

People don't usually visit the UK for the sole purpose of tourism.

They either go there to study, work or visit family. Last year I had the chance to spend three weeks in London, and it was the best vacation of my life. The only reason many, at least from Bangladesh, don't consider the UK as a holiday destination is because of the high price tag. But if you're savvy, there are many ways to cut down on your expenses. Once you figure out food and shelter, your UK trip should be a breeze.

Before I get into the details of my trip, I feel that it's necessary to give you an idea of what I am like as a person, because that determines which places I chose to visit. I grew up reading British literature, like many other Bangladeshi "90s kids." I used to paint as a hobby, and I deeply appreciate fine art. I enjoy walking in random streets when I travel, because I once read in a Feluda book that the best way to learn about a city and its people is to walk—and it's true. If you

# LOCAL WOMAN GOES TO ENGLAND AND SPENDS HER TIME LOOKING AT PAINTINGS BY DEAD DUDES AND RELICS STOLEN FROM COLONIES

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are someone who enjoys restaurants and theme parks and other fancy attractions, you probably wouldn't like the places I visited. Most people are usually quite disappointed that I didn't go to Madame Tussaud's or Buckingham Palace, but you must understand that I am an artsy snowflake who has no time for mainstream tourist spots. It's not you, it's me.

Now that the introduction's out of the way, let me tell you the number one secret of cutting down on travel expenses: find a place where you can stay for free. I know it's not easy, and in some cases impossible, but please check whether you have a long lost Sylheti relative who will let you stay at their place for little to no rent. I lucked out because my favourite aunt is a doctoral student in London, and I am also her favourite niece. So despite being a person with zero connections to Sylhet, I found a perfectly fine place to stay, along with free food.

The second trick to saving a whole lot of money is to visit museums, since most of them don't require entry fees. I love museums because I feel that it's the closest I can get to time travel. So I passed on deformed wax figures of footballers for sculptures made by people who are long dead. In South Kensington, three museums are located



