

# A world made small

Carla Passino figures out how to follow in the footsteps of Phileas Fogg without ever leaving London

Illustrated by Fred van Deelen

**A** MODERN Phileas Fogg could wager with reasonable confidence that he could go around the world in 80 minutes. So long, that is, as he never left London, which, since Fogg departed the Reform Club on October 2, 1872, has acquired enough international culture institutes, art galleries and restaurants to make a whistle-stop tour of the globe entirely possible (unless there's a Tube strike, in which case 80 days might prove necessary).

**'Chinatown feels deceptively eternal, a bustling hodgepodge of prickly dragon fruit and odorous durian'**

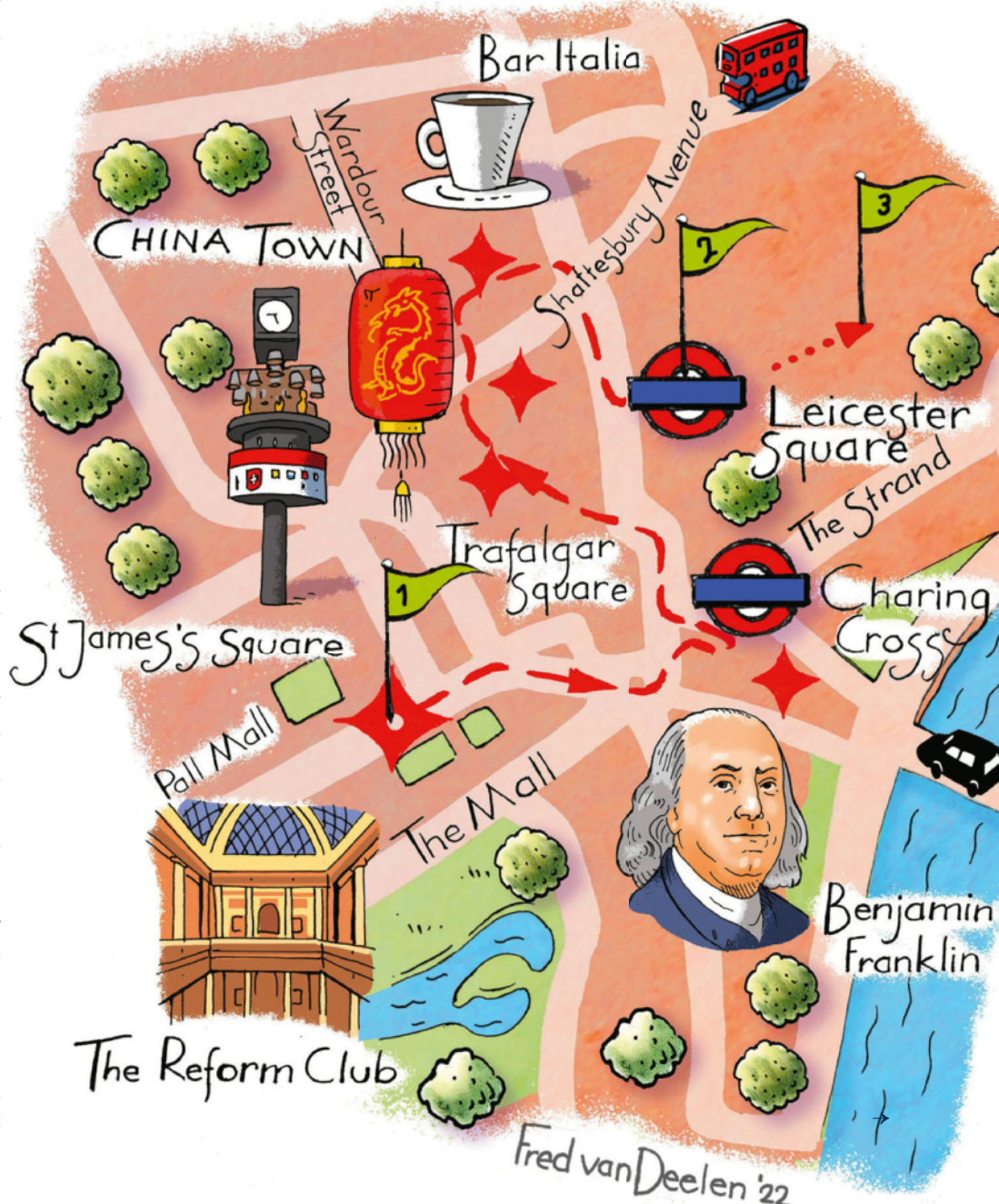
In his dash to catch a Yokohama-bound steamer after he missed the departure of the *Carnatic* from Hong Kong, Fogg didn't really have a chance to enjoy the best of Shanghai, but, in London, he would never need to miss out on crispy duck and cloud-soft bao buns. All it takes is heading towards Chinatown, albeit allowing, first, for a diversion to the house of American Founding Father Benjamin Franklin in Craven Street (his only surviving home) and a brush past the Glockenspiel that presides somewhat incongruously over Leicester Square. At nearly 33ft tall, it is, apparently, the tallest one in the country—although it is perhaps more surprising to discover it is not the *only* glockenspiel. Despite the profusion of flags from each Swiss canton, the 27 bells with their four ringers and the figurines of goats, cows and people dressed in traditional costumes, the current version was put together by British clockmakers Smith of Derby and the tunes it performs come from students of the Royal Academy of Music.

