

The Sydney Morning Herald

SE Traveller
HD **Monumental as anything**
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WC 2,657 words
PD 19 January 2014
SN Sun Herald
SC SHD
ED First
PG 10
LA English
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Cover story - WORLD

. . . and that's just the lines to get in. Don't let the queues at the world's busiest tourist attractions defeat you. In this cut-out-and-keep guide, Julietta Jameson reveals how to beat the crowds for 20 major sights from the Taj Mahal to the Tower of London.

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Unless you're into extreme adventure, you likely want your holiday to be an exercise in relaxation, not survival of the fittest. But when your destination is a sea of noisy, jostling others looking for their own slice of relaxation, every day can seem like a battle.

One strategy for dealing with the frustration of crowds is, of course, to avoid them: head off the tourist trails and steer clear of the iconic landmarks where sightseers swarm.

The problem with that is, you're missing out. The world's busiest tourist attractions are busy for a reason - they're amazing. People head in droves to the Eiffel Tower, the Taj Mahal and the Grand Canyon because they are inspiringly beautiful and to see them is to be moved. So don't forgo them - especially if it's your first time at a destination. Save the off-piste itineraries for return visits, and arm yourself with strategies to beat the crowds. Here's 20 to help you tick off those bucket-list items with minimal stress.

Eiffel Tower, Paris, France

Why go: Though it was built as a temporary exhibit, the Eiffel Tower remains the emblem of modern Paris and the views are utterly stunning.

Opens: 9am-midnight June-September, 11pm rest of the year.

Strategy: Join the queue at the south pillar 15 minutes before opening. Take the stairs to level two, where you have to **buy** a separate ticket for the four lifts to the third level. But before 10am, the wait won't be too bad and not nearly as bad as down below. No stairs for you? **Buy** lift tickets online and print prior. You'll avoid the ground-level lift queue, at least, and pass through a dedicated channel.

Tip: The best month to go is October. The summer season is over, it's still not too cold and Christmas is yet to kick in.

Eiffel-tower.com

Magic Kingdom, Walt Disney World, Orlando, Florida

Why go: It's the most visited place on the planet for good reason - one of four parks in the Walt Disney World complex, within it are six different "lands", rides for all ages, parades, fireworks, and seasonal events. Last year, 17.5 **million** people visited the Magic Kingdom.

Opens: 9am-11pm, shorter hours some holidays.

Strategy: Go in the lead-up to the cooler months' US holidays: Thanksgiving holiday week and two weeks before Christmas are relatively quiet, so too the week after New Year's Eve. Another thing to keep in mind is that peak time on any day is between 11am and 3pm.

Tip: A great time to line up for rides is when everyone else is lined up for fireworks.

Disneyworld.disney.go.com

Taj Mahal, Agra, India

Why go: Its beauty up close surpasses expectations - it really is one to see for yourself. The 17th-century monument to love is one of the most photographed buildings in the world.

Opens: Sunrise-sunset (closed Fridays). Night viewing is 8.30pm-12.30am full moon days, as well as two days before and two days after.

Strategy: The Taj is enchanting at sunrise, and lucky for early birds, that time also happens to be the best for beating the crowds.

Tip: Get a qualified guide, skip the night viewing and secure a nearby **hotel** with your own private view.

Tajmahal.gov.in

Vatican museums and Sistine Chapel, Vatican City, Italy

Why go: Michelangelo's ceiling in the chapel is alone worth the cost of entry. But as well as harbouring a breathtaking collection of curios from all around the world, the museums contain some sublime pieces of Renaissance art.

Opens: Tickets 9am-4pm; rooms 9am-6pm. Closed Sundays.

Strategy: **Buy** an online ticket up to 60 days in advance. It will give you a specific entry time and costs €20 (\$30) (€12 under 18). That's €4 more than buying at the door but when you see the line, particularly in summer, you'll say a prayer of thanks.

Tip: Get to the Sistine Chapel an hour before closing time - considerably fewer people.

biglietteriamusei.vatican.va/

Versailles, France

Why go: A dizzying 10 **million** people a year visit Louis XIV's humble chateau and gardens. As historically important as it is exquisite and an easy day trip out of Paris, Versailles is the definition of a do-not-miss attraction.

Opens: Hours vary based on season, but first entry to the palace is 9am. Closed Mondays.

Strategy: Book online for a **group** tour. It allows you to forgo the queue and best of all, you see things others won't: the King's Apartments, the Opera, and the Royal Chapel. You can check out everything else once the tour finishes. (€16; €8 under 17)

Tip: Arrive late in the afternoon and, if it's summer, stay for one of the regularly scheduled performances.

billetterie.chateauversailles.fr/

Basilica Di San Marco,

Venice, Italy

Why go: Glittering mosaics and priceless artworks lead a Vatican-defying opulence that is pure Venetian splendour. This gorgeous cathedral took 800 years to build. The least you can do is give it an hour of your time.

