



ATTRACTION: Tower Bridge on the Thames



FEEL LIKE DANCING: Scissor Sisters rock out at the O2 Arena



LICENCE TO THRILL: RIB action past Canary Wharf

Water way to see London

TRAVEL

By DAWN CLARKE

GETTING round London's vast array of sights and venues can be exhausting — blisters if you travel by foot, suffocation if travelling on the Tube — so sometimes the best way to get from A to B is by sea (the Thames, to be exact).

The best views of London are, of course, from the BA London Eye where, on a good day, you can get uninterrupted 360 degree views for 25 miles, but it's surprising just how many major buildings stand along the banks of the Thames.

Our first base, the five-star Marriott West India Quay, at Canary Wharf was only a short distance away from a Thames Clippers hydrofoil which sped us through the gleaming skyscrapers of the Docklands before allowing us to take in great views of Tower Bridge, the 'Gherkin', past the striking rounded-glass building that is Ken Livingstone's swanky City Hall and on to the Tate Modern and the Oxo Tower (great for interesting gifts).

We caught a brief glimpse of the dome of Saint Paul's Cathedral before arriving at the revamped South Bank Centre, only 20 minutes after boarding the boat.

Boasting a make-over costing £111m, the South Bank is a great place to walk (without traffic), shop, eat and drink, and enjoy the river and skyline.

We took in one of the centre's many highlights, Anthony Gormley's (of The Angel of the North fame) Blind Light Exhibition at the Hayward Gallery.

Check out www.southbankcentre.co.uk for what's on over the coming months.

You're always spoilt for choice when it comes to lunching in London and we 'lucked out' at the newly-opened Canteen Restaurant which serves scrumptious and satisfying comfort food right in the pedestrian heart of the South Bank.

It's also perfect for a spot of people watching.

Another venue that's had a bit of a makeover is the infamous Millennium Dome.

Once a bit of a white elephant, the Dome has been transformed into the O2 Arena — a state-of-the-art music and entertainment destination.

From the air, the gleaming white canopy of the arena is one of the first of the city's recognisable features and as I arrived it was being dive-bombed by the Red Bull Air Race pilots. What a spectacle!

This massive arena is now the place to catch that gig of a lifetime.

It's been rocked by the Rolling Stones, wowed by Prince and greats like Elton John and Take That are on their way, as is a major Tutankhamun exhibition in November — the first time anything like this has visited

the UK in more than 30 years. With the O2 staging such major acts, sports events and attractions, it's the perfect excuse for a weekend away. And you can fly right into the heart of the city.

The short flight from George Best Belfast City Airport to London City Airport lands you in the heart of the capital, and just a 15-minute Docklands Light Railway Journey brings you to Canary Wharf.

Another way to get around London by water is a high-speed, white-knuckle ride of a lifetime on a rigid inflatable boat (RIB) with London RIB Voyages.

The trip started calmly enough with a rather tongue-in-cheek history lesson and commentary on the bridges and buildings given by the skipper, but beyond Tower Bridge, it was time to hold on tight as the boat reached more than 30mph for some daredevil James Bond-style, speedboat action.

The only real difference was we were in life jackets not tuxedos, but we were definitely shaken!

After that, a change of pace and scenery was needed and we transferred to the Colonnade Hotel in Little Venice, just north of Paddington.

The Colonnade is the epitome of classic Victorian elegance, (Corinne Bailey Rae always books her favourite suite when in town), and it's just a short stroll past beautiful houses and tree-lined streets down to the charming canals from which Little Venice got its name.

Here, water transport is much more laid



SPECTACLE: Red Bull Air Race takes place over the O2 Arena