V&A's exquisite collection of sculptures

PHOTO COURTESY: V&A MUSEUM

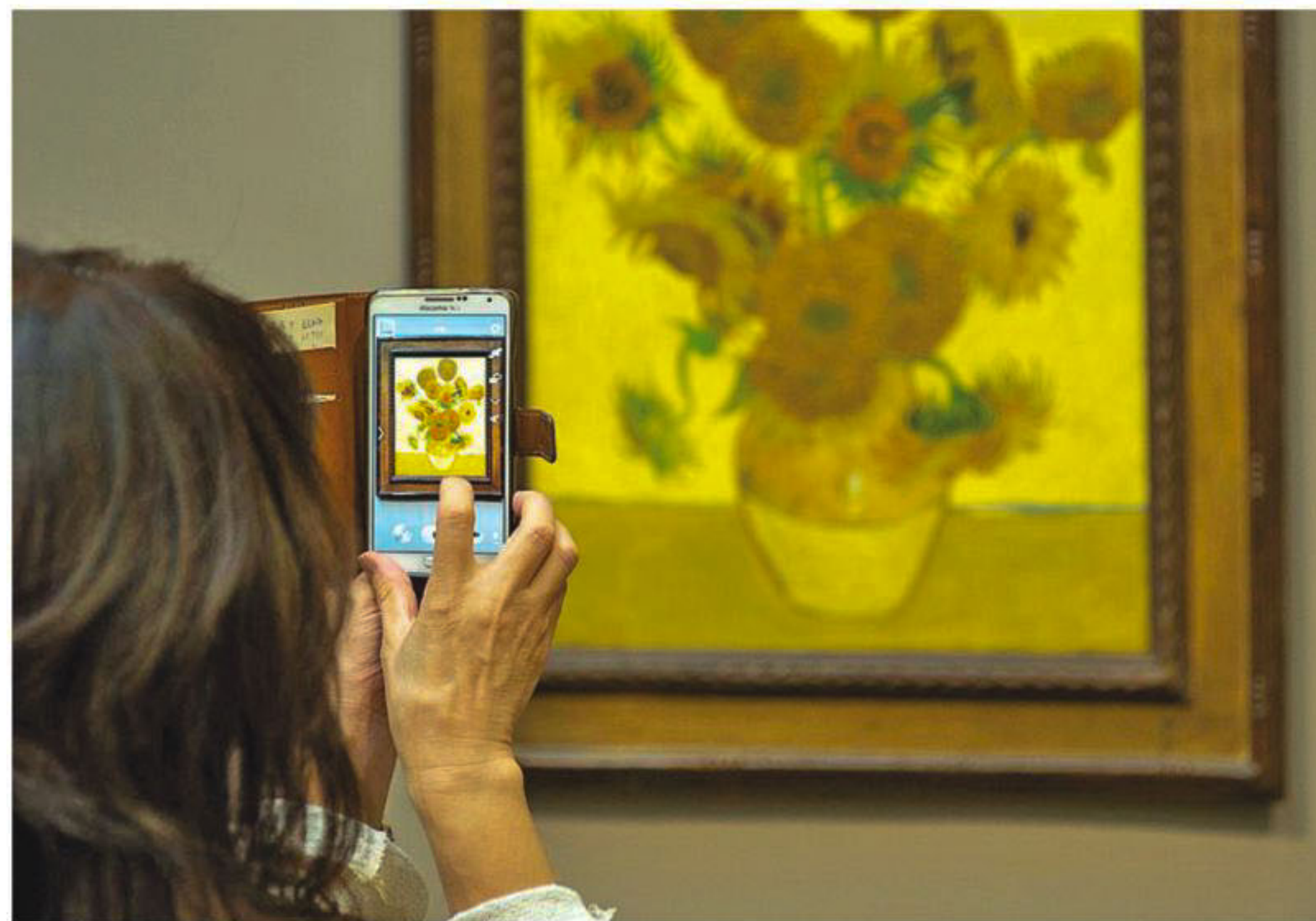


Are you my mummy?

and guillotines, how much do we know about the daily lives of the people who lived in France at that time? V&A contains everything from tea pots to intricate sculptures to fashion that tell the history of specific peoples who lived during a specific time in human history. I now realise that I can write an entire article only on V&A, but since that's not possible at the moment, I'll just mention some of my favourite exhibits. Of course, the French Revolution gallery was one of the best. Apart from that, there is a gallery on medieval England and its many noble houses, which reminded me of Game of Thrones. A part of the museum is dedicated to Asian art and design, and there was a gallery that hosts beautiful Arabic rugs, patterns and calligraphy. Everyone always talks about the sculpture collection of the British Museum, but if you are a fan of sculptures, then don't miss V&A. It's just as good.

The other place that I visited twice was the British Museum, simply because these museums are just way too big to finish in one day. But what can we do? The British stole so many things from their colonies that they needed these giant museums to store everything. Despite this gory reminder of a bloody past, the British Museum is like Disneyland for history buffs. The sheer size of the place was overwhelming for

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Van Gogh's Sunflower

side by side—the Natural History Museum, Science Museum, and the Victoria and Albert Museum. Out of the three, I loved V&A the most, because it's a design and art museum. I stayed in London for 17 days, and there are three places that I visited twice—one of them was V&A.

My engineer aunt took me to the Science Museum on my first day in London. But I am not a (wo)man of science. Sure, I know how important the steam engine was for the progress of human civilisation, but I

don't find engines to be more interesting than table cloths designed during the French revolution. So I went next door to V&A, a museum that I had never heard of before. As soon as I entered through a little tunnel in the subway, I was blown away.

There are many ways to tell history. You can talk about the gruesome details of wars, you can talk about the lives of the revolutionaries, you can write historical fiction. But art and design are just as important as wars. While we all know about Marie Antoinette, Jacobins

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## HALF OF MY HEART IS IN HAVANA

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government funding. The contrast is visibly apparent. While you have locals being told there is no cheese in the market and beef has not been available for years, the hotels are filled with fresh cheese, steak, smoked salmon, catering to the Canadian and European palette.

In Havana, art is hung for sale in every other window along the tight cobblestone streets. Saturated images of Che Guevara and classic cars hang on shop walls that thrive on the souvenir driven need of tourists to prove they were *there*. The people in Cuba have mastered replicating paintings with ease, but if you go near the only mosque in Old Havana past the coconut stand there are two old men who sell original paintings and do it more for the art than the sale. There are people like this all over Cuba—the catch is to find them. And once you do, keep in mind, don't haggle too much for good art.

While on the subject of art, if you've read any Cuban travel blogs you've definitely been told to go to Fábrica de Arte Cubano (FAC) in Vedado and yes, it is worth ALL the hype. It is by far one of the most unique places you can visit if you want a feel for the artistic and musical talents of Cubans. The FAC is a youthful innovation and a sign that Cuba isn't stuck in time. It is moving forward, and it will move forward. The exhibits are critical of the current system and a lot of the pieces are satirical. Make sure you pay for food/drinks before you go to the main exit in order to avoid the long line.

You can take a taxi from Old Havana to the FAC. I personally walk everywhere when I travel so it's a hike from Old Havana. There you see crowds of people ritualistically gathered every day and night with radios in shopping trolleys, men selling popcorn while children run around next to inebriated couples listening to the waves crash back and forth on the deteriorating walls protecting the island. Tourists, Cubans, black, white, French, American—people from all over gathered till sunset, and then sunrise.

While in Vedado, there are restaurants in residential buildings where you'll see wealthy French tourists order everything under the embargo list. Vedado is a place



The Che Guevara Mausoleum in Santa Clara

PHOTOS: COURTESY



Teatro Nacional, Grand Theatre de Habana (Great Theater of Havana)

where I would prefer eating all my meals while in Havana because I too am privileged and a brat when it comes to food. Aside from the amazing breakfasts my host family made and after trying two dollar meals at the local cafeterias, my South Asian palette couldn't handle the lack of seasoning. I needed seasoning but there's always a ration for it that local non-touristy restaurants had to accommodate. While looking for an Airbnb with no minutes on my internet cards, my group and I ran into the restaurant Razones on our second day in Cuba (yes, I lasted one day without salt). It became the lunch/dinner/dessert spot for the whole trip. Best *hugo de pina* (pineapple juice) ever! Just go ahead and order two at a time. Just save yourself the trouble and do it. Don't worry about the raised eyebrows

by the waiters and confirm their confusion that they heard right.