Opens: 9.45am-4.45pm, Sundays 2pm-5pm.

Strategy: Go early. But a better bet is to book online for €2, which you can do up to 10 minutes before your visit. Considering you can wait in the queue 45-plus minutes for free entry, that's a sweet deal. It's only available April-October.

Tip: Consider a tour via venetoinside.com and others for extra access and insight.

Basilicasanmarco.it

Uluru, Northern Territory, Australia

Why go: Nowhere else in Australia can a visitor feel so connected to the indigenous spiritual heart of the country. The physical presence of the rock is power unsurpassed.

Opens: Uluru-Kata Tjuta Cultural Centre is open 7am-6pm daily.

Strategy: Peak season is June to August. The rest of the year is less crowded but if you're not a fan of heat, then try for shoulder times. Alternatively, just be prepared to arrive at your chosen viewing area a good while before sunrise and take a picnic breakfast. Then you can walk into the scrub a little way when the sun appears.

Tip: Book a tour led by local indigenous people.

environment.gov.au

Great Wall of **China**, Beijing (and other locations), **China**

Why go: Spanning nearly 9000 kilometres from the east to the west of **China**, 2000 years of history and dating back more than 400 years BC, the wall writes the book on majestic.

Opens: Badaling, the most popular section, is open 6.40am-6.30pm.

Strategy: Your biggest competition for a great experience are the **Chinese** themselves. So plan your visit around **Chinese** holidays. Spring Festival, or **Chinese** New Year is a no-no, so too the **Chinese** holidays in the first weeks of May and October.

Tip: Beijing is freezing in winter, but there are smaller crowds at nearby wall access points.

Grand Canyon, Arizona, US

Why go: This steep, terraced formation carved by the Colorado River in Arizona shows **millions** of years of natural history. It's awesome, in the true sense of the word.

Opens: The North Rim is only open May 15-October 15. The South Rim is always open.

Strategy: The South Rim, particularly in summer, is where all the action is. Some reports have 90 per cent of visitors to the canyon congregating there. So head to the North Rim. It's a much longer drive but the difference is chalk and **cheese** in terms of numbers. Tip: May to November, there is a bus shuttle between the two rims. The trip is 4.5 hours one way. See trans-canyonshuttle.com.

Tip: Take a ride on the Grand Canyon Railway (thetrain.com).

Nationalparks.org

Pyramids of Giza,

Cairo, Egypt

Why go: One of the ancient wonders of the world, visiting the pyramids is an item on many a bucket list. A marvel of human endeavour and truly iconic, the allure of Giza is enduring.

Opens: 7am-7pm. Shorter hours during Ramadan.

Strategy: The sad fact is that now is a pretty crowd-free time at the once busy pyramids, due to Egypt's post-revolution situation. Visitor numbers are hugely down. When they pick up again (and they will), the key is simply to go early, particularly if you want to go inside. A very limited number of tickets are issued and they are on a first-come, first-served basis.

Tip: Don't listen to the hawkers. Heed the travel warnings (including those on the Australian Government's Smart Traveller website) and employ a trusted guide.

Touregypt.net, smartraveller.gov.au

Niagara Falls, Ontario Canada (also New York State, US)

Why go: Three falls creating the highest water flow anywhere on earth, astounding beauty spanning two countries and a source of power for an entire Canadian state, Niagara leaves an indelible impression.

Opens: Some services close in winter.

Strategy: Goat **Island**, Three Sisters Islands and Luna **Island** offer the least crowded vantage points. But the best idea is to avoid summer. In fact, winter is pretty special. The Winter Festival of Lights sees Queen Victoria **Park**, which surrounds the Canadian side, festooned with more than 2 **million** bulbs.

Tip: The Keg Steakhouse and Bar on the ninth floor of the Embassy Suites **Hotel** has a corker of a view (Canada side).

niagarafallstourism.com

Tower of London

Why go: The Crown Jewels and a gory history are encased in this evocative fortress which is the world's longest-running tourist attraction.

Opens: Tuesday-Saturday 9am-4.30pm; Sunday-Monday 10am-4.30pm.

Strategy: The tower is one of nearly 60 attractions included in the London Pass. Holders can skip the entry queue, even if their visit is a last-minute decision (londonpass.com).

Tip: The Twilight Yeoman Warders' tours are the best bet. For £25 (\$45), visitors get the inside word on the monument at a most evocative time (7pm-8.30pm).

Hrp.org.uk/TowerofLondon

Grand Bazaar, Istanbul, Turkey

Why go: Open since the mid-1400s, one of the largest and oldest covered markets in the world is an ornate rabbit warren of more than 3000 shops in 60 covered streets - an exhilarating feast for the senses.

Opens: 9am-7pm, closed Sundays.

Strategy: Get there early and explore the main drags before 10am. As the crowds build, venture into less touristy side streets, back alleys and courtyards as well as the outer fringes. You'll find a far more local experience.