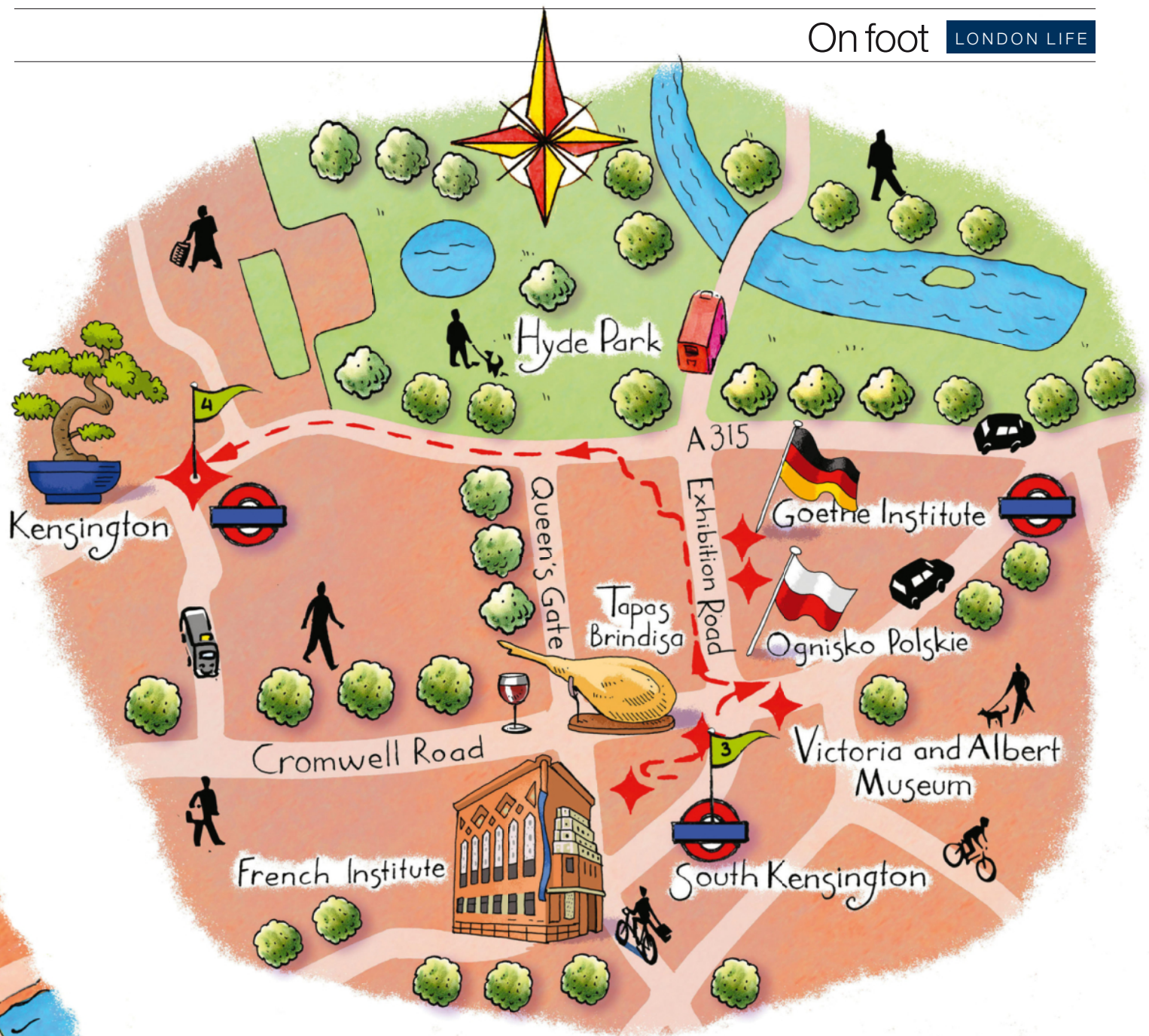
If London's Swiss presence is fleeting, Chinatown feels deceptively eternal, a bustling hodgepodge of prickly dragon fruit and odorous durian, biting spice and melting

