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## In London, Persia the Great

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**WHAT:** "Forgotten Empire: The World of Ancient Persia" at London's British Museum.

**WHEN:** Now through Jan. 8.

**HOW MUCH:** About \$14.40.

**WHY GO:** Two and a half millennia before it got lumped into the "Axis of Evil," Iran was thriving as the Persian Empire, one of the farthest-reaching cultures of the ancient world. When the empire fell to Alexander the Great in 331 B.C., the well-traveled conqueror reportedly remarked that the wealth of its capital, Persepolis, surpassed anything he had ever seen.

With loans from the Persepolis Museum and the National Museum of Iran, the exhibition re-creates the royal atmosphere using everything from massive palace columns and huge stone carvings to intricately wrought drinking vessels and luxurious jewelry. But the show is more than simply a collection of rare artifacts. The history, geographical scope and administration of the Persians' far-flung land--its roads, armed forces and even its postal service--are also featured.

**DON'T MISS . . .** the silver *foundation plaque* (date unknown) of *Darius I* (who reigned from 522 to 486 B.C.), which was unearthed from Persepolis and is considered one of Iran's most important cultural treasures. The riches of ancient Persian rulers are embodied in an impressively wrought and *inscribed golden bowl* (date unknown) honoring "Xerxes the King," a son of Darius who ruled the empire from 486 to 465 B.C. Inscribed in Babylonian cuneiforms, the *Cyrus Cylinder* (circa 530 B.C.) recounts the humane treatment and privileges accorded to the defeated Babylonians by Persian king Cyrus (559 to 530 B.C.).

**EATS/SLEEPS:** Round out the archaeological extravaganza with some nice digs. At the *Radisson Edwardian Kenilworth* (97 Great Russell St., 800-333-3333, <http://www.radisson.com/>), just across the street, the exotic vibe continues. Many rooms feature African wood surfaces and bathrooms of Sicilian marble, and the Creation restaurant is outfitted in Far Eastern decor. Doubles start at about \$170 per night.

Another ancient culture is featured at the *Montague* (15 Montague St., 011-44-20-7637-1001, <http://www.montaguehotel.com/>), a plush townhouse hotel that's also a few steps from the museum. The hotel's "British Museum Break" package includes a night's accommodations, full breakfast, a bottle of champagne and a book about ancient Egypt. For two, rates start at about \$251.

Nearby but substantially cheaper is the *Langland Hotel* (29-31 Gower St., 011-44-20-7636-5801, <http://www.langland%20hotel.com/>), in a Georgian townhouse. Doubles start at about \$125.

Fuel up on *mirza ghasemi* (grilled eggplant in tomato garlic sauce), *chenjeh* (skewered lamb) and baklava at *Simurgh Restaurant* (17 Garrick St.), whose decor pays homage to ancient Persia. That meal will run you about \$46 per person.

**GETTING THERE:** For travel through Oct. 31, Virgin Vacations (888-937-8474, <http://www.virginvacations.com/>) offers a "London Midweek Fling" package. It includes round-trip air from New York, six nights' lodging and

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continental breakfasts. Rates start at \$499 per person double (taxes and fees extra). Book by Sept. 29.

**EXTRAS:** Curiously, the ancient Persian god of light has a place of worship in London. (The gray and rainy weather may have something to do with it.)

To visit, head to the courtyard in front of the *Sumitomo Bank* at 11 Queen Victoria St. and check out the ruins of the Temple of Mithras, built by a cult of Roman settlers in the 3rd century. The temple, once underground, was uncovered in the city center during post-World War II reconstruction and subsequently was moved to its present location. Before the Romans adopted Christianity, a number of religious cults flourished around the Empire, often in secret.

London's *Victoria and Albert Museum* (Cromwell Road, 011-44-20-7942-2000, <http://www.vam.ac.uk/>; free) boasts an excellent collection of Persian decorative arts and textiles. Its marquee item is the 16th-century Ardabil Carpet, considered by many to be the finest Persian rug ever made.

Self-styled shahs can blow their extra pounds on a classic hand-woven Persian carpet at *Liberty* (Liberty Place, 210-220 Regent St., 011-44-20-7734-1234), the famous purveyor of exotic foreign goods.

**INFO:** *British Museum*, Great Russell Street, 011-44-20-7323-8000, <http://www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk/>.

-- *Seth Sherwood*

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