

Shopgirls

Come for the Crown Jewels, the famous bridge or Buckingham Palace. But don't miss London's best-kept secret, the Burberry Outlet.

by **Tori Woods**

We've been riding in the cab for a while now. Too long, even. It has been almost an hour since we left the British Museum and at least 40 minutes since we last passed any landmark with a whiff of familiarity.

"You're quite sure we're still in London?" I inquire of our taxi driver.

"Well yes, you see, London carries on for a fair stretch," he replies, meeting my eyes in the rearview mirror. "But there are different boroughs in it. So in fact, while we are still in London, now we're in Hackney."

My mom and I exchange glances. Hackney? This certainly wasn't in our "Fodor's," our "Top 10 Guide to London," even our "Lonely Planet." I look out the window as we zoom past residential properties that are becoming increasingly shabby by the block.

I finally ask our driver, "Are you sure it's safe, where we're going?"

He doesn't meet my eyes. "Well, yes, I mean it's cleaned up quite a bit recently. But, erm, well it's just that Hackney used to be called, oh, dare I tell you? Hackney used to be called 'Gangsterland.' I shouldn't worry if I were you."

I fix Mom with a stare. She sheepishly shrugs.

"It will all be worth it when you get your raincoat!" she promises.

While in London, we've visited and relished a laundry list of memorable sights. We saw plays in the West End, ogled the Crown Jewels at the Tower of London and determined that London Bridge is, gratefully, not falling down. But, as committed connoisseurs of commerce, we have also

planned to shop. The behemoth, blocks-large emporium that is Harrods makes our heads spin with possibilities, but we know there is something even better waiting for us. A commercial mecca, the ultimate destination for all who refuse to pay £400 (about \$800) for a slicker: the Burberry Outlet.

Prior to our departure, one of my mom's friends handed her a copy of a magazine page listing shopping secrets in London. She had admired her friend's Burberry jacket, and when she learned it was from an outlet in London, where we were about to visit, it seemed a fateful conversation, destined to correct our Burberry-bereft lives.

To us, Burberry represents quality, sophistication and a level of poshness that



London to-do list: Visit the birds outside the Houses of Parliament (check!), ride the Tube (check!) and — most importantly — call the Burberry Outlet (check!).

Clevelanders dream about. However, while you can take the girls out of Cleveland, you can't make your average Clevelander spend \$800 on a plastic coat.

So we plan our trip to the Burberry Outlet after an educational morning spent

doesn't know where it is. This should have been the warning sign.

In London, the noble trade of cab driver is not entered into lightly. A rigorous test must be passed before a license is issued — it's considered the hardest taxi-driving

An hour later, we are fretting. Not a tourist nor a bobby (police officer) in sight, we could have been driving down the wrong side of the street in a questionable part of Brooklyn, N.Y. Bodegas and pubs vie for attention among low-end retail storefronts. We finally stop at a nondescript, miniwarehouse-sized building, next to a church where people are milling around in complicated white garments.

"We're here," he says, a bit apologetically. Our driver explains to us, once again, how we should return to London proper. Get on the bus, any bus, and go THAT way. He departs with a merry beep of the horn, and we are on our own.

"This better be worth it," I say, as visions of moth-eaten Burberry rejects torment my head.

We slide open the door. My eyes widen in, could it be, yes, delight! We are greeted by rack upon cheerful rack of Burberry coats in every style — trench coats, winter coats, rain jackets, in a rainbow of colors, all with that unmistakable, gotta-have-it Burberry plaid.

Scarves, shirts, more scarves, gifts, gloves, sweaters rapidly pile up in our shopping bags. And then, reverently, we

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investigating the Rosetta Stone, famous mummies and the Parthenon Sculptures at the British Museum. (It is far easier to justify shopping when we've already satisfied our culture quotient for the day.) Popping into one of the famous red phone booths, I place a call to the outlet and determine it's open, and verify the address. We hail a cab, but the driver apologetically says he




test in the world — which means would-be cabbies spend roughly three years driving around the city, learning some 20,000 streets and sights. By law, the cabbie must take you the quickest and cheapest route. The drivers joke and chat with us, make suggestions for further exploration and keep their vehicles immaculate and safe. We had yet to encounter a cabbie who didn't immediately know how to get us where we wanted to go.

So we flag another taxi. No luck. The third cabbie pulls up in a timeless, classic black model refreshingly unadorned with advertising. He invites us to climb in, and after a brief consultation with his map, pronounces himself ready to transport us to shopping paradise. He warns it's a bit off the beaten path, but nothing to fret about.

select the Chosen Ones — the coats we will rescue from Gangsterland and tenderly transport home to America. A cropped and quilted model for Mom in a fetching pink, lined with the signature plaid. A knee-length, belted, full-fledged Burberry plaid raincoat for me. At £139.99 and £129.99 respectively, plus our VAT refund (a "value added tax" refund that non-European shoppers receive at the airport for any goods they purchased), we saved hundreds of dollars while adopting coats that simply can't be found in the States.

It takes hours to get back into what we recognize as London on a queasy double-decker bus ride, all the time Mom tightly gripping our packages and hissing at me to cover up the "Prada" on my messenger bag. Was Hackney truly terrifying or was our perception skewed from our days spent in the fairy tale of Westminster Abbey and Buckingham Palace? I will happily leave the mystery unsolved. For now, Cleveland showers can do their worst. I'm irrepressibly cheerful when it rains, because how many other people I pass have a genuine Burberry from Gangsterland? ■

If You Go:

-  Continental Airlines offers an overnight direct flight from Cleveland Hopkins International Airport to London Gatwick certain times of the year. Gatwick is a short train ride from Victoria Station and less crowded than Heathrow.
-  Choose a hotel near an Underground (Tube) stop or bus stop ... or take lots of cabs, which are more expensive, but often worth it.
-  A London Pass includes admission to many attractions and unlimited public transportation. You can purchase it at www.londonpass.com.