



VISIT PARLIAMENT

For a good day out in London, you could do a lot worse than to spend the day in Parliament! There are three main activities to take part in: listening to a debate, visiting Big Ben, or going on a guided tour.

The second and third options have to be arranged ahead of time, but you can get into the galleries in the Houses of Commons and Lords ‘on the spur of the moment’. You can also get into some of the Committee rooms. The visitors’ entrance is just across from Parliament Square; you pass through airport-style security, are issued with a visitor’s pass, and then are

free to go into the various chambers. The hours during which Parliament is sitting vary from day to day, so it is worth checking ahead of time, to make sure something is going on! You also need to avoid the six ‘recess’ periods in the year, during which parliament does not sit. You may request an admission ticket from the office of your MP, although this is usually not necessary, except for Prime Minister’s Questions on a Wednesday. Without a ticket, admission is by queueing; the length of the queue varies a great deal—we were lucky enough to get straight in, late in the afternoon on a day when the House of Commons was conducting a debate which was very poorly attended by MPs, but which we found quite interesting!

The tour of Big Ben is a fantastic experience! (OK—Big Ben is really the just the bell, but everyone uses that name for the clock tower, too!) The visit must be booked in advance, through your MP. It is free—plans to charge for it have been scrapped. However, it gets booked up about three months ahead. The ‘downside’ of the visit is that there are 334 steps—and no lift!

However, when we visited we had an excellent guide, who took it very easy. Nobody had any problems, although several of the visitors were in their 70’s. As well as seeing the Big Ben bell itself, you also see the clock mechanism and the ‘Westminster chimes’, and you walk round behind the clock faces! The visit is timed so you are right beside the bell when it strikes the hour! (Ear plugs are provided!) Highly recommended!

Guided tours of Parliament are free for UK residents, if booked through their MP or a Member of the House of Lords. They generally take place on weekdays, except Thursdays. At other times, the tours are open to anyone, but there is a charge.

Andrew Tyrie is the MP for the Chichester area—his staff may be contacted by email at andrew.tyrie.mp@parliament.uk or by phone on ☎02072 196371. There is a lot of useful information regarding these visits on Parliament’s website: www.Parliament.uk.

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