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A happening London district is ready for its close-up

BY ELIZABETH HARRYMAN

On a June evening in London's Soho Square, groups of young people picnicked on the grass while men played table tennis on paved walkways and couples sat chatting on wooden benches. Towering trees in summer-green finery framed the scenes, and the air was soft with the promise of summer.

The scene epitomized the current communal vibe in Soho. This neighborhood of hot restaurants and bars just steps from West End theaters is now one of London's trendiest areas, different from its image in the 1970s as a slightly dingy and depressed district of strip clubs and sex shops.

"Soho has changed considerably," said Robert Nadler, co-owner and operator of The Nadler Soho Hotel, which opened two blocks from Soho Square in May 2013 as a sign of the neighborhood's renaissance. "While Soho has retained that edginess, it's thankfully lost most of the sleaziness," he said as we strolled through the square.

Nadler's passion for Soho inspired me to concentrate my two-night London visit in this neighborhood. What I discovered within this approximately 1 square mile could have entertained and intrigued me for weeks.

In the 1600s, the hunting cry "Soohoo" is said to have echoed here as the area's farmland became hunting grounds for the wealthy. Entrepreneurs later developed the land for houses and their gardens; the tiny half-timbered building that resembles a fairy-tale house in the middle of Soho Square was once a toolshed. During the 20th century, Soho became a music mecca, first for jazz artists, later for rock stars. The Rolling Stones, David Bowie, and the Sex Pistols performed or recorded here, and Soho remains home to recording studios and media companies.

"Soho is a village like no other part of London," said Nadler, "with a real sense of community."

GATHERING PLACES

I set out to discover that community the next day, strolling narrow winding streets lined with 18th- and 19th-century buildings. Down one curving pathway, three-story red brick homes and flower baskets hanging from iron lampposts made me feel as if I'd stepped into a Jane Austen novel. On a busy street, storefronts advertising everything from silk fabrics to used records to organic hairdressers reminded me of Soho's eclectic nature.

I headed to the Society Club, a bookstore and art gallery where volumes of poetry, biography, and fiction crammed the shelves, and black-and-white photographs of artfully posed nudes hung on the walls. I sat at a long black picnic table, sipping tea and admiring freshly cut white peonies in the vase in front of me, when the store's co-owner, Babette Kulik, burst into the room with her three dogs: Modesty, an English bulldog; Molly, a one-eyed Cavalier King Charles spaniel; and Monty, a 16-year-old Chihuahua.

(Opposite page) Rock musicians put London's Soho district on the map in the late 20th century, and while the neighborhood continues to be a musicians' mecca, it is being embraced anew by writers, artists, and foodies. (Below) In Soho Square, London sculptor Bruce Denny's *The Conversion of St. Paul* depicts the apostle being blinded by a light on the way to Damascus, leading to his conversion to Christianity.





(This page, clockwise from top left) Actor Tim Woodward holds court at The French House, which was the headquarters of the Free French during World War II. Other notable Soho spots include the Michelin-starred restaurant Arbutus; the Society Club, a bookstore and art gallery with a huge local following; and Lina Stores Ltd., a fancy delicatessen.



"We wanted a place that would encourage new writers, photographers, and artists," said Kulik, once she'd unleashed the dogs. She founded the club in 2012 with Carrie Kania, formerly of HarperCollins in New York. "We wanted to give the creative people a showcase, a place to be discovered," she added. So Kulik and Kania host book signings, art exhibits, and poetry readings.

"We're also a neighborhood gathering place," said Kulik, whose vibrant energy filled the room. "Everyone from bank CEOs to local chefs comes here."

As if on cue, another regular arrived, interior designer John Whittle. "John designed the upstairs space at The French House," said Kulik. "You have to go there. It's the heart and soul of Soho."

With good reason, I learned when I visited the cozy pub, where photos of French performers and singers from the 1920s and '30s lined the walls.

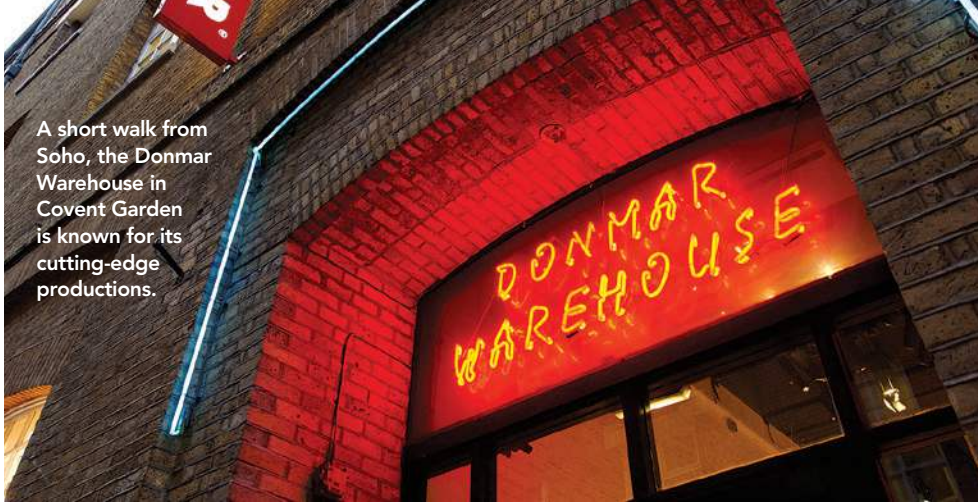
"This was the headquarters of the Free French during World War II," said manager Annabel South. From here, General Charles de Gaulle organized forces to fight for the liberation of France from Nazi occupation.

