

# Chic and colourful

Gillian Wills visits Islington, the heartbeat of multicultural London and home to rich and famous

**Y**EARS ago, an otherwise sensible male friend fell to his knees in the middle of Upper St, Islington's arterial road, to ask his girlfriend to marry him. Cars screeched to a halt, but pedestrians strolling past showy boutiques, alternative bookshops, historic pubs and chic cafes didn't blink an eye.

Surprises and dramas are played out 24/7 on this main corridor between north London and the city. Islington encompasses the Georgian suburbs of Barnsbury, Canonbury and De Beauvoir Town.

Home to Rolling Stones' drummer Charlie Watts, actors Colin Firth, Hugh Laurie and Kate Winslet and, at one time, former prime minister Tony Blair, the streets of renovated terraced Georgian dwellings are immortalised in the Hugh Grant films *About A Boy* and *Four Weddings And A Funeral*.

Islington has been home to a shoal of writers including George Orwell and Salman Rushdie. The *Guardian* newspaper dubbed the area "the spiritual home of Britain's left-wing".

With skyrocketing house prices in parts and "Murder Mile", site of many gangland killings to the east, Islington's personality is colourful.

For people watchers, it's prime territory, the heartbeat of multicultural London.

Mothers and babies, rasta-plaited guitarists, students, the unemployed, artists, street gangs, the bizarrely dressed and dozens of urbanised foxes flow to the sound of screaming police sirens, day and night.

Thirty years ago, Islington Green School provided the chorus for Pink Floyd's *We don't need no education*. Now there's a plethora of desirable schools.

Still grimy, but with flashes of gentrification, Essex Rd has a rougher edge.

Shops and businesses are diverse with Lebanese greengrocers, a Polish ceramic shop, French cafes, charity shops and Raab, an old-fashioned bakery with sugary treats.

Good pubs such as The Camden Head and the Green Man abound.

Essex Rd is essential browsing territory. Get Stuffed, a homage to taxi-



Crowds flock to Camden Market

“The streets of renovated terraced Georgian dwellings are immortalised in the Hugh Grant films *About A Boy* and *Four Weddings And A Funeral*

dermy, displays a sad quarry of a lion, bat, birds, snakes and a camel, and is studded with skeletons and skulls. Eccentricities is a quirky antiques and bric-a-brac store.

Islington has had a chequered past. The area was popular with Henry VIII and a favorite haunt for the wealthy during his reign.

By the 1900s, Islington was a wasteland with disused music halls, crumbling dwellings and vacant shops. In the 1950s, it was a byword for poverty.

Small, old theatres, once forgotten, have been pressed into service as mini-portals of culture.

The Rosemary Branch Pub is De Beauvoir Town's cultural nerve centre. While regulars throw back spirits and beer, flamenco dancers, Zimbabwean actors and opera singers kick up a storm upstairs. The

popularity of mini-operas is such that local pubs such as the King's Head and The Rosemary Branch are at loggerheads to claim this or that production.

The area is the source of several markets, such as Chapel Street and Ridley Road markets, and close to Brick Lane with its vintage clothes shops and leather goods.

Camden Passage, a Dickensian enclave of small shops, brimming with antiques, brass ornaments, African waistcoats, jewelry from the '60s and racks of second-hand furs, is an oasis of interest with appealing restaurants.

Islington is within walking distance of Covent Garden and the West End. Well served by public transport, it offers a rich base from which to explore London, Britain and Europe.



A pub in Islington

## If you go

**Highbury Fields, Islington's largest park, has tennis courts, an indoor pool and fitness centre**  
**See international dance performances at Sadler's Wells**  
**Visit the Islington Museum**  
**Go to Arsenal FC's Emirates Stadium**  
**Go shopping in Upper St**

## family fun



Legoland at Carlsbad

## Legoland growing

LEGOLAND officials hope to draw families to their newest theme park, which will open in October near Orlando, Florida.

Up to 50 million of the iconic Lego bricks will be used in rides and attractions geared toward children aged two to 12.

Legoland Florida is under construction in Winter Haven, a 45-minute drive south of Walt Disney World and other Orlando parks. It will be the largest of five Legolands in the world.

The 60ha park is being built on the site of Cypress Gardens, a theme park which closed in 2009.

Besides four gentle rollercoasters and other family rides, visitors will see miniature Lego skylines of famous cities, a castle and animals, with exhibit sizes from tiny to larger-than-life.

Lego bricks were named by a Danish toy maker in 1932. The first Legoland opened in Denmark in 1968.

Parks at Windsor, England, and Carlsbad, California, went up in the 1990s, and at Gunzburg, Germany, in 2002.

A day ticket to Legoland Florida is being offered now for \$US65 (\$A64) plus tax for adults and \$US55 (\$A54) plus tax for children aged three to 12 and seniors. Kids two and under get in free. After the opening, prices will go up \$US10 (\$A9.89).

## Picks of the week

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