

London and Manila – A Tale of Two Cities

Upon arriving in the city-capital of the world, London proved to be the most popular of the cities I ever visited. The main geographical feature of the city is the River Thames, which snake its way through Central London, dividing it into northern and southern halves. One could find everywhere in the city a diverse conglomeration of people from all walks of life and in different faces, colours and races.

The central area and the most important sights, theatres and restaurants are within the Underground's Circle Line on the north bank of the river. The trendy and tourist-ridden West End lies within the western portion of the loop, and includes Soho, Trafalgar Square, Piccadilly Circus, Leicester Square and Regent St. The East End, which lies east of the Circle Line is used to be the exclusive preserve of the Cockney but is now a cultural melting pot. There are interesting inner-city suburbs in North London, including Islington and Camden Town. South London includes a mess of poor, dirty, graffiti-ridden suburbs, like Brixton, which have vibrant subcultures of their own.

Similarly, in the Philippines, the Pasig River bisects the urban centre but easterly and westerly. Manila, like most of the world's large cities, suffers from a huge and problematic urban sprawl. Typically, urban sprawl also creates nightmares for travellers, although the main points of interest to visitors are centralised, making suburban navigation unnecessary. Manila sprawls east from Manila Bay along the Pasig River, and immediately south of the river is Intramuros, the old walled Spanish town where many of the city's historical sites are found. Further south again and you'll find yourself in the 'tourist belt' of the Malate and Ermita districts, where you'll find restaurants, accommodation and travel agencies.

Getting to London is easy, as it boasts of 4 major airports situated all around it. Heathrow airport is accessible by bus, London Underground (Piccadilly line) and the Heathrow Express, which makes the journey from Paddington Station to Terminals 1-3 in 15 minutes and to Terminal 4 in 20. A cab to or from the airport will cost around £15 to £25. The Gatwick Express runs between Gatwick airport and Victoria station in 30 minutes, or you can get a cab for around £30. The Stansted Express will get you to Stansted airport from Liverpool Street station in 60 minutes or you can get a cab for £50 (as if!).

London's tube is legendary, but mainly because it's not that much fun to use. Although the tube network is immense, buses are more pleasant and interesting, as long as the traffic's not gridlocked. Travelcards can be used on all forms of transport and there are weekly Bus Passes (or monthly or daily, whichever one would prefer and could afford) that costs £8.50 – this will take you anywhere, at anytime up to London's 4 major suburban zones. Several rail companies now run passenger trains in London, most of which interchange with the tube.

London's famous black cabs are excellent but expensive. Minicabs are cheaper competitors, with freelance drivers, but you can't flag these down on the street. If you'd rather drive yourself, you're in for a parking nightmare - it's almost impossible

to get a park in the city centre, and the punishments for parking illegally are cruel and unusual indeed.

Arriving in Manila's Ninoy Aquino International Airport is about as far as you'll ever get from a streamlined process. Poor signage, crowds and an illogical layout all contribute to the chaos, but if you're confused you won't be alone. Once you finally make your way to the street, things begin to look up. The airport, only about 8km (5 miles) south of the centre of Manila, is well served by buses and taxis, and there is a Metrorail station about 2km (1.2 miles) away. Fares could range from less than £0.50 in public transport such as buses and jeepneys which traverses a specific route like the London red buses. Taxi cabs and AUV's (Asian Utility Vehicles) can be hired and would normally cost not more than £3 to £5 in and around the city. Light and Metro Rail Transit runs overhead amidst the turmoil of the busy traffic below, intertwined with numerous flyovers that criss-cross the city's major streets and thoroughfares. This is also a safer way to travel Manila when its streets become flooded during the rainy season (June to October). Driving your own car along the hectic city streets can prove to be accident-prone and very taxing, as there are no designated bus lanes and the traffic jams seemed to last forever on rush hours.

Unlike in Manila where staying out for nights on end isn't a problem, accommodation in London is ridiculously expensive and in short supply in July and August. There's the usual mix of hostels, university colleges, B&Bs and hotels. Earl's Court is a major centre for cheap hostels and hotels, but there are other good centres in Bloomsbury and Notting Hill. Less-cheap alternatives are Paddington, Bayswater and Pimlico. In contrast, Manila has cheap hostels sprouting like mushrooms in the Pasay, Ermita and Malate area and accessible 24/7. But also, five-star hotels can also be found in the posh Makati district.

It is interesting to know that in Manila alone, one inhabitant will be occupying at least 54 square meter of the land, as compared to London whose inhabitants could be allotted 135 square meter of available space for each individual, given the relatively sparse population in a much bigger total land area. Indeed, Manila is a much more crowded place to spend one's holiday in than London.

In London, eating out is also expensive, though Indian, Chinese and Italian restaurants are less threatening to your wallet. This isn't the case in Manila, where your one pound will get you a complete meal (with dessert) in McDonald's, KFC or other fast food chains. And lunch or dinner at a fine Filipino restaurant would be a steal to the most avid of culinary-hunters.

Never had I encountered so vibrant a place as the city of London and as nostalgic as the city of Manila!