A heady thing to contemplate, as I sat in a dining space so tiny I couldn't help but overhear two men at the next table strategize about their multimillion-dollar software plans. After I finished my Welsh rarebit—a thick piece of bread covered in a rich cheese sauce with a hint of ale—I returned to the bar.

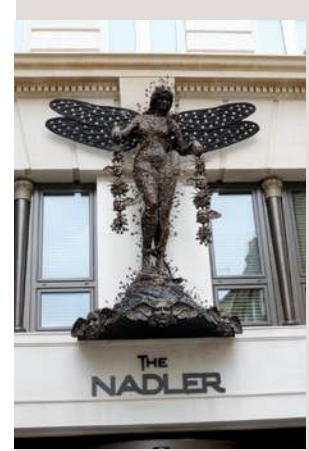
"It's very easy to sit down and have a good conversation if you want," said Tim Woodward, who sat on the next stool. "And artists like [British painters] Lucian Freud and Francis Bacon used to be regulars here—this was their 'local.'"

The pub is still a hangout for artists, writers, and actors, such as Woodward, who has appeared in the West End in *Medea* with Diana Rigg and *Phaedra* with Glenda Jackson.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: ELIZABETH HARRYMAN (3); LOOP IMAGES LTD/ALAMY



A short walk from Soho, the Donmar Warehouse in Covent Garden is known for its cutting-edge productions.



Sleeping in Soho

A good base for exploring Soho is **The Nadler Soho Hotel**. It has a sleek, modern style and comfortable rooms with minikitchens; free, fast Wi-Fi; and thoughtful extras—such as a power adapter, in case you’re traveling from the United States and forgot your own. The Nadler has no restaurant or bar, but it’s located amid a wealth of popular eateries and watering holes, and friendly staff members can make recommendations and reservations. Rates begin at about \$278. (011-44) 20-3697-3697; thenadler.com/soho.shtml.

FROM LEFT: ELIZABETH HARRYMAN; KEVIN FOY/ALAMY

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“It’s said that Dylan Thomas left his only copy of his play *Under Milk Wood* in this bar,” said Woodward. “That was before Xerox. Miraculously, though, it turned up three days later.”

Clearly, The French House is still a great place to sit down and have a good conversation.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

I continued my Soho exploration, browsing shops such as Lina Stores Ltd., a deli that sells imported Italian olive oils and Parmigiano-Reggiano. I stopped at Paul A. Young Fine Chocolates to buy a gift for my husband, Paul.

“When will you be seeing him?” the salesman asked. “These chocolates should be eaten within seven days of purchase.”

After assuring him I’d see Paul in the United States in just a couple of days, I bought a selection of dark chocolate truffles in unusual flavors, such as one with sea salt and another with a hint of cucumber. (When Paul and I later ate them in Boston, they were rich and creamy, and the flavorings created wonderful taste surprises.)

Taste treats are part of Soho’s attraction. One evening, I dined at Arbutus, a one-Michelin-star restaurant helmed by chef and co-owner Anthony Demetre and co-owner Will Smith. Sitting at a white marble counter, I started with grilled English asparagus, served with a slice of wild boar cheek so thin it was nearly transparent, and a poached egg surrounded by bits of buckwheat mixed with pancetta that added a great texture. Then came flavorful slow-roasted Welsh lamb so tender I could cut it with a fork. An accompanying ramekin contained the most delicious scalloped potatoes I’ve ever tasted. For dessert, English cherries with salted caramel

cream and lemon ice cream nicely balanced sweet and salt. The whole meal came to about \$70—not cheap, but great value for such a feast.

THE WORLD’S A STAGE

On my last evening in Soho, I went to the theater. I’d always wanted to see a play at the nearby Donmar Warehouse, a 251-seat venue known for innovative, often daring, productions. For about \$12, I got standing-room for *The Night Alive*, by Irish playwright Conor McPherson and featuring one of my favorite actors, Ciarán Hinds. By the end of the bittersweet drama, I felt I knew these flawed but irresistible Dublin characters, and the theater’s intimacy almost made me feel part of the action.

Walking back from the play, on Nadler’s recommendation, I stopped at Ducksoup. At 10 p.m., the long, narrow restaurant hummed with 20-something professionals sipping wine and listening to classic rock on vinyl records. I took a seat at the wooden counter and had char-grilled sea bream with rosemary and lemon and for dessert, strawberries with crème fraîche ice cream. “We post our menus daily on Tumblr,” said my waiter, Declan, as I was leaving.

Before turning in, I strolled past lively restaurants and nightclubs with neon signs and spandex-clad women and black-T-shirted men standing in line behind velvet ropes. Soho Square was quiet now, save for a few people walking their dogs. A flight home awaited me in the morning, but I didn’t want to leave. In only two days, Soho’s off-beat charm had cast its spell on me. **W**

Elizabeth Harryman is Westways’ travel editor.