

Nonfiction

An Animal's Eye View of London

Featured Writer

*By seeing London, I have seen as much of life as the world can show." – Samuel
Johnson*



Famed 18th century writer Samuel Johnson lived almost half a century in London, but probably never thought to experience his beloved city through the eyes of his (equally beloved) cats. Nor can we. But a unique tour offers us the opportunity to try to understand part of London through the animals that have inhabited it. This tour was conceived and conducted by Valery Danko, a Ukrainian-born animal lover, vegan, and founder of Pigeon Tours, an agency offering customized tours of London not available elsewhere.

Danko struggled to select the specific sites included in “Animals of London.” The first version of her tour clocked in at five hours because there are so many parks, gardens, statues, and buildings in London honoring cats, dogs, horses, and less expected creatures (lots of lions), and all are in different parts of the city. “You could spend a week trying to visit them all,” she sighs. “So I had to focus on memorials that were close to each other to make this an entirely walking tour without taking the tube. It lasts about two hours, depending on how fast people walk and how much lingering they do.”

Her customers are mostly American families, with a smattering of Irish and Danish and a few from other countries. The most popular time is around Christmas because of the attraction for children. “Kids like the stories about crocodiles and lions, they like seeing the live horses and pelicans, and they love the idea that pigeons carry secret messages, like at Hogwarts.”

The adventure starts at Embankment Station beside the Camel Memorial. Not a real camel, but a statue of a dromedary ridden by a soldier, mounted on a marble base. It’s not an homage to Lawrence of Arabia, though it does evoke the David Lean classic film. The accompanying plaque pays homage to the Imperial Camel Corps, created in 1916 to support British efforts in the Middle East during World War I. At its peak, the ICC boasted 4,150 men and 4,800 camels. It was disbanded in 1919, but the memorial remains to honor the 240 men who died in its service; they came from the UK, Australia, New Zealand, and India. It doesn’t say how many camels died, though. The site is a reminder of the size of the British Empire at its peak, according to Danko.

Busy Trafalgar Square lies about half a mile west of the Camel Memorial. It is dominated by Nelson’s Column, a 169-foot monument celebrating the life (and death) of Admiral Horatio Nelson, with four Barbary lions at the base. One might wonder about the connection between these land mammals and a British naval officer, but the lion is the official animal of the UK, representing strength, courage, and pride (Richard the Lion-Hearted anyone?). Never mind that the king of beasts never roamed the British Isles.

The original plan – including granite lions -- was approved in 1840, but the creatures were missing when the monument was completed in 1854. The sculptor initially assigned to create them had declined the commission in 1846. Queen Victoria then asked her favorite artist, Sir Edwin Landseer, to design them in bronze. Landseer was a very well-known painter of animals, especially dogs and horses (including several belonging to the Queen), but he had little experience as a sculptor. Plus he had never sculpted a lion and had no idea of what they really looked like.

At this time, there was one lion at the London Zoo in Regent’s Park. Landseer waited two years for the lion to die of old age and

had the body brought to his studio. Danko describes what happened next: “The carcass started to rot and smelled terrible. Police were called, expecting a crime scene, and forced Landseer to throw away the body.” The artist was halfway through his sculpture by now, and had to improvise, drawing on his knowledge of the cats and dogs with which he was familiar. The result is evident in the final sculptures installed in 1867. The lions have dog-like expressions and sit like cats. Their backs are arched in a catlike fashion, not like the declined back of a lion. Still, they are popular with tourists, some of whom scramble to ride on those arched backs.

Riding is a temptation also for the next stop on the tour – the Horse Guards Museum, also called the Household Cavalry Museum. It is located south of Trafalgar Square between Whitehall and Horse Guards Avenue and features live animals, since this is where the Royal Stables are found. There are sentry changes every hour, and guard changes in the morning and afternoon. One can’t get too close to the horses but one can see them in action. (To REALLY see them in action, time your visit to the annual Trooping the Colour ceremony held every June). A small museum illustrates the training of the horses and displays some of the colorful uniforms worn by their riders.

That horses played an important role in British history goes without saying. Horses were key to the expansion of the British Empire in the 17th and 18th centuries. Yes, naval power was determinant in some regions, and yes, camels also played their part, but the cavalry was essential to British military strategy. No surprise that most of the statues of famous military figures visible throughout the city depict men on horseback. They all adhere to a special code of Anglo sculptors: if the horse is rearing, the rider died in battle. If one of the horse’s hooves is off the ground, the rider was wounded in battle. If all four hooves are on the ground, the rider did not die in battle.

