



## Exit through the gift shop

Rolf Potts wrote a book, *Souvenir* and dove into the history of our obsession for collecting and keeping items from where we go. As humans, we like to brag, and this is a great way to physically prove we have been somewhere. This topic has even been studied by academics and there are official categories for the “stuff” we buy:

- ★ ‘piece-of-rock’ meaning physical items like shells or rocks
- ★ ‘local products’ made in the place, like French wine or Greek olive oil
- ★ ‘pictorial images’ your standard postcards and calendars
- ★ ‘markers’ items that prove you have been there (t-shirts, mugs, keychains)
- ★ ‘symbolic shorthand’ small versions of items (mini Eiffel Towers or pyramids)

Yet gift shops should not be reserved for our own consumption. Here in London, there are some fascinating shops where you can purchase items as gifts for Christmas or all year around for those who may or may not live here. Gift shop items make great gifts because, unlike retail shops, they have a more unique quality. If you are

seeking the ‘wow’ factor, you’ll find it there.

Dominating the corner of Trafalgar Square is St Martin-in-the-Fields, an 18th century church that was designed by John Gibbs as part of Queen Anne’s plan for 50 new churches in London in 1711. The church is always open and full of activity. The Café in the Crypt is extremely popular and serves up a delicious breakfast, lunch, dinner and afternoon tea and the toilets are a perfect pit stop, providing a free convenience in the middle of the hustle and bustle of London. The crypt features a brass rubbing centre that is still quite popular and the perfect distraction for kids who need to sit still and focus in order to calm their nerves or allow the parents to have a well-deserved cup of tea. But the gift shop at St Martin’s Crypt is extra special. It is divided up in little boutique-like sections, where there is a theme and gifts to match. There are about 15 little areas to allow you to find something for a friend or loved one. Even a person that is hard to buy for would be delighted at one of the treasures they offer. They cover the basic English interests: gardening, music, knitting. And the

shop covers the basic tourist interests: London, kings and queens, heritage names, church items. But they also have products for niche interests: suffragettes, Churchill, Shakespeare and Oscar Wilde. It is a hard challenge to leave the store empty-handed.

The South Bank holds two fantastic gift shops for you to discover. First, the main Southbank gift shop that is located across from the Royal Festival Hall – it’s not inside the hall, although there is a shop inside. This one is next to Las Iguanas and Le Pain Quotidien. The store seems to represent the entire South Bank as a whole architectural area and the gifts are always something special. As they come from an architectural approach, the focus is on design. Many of the items are local, upstart or well-known designers who have crafted interesting items aimed at making everyday a little better. The merchandising of the shop always has a theme: Christmas, Spring, homewares. They even had a whole theme around ‘Hygge’, the Danish idea of sitting around with good friends and good food and just relaxing. Once past the initial entrance, explore downstairs to find large posters with entire books written on them: