



Secret city

Regent's Canal - Little Venice to Camden

Any city canal can be a beautiful warts-and-all walk, yet the Regent's Canal tiptoes through England's capital city and still manages to quietly surprise the walker with its slow secrets. This is a city walk through the backdoor, catching London in private, with its slippers on.

The canal sets off from the well-off residential patch around Little Venice, with tree-lined roads bordering the gentle water. Here, the canal is eloquently loved. Moored boats that line the water's edge are made into narrow-homes, and other boats take tourists out for a ride. The zone is in keeping with the romance of its name. However, Little Venice risks the wrath of Birmingham for stealing the Italian connection, since Birmingham is the official capital of the canals with more waterways than the real Venice.

Follow the towpath beyond the whitewashed haven of Little Venice and more intrigue unfolds. The big city has two tales to tell - there's the one it intends you to hear, and then there's the quieter story from the water. It soon becomes impossible to position yourself with the 'other' London as it disappears from any of the senses. The 4mph water-zone doesn't let anything infringe the simplicity.

Little Venice to Camden

Before the M1 was a twinkle in the industrialists' eye, the canals had already linked London to the rest of Britain for more than a century. The canal was first opened in 1820 and named after the Prince Regent, later to be King George IV. London, naturally, is rife with royal connections. The canal even treads on land that was once the hunting grounds of Henry VIII (until in 1811 John Nash landscaped them into the Royal Park).

Regency housing backing onto the canal isn't the whole story of this walk. The canal briefly gets tangled up into patches of urban bleakness but the water always keeps the mood sweet and opens up again into urban leafiness and clean-cut stretches.

Be prepared for tropical squawking, tusks and unmentionable aromas to surprise you, as the towpath walks straight through the middle of London Zoo (there's mesh to keep you safe!)

On another turn in the water, multi-coloured tie-dyed Camden is the compulsory cool bit of the walk. The markets are world famous for joss-stick accessories and possibly more purple-patterned trousers than anywhere else on earth. Even outdoor-minded walkers who are shop-phobic might be tempted to stalk the markets for bargains of zappy-labelled clothes or not-over-packaged earthy veg.

The Regent's Canal is a different experience to walking those cosier narrow canals of the Midlands or the North, and the towpaths are fastidiously hard-surfaced with less appeal than soft grass paths, yet the waterways' balm manages to bring out the same old-fashioned smiles and hellos that canals have a knack of doing - even when it takes you into the concrete heart of the capital.

An urban walk with the treat of a rare peek into the most secret side of the capital city.





Highlight of the walk

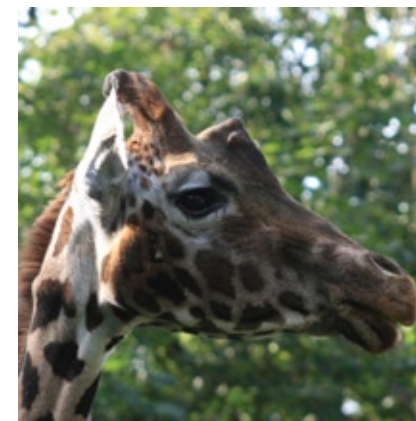
The towpath runs alongside Regent's Park. John Nash, the designer of both the canal and Regent's Park, had intended that the canal should run through the middle of the park - but he was convinced by others that the delicate residents of the park would be horrified by the foul language used by navvies building the canal, so in the end, he decided to take the canal round the edge instead. Not too terrible a compromise for canal-goers today!

Did you know?

The poet, Robert Browning, used to live in a house overlooking the Regent's Canal. Having compared the canal to Venice, he is thought to be the first person to name the area Little Venice. The small island in the middle of the Pool of Little Venice is called Browning's Island after him.

Fascinating fact

Camden Lock is the name for the area around the locks and markets at Camden, yet there is no Camden Lock. The twin locks at the centre of Camden are actually called Hampstead Road Lock.



Start:

Little Venice
OS Grid ref: TQ262818

Finish:

Camden Lock
OS Grid ref: TQ288841

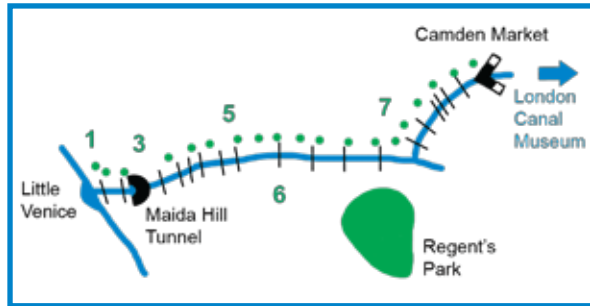
Distance:

2 miles approx

Terrain:

Flat easy walking.