Vedado is also where the bus station is located. You can haggle your way to rent a private car to take you to different towns and cities (which works if you're in a group of four or more). From here we took the bus to Santa Clara. In this historically significant ghost town, tourists pay homage to Che Guevara in a mausoleum dedicated to the fallen of the Cuban Revolution. The Santa Clara Hotel still has the bullet holes from the battle with Batista's army, which feels slightly larger than life. Next to the mausoleum there was a museum dedicated to the life of Che Guevara.

My favourite part of this little town was the live music in this bar down the road from the Santa Clara hotel. It's

crowded with locals and tourists alike salsa dancing, getting lost in the music and the frequent breeze. This is where you strike up a conversation with strangers, get to know their back story, knowing full well by tomorrow you'll never see them again, but hey you shared this fading joyous moment.

But a walk away from the phototouristy section of Santa Clara drew us one step closer to reality. A lot of the streets weren't paved and walking and horse carriages were the main forms of transportation. Children played soccer and tag in the street amidst the occasional destroyed building. Eyes gazed toward us as outsiders from a different world.

The milk given to us at the bed and breakfast in Santa Clara was from a child's milk ration. But the truth is the luxury for us was a necessity for the child, and we received the milk not knowing this was what small business owners had to do to serve their clientele. It's a stark, ugly reality to encounter. You can't buy milk because it's not sold everywhere. There is a limited total amount divvied up, and it provides context for how milk for a tourist's coffee is directly yanked from a family's ration for their child's growth. Similarly, the aspiration of socialism is yanked from Cuba by larger, more economically powerful countries.

Visiting Cuba isn't something you can do in just a week and writing about Cuba isn't something you can do in a few words. It's a conversation of political history, tales of migration, and the creativity that arises from constraints. As with everything and anything, the country is changing. If you are travelling to Cuba, prioritise what is important to you or plan like hell. There are the beaches of Trinidad, the mountains of Viñales, and of course, more of Havana. Always stop to ask the old man selling newspapers for a quarter, his story, because there's so much more to Cuba than the tourist spots.

**Place to eat:** Razones: Calle F entre 5 y 3, Casa # 63 | El Vedado-piso 2, Havana, Cuba

**Place to pray:** Abdallah Mosque

**Book to read:** Reminiscences of the Cuban

Revolutionary War by Che Guevara

**Place to stay:** Habitación Don Pepe

**Place to dance:** FÁBRICA DE ARTE CUBANO ([www.fac.cu](http://www.fac.cu))

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me, but that could've been because my old leg injury started acting up by the end of the trip and I had to visit the museum with a crutch. I have wanted to see mummies for as long as I can remember, and here I saw so many that it's safe to say that my dream is more than fulfilled. The museum's best exhibit is probably the one on Egyptian history, but one lesser known exhibit that really stood out to me was on Africa. Maybe I liked it so much because I knew very little about the history of Africa to begin with, but regardless, it's a wonderful gallery that tells the story of a unique

land. Also, they're not lying when they talk about that sculpture collection. There are Nereid monuments, sculptures from Parthenon, and Egyptian statues that I never thought I'd get to see in person, and I was not disappointed at all.

I went to a lot of places in and around London during my stay, but my favourite was the National Art Gallery, where I shed tears standing in front of Van Goghs and Monets because I grew up studying these very paintings, and I was extremely overwhelmed after I saw how beautiful the work were in person. There are very few moments in life when you feel truly content, when you know that you have ticked something off of your bucket list, and you have lived a somewhat good life. When I stood in a room at the

National Art Gallery and stared at Van Gogh's *Sunflowers*, I had a moment like that. But make no mistake—the National Art Gallery is so much more than just Van Gogh. It has thousands of paintings, each more impressive than the other. The museum has paintings from the mid-13th century onwards, and I looked through them chronologically. I saw how art evolved, and how it fit with the time it was created. I went back to the gallery just to see Van Gogh, Da Vinci and Monet one more time before I left, because I wanted to remember every little detail about how the paintings looked, and how they made me feel.

The one word I would use to describe this trip would be liberating; I am a 21-year-old who hardly gets to walk alone

in the streets of Dhaka, yet I managed to travel the entirety of London mostly alone, with just the help of Google Maps. I did not get lost, never got harassed, and everywhere I went, I was fortunate enough to find helpful, kind people. Vacations may be meant for partying, but I used mine to learn about history, art, and art history. London holds many more interesting places, and perhaps I will elaborate on them some other time. But it's no wonder that Diagon Alley is hidden inside London—the city really is full of magic.

Aanila Kishnuar Tarannum feels depressed after writing this article because she misses hopelessly staring at the abyss at London's tube stations. You can send her your condolences at [aanila.tarannum@gmail.com](mailto:aanila.tarannum@gmail.com).