sweetness, red lanterns and dragon-encrusted buildings, all hemmed in by ornate gates.

Although the first Chinese to settle in Britain came as early as the 18th century—mostly former sailors who had worked for the East India Company—Soho's own corner of Asia only began to take shape in the 1950s, when Chinese businesses moved westward

from their outpost in the East End, and the gates, pagoda and lion statues only arrived in the 1980s. With the move from the East End came a change in perception, aided perhaps by Britain's growing taste for Asian food. The old Chinatown was once portrayed as a den of drinks and drugs, 'where the cold fatalism of the Orient [met] the wistful dubiety





of the West,' according to Thomas Burke's 1916 *Limehouse Nights*, although it was also intriguingly exotic, to the point that Thomas Cook ran coach tours there. Today's incarnation, by contrast, is so treasured that The King, then Prince of Wales, announced in 2007 that his Foundation for the Built Environment would work with the local council to encourage the use of traditional Chinese architectural practices 'to help Chinatown become more authentically Chinese'.

Well before Chinatown put down roots there, Soho was already home to an assortment of nationalities, from the Irish to the Italians. London's Italian community—a varied group of frame-makers, ice-cream sellers and musicians—had first clustered around the Grade II\*-listed church of St Peter's Italian Church in Clerkenwell (modelled on

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a Roman basilica) and the Hatton Garden house of Italian unification campaigner Giuseppe Mazzini, who found refuge in London after being sentenced to death. (Britain was very sympathetic to the Italian patriots' cause, with Giuseppe Garibaldi, in particular, given a hero's welcome when he visited in 1864.)

In the early to mid 20th century, however, many Italians moved to Soho, opening

restaurants and cafés, some of which still survive—the *grand dame* among them is Bar Italia, its long counter (now as laden with Aperol bottles as with espresso demitasses) stretching under an almost sacred relic: Rocky Marciano's gloves.

Today, by contrast, many Italians and other Europeans live in South Kensington, home, among others, of that purveyor of Continental books that is the Italian and European Bookshop ([www.europeanbookshop.com](http://www.europeanbookshop.com)). With the Tube as a means of conveyance, albeit one rather less glamorous than Fogg's trains, steamers and elephants, it's a matter of minutes to defy geography and reach SW7's own slice of Europe. The reward for clambering up the steps at South Kensington station is a cornucopia of flavours, from Spain's Brindisa, where *croquetas* coat in deceiving creaminess the punch of *jamon*, →

to the 'perfect blinis' of Poland's Ognisko, in Princes Gate (LONDON LIFE, *October 5*). But there's as much food for the mind as for the body here. Ognisko the restaurant shares the premises with Ognisko Polskie, a club formed in 1939 to support the Polish community that lived in London, as their native country faced invasions from both Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia—it's easily forgotten or taken for granted how much Britain has, over time, represented a beacon of freedom for those oppressed in their own countries, whether 19th-century Italian patriots, the Jewish and Eastern Europeans during the Nazi occupation or today's Falun Gong, who, silent and cross-legged, protest against China's repression under the red lanterns of Chinatown.

