

In the heart of the Royal Borough

Hip and happening or calm and cultured, London has it all. Giselle Whiteaker explores the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea

Part of the excitement of a city the size of London is that you can never really see it all. You think you know it, you have a favourite coffee shop and you can navigate the tube, but there's always something new to discover. I've yet to tire of exploring London's nooks and crannies. On my last visit, I stayed in the east. This time, I'm discovering whether the so-called "Royal Borough" of Kensington and Chelsea lives up to its name. It certainly has a genteel air, with elegant streetscapes and rows of gleaming white townhouses lining the streets. I feel almost like I belong when the doorman swoops down to lift my overnight bag up the three stairs into The Kensington, touted as London's finest townhouse hotel. The gorgeous property sits in the heart of South Kensington and comprises four traditional Victorian townhouses, subtly merged into one grand hotel.

The Kensington, part of the Doyle Collection, recently underwent an extensive renovation – and the results speak for themselves. A few patrons dot the plush chairs off the lobby, which, feels like the drawing room of a family manor. A pair of women, perhaps mother and daughter, giggle over the tiers of delicacies that make up The Kensington's afternoon tea, and the décor blends muted hues of ash grey and teal with bursts of colour that complement the hotel's period architecture.

I'm booked in to the new Knightsbridge Suite, a generously proportioned, light-filled space with exquisite original artworks and a well-matched blend of antique furniture and contemporary designed pieces. Through the lounge, with its fireplace and floor-to-ceiling French windows, is the plush bedroom and I'm immediately drawn to the circular daybed occupying a corner of the room, it's tempting to snuggle up here for the afternoon, or perhaps make use of the lush marble bathroom, replete with its own television if the whirlpool bath is not enough entertainment, but Kensington is calling.

Home to the monarchy at Kensington Palace since 1689, and the official Royal Borough since 1901, Kensington has built-in appeal. Throw in some of the UK's most venerable museums – The Victoria and Albert, Natural History and Science Museums – and Kensington Gardens and Hyde Park, plus a plethora of one-off boutiques and a buzzing café culture, and it's easy to understand the popularity of the locale.

My exploration starts with a stroll by the Natural History Museum, where children dash past their parents to enter the space, in an endearing display of enthusiasm. Within moments, I'm in the peaceful environs of Kensington Gardens as I make my way to the Serpentine, where rowers skim across the water in lazy loops. >>

Opposite page clockwise from top: The lobby lounge; The K Bar at The Kensington; Cocktails at K Bar





The facade of the Natural History Museum.



Kensington Palace.

My next stop is the V&A, which is partnered with the Kensington Hotel and is a short stroll away. I'm keen to take in the *Botticelli Reimagined* exhibition, the largest Botticelli exhibition in Britain since 1930. Running until early July, it explores the way artists and designers have reinterpreted the Renaissance artist's work. I could spend days dipping in and out of the exhibitions on offer, and I probably will.

Flagging in the late afternoon, I debate between a cupcake from the Hummingbird Café or a coffee at La Bottega. It's tempting to indulge in both, but by in act of willpower, I settle for the authentic Italian deli-style café bar, purely based on proximity and the delicious aroma of caffeine wafting through the open door.

Revived, I stroll back to The Kensington. My friend Katy is joining me at the hotel's Town House, situated in the interconnected drawing rooms on the ground floor. The conversion of these three spaces was overseen by Alexander Waterworth Interiors, and they've created a cosy ambience, without any pretence. The menu, developed by Executive Chef Steve Gibbs is the cuisine equivalent, featuring a selection seasonal, locally-sourced dishes.

For starters, we share deliciously crispy pig's cheeks, served with mustard crème fraiche and a smooth apple and raisin chutney, which lends the smoky pork flavour a hint of sweetness. We also dive into a plate of lightly seared tuna, the soy and ginger dressing and pickled radishes giving a nod to oriental influences. Katy opts for whole sea bass for her main, the delicate flesh paired with samphire and a lemon dressing. I'm in heaven with the roast breast of Gressingham duck, served with asparagus, peas, confit shallot and orange sauce. It's everything duck should be – rich and fragrant, yet velvety smooth, every mouthful a delight. We finish off with a generous serving of warm apple pie served with cinnamon ice-cream, the perfect finale.

Post-dinner, we slip into K Bar, also newly renovated, with leather wingback chairs, teal and violet velvet sofas and tartan accents, not to mention an extensive cocktail menu expertly crafted by award-winning bartender Ben Manchester. We perch at the bar and sample immaculately presented concoctions such as the Aviation, with No 3 Gin, Luxardo Maraschino, Bitter Truth Violet Liqueur and lemon juice, and Georgia Mint Juleps served in chilled brass mugs. Every cocktail is a work of art, framed with flowers and fruit.

No visit to this area is complete without browsing in Harrods and window shopping along King's Road. That's what tomorrow is for. For the remainder of the evening, though, I'll sit back, relax, and feel like the queen of this Royal Borough, in my palatial suite at The Kensington. ■

To book a room at The Kensington or a table at Town House, see www.doylecollection.com/kensington

If you're looking for a spectacular home in London these properties are bound to impress.



Ealing, London

Beautifully presented in the highest order throughout, this breath-taking seven bedroom detached house is arranged over three floors and exhibits elegant classic and contemporary styling. The large kitchen with a lengthy island counter leads to a garden room, looking out onto the outdoor swimming pool.

Guide price: £4,750,000
Fine & Country Mayfair
 mayfair@fineandcountry.com

North Row, Mayfair

Situated at Marble Arch, between the premier locations of Park Lane and Oxford Street, this stunning three-bedroom, two-bathroom property is located on the sixth floor of a prestigious portered block. The apartment features views over Hyde Park and benefits from access to the services of the adjacent Marriot Hotel, including room service and swimming pool and gym access.

Price: £4,750,000
Fine & Country Mayfair
 mayfair@fineandcountry.com



Totteridge Lane, London

This immaculately presented detached residence is set back from Totteridge Lane within a gated plot providing privacy, security and parking for several vehicles. The vast accommodation offers luxury finishing throughout and has been skilfully extended, featuring a glass conservatory with air conditioning, overlooking the landscaped rear garden.

Guide price: £3,250,000
Fine & Country Cockfosters
 cockfosters@fineandcountry.com