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The Shard

I enjoy visiting high places with a view. There are several areas of London on high ground, such as Highgate, Crystal Palace Park and Alexandra Palace. Several years ago we went up to the topmost tower of St Paul's Cathedral which gave wonderful views over the city. A few years after that, we made our first visit to the Sky Garden in the Fenchurch Street building which gave magnificent views over the whole city and, being free, although ticketed, we went back several times at different times of the day. Each time we were there, we looked over to the gleaming Shard immediately opposite on the south bank of the river, with our eyes level with the middle of it.

This year our desire to visit The Shard was realised, when friends gave us the wonderful surprise gift of tickets for the top level viewing experience known as The View From The Shard. We could choose our day and time within the next year and we spent all summer waiting for a fine clear day immediately after some rain, to ensure the air was free of dust and haze. The entire summer has been a non-stop heatwave and drought, so the wait lasted three months. At last the weather forecast showed heavy storms and showers on a Thursday, followed by a bright, sunny, clear Friday. We booked immediately for a mid-morning entry.

Before we go up the building, there are a few facts and figures that will introduce this remarkable building. Its former names were Shard of Glass, Shard London Bridge or London Bridge Tower and its shape was inspired by the many church spires and the former ships' sails of London. It is located immediately next to London Bridge railway station and its address is 32 London Bridge Street, Southwark. Its height is 309.7 metres (1,016 feet), comprising 95 storeys of which 72 are habitable floors. It is the

tallest building in the UK and in the European Union, the 5th tallest in Europe and the 96th tallest in the world. It can be seen from 40 miles away in any direction, which also means you can view the city and countryside within a 40 mile radius, on a perfect clear day. Construction began in March 2009 and finished in March 2012. It was inaugurated on 5 July 2012 by the Prime Minister of Qatar, and practical completion was achieved in November 2012.

The Shard has 11,000 glass panels covering an area of 56,000 square metres (602,799 square feet) which is about the area of about 8 football pitches. It has 306 flights of stairs and 44 lifts (elevators) including dedicated lifts for fire fighters. The lifts travel at 6 metres per second. Approximately 95% of the building materials and 20% of the steelwork is from recycled sources. The construction used up most of the rubble from the demolished Southwark Towers that it replaced. It has a skin of triple-glazing with integrated sun screens. The tower cost about 430 million pounds to build.

The Shard has a floor area of 110,000 square metres (1.2 million square feet or 11 hectares or 27 acres) comprising 27 floors of offices, 3 floors of restaurants and 19 floors of hotel accommodation. There are also 10 luxury apartments which are still empty and unsold at present, with a price tag of 50 million pounds each. I have no wish to live in the city centre, despite the amazing outlook over the cityscape, so I am not going to buy any of those, as you might have guessed. The viewing decks are on levels 68, 69 and 72, the topmost one being open to the air at 244 metres (804 feet). The levels above house a power station and radiators.

The Shard

We knew none of that as we arrived at the building, we just knew we were going to have a great time in this beautiful giant crystal building. As we went through the revolving doors, we saw long queues at the ticket counters but we were able to bypass those as we had booked online. We went straight through the barriers, scanners and bag check. The journey upwards was by two separate lifts, each with fully mirrored sides and a ceiling made of a large screen showing the views from the top at various times of day and night. This was our first piece of entertainment, a taster of what was to come. I gave up trying to follow the level indicator as the numbers were increasing so fast.

We exited the second lift on level 68. This level is completely enclosed and therefore wind and weatherproof. We found ourselves surrounded by glass walls and sky, with the city far below and the suburbs spread out as a giant living map, with very few other tall buildings to obscure the view. The people were tiny dots flowing along the paths like ants following their trails, the cars were miniaturised toys and the trains were little white worms sliding along their allotted tracks in slow motion. The river was a ribbon of coffee coloured water, and its bends became more obvious as we followed it by eye to the high rises of Canary Wharf and beyond to Greenwich, just out of sight behind the Isle of Dogs. We could just about make out the supporting towers of the Dartford Crossing bridge.

We then went up to Level 72, which is open to the air, although the glass is high and you have to look up to remind yourself of this fact and see where the air flow is coming from. During the summer the floor surface has been covered in artificial grass, making it the highest "park" in London. The views were of course not much different but the

occasional breezes from above in a couple of places did emphasise the reality of our elevated position. You know that you are at the top when you run out of ceiling and there is only the spire and sections of open sky above you. The passing jet plane on its way to Heathrow Airport seemed not too much higher than us, and a noisy police helicopter zoomed round the spire exactly level with us.

We spent two hours on the decks, walking round and finding landmarks, which as Londoners were all well-known to us. We could not see our home area, as that was hidden behind high ground to the south east, but everything else was duly identified, zoomed in on and photos taken. However, the most dramatic photos were those taken looking straight down the side of the building, at the corners where the glass façades do not quite meet, and you can see directly down to the ground, following the converging lines of the edges. As the building is topped by an open spire, this must be the only building in London that does not have a roof.

To me, this is the most attractive building in London. As all the sides are sloping inwards, it reflects the sky at all times, which other glass sided buildings do not and it is therefore not in the least imposing or looming, in fact it seems to quietly disappear at times depending on the light and weather conditions. Each time we go into London via London Bridge station, we can look up at The Shard and will not have to wonder what is up there, although there is now a new bucket list item of seeing it all at night. That is something that is best done in winter when darkness falls much earlier. I think our next opportunity to do that will be in the Sky Garden opposite, with the advantage that we can admire The Shard in its entirety and reflected in the water of the river Thames. (1303 words)