

25. london for children

An exciting place in which to grow up, and even more fascinating to visit, London is as thrilling for kids as a bucketful of blue Smarties. Its thousands of child-friendly attractions – which include everything from lion-spotting at the zoo and button-pressing at the Science Museum to dedicated children's festivals and theatre performances – are well documented, but the city also boasts many free (and permanent) sites that are sure to fire the imagination of any wide-eyed infant. This bus journey takes in some of the famous places that no child will want to miss, as well as several more obscure – though no less enjoyable – landmarks. Adults, take note. There's no need to grow up and act your age on this trip.



Start point: South Kensington tube

End point: Bethnal Green tube

Duration: 4.5 hours

● Turn right after the ticket barriers at **South Kensington tube**, then walk along the tunnel that leads to the **Natural History Museum**. Admission is free, and you'll see your first dinosaur skeleton – a 26-metre-long diplodocus – as soon as you go through the museum's main entrance. The Dinosaurs area, which features an animatronic tyrannosaurus rex among all the bones and teeth, is located immediately to the left of here.

● Though wonderful, the Natural History Museum is huge enough to exhaust even the most enthusiastic six-year-old. So, as soon as you've seen the dinosaurs, leave through the main entrance. Turn left outside the museum gates and walk for a couple of minutes (crossing Exhibition Road) to catch the eastbound **14**, **74** or **414** from the **Victoria & Albert Museum** bus stop. Get off at the **Hyde Park Corner Station** stop.

● There are several bus stops with the same name along this stretch of road, so locate the one from which the eastbound **9** departs. Take this bus all the way to the **Southampton Street** stop, continue walking along the Strand then turn left up Southampton Street. **Covent Garden**, at the top of the road, is home to the sort of places – Benjamin Pollock's Toyshop, The London Transport Museum, Eric Snook's fun store – that will have children asking for their pocket money. It is also famed for

its street performers, and many a parent has tarried here with a coffee for half an hour while their offspring gawp at magicians, acrobats and statue-still art students dressed as Charlie Chaplin.

● Walk the short distance back to the Strand by heading along Henrietta Street, which runs along the left-hand side of St Paul's Church at the front of the piazza, then turning left down Bedford Street. At the bottom, cross the road and catch the westbound **6** or **23** from the **Bedford Street** stop directly opposite. Both these buses pass **Hamleys Toy Store** on the right as they make their way up Regent Street. This seven-storey, 5,000sq m temple to toys – the biggest store of its kind in the world – will be the highlight of any child's day if you take them here.

● Get off the bus at the **Marble Arch Station** stop, then catch the westbound **94** or **390** from the identically named stop a little further along the road. Both buses take you along the perimeter of Hyde Park and Kensington Gardens. Look out for the house on the corner of Leinster Terrace and Bayswater Road (marked by a blue plaque), which is where author JM Barrie wrote *Peter and Wendy* – the story that introduced Peter Pan, Captain Hook and Tinkerbell to the world.

● Get off the bus at **Queensway Station**, then walk back and enter Kensington Gardens through Black Lion Gate. Walk down the path straight ahead and bear right when you reach the café. To one side of this stands the **Elfin Oak**, a tree

stump that swarms with wooden elves, fairies and miniature animals, which was created by artist Ivor Innes in the late 1920s. Behind the oak is the entrance to the **Diana Memorial Playground**, a huge play space that opened in 2000 as a memorial to the late princess. Inspired by Barrie's Peter Pan story, the enormous playground contains a recreation of a pirate ship, as well as tipis, a beach and climbing apparatus.

● When the kids have had enough of this mock Neverland, leave the park through Black Lion Gate, then cross the road and turn right. Catch the eastbound **94, 148** or **390** from the **Queensway Station** bus stop. Take a short ride to **Lancaster Gate Station**, then get off the bus and continue walking up Lancaster Terrace. Bear left around Sussex Gardens and carry straight on up Westbourne Terrace, then turn right into Craven Road. The entrance to **Paddington Station** is on the left just after a hotel. Once you're on the station concourse, turn left and walk into the piazza area directly behind platforms 3 and 4. Here you'll find Marcus Cornish's sculpture of Paddington Bear – the famous 1950s children's character who, in Michael Bond's story, was found at this station.

● Retrace your steps to Craven Road, then turn left down Praed Street. Catch the eastbound **205** from the **Paddington Station** stop, get off at **King's Cross Station** and walk onto the station concourse. Bear left towards platforms 9, 10 and 11, located in a separate building, and you will see **Platform 9 ¾** on the right. As any Harry Potter fan will tell you, this is the departure point for the Hogwarts Express – the train that takes young witches and wizards to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry in JK Rowling's books and the subsequent films. A luggage trolley disappearing into the brickwork hints at a magical platform on the other side of the wall.

● Return to the **King's Cross Station** stop and catch the southbound **45** or **46** from the identically named stop a couple of metres to the right. Get off the bus at the **Guilford Street** stop, continue walking down Gray's Inn Road and turn right into Guilford Street. Walk along the road for a few minutes and you will arrive at the entrance gates to **Coram's Fields** – a 28,000sq m park dedicated to children. Adults must be accompanying a child to enter Coram's Fields and the space – which includes a nursery, children's centre, café, on-site farm and well-maintained play areas – is a safe and peaceful haven for kids and parents. The park is laid out on the former site of London's 18th-century Foundling Hospital, which is where many a deserted or orphaned child found sanctuary from the 1700s until as late as the 1920s.

● When you leave Coram's Fields, turn right onto Guilford Street and continue walking in a straight line until you reach Russell Square. Cross over the road, turn left and walk around the bottom of the square until you emerge at the top of Montague Street. Walk down here then turn right onto Great Russell Street. You will find yourself at the entrance to the **British Museum**. As at the Natural History Museum, there is so much to see in here that children can easily be overwhelmed. If you do go in (admission is free), head straight for the Egyptian mummies in Rooms 62 and 63 on level three. Children will find these a lot more exciting than the Elgin Marbles, we promise you...

● When you emerge from the British Museum, bear right across the zebra crossing outside the main gates and walk straight down Museum Street. At the bottom of the road, turn left up Bloomsbury Way and catch the eastbound **55** from the **Museum Street** bus stop. Get off at the **Cambridge Heath Station** stop, continue along Hackney Road, then turn right down Cambridge Heath Road. Walk on for five minutes or so, and you will find yourself at the **V&A Museum of Childhood**. This gorgeous 19th-century building houses the Victoria & Albert Museum's fascinating collection of toys, games and child-related artefacts, and features playthings that date from the 1600s to the present day. Admission is free and parents will be glad to hear the museum also offers a café to offset all that excitable squealing over Dinky cars and 1980s He-Man figures.

● Once you've finished at the museum, simply turn left outside the gates and walk down to **Bethnal Green tube**.