OS Explorer Map - 173
(or London A-Z)



The walk - step by step

1. The pool of Little Venice makes a grand start to the walk. This wide open space is lined with boats and surrounded by white stucco-clad Regency houses.
2. Take the towpath under Warwick Avenue Bridge. The scene ahead is of moored boats on both sides of the water, mirrored by the terraces of Regency houses. Some residential boat owners have developed their canalside gardens to such an extent, it is a haven of pots and wisteria.
3. Follow the road alongside and, just beyond the moorings by Maida Hill Tunnel, cross the road to Aberdeen Place. Carry on until you pass Crocker's Folly pub on your left, then straight along the path (signposted Regent's Canal) to rejoin the towpath down steep steps at the other end.
4. Continuing under the next couple of busy road and rail bridges, you enter a scene of tranquillity - white mansions

line the opposite side of the canal, their gardens and weeping willows swooping down to the water. This is the edge of Regent's Park.

5. Look out for the aptly named 'Blow Up Bridge' - a boat with a cargo of gunpowder bound for the Midlands exploded here in 1874, demolishing the existing bridge and terrifying the residents. When rebuilt, the pillars were turned round, so there are now rope grooves on both sides.
6. Just beyond the bridge, notice the cages and wire as the canal goes through part of London Zoo - watch for Red River hogs, the giraffe house and a huge aviary of exotic birds.
7. Past Cumberland Basin, with its moored boats and unusual Chinese restaurant, the canal curves under a quick succession of low road and rail bridges before arriving at the hustle and bustle of Camden (if you follow the towpath for another mile, you'll reach Battlebridge Basin and the London Canal Museum).

Where to eat

The Summerhouse

Canalside at Little Venice.
T:0207 2866752 www.thesummerhouse.co

The Waterway

Canalside at Little Venice.
T:0207 2663557 www.thewaterway.co.uk

The Bridge House & Canal Café Theatre

Canalside at Little Venice.
T:0207 2664326
www.thebridgehouselittlevenice.co.uk

Waterside Café

Moored in Little Venice. T:0207 2661066

Café Laville

Perched on top of Maida Hill Tunnel, overlooking the canal.
T:0207 7062620 www.cafelaville.co.uk

Feng Shang Princess

Floating Chinese restaurant boat moored in Cumberland Basin.
T:0207 4858137 / 0216 www.fengshang.co.uk

Lock 17

Canalside by Camden Lock.
T:0207 4285929 www.lock17-camden.co.uk

Starbucks Coffee Company

In the old Lock Keeper's Cottage. Canalside overlooking Camden Lock.
T:0207 4851986 www.starbucks.co.uk

The Ice Wharf

Canalside by Camden Lock.
T:0207 4283770 www.jdwetherspoon.co.uk

The Constitution

Canalside by St Pancras Way Bridge, just beyond Camden.
T:0207 3874805 www.conincamden.com

Best picnic spot

At Little Venice or alongside Regent's Park.

And more

Large choice of other pubs and cafés in and around the route from Little Venice to Camden.

Where to stay

Canalside cottages

Europa House Apartments
Little Venice. Serviced apartments, a short walk from the canal.
T:0207 7245924
europahouseapartments.co.uk

Canalside hotels

The Colonnade Hotel 4-star
Little Venice. Short walk from the canal.
T:0207 2861052
www.theetoncollection.com

Holiday Inn Camden Lock 4-star.
Canalside by Camden Lock.
Wheelchair access.
T:0207 4854343
www.holidayinncamden.co.uk

And more

There's also a large choice of self-catering, B&B and hotel accommodation in and around Little Venice and Camden.
www.visitlondon.com

The Puppet Barge

Established in 1982, the Puppet Theatre is a floating theatre boat moored in Little Venice for most of the year. The boat, which seats up to 55, also takes a theatre tour of the Thames during the summer.

T:0207 2496876
www.puppetbarge.com



How to get there

Train info

Paddington, Warwick Avenue & Camden Road

London Underground www.tfl.gov.uk

National Rail Enquiries T:08457 484950

Bus info

London Buses www.tfl.gov.uk

Parking

Car park at Paddington (charge)

Local Tourist info

London Tourist Information

T:08701 566366 www.visitlondon.com

Canal & River Trust

Use the Canal & River Trust website to find specific local information.

www.canalrivertrust.org.uk

London Canal Museum

Battlebridge Basin. Canalside museum in Carlo Gatti's former ice warehouse. Displays on London's canals, boats, cargo, people and horses - including a huge ice well. Discount for Friends of the Canal & River Trust - see Supporter Magazine for details.

T:0207 7130836 www.canalmuseum.org.uk

London Zoo

The world's oldest scientific zoo, it has an emphasis on education and conservation.

T:0207 7223333 www.zsl.org

Boats

Jason's Trip

100-yr old converted narrowboat running from Little Venice to Camden. Live commentary.

T:0207 2863428 www.jasons.co.uk

London Waterbus Company

Regular trips on traditional narrowboats between Little Venice & Camden.

T:0207 4822660 www.londonwaterbus.com

Jenny Wren Canal Boat Cruises

Walker's Quay. Boat trips with commentary.

T:0207 4854433 www.walkersquay.com

'My Fair Lady' Cruising Restaurant

Walker's Quay. Dinner and Sun lunch cruises.

T:0207 4854433 www.walkersquay.com