Some figures fall between the cracks, literally. William the III, aka William the Orange, was fond of his horse Sorrel. In 1702, Sorrel changed British and Scottish history by stumbling on a molehill with William astride. The king died as a result, changing the course of English and Scottish history. Since he didn’t die in battle, artists had free rein with their sculptures. Some show William on a rearing horse, as he did die from his fall. But others show his horse with one leg raised, as the monarch did not die immediately (he lingered for 16 days).

History is being made daily on the tour’s next stop – 10 Downing Street off Whitehall. It is the traditional home of Britain’s Prime Minister, and historically it has hosted a long line of rescue cats, invited to take care of the rats typically found in older homes. One wonders why exterminators are not hired to handle such things these days, but tradition is a Big Deal on Downing Street.

One of the most famous mousers was Larry, who served three prime ministers – David Cameron, Theresa May, and Boris Johnson. He didn’t get along with Palmerstone, a rescue cat assigned to rat-hunting duties at the Foreign Office across the street. Larry and Palmerstone’s mutual dislike became exceedingly vocal, leading to screeching contests and violent physical encounters. Eventually both cats were retired to homes in the country, quite removed from each other. It’s not clear who the current First Mouser is, but then, it’s not clear who the current Prime Minister is either.

West of Downing Street is St. James Park, created in 1536 when Henry VIII earmarked a 57-acre expanse of land near Westminster Palace for a deer park. Maybe he wanted a distraction from the business of beheading his second wife, Anne Boleyn, which occurred the same year. The park was re-landscaped in 1603 under the direction of James I, who had just become king. James loved animals and housed his collection in the eponymous park, including camels (again!), crocodiles, an elephant, and an aviary of exotic birds.

In 1664, the Russian ambassador gifted a pair of pelicans to Charles II to adorn the park. That tradition has continued to the present, and pelican-watching of the five current birds is a highlight for visitors. However, a bad seed bird caused a PR fiasco in 2006 when it swallowed a pigeon whole in front of a horrified group and the entire gruesome attack was caught on video.

A more family-friendly episode had been filmed in the park in 1996: the live action version of 101 Dalmations includes the meet-cute encounter between Pongo and Perdita (the dogs) and their humans (played by Jeff Daniels and Joely Richardson). They all wind up in the lake of St. James Park.

The final stop on Danko's tour is the Animals in War Memorial in Hyde Park, just east of Speaker's Corner, about a 10-minute walk from St. James Park. The memorial was inaugurated in 2004, and features two walls broken by an opening. On the lower side of the wall are two bronze mules struggling uphill and heavily burdened. On the other side are a horse without any tack and a dog, both looking noble and optimistic. The walls include tableaux of various animals that "served and died alongside British and Allies forces in wars and campaigns throughout time." It celebrates not only the aforementioned dogs, horses, and mules, but also elephants, camels, ox, cats, canaries, and pigeons. A small inscription acknowledges that "They had no choice."

Danko highlights the special role of pigeons, since her tour company is named for them. "Pigeons are everywhere in London, which is why I chose the name. They served an important role in WWII, delivering messages and saving lives." A story she recounts to her clients is that of a British plane crash in 1943 in the seas near Scotland. In addition to 11 crew members, a pigeon named White Vision was a passenger on the plane. She was released with the plane's coordinates, returned to her base in the UK after a stormy nine-hour flight, and the entire crew was rescued safely eight hours later. The pigeon received the first Dickin Medal for her actions: the BCC calls this medal "the animals' Victoria Cross."

The tour ends in somber note at Hyde Park. Those who are interested can visit other attractions independently, such as the Tower of London, which was once a menagerie with many animals, including a polar bear. Or Canary Wharf, which is located on the Isle of Dogs, perhaps named because Edward III and Henry VIII both kept their dogs on this peninsula. Nearly two dozen tube and train stops have a connection to animals; some are factual (Lambeth, a place where lambs were shipped) and some fanciful (Elephant & Castle, graced by neither in the course of its long history). Some tour takers head for London bookshops known for their large departments dedicated to animals. Waterstones and Foyles are two of the best-known.

One can find the writings of Samuel Johnson in both emporia, including his many musings about his cats. He loved them so

much that there is a bronze statue of his favorite at 17 Gough Square, Johnson's home in London for many years. Hodge sits on a base suggesting Johnson's famous dictionary of the English language, with two empty oyster shells representing the cat's preferred snack. Hodge is too far from Trafalgar Square to be included in Danko's tour, but he is one of many fascinating creatures that tell us as much about London life as the animal world can show.

Claudia Flisi is a dual national, Italian and American, whose articles have appeared for decades in the International New York Times, The Economist Intelligence Unit, Newsweek, Variety, MS., and dozens of other publications worldwide. She has visited more than 100 countries, fallen off horses on six continents, and trained dogs in three languages. She is also the author of a children's book about dogs, Crystal and Jade. For more about her and some of her recent clips, check her out at www.paroleanima.com, or Google her name.