The Polish club, which hosts musical evenings once a month, is only one of the many cultural institutions that dot South Kensington. Almost next door to it is the Goethe Institut, the bulwark of German culture in the world, and, in Queensberry Place, the Institut Français, where the Ciné Lumière screens a combination of French classics and new releases. This month alone sees the 30th French Film Festival, with Patrice Leconte's *Maigret* as one of the highlights (November 2–13); the latest adaptation of *Le Petit Nicolas* as part of the South Ken Kids Festival (November 14–20) and an ongoing tribute to French film star Jean-Louis Trintignant.

The Institut is as much a treasure of French Art Deco architecture as it is a cultural

powerhouse. Its Grade II-listed library, all wooden panelling and stained-glass windows, was designed by Patrice Bonnet, heritage conservationist architect at Versailles from 1925–40, and somewhat echoes Louis XIV's grand palace. The Institut's children's library, full of cartoons and French *bandes dessinées*, also has its very own artwork—a mural donated by patron Sir Quentin Blake.

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Surprisingly, however, a cornerstone of any world tour of London is a quintessentially British landmark—the V&A Museum. Since it was founded in 1852 to improve Britain's art and design knowledge, the museum has been exploring creative endeavours from other cultures, not least through two current exhibitions, 'Africa Fashion', which celebrates the creativity of the continent's designers, and 'Hallyu! The Korean Wave', which delves into the Asian country's fashion, beauty, cinema and music. In the Islamic galleries, the dense knotting and rich colours of the world's oldest dated carpet—its yellow medallion still vivid after about 700 years—bring alive the glories

of the Persian empire; the Monkey God Hanuman, the Sikh heroes and animal portraits of the Lockwood Kipling collection reveal snapshots of 19th-century Indian life; delicate floral vases, intricately embroidered robes, finely lacquered thrones and another 16,000 objects trace the history of Chinese art from 3,000BC to today; and, in the Japan galleries, fearsome Samurai armour, lethal *katana* swords and kimonos strewn with tiny flowers stand counterpoint to Hello Kitty rice cookers.

Contemporary Japan also awaits behind the forbidding geometry of the Art Deco building that was once the Derry & Toms department store in High Street Kensington. Much as Fogg dithered in India to save Aouda, a detour there may lose you the wager, but it's well worth it. Japan House combines an exhibition space (at the moment exploring the millenary wood-working tradition of the forested Hiba region) with a shop full of washi paper, Kutani cups and clean-lined brass vases; a library brimming with books in both English and Japanese (the current theme is Japanese architecture); and a cinema with free film screenings (Kon Satoshi's ingenious animations until December 20)—plus the Michelin-starred Akira restaurant. Here, theatrical chefs and exquisite tableware made by Japanese craftsmen complement a menu of delectable wagyu-beef croquettes, sushi rolls and meat skewers cooked over the *robata* charcoal grill.

To quote Verne: 'Would you not, for less than that, make the tour of the world?' 🦋

## At home in international London



### Harrington Gardens, £1.35 million

This 1,051sq ft apartment in Harrington Gardens has three bedrooms and a 500sq ft open-plan kitchen and reception room, complete with marble fireplace and sliding doors to a private terrace. *Winkworth South Kensington* (020-7373 5052; [www.winkworth.co.uk](http://www.winkworth.co.uk))



### Pelham Street, £3.895 million

Close to the Tube station, but not affected by it, this 3,090sq ft house has five to six bedrooms, plus a vast drawing room and a private garden. The master suite, which takes up the entire top floor, comes with its own terrace. *Strutt & Parker* (020-3794 0745; [www.struttandparker.com](http://www.struttandparker.com))



### Kensington Church Street, £15.02 million

This four-bedroom, 3,117sq ft apartment on the fifth floor of Lancer Square—a development on a former barracks—has striking interiors by 1508 Design London, two balconies and access to the communal pool and spa. *Savills* (020-7016 3860; [www.savills.co.uk](http://www.savills.co.uk))