Tip: Seek out the tiny authentic kebab cafes where local workers eat.

Grandbazaaristanbul.org

Barcelona, Spain

Why go: It's a tourist magnet for good reasons: the legacy of Gaudi, the Picasso museum, gorgeous beaches, the atmospheric Gothic old town and the Spanish way of enjoying life are just some of them.

Opens: This is a city that stays up late.

Strategy: Winter is a fantastic time in Barcelona. Some say it's when the city is reclaimed by its residents. So while it won't be quiet (and whoever wants a quiet Barcelona isn't going for the right reasons), there will be fewer English hens and bucks parties.

Tip: Check on English long weekends to avoid rampant gangs of lager louts.

Barcelonaturisme.com

Galleria dell'Accademia and Uffizi Gallery, Florence, Italy

Why go: If the Statue of David isn't enough reason, an amazing collection of 15th and 16th-century art is kept safe in what is Europe's first school of drawing, the Galleria dell'Accademia. At the nearby Uffizi, be wowed by Botticelli's The Birth of Venus.

Opens: 8.15am-6.50pm. Closed Mondays.

Strategy: Early and/or pre-emptive is best. Book your tickets online for designated appointment times and try to secure early-morning slots before the bus tours hit. High summer, as usual is the worst. May is surprisingly calm (relatively).

Tip: Avoid the US summer school holidays when art students descend in droves.

Uffizi.org

Smithsonian, Washington DC, US

Why go: These are just two of the 19 in the world's largest complex of museums where there's literally something for everyone. But these two include dinosaurs, outer space, animals, rockets and plenty more to mesmerise both adults and kids.

Opens: 10am-5.30pm. Closed Christmas Day.

Strategy: Get there after school hours, or early - most school groups are there from noon to 3pm. But these are the busiest museums on the planet so be mentally prepared for that.

Tip: Do your research and secure Imax and other theatre and attraction tickets as soon as you arrive.

Si.edu

Machu Picchu, Aguas Calientes, Peru

Why go: It remained abandoned and undiscovered for nearly 400 years. Now this enigmatic World Heritage Inca **site** is an obligatory stop on any South American tour.

Opens: 6am-5pm daily. Some tour companies will organise night visits between 6pm-1am.

Strategy: Forgo the day trip out of Cusco and stay two nights, one before your visit and another the night after so you have a full day with the option of visiting twice, early before the day trippers have arrived and in the evening when they've left.

Tip: Looking for somewhere to stay close to the action? Machu Picchu Sanctuary Lodge by Orient Express is right at the entrance and rated No.1 on Trip Advisor.

Machupicchu.gob.pe

Angkor Wat, Cambodia

Why go: This Hindu temple complex is one of the largest religious monuments ever built. Staggering in scale and grandeur, it is remarkably preserved for a building that dates back to the 12th century.

Opens: 5am-6pm.

Strategy: High season is November to March. Late October is often not as busy. Everyone heads to the temple for sunrise, and most head back to their **hotel** afterwards for breakfast. Bring a picnic and hang around. The crowds don't build again till about 9am.

Tip: Lunchtime can also be a quiet interlude.

Tourismcambodia.com

Westminster Abbey

Why go: Built by King Edward the Confessor, the abbey has been the **site** of royal pomp and ceremony since the 11th century. Its crowded interior tomb is a who's who of the history of the British monarchy.

Opens: 9.30am-3.30pm, 1pm-6pm Wednesdays, closed to visitors Sunday.

Strategy: The odd Wednesday opening times are a bonus for those who have done some research. The morning puts off those who have made it to the abbey only to find the doors closed while other visitors may not realise the extended hours at the end of the day. Plan to hit around 4pm.

Tip: Join a service on Sunday.

Westminster-abbey.org

The Louvre, Paris, France

Why go: The world's most visited art gallery is home to thousands of masterpieces and considered a crowning glory of European civilisation. The Mona Lisa and Venus de Milo are the tip of the iceberg.

Opens: 9am-6pm most days, 9am-8pm Wednesdays and Fridays.

Strategy: Go late on a Wednesday or Friday, say about 5pm or 5.30pm. Take advantage of the fact that while others are leaving the gallery to go freshen up and eat, you may not need to queue for the Mona Lisa.

Tip: The Louvre is included in the Paris Pass (parisspass.com).

Louvre.fr/en

ABOUT THE WRITER

Julietta Jameson would rather be in Rome, but her home town, Melbourne, is a happy compromise. A gypsy at heart, she loves hotels, train stations, airports, road trips and inspiring others to love them too.

RE london : London (UK) | sydney : Sydney | apacz : Asia Pacific | ausnz : Australia/Oceania | austr : Australia | eecz : European Union Countries | eland : England | eurz : Europe | nswals : New South Wales | uk : United Kingdom | weurz : Western Europe

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AN Document SHD0000020140119ea1j00037