



TRAVEL

# Who owns London?

Wer residiert eigentlich in den herrschaftlichen Stadtvillen der britischen Hauptstadt, wem gehören die futuristischen Hochhäuser Londons und wer ist einer der wichtigsten Vermieter? LORRAINE MALLINDER hat überraschende Antworten auf all diese Fragen.

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## **Kensington Palace Gardens**

A street, also known as Billionaires Row, includes, for example, a house belonging to Russian oligarch Roman Abramovich

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## **Dudley House on Park Lane**

One of the properties belonging to the Qatari royal family

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## **Eaton Square**

These premium properties belong to Hugh Grosvenor, the Duke of Westminster

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**The Tower of London**  
King Charles's portfolio includes Buckingham Palace, the Tower of London and St James's Palace

1

**The "Walkie Talkie" building**  
This and a whole cluster of buildings in Vauxhall are owned, but not necessarily used by or lived in, by Chinese business people

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Join us, won't you, on an unusual trip around London. First, imagine you're looking at an updated Monopoly with the British capital as an enormous and complex board. Prime real estate stretching in every direction.

London is, in fact, a kind of crazy real-life Monopoly game. Against post-Brexit expectations, this city remains one of the world's most attractive safe-deposit boxes for the uber-rich to park their wealth. If anything, the falling value of the pound against the dollar has only increased the city's appeal.

London has worked hard to attract plutocrats, says Caroline Knowles, a sociologist at Queen Mary University of London. She wrote a book called *Serious Money: Walking Plutocratic London*. It maps the city's biggest landlords on foot – from the high-profile royals to often secretive foreign investors, some of whom buy their properties through offshore shell companies.

According to Knowles, London is now home to more resident billionaires than New York, Hong Kong and Moscow. Loosely regulated, with armies of high-level accountants, investment advisers and lawyers, London has become a playground for insanely rich property investors. Touring its most affluent areas offers some revealing insights into who holds the keys to the city – Monopoly on a whole different level.

### The Crown Estate

King Charles III has a head start in the property market, inheriting a portfolio that includes Buckingham Palace, the Tower of London ❶ and St James's Palace. They are part of the Crown Estate. Set up in 1760 to manage royal estates, it owns nearly 250 properties in London's West End, including the elegant Regent Street, and hands a cut of profits directly to the monarch.

Now and again, the Crown's tenants struggle with the rent – Twitter was sued this year for not paying rent on its London headquarters near Piccadilly Circus. As the retail sector shrinks amid a cost-of-living crisis, the Crown

Estate has lost hundreds of thousands in London in the last financial year. But with city holdings worth £7.2 billion, Charles can probably rest easy for now.

### Aristo city

Hugh Grosvenor, the Duke of Westminster, has a London portfolio worth £9.5 billion and owns vast areas of the city. As his late father said, he was “born with the longest silver spoon” in his mouth. The 32-year-old's fortune dates back to the days of William the Conqueror, when ancestor Hugh Lupus was given grounds in Cheshire.

The Grosvenor dynasty has played a central role in shaping London. In the 19th century, it built Belgravia's Eaton Square ❷, the city's most expensive residential street, with elegant townhouses that can cost anything between £15 and £20 million. Famous neighbours have included composer Andrew Lloyd Webber, actor Laurence Olivier and former Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain. Oh, and of course the fictional James Bond also had a pad here – where else?

Eaton Square is the jewel in the Grosvenor crown, but young Hugh, a close friend of Prince William, also owns large parts of Mayfair, with its luxury hotels, art galleries, hedge fund offices, casinos, Michelin-starred restaurants and private member clubs.

### Sheikh shacks

So, is most of London really owned by the royals and the aristocracy? No, sovereign wealth funds from the oil-rich Gulf have long been on the



