oxford Street, get off at the **Wardour Street** stop and continue along the road for a few metres before turning left into **Berwick Street**. The small market at the bottom of here, which specialises mainly in food items, has been operating in the heart of Soho since the 18th century. As snapshots of London life go, it's hard to beat the image you'll find here of traders hawking apples, potatoes and fresh fish against a backdrop of neon sex shop signs.

● Walk back up to Oxford Street, turn right and catch either the westbound **8**, **10** or **73** from the **Wardour Street** stop, or the westbound **7** or **25** from the identically named stop just a little bit further along the road. Take the bus up to the **Selfridges** stop – opposite the ultimate upmarket and glamorous modern take on the old-fashioned marketplace – and walk back to Bond Street tube station. Turn down Davies Street, the first

road on the right after passing the station, and walk down to **Grays antiques market** – housed in a beautiful Victorian terracotta building at number 58. A mecca for dealers and experts, this vast concentration of stalls, which fill two floors and a mews building nearby, holds millions of pounds worth of stock. Everything from toys and trinkets to maps and militaria can be found here, and a lot more besides. You may not find many bargains; but wandering its snaking aisles, gazing into cases and chatting to the passionate and knowledgeable stallholders, makes it well worth the visit.

● Return to Oxford Street, cross over the road and turn right. Turn left after passing the John Lewis department store and catch the eastbound **8** or **25** from the **Holles Street** stop. After travelling the length of Oxford Street and past Holborn tube, get off at the **Brownlow Street** stop on High Holborn, continue walking down the road and turn right into Chancery Lane. **The London Silver Vaults**, which you access by turning left into Southampton Buildings, is one of the city's most secret marketplaces. There's very little to advertise its subterranean presence and visitors have to pass a security guard and go down a flight of stairs before reaching the vaults. The market began life in 1876 as a storage facility for household valuables, but the dealers moved in shortly afterwards. It's exactly as it sounds. The traders here occupy 19th-century strongrooms, throwing open thick doors to reveal glittering collections of silverware from every period and in every style imaginable. The overall feel is of stumbling across a pirate's treasure hoard in a Victorian prison. It's absolutely stunning and rather unearthly.

● Return to High Holborn, cross the road and turn right. Walk for two minutes, then turn left into Leather Lane, the entrance to which is marked by the Sir Christopher Hatton pub. **Leather Lane Market**, which begins just a short stroll beyond here, has been well-known as a place to pick up cheap goods for more than 300 years. The stalls that line the road from its junction with Hatton Gardens all the way up to Clerkenwell Road sell everything from designer dresses and cut-price underwear to cheap CDs and boxes of past-its-sell-by-date cereal. These days, though, there are just as many pitches selling high-end street food as there are traditional market stalls. Even a stroll of just a few metres along this road takes you past steaming grills and giant pans that send out aromas of Thai curry, Mexican chilli and slow-roasted English pork into the air. With the financial institutions of the City, the legal practices around Lincoln's Inn and a large concentration of offices in Holborn just around

the corner, there are huge numbers of hungry workers to feed at lunchtime. Just like the traders that occupied this spot in the early 18th century, these stallholders are simply meeting a demand.

● Return to High Holborn and catch the eastbound **8** or **242** from the **Holborn Circus/Fetter Lane** stop. Both buses take you back into the old City of London, where the capital's original markets were held. Though the buildings may now be gleaming and futuristic, the narrow streets and lanes on which they stand are as medieval as the Black Death. Look out for the street names as you pass. Names such as Ironmonger Lane, Milk Street and Poultry reveal exactly what was sold on those particular roads more than 500 years ago.

● Get off the bus at the **Liverpool Street Station** stop and cross the road to the identically named stop on the other side. From here, catch the southbound **35, 47, 48, 149** or **344** down to the **Fenchurch Street** stop and walk back up the road to **Leadenhall Market**. This glorious temple to Victoriana – designed by Sir Horace Jones, who was also responsible for Smithfield Market – features in the Harry Potter films, and it certainly has a more rarified air than bustling Leather Lane. Stalls are set up in the centre of the market until early afternoon. But even if they've been dismantled by the time you get there, the businesses lining the aisles are equally interesting. Celebrate the end of your journey with a glass of wine on the forecourt of Cheese, just inside the market entrance at number 4, and enjoy the glorious architecture around you before heading back up to Liverpool Street tube.

