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See Tower of London at night

At Ceremony of the Keys, visitors can see Tower of London at night

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By LINDA A. ODUM / Special Contributor to The Dallas Morning News

LONDON – While every visitor to this city should experience the daytime tour of the Tower of London, a nighttime rite allows them to take part in the centuries-old locking of the tower.

Darkness envelops the tower as a yeoman warder admits you onto the grounds for the Ceremony of the Keys. At 9:53 p.m., the chief yeoman warder approaches carrying a brass lantern in one hand and a set of keys in the other. He and his guard lead the way to lock the outer gate as well as the Middle and Byward Tower gates.

As your group approaches the archway of the Bloody Tower, a sentry shouts, "Who goes there?"

"The keys," replies the chief warder.

"Whose keys?"

"Queen Elizabeth's keys."

"Pass Queen Elizabeth's keys," the sentry says. "All's well."

The ceremony has taken place every night for the past 700 years, including when the tower was bombed by the Germans in September 1941, although the ceremony was delayed by half an hour.

The Tower of London actually is a group of 11 towers. It has served at one time or another during the last 900 years as a royal palace, fortress, prison, armory, treasury, menagerie and astronomical observatory. Its most popular modern claim to fame is as home to the crown jewels. The collection includes the Imperial State Crown set with about 3,000 jewels, mainly diamonds, and the Black Prince's ruby worn by Henry V. The 530-carat Star of Africa diamond also is part of the collection.

However, it's the tower's dark history of murder and execution that makes visiting at night so intriguing. The two young sons of Edward IV were murdered in the Bloody Tower, and Sir Walter Raleigh, Sir Thomas More, Lady Jane Grey and Henry VIII's wives Anne Boleyn and Catherine Howard were executed within the tower's walls.

Guests are admitted at 9:30 p.m. After the ceremony begins, no latecomers are admitted. The ceremony lasts 10 minutes.

Tickets are free, but visitors must apply at least six to eight weeks in advance. Send a list of the full

names and addresses of those who wish to attend, three possible dates when they can be there, a self-addressed envelope and two International Reply Coupons, available at any U.S. Post Office (U.S. stamps aren't accepted) to: Ceremony of the Keys, Waterloo Block, HM Tower of London, London, England, EC3N 4AB.

Groups are limited to six people from April 1 through Oct. 31 (15 people the rest of the year).

Information: hrp.org.uk/tower_oflondon.

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