



Thinking about visiting the UK?

Well if you are, it'll be a fantastic investment so I put a few *objective* thoughts together. Read on for advice which while not exhaustive, is still nevertheless long winded !

Firstly sorry to "rain on your parade" but Britain is not a land of "fairy tale castles" with "Knights on horseback". It probably never was ! But we do have a rich history with many castles and living museums where visitors can get a feel for what life was like back hundreds of years ago.

You will get the feeling that much of the UK – particularly outside London looks "old" – that's because it is ! But its not one big museum – people actually live in these 500 year old homes preserved, usually, because wood is not used as a building material for the structure of houses. Rather we use brick, stone and concrete and roofs on older homes are made of thatch, slate and stone while more modern homes have a "manufactured" tiles etc on their roofs to blend in with the older buildings.



England (as opposed to the UK which includes Scotland and Wales) has the dubious reputation of being the most densely populated country in Europe although outside of the major cities you may find that hard to believe with huge areas of open land with often not a house in sight. That's because our residential areas are strictly controlled – it is virtually impossible get permission to build a house in the middle of the countryside even if it is on land that you own. Town is town and country is country in the UK!

Anyway I'm not telling you all the differences.....otherwise there is no point in coming!

Travelling to the UK

Travelling from the US the only document you'll need to enter the UK is a Passport. There is no visa requirement but you'll need to fill in a form on the plane to say where you are staying for the first night.

There are restrictions on *what* and *how much* you can carry – in particular you'll need to be careful what you have in your carry-on luggage from a security point of view – liquids, creams, sharps, etc,

Most planes leave the US in the evening and arrive in the UK in the morning – often as early as 6:00am UK time.

If you do the math you'll work out that you'll get very little sleep that night what with noise, discomfort, form filling, dinner, drinks and breakfast on the plane. Unless you have the time and the financial means though, it would *not* be a sensible use of time to spend your first day in the UK resting up (you can't generally check into hotels until 3:00pm). Just accept you'll be very tired and take the odd snooze while travelling between your first places to see. Many initially go to London - that's often a good option.



Where do you want to visit?

When I first collect people at the start of a tour, I usually say to them

“Have you been to England before” to which the frequent response is:

“Yes I’ve been to **London** a few times” !

.....I don’t usually have to wait long before my Customers ask me a similar question.....

“Have you been to the US before” to which my reply is always;

“Yes I’ve been to **New York**” !

The next thing the Customers say is:

“New York is *not* the United States” and of course my reply to them is “Neither is London, England” – much laughter usually ensues with comments like “ok ok point taken” !

Basically, London is an international city and in many ways “feels” similar to New York, Paris, etc. To discover the real England you need to leave London and get out into the countryside and the smaller towns and villages.

So you need to decide where your priorities lie – be it simply London or whether you want to go further afield to see the important sights:

- ✓ Bath and The Cotswolds and Stratford-upon-Avon
- ✓ Stonehenge, Salisbury and Avebury
- ✓ The contrasting maritime landscapes of Devon and Cornwall
- ✓ The Castles along the English / Welsh borders
- ✓ The mountains of Wales – mid Wales is a largely deserted landscape
- ✓ The English Lake District
- ✓ Scotland – the west coast, Skye, a distillery and the wonderful city of Edinburgh
- ✓ The island of Ireland – wonderful people, scenery and culture – not the UK but easily accessed from here as part of a tour of The British Isles.

All I would say is that many of the places that are on the tourist maps as “must see’s” can be a little disappointing if you don’t plan properly. For instance:

- ✓ A regular trip to Stonehenge with a car park full of tour buses and “visiting” with a thousand or so other people *without* gaining direct access to the ancient 5000 year old stones can be deflating! Arrange a *Special Access* tour with a maximum of 25 allowed in for one hour before or after the public opening hours is much more atmospheric – with a knowledgeable guide you are allowed right *inside* the stone circle. Believe me it’s the *only* way to visit Stonehenge. Of course the weather will have a bearing.
- ✓ Stratford-upon-Avon – I just read this on “Trip Advisor”:
“How can you visit England without visiting the birthplace of the man who practically invented the English language? One negative of course is that it has become a tourist trap in the worst way, but those who avoid peak hours should still manage to find the experience worthwhile.”
...well that was a contradiction in terms. My recommendation? Unless you are a Shakespeare enthusiast and intend to go to a play, I’d give Stratford a miss!



What visitors need to remember is that the UK measures some 550 miles from the North of Scotland to the South Coast, and 240 miles across at the widest point in the middle. That's coincidentally roughly the size of New England – including New York State and up to Maine. And compared to the US, our Highways and main route roads are rather more congested while the smaller roads are often narrow and winding. So travelling times are somewhat longer for the same distance in the UK and unless you want to be driving all day, time must be allowed to “visit”.