King and landlord:  
Charles III

**prime real estate** (N. Am.)  
➤ erstklassige Immobilie(n)

**safe-deposit box** [di'pɒzɪt]  
➤ Bankschließfach

**uber-rich** ['u:bə]  
➤ Superreiche(r)

**landlord**  
➤ Vermieter

**secretive** ['si:kri:tɪv]  
➤ geheimnistuerisch

**offshore shell company**  
➤ Strohfirma

**billionaire** [ˌbɪljə'neə]  
➤ Milliardär(in)

**high-level**  
➤ hochrangig

**accountant**  
➤ Steuerberater(in)

**insanely**  
➤ wahnsinnig

**affluent** ['æfluənt]  
➤ wohlhabend

**head start**  
➤ Vorsprung

**inherit**  
➤ erben

**cut of profits**  
➤ Gewinnanteil

**tenant**  
➤ Mieter(in), Pächter(in)

**sue sb.** [sju:]  
➤ gegen jmdn. klagen

**retail**  
➤ Einzelhandel

**rest easy**  
➤ ruhig schlafen

**duke** [dju:k]  
➤ Herzog

**vast**  
➤ riesig, enorm

**late**  
➤ verstorbene(r)

**silver spoon: be born with a ~ in one's mouth**  
➤ aus einer reichen Familie stammen

**composer**  
➤ Komponist(n)

**pad** (ifml.)  
➤ Bude

**sheikh** [ʃeɪk]  
➤ Ölscheich

**shack**  
➤ Bretterbude, Hütte

**sovereign wealth funds** [ˌsɒvrɪn 'welθ fʌndz]  
➤ Staatsfonds





West London property:  
costs serious money





Belgravia: a property bought by a Russian oligarch in 2017

mother of all spending sprees. Frightened by the Arab Spring, nervous rulers rushed to stash their cash in safe-haven property markets protected by the rule of law. And what better place than Britain, the nation that once held such sway over the entire region?

Cutting into the London sky with its sharp pinnacle, the Shard is the ultimate symbol of power and wealth. Built with nearly £2 billion of Qatari oil money, its opening in 2012 marked a key point in then-mayor Boris Johnson's plan to turn London into the "capital of the world". Qatar is now one of the biggest players in London real estate, part owner of the financial district Canary Wharf and of Chelsea Barracks, a luxury housing development next to the Thames, where townhouses sell for eight-figure sums. It also owns Harrods.

Members of the Qatari royal family own dozens of mansions around London, earning Mayfair its new nickname: Little Doha. The best known is the palatial Dudley House on Park Lane ③. Known by locals as the Sheikh Shack, this metropolitan mansion has a massive ballroom, a picture gallery filled with artistic treasures and views over Hyde Park. When Queen Elizabeth II paid a visit, she reportedly said it made Buckingham Palace look "rather dull" by comparison.

The UAE is also investing heavily in a city it calls its "eighth emirate". It owns 95 properties on Mayfair's iconic Berkeley Square – once home to Oscar Wilde and Winston Churchill, now hedge fund central. A Guardian investigation revealed that much of the UAE's estimated £5.5 billion of London holdings had been purchased stealthily, through overseas shell companies run by law firms in the city.

The Saudis have been in the game for a long time, but there's recently been some belt-tightening in the royal family and lesser-known members have been selling their most valuable property. Overlooking a lake in Regent's Park, the Holme has a price tag of around £250 million, making it the most expensive private residence in Britain. The 40-room mega-mansion is not often used. Though, as one employee told this reporter, "maintenance costs a bloody fortune".

### Londongrad

Walking down Kensington Palace Gardens ④, also known as Billionaire's Row, we come to a mansion that stands frozen in time. Located just behind Kensington Palace (the official residence of the Prince and Princess of Wales), the 19th-century property has been silent since last year, when



Qatar comes to London:  
Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani

the British government sanctioned its owner, Roman Abramovich.

Abramovich, who once sold rubber ducks from his Moscow apartment, made his fortune in the gangster capitalism era that followed the fall of communism, later becoming a global celebrity as the London-based owner of Chelsea FC. Of all the Russian oligarchs, Abramovich came closest to joining the British establishment – until Russia invaded Ukraine.

Russians own some of the most expensive properties in London, often dubbed "Londongrad". In total, 1,300 individuals have been hit with sanctions. But it seems many have passed on their assets to family members. It's a loophole that recently saw one eight-year-old girl become the owner of a £2.3 million mansion in Kensington. Her Russian father bought the property through a shell company registered in the Cayman Islands – a classic example of how things work in London.

Russian oligarchs are not willing to give up their assets easily. "They're all fighting to get them back. They expect to get them back," says Elisabeth Schimpfössl, author of *Rich Russians: From Oligarchs to Bourgeoisie*.

