

My summer vacation: The Changing of the Guard at Buckingham Palace

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During our stay in London, we set aside one morning to observe the Changing of the Guard at Buckingham Palace, because that's pretty much a mandatory tourist activity.

Do note that the ceremony does not occur every day. [Check the schedule](#) before going!

There is a [Changing of the Guard web site](#) that is really informative. We relied upon it to plan our attack, along with information from another family who watched the ceremony a few days earlier.

Since our group included younger children (ages five and seven), we opted not to go for the Buckingham Palace courtyard experience. The reports are that it's very crowded, you have to get there quite a bit in advance, and once you're there, the crowds prevent you from leaving. This didn't give a lot of flexibility, and when traveling with young children, flexibility is essential. (That said, the tip from the other family was to try to get a spot atop the Victoria Memorial for a better view.)

We opted for the [kid-friendly version of the Changing of the Guard](#).

Take the Tube to St. James Park. It's a short walk to Birdcage Walk, Turn left onto Birdcage Walk (heading toward Buckingham Palace), and after a building or two, you pass the gate for [The Guards Museum](#) on your left. If you have time, you can pop into the museum courtyard for a photo op with [a cardboard cutout of a guard in a sentry box](#). (The sentry box is the blue thing in the middle of the picture.)

Continue past the Guards Museum, and the next building is Wellington Barracks. You have two choices for positioning.

- If you stand near the center of the courtyard, you can watch the guards present themselves for inspection and do a little bit of marching around. The ideal viewing spot for this is [blocked by a large sign](#) just inside the fence.

- If you stand near the exit gates of the courtyard, close to Buckingham Palace, then you can watch the musicians present themselves for inspection and play some music while you wait. When we were there, they played a John Williams medley: The theme to *Indiana Jones*, the *Imperial March* from *Star Wars*, and the *Olympic Fanfare*. As the ceremony begins, the band leads the troops out of Wellington Barracks toward Buckingham Palace. They play traditional marching band music at this point.

The crowd at Wellington Barracks is only one person deep, so everybody will be able to see.

Once the troops leave Wellington Barracks, the next step is to watch the return of the troops to Saint James's Palace. You have quite a bit of time, so you don't need to rush.

Cross Birdcage Walk, and enter St. James's Park. Follow the path along the lake heading away from Buckingham Palace. The kids will enjoy the birds hanging around the lake. The path will take you to a footbridge that takes you the other side of the lake. Crossing the bridge is the only crowded part of this itinerary, as it's a bottleneck for people getting from one part of the Changing of the Guard ceremony to the other.

You can stop on the footbridge to take a scenic picture with Buckingham Palace in the background, but you might just want to make a mental note to return when things are less crazy.

Continue along the path leading away from the lake, stopping at the restrooms if you need to, until you reach The Mall. Cross to the north side of the street, then turn left and head back toward Buckingham Palace to Stable Yard Road. There are police on horseback guarding the back entrance to Saint James's Palace, so the kids can have some fun petting the horses while waiting for the second act. The police officers were patient with the attention, but they are there to do a job, so be prepared to get out of the way once they start moving.

Stand at the northwest corner of Stable Yard Road and The Mall, and you'll be able to watch three sets of guards, two of which pass very close to you.

- The police officers clear the way for the guards from St. James' Palace to march toward Buckingham Palace. The guards pass right in front of you.
- The new guards march from Buckingham Palace back to St. James's Palace. They pass right in front of you.
- The Household Cavalry ride past on the opposite side of the street. Marvel at the horses, and more amusingly for the kids, the street sweepers whose job it is to clean up the horse poop after the horses go by.

After watching the Changing of the Guard, we walked up to Piccadilly to grab some lunch. There are a number of quick-serve take-away places, like [Itsu](#), [Paul](#), and the ubiquitous [Pret a Manger](#). We took our lunch back to St. James's Park for a little picnic.

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