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Travel Wise

London tourists will see increased security

By Carol Pucci

Seattle Times staff columnist

LONDON — While Seattleites were bundling up against the cold last week, visitors to London were picnicking in the parks as they basked in a spate of springtime in February.

The scene at the Russell Square Underground station, one of the locations where terrorists targeted trains last July, felt more like Tourist Central than Fortress London. Likewise for peaceful Tavistock Square a few blocks away where a bomb exploded on a bus. Mick Pointing, who sells suitcases, scarves and gloves from a kiosk outside the Russell Square station, is back in business after being forced to close for six weeks after the bombings.

The British Museum, a few blocks away, was crowded with winter visitors, and tourists such as Janette Bever of Illinois, visiting with her mother, Lee Poppen of Minneapolis, seemed more concerned about high prices than safety.

Lugging suitcases off the subway train, they had just arrived on an overnight flight and were hunting for the Holiday Inn where they planned to stay for five nights while touring London and visiting Bever's son, who's studying here.

"My niece was killed outside a Wal-Mart, so I know that things are going to happen to people, and there's nothing you can do to prevent it," said Bever.

Having snagged a \$1,400 air-hotel package for two on Travelocity, their "survival strategy" was aimed at keeping their costs down rather than

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Mick Pointing owns a kiosk outside Russell Square Underground station. He was closed for six weeks after the bombings.

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Information

Terrorist attacks: Bombings on the London transport system on July 7 killed 56 people, including four suicide bombers, and injured more than 700.

Where the attacks occurred:

taking extra safety precautions.

"We're going to walk everywhere," she said, "and visit all the free museums."

Mick Pointing hopes for colder weather so that they might need an extra hat or scarf to keep warm. For 29 years, he's done a brisk business selling to tourists in the popular Bloomsbury neighborhood, "but since the bombings, it's gone down," he says. "I'm just surviving now."

Security measures in play

As London struggles to get business back on its feet, and boost tourism this spring and summer, visitors will definitely notice some changes. There's a more visible police presence and more undercover officers at work.

One of the most obvious signs of extra security is the presence of "Community Support Officers" wearing yellow day-glow vests with silver stripes. Their job is to patrol the streets and stations, but I've approached several with questions on everything from directions to where to find an ATM machine, and all were helpful and friendly.

Video-surveillance cameras have been installed on all buses and across the Tube network. These were the same type used to photograph and identify the four July 7 bombers.

Signs in some Underground station entrances warn of the possibility of random searches, and signs outside the British Museum warn of bag searches and advise that suitcases and large bags are no longer allowed.

Some of the security moves have been controversial.

A four-week counterterrorism police campaign launched in January included an advertising blitz that encouraged people to report suspicious bags, vehicles or other people's behavior to police either by dialing 999 or calling a confidential anti-terrorist hotline.

Critics said the campaign blurred the lines between acts of terrorism and everyday life by focusing on personal activities and encouraging Londoners to report on one another. Police said it was all part of an effort to get locals and visitors to stay alert.

Also controversial was a recently completed test of see-through-clothes body scanners for passengers boarding the Heathrow Express, a train that travels between the airport and the Paddington rail station.

The scanners can detect concealed items by showing the screener a robot-like body X-ray image of the passenger.

"It doesn't actually take a picture that's clear enough to show any of your individual features, just what you might be carrying under your

- On the Circle line, between Aldgate East and Liverpool Street Tube stations.

- On the Piccadilly line, Between Russell Square and King's Cross Tube stations.

- At the Edgware Road Tube station (Circle line).

- On a bus at Tavistock Square

Tourism projections:

- For 2006, total visits to London are expected to increase 1.2 percent to 26.6 million.

- Visits by U.K. residents are predicted to fall by 2.1 percent to 11.75 million.

- Visits by overseas tourists are expected to rise by 4 percent to 14.9 million, with the strongest growth expected to be in visitors from Eastern Europe, China and India.

* Source: Visit London.

If you go

London

Tourism information

- A useful one-stop site is <http://www.londontoolkit.com/>. Look here for easy-to-find information and links to using London's public-transport system, getting to and from the airports, airport hotels, budget accommodations and more.

- See <http://www.londonfreelist.com/> for all the events and attractions in London that are either free or cost \$5.50 per person or less.

- Find out what people from the U.S. who follow Rick Steves' advice have to say about their experiences at www.ricksteves.com.

clothes," said Miriam Lea, a spokeswoman for the central government's Ministry for Transport which conducted the tests.