### China's sci-fi city

To get an idea of how much London is changing, let's visit the Nine Elms area near the Houses of Parliament. Once a post-industrial landscape filled with warehouses, today, it's home to MI6 and the glittering new US Embassy, just across from Embassy Gardens, a luxury

#### mother of all

- Inbegriff

#### spending spree

- Kaufrausch

#### stash sth.

- etw. verstecken

#### safe haven <sup>[ˈheɪvən]</sup>

- sicherer Hafen

#### sway: hold - over sb./sth.

- über jmdn./etw. herrschen

#### pinnacle <sup>[ˈpɪnækəl]</sup>

- Spitze

#### eight-figure <sup>[ˌeɪt ˈfɪɡə]</sup>

- achtstellig

#### mansion

- Herrenhaus, Villa

#### nickname

- Spitzname

#### palatial <sup>[ˌpælɪˈeɪʃəl]</sup>

- luxuriös, prunkvoll

#### reportedly

- angeblich

#### dull

- öde, langweilig

#### UAE (United Arab Emirates)

- Vereinigte Arabische Emirate

#### stealthily <sup>[ˈsteɪlθli]</sup>

- heimlich

#### law firm

- Anwaltskanzlei

#### belt-tightening <sup>[ˈtɑːtɪnɪŋ]</sup>

- Sparkurs

#### dub sth.

- etw. bezeichnen

#### asset

- Vermögen

#### loophole

- Hintertür, Schlupfloch

#### warehouse <sup>[ˈweəhaʊs]</sup>

- Lagerhalle

#### MI6

- britischer Nachrichtendienst





Relaxing: parks are still free

**bridge**

➤ hier: verbinden

**storey**

➤ Stockwerk

**jigsaw** ['dʒɪɡsɔ:]

➤ Puzzle

**jumbled** ['dʒʌmbəld]

➤ ungeordnet

**assortment**

➤ Mischung

**criss-crossed**

➤ kreuz und quer durchzogen

**residential high-rise**

[,rezɪ'denʃəl]

➤ Wohnturm

**absentee** [ˌæbsən'ti:]

➤ abwesend

**chef**

➤ Chefkoch, -köchin

**scorch**

➤ sengen, verbrennen

residential enclave. Look up and you'll see the famous Sky Pool, a swimming pool bridging two rooftops reserved for the buildings' elite residents.

Towering above these developments is a group of tall buildings that wouldn't look out of place in *Bladerunner*. Built by Chinese developers, these £3 billion tower blocks, some of them more than 50 storeys high, were described by former mayor Johnson as the city's "final piece of the jigsaw". But the pieces don't quite fit together, creating a jumbled assortment of isolated totems criss-crossed by heavy traffic.

A representative of the fully opened No. 8 Thames City building says that almost all the luxury apartments in the

53-storey residential high-rise – ranging in price from £1 million to about £4 million – have been bought. But the development has been criticized for its high rate of absentee owners, who are thought to have purchased the properties as investments that they will never live in. As one local chef says, "There aren't many lights going on at night."

China, now one of the big boys on the property market, has also invested in the City of London, in a building nicknamed the "Walkie Talkie" ⑤ because of its shape, but now more famous for reflecting scorching sunlight that is hot enough to fry an egg on the street below – as one enterprising journalist was able to demonstrate.





Roman Abramovich:  
currently not  
welcome in London



Caroline Knowles: author of *Serious Money*:  
*Walking Plutocratic London*

## Londoners

These days, London is clearly a city for the wealthy, who have driven up property prices to stratospheric levels. Meanwhile, the ordinary people who keep the city running – the teachers, the nurses and many other workers – struggle with rising rents, their hopes of owning a piece of the city a distant dream. At which point does all this become publicly indefensible? The property grab takes place against a backdrop of underfunded infrastructure: waterworks leaking, sewage spilling into rivers and streams, schools and hospitals struggling.

Knowles was moved to write her book after observing the growing gap

between rich and poor, the contrast between the glitz of the centre and the “armies of homeless huddled in doorways”. She writes that the wealthy live in “a world of isolation, high security and paranoia”. The plutocratic city appears to be entrenched, but it is fragile.

One thing’s for sure. Londoners – a breed as globalized as its wealthy landlords – are what makes the city. London without its vibrant street culture could become a dull place indeed. After all, who wants to live on a Monopoly board?

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### stratospheric levels

[,strætə'sfɛrɪk]

➤ astronomische Höhen

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### indefensible

[,ɪndɪ'fensəbəl]

➤ nicht zu vertreten

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### grab

➤ Raub; hier: Gier

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### backdrop

➤ Hintergrund

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### sewage

 ['su:ɪdʒ]

➤ Abwasser

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### huddled

➤ zusammengekauert

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### entrenched

➤ etabliert

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