

In the market for colour

Writer **Kate Salter** jumps on the train to London to visit Columbia Road Flower Market, in search of beautiful blooms – and to soak up the atmosphere in this unforgettable enclave

There is something about arriving at any big city early in the morning that makes you feel it's yours for the taking. As the train pulls into London Paddington on a sunlit Sunday morning, there's a stillness you don't often find at one of the capital's busiest stations.

I'm on my way to Columbia Road Flower Market, in Hackney, east London, to try to revitalise a garden ravaged by a bitter winter and heavy snow. Columbia Road is one of the country's most exciting markets, a place where you can pick up horticultural bargains at the same time as browsing art galleries and vintage furniture, while eating anything from fine pastries to fresh oysters.

By nine o'clock, the market is in full swing. Against a vivid backdrop of roses, camellias, begonias and

tulips, there are locals carrying trays of bedding plants for their window boxes, a well-to-do couple discussing the virtues of wisteria over jasmine, stylish Japanese tourists in an Instagram frenzy and trainer-clad young dads pushing expensive buggies.

There are stalls selling house plants, bulbs, herbs, succulents, fruit trees and even a hefty tree fern that I'm tempted by, but decide against as it would need its own seat reservation on the train home. Add to that the soundtrack of the market traders belting out their sales pitches, a young woman tap dancing and an all-male quartet striking up a tune, and it is a scene full of eccentric energy.

Columbia Road not only looks beautiful, it is a place where you can experience a slice of working London life



HARRY BORDEN



Top: Kate Salter at the market and, above, catching the train home

not so easily found these days. A market has existed here since the mid-19th century, but it was after the Second World War that it began to sell flowers and plants in earnest.

Most of the stalls are family businesses, and many of the traders have been working here every Sunday since they were young. It's their energy and humour that give the place its USP. There are booms of "Come and have a look: silly prices for silly people" and "If you can't spend your money here, you can't spend it anywhere!"

I buy a climbing hydrangea from Louis Burridge, one of

the longest-standing traders. His father had a stall here in 1922 and Lou, now 83, although retired, says he comes every Sunday to spend time with his sons who run stalls. I buy a bunch of candy pink tulips from Ricky Cramer, who works with his dad Kenny and his grandfather Ron, and a pretty dicentra from another stall for a shady corner of my garden.

One of the most surprising things is that the market is here at all, in such an urban area. But London specialises in beautiful, unexpected gardens, places that act like oases from the noise and

frenetic pace of life. There is Kew Gardens, or Regent's Park Rose Garden. Less well known, but equally beautiful, is the Chelsea Physic Garden, London's oldest botanical garden; Fenton House, a 17th-century walled garden in Hampstead; or Middle Temple Gardens, tucked away behind Embankment, which has borders to die for.

This tradition of the "urban gardener" means that London has amazing florists, too, who manage to combine traditional English blooms with cutting-edge design; bouquets from Scarlet and Violet, McQueens or Flora Starkey look equally at home on the fashion editor's desk at *Vogue* as on your dining table.

And if you want to make like a professional, there's New Covent Garden Market, in Battersea, the country's largest flower market, where many of London's best florists get their stock.

For now, those delights will have to wait as it's time to catch my train home. I resist one last glance at that tree fern and head back to the station. The sun is out and I need to get planting.

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