Nevertheless, public concern was high enough that the government decided that only male screeners would screen males and females would screen females.

Where and when the system will eventually be used is up in the air.

"We've left open the possibility of trying them at other rail stations and Underground stations," Lea said, although there are no immediate plans for Tube trials.

Overall ridership on the Underground is estimated to be back to normal levels, about 3 million people per day, but Londoners are using it less in certain areas, such as the West End retail and tourist area, where ridership is down by about 5 percent.

Higher costs

Safety concerns are not necessarily why many here are falling back on a Plan B when it comes to getting around. The big issue — the one that will impact travelers the most — is what's happening to prices and service.

The cost of single one-way Tube ticket for travel in Zone 1, an area that covers many tourist sites, is now £3 (\$5.25 based on current exchange rates), up from £2 (\$3.50) last year.

Given the sticker shock that goes with the price of almost anything in London, you might wonder if this is really out of line, but even the mayor admits it may be the most expensive public-transport fare in the world.

The new fares are designed to encourage a switch from paying for tickets in cash to using a pre-paid smartcard called the Oyster card, a plastic card, preloaded with cash, that's swiped over an electronic reader on a bus, or at the beginning and the end of a journey on the Tube. (With the Oyster card, a Zone 1 Tube ride costs just £1.50 (\$2.60).

London TravelWatch, a passenger-watchdog group, protested the fare increase, saying that the new system punishes infrequent travelers and pointing out that some tourists may not want to or know how to buy an Oyster card which includes a £3 deposit, unless you're buying a seven-day pass.

For its part, London Transport says that thanks to the Oyster, 1 million fewer paper tickets are being sold each week, meaning more staffers can be redeployed to help passengers, not only on the Tube, but also on the buses where 1,300 officers and support staff patrol the network.

With the price of a single-journey ticket so high, most short-stay travelers will want to opt for a one or three-day paper travel card, a pass good for unlimited rides on the Underground and buses, but if you're planning to be in London for longer than a few days, then an Oyster card starts to make more sense.

Whatever you decide, check out all the information at <http://www.tfl.gov.uk/> before you leave to avoid the long lines in front of ticket windows filled with confused tourists.

Strikes and shut-downs

The Tube system has been plagued by strikes and delays this year, including 24-hour walkout on New Year's Eve, as unionized staff protested plans for a 35-hour work week, partly brought on by the move to the cashless fare system.

[com/books/feedback](http://www.visitlondon.com/books/feedback)

[/questions.cfm?url/pid/52/](http://www.visitlondon.com/questions.cfm?url/pid/52/) Readers comment on recommendations in Steves' guidebooks and offer their own tips.

- The city's official tourism Web site is <http://www.visitlondon.com/>. See also <http://www.visitbritain.com/>, and <http://www.tfl.gov.uk/>, the London Transport Web site.

The unions called off a strike planned for last Tuesday (Feb. 21) but have threatened more strikes this year. Meanwhile, service interruptions are common, especially on weekends when engineers make repairs.

What's a traveler to do?

Given the nearly constant announcements about service disruptions I heard while traveling in the Underground here last week, it seems wise to stay in an area where there are alternatives for getting around. Best is a hotel or B&B that's on several Tube lines and bus routes, or one that's within walking distance of the sites.

There are always taxis, but be prepared to pay dearly, especially if you're traveling alone. The average fare for a four-mile ride across London in a traditional black cab is \$17-\$24, and that's weekdays. Count on \$7-\$10 just to get in and travel no more than a mile.

Buses are more reliable than the Tube, but slower. Still, many Londoners seem to prefer them. One change this year: no more hopping on and off the double-decker Routemaster buses. They were retired last year in favor of modern double-deckers and single-deck "bendy" buses.

Walking, of course, has always been the best way to see London, and if there's an upside to all that's gone on, maybe it's that we'll all be encouraged to do more of this. It's really the best way to get your bearings, and it's fun to discover how London "shrinks" once you know the shortcuts.

Download a street-finder program to your Palm or BlackBerry, or buy a good map.

One of the handiest is the London All-On-One map that sells for about \$4.50 at London bookstores or \$6.50 online, postage included, at <http://www.quickmap.com/>. It shows you how to work around service disruptions, the best night bus routes, and if all else fails, the fastest walking routes between destinations.

All-On-One's motto is "whatever the rights and wrongs of the strikes, Londoners need to keep moving."

This goes for tourists, too.

Carol Pucci's Travel Wise column runs the last Sunday of the month. Comments are welcome. Contact her at: 206-464-3701 or cpucci@seattletimes.com

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