

30 THINGS TO DO BEFORE YOU ARE ANY AGE... IN A CITY!

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To mark 30 years of *Primary Geography*, Ben suggests 30 geographical activities that everyone should do in an urban area.

Since April 2012 stick dens have been appearing in forests nationwide, children return home caked in mud pies, river flows have been slowed by their hand-built dams and parks echo to the sound of grass trumpets. The National Trust launched a nationwide campaign to encourage electronically addicted children in darkened bedrooms to get outside and engage with nature. The '50 things to do before you're 11¾' initiative was in response to a report commissioned by the National Trust, which highlighted evidence of a long-term and dramatic decline in children's engagement with the outdoors. Research showed that less than one in ten children regularly play in wild places

compared to almost half a generation ago. One-third have never climbed a tree, one in ten cannot ride a bike and three times as many are taken to hospital after falling out of bed as from falling out of a tree.

Cities could be said to be the antithesis of this. Indeed, I often recount to my students the traumatic visit to a city by my Lake District living ex-countryside ranger, ex-geography teacher and lover of all things green and outdoors many years ago. He was truly shocked to visit a city landscape devoid of green space – and was horrified with the thought of children growing up without immediate access to nature.

However, many city areas are blessed with parks and natural spaces, which hold geographical adventure. They can be a place of towering and subterranean urban awe, wonder, surprise and disappointment in our human patterns and habits.

They have complex and simple spatial and temporal patterns, amazing features, mind-boggling movements and hidden surprises. Maybe especially so for the young person who has never been before, or perhaps for us all because we are often too busy to notice them and notice the geography therein.

We simply need to explore and discover our urban landscapes... and notice things. The following is far from definitive, instead it is offered as a list from which to pick-and-choose your own adventures. It is inspired by Keri Smith's fabulous *How to be an Explorer of the World* (2011). Buy the book, explore it and make a 'Geodoodle' booklet for your class with a headed activity and space for notes, drawings, rubbings or collections on each page. Alternatively, talk to your art subject leader about how to make a simple sketchbook. You are then ready to explore...



Figure 1: Public fountains or water features in cities, such as Bordeaux's Water Mirror seen here, offer opportunities for particularly refreshing exploration. Photo © Anna Grandfield.

1. Find the highest multi-storey car park or public access building. Go to the top floor and look at the view: north, east, south, west. What are the main landmarks? How far beyond the city can you see?
2. Take a trip on a double decker bus, sit on the top deck and observe how the land use changes. Think about what there is above all those shops, restaurants and takeaways, or what could there be (many of these spaces look empty)?
3. Find a park as close to the city centre as possible. Sit, listen, enjoy and escape the city.
4. In the main train station, find a good place to sit for 10 minutes and watch people at rush hour. Try to visualise a map in your head of where they came from and where they are going.
5. Stand under the tallest building and look up. Can you imagine the views from the top? Take a selfie of you and the building with the camera pointing up.
6. Look or listen for running water. Most cities have evolved on a river and its tributaries, then planners 'buried' them in conduits. Find the local river and try to track or visualise its course.
7. Take a ride on an underground train/tube or take the train to the city. Track your route on a map.
8. Look at the departures board in the train station. Visualise where all these places are and the routes to get there – which is the furthest away? Where would you go if you had a free ticket?
9. Explore the city centre on an early Sunday morning. Is it more peaceful than at other times?
10. Go on a geology trail or (if there is not one) create your own. Find and map as many different types of building stone that you can, or just notice all the different colours and textures of the rocks, stones and bricks. Find 10 different types of stone used in the buildings. Take rubbings and/or colour match them to paint charts.
11. Stand under a railway, tube or tram bridge and feel the 'rumble' as it travels over you.
12. Look for a fox... or keep a nose out for the smell of one. How many different animals, birds, butterflies or other insects can you spot? Listen out for the squawk of a parakeet – they are more common than you think!
13. Find out how the city (or parts of it) derived its name. Does it mean something? Was it known by other names in the past?
14. Look for the city's coat of arms – does it tell you something about its geography and history?
15. Buy and eat some tasty street food or visit a Curry Mile or China Town and enjoy the smells.
16. Visit a traditional indoor or outdoor market. How are these markets organised? How do the stalls tell you something about local trade, industry or culture?
17. Visit a church, cathedral or mosque on a really hot day. Sit, breathe deeply and enjoy the cool peace and tranquillity.
18. Count all the construction cranes you can see – watch them as they dance, hoist and turn. Listen to the noises they make. Think: how do they build skyscrapers? Notice what the cranes do when the wind speed increases.
19. Splash in puddles or a public fountain (Figure 1).
20. Watch a sunset or sunrise reflected in a towering glass-clad skyscraper.
21. Dance along to the music of a busker or watch a street performer.
22. Admire some graffiti. Is it art?
23. Count buses at different times during the day. Notice which are full or empty. Notice the people on the buses; what are they doing?
24. Find a place where you can see an expanse of sky and enjoy the cloud shapes or the blue of an 'empty' sky.
25. On a hot summer day lie on the grass in a park and think about why it is so much cooler than the streets.
26. Notice buildings that have had an 'organ transplant' (where planners have kept the old (special) façade but made the inside all modern and new); or a building that has new and old elements together. Do you think the designers and architects have done well? Pick a grand old building and imagine you are an architect who has to design an extension. Complete that design.
27. Explore an area of redevelopment. Notice the design of the new (maybe sustainable) housing. Which house would you like to live in? If you could 'Grand Design' your own house what would it look like?
28. Instead of just walking past a statue, study it. Find out about who it is, what it represents and why it is there. What kind of statue would you create and where would you place it?
29. On a really windy day, notice the wind tunnels/channels between buildings as well as areas of shelter and calm. What is blown around in the wind? Where does it collect?
30. Look for CCTV cameras. Who is watching you, where from and why? Map the cameras in your head.

Reference

Smith, K. (2011) *How to be an Explorer of the World*. London: Penguin.

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