The Bottom Line – take advice from a local specialist who knows the area and those “secret places” that experience has found that visitors enjoy.

Lets deal with London first !

The Capital City is a must see/do when coming to England. From seeing a spectacular show on London's “West End” to having a ride on the London Eye there's plenty to see and do in London. It really all depends on how much time you have but *10* must do's (or I would say *should* do's) are:

1. Buckingham Palace – changing the Guards around 11:00am
2. Big Ben and The Houses of Parliament
3. Trafalgar Square and the monument to Admiral Lord Nelson
4. London Eye and The Shard for great views of London
5. St Paul's Cathedral
6. Shakespeare's Globe Theatre
7. Tower of London & Tower Bridge
8. Tate Modern Art Gallery
9. Covent Garden
10. Imperial War Museum and Churchill's War Rooms – fantastic history

If you want to be completely “knackered” (worn out) it is possible to see much of this in a well planned day. The first three you simply walk around and look at. **St Pauls** you could walk around in 45 minutes unless you want to take the precarious climb up to the Dome and the “whispering gallery”. If you pre-book the **London Eye** and **The Shard**, the lines are not too bad

Shakespeare's Globe (a re-built “copy” of the original, positioned on the south bank of the river close to the location of the original “Globe” would take 30 minutes to 90 minutes to see depending on what you like to do.

The Tower would take several hours depending on how much time you need to stand in line. The guided tours (from the “Beefeaters”) are excellent. You would need to stand in line again to see the **Crown Jewels** so you are really looking at half a day in the area of the Tower. Otherwise you can view it from outside from **Tower Bridge** and across the river and that takes much less time.

The “**Tate Modern**” takes as long as you want to take to see piles of bricks, cattle parts in saline and other odd things. If you prefer a more conventional art gallery the *original* “**Tate**” or the **National Portrait Gallery** (which has fantastic views of London skyline from it's café) are a good examples.

Covent Garden, once a flower market is now a classy and characterful shopping area which, as they don't sell motorbikes, PCs and cameras, I've never been to !!

And a West End Play or Musical – well that's an evening out !



Electical Power Supply

In the UK power supply is 240v and uses a different style of wall plug to North America. Most electrical appliances you are likely to want to bring – laptops, camera chargers etc use transformers and all you need to do is purchase an adaptor from Amazon or suchlike before leaving. Just read your manual to confirm your appliance can run on 240v. Most top hotels provide hairdryers.



Language

Don't assume we speak the same language and that things that have a name similar to the name of a familiar item are the same. Often they aren't. French fries are called *chips* and potato chips are called *crisps*. The elevator is the *lift* and the WC or the ladies and men's room, is the *toilet* also known as the *loo*. Eggplant is *aubergine* and a zucchini is a *courgette*!

The “Queens English” is much different from the English spoken in America and, like the US, we also have regional accents – in fact many more than there are in the USA. There are some English accents that sound very like a foreign language to a native Englishman let alone to an American ear. Think of it as a linguistic adventure.



There are also many embarrassing words that are used in the USA that may mean rude things here – eg a *fag* is a cigarette ! You can be assured you'll come unstuck at some stage....it will be great fun!

The National Character !

The “stiff upper lip” that the British are renowned for is, in fact, a natural polite “*reserve*” which I put down to the fact that we live very close alongside our neighbours so we tend to *keep ourselves to ourselves* and value some solitude and privacy.

On the other hand, Americans tend to be rather *louder* and certainly more outgoing. You may find you have to do the initial engaging if you'd like to talk to the locals but you'll find them genuine, honest for the most part, and keen to tell you about their part of the country they love.

Once you have gained their confidence, you'll find their sense of humour is often *dry* and they will ask questions – don't misinterpret that as being *nosey* – and don't feel threatened if they ask you where you are from, what you are doing here, where you are staying etc. Its innocent curiosity !



National Trust and British Heritage

Many of our castles and ancient buildings, as well as the palaces and stately homes, are administered by the *National Trust* and *English Heritage*; rather like your Preservation Nation and the Royal Oak. If you are a member of either of these you may be entitled to discounts in the UK but if you are planning to visit a number of historical sites in the UK it may be worth considering a multi-day overseas Touring Pass from The National Trust and a Visitors Pass from English Heritage each costing from £35 entitling you to free entry to many historical sites including Stonehenge (but *not* the special access tours).



Tipping

Unlike North America, and particularly the USA, *tipping* is not a huge part of our culture in the UK and really is generally applied as appreciation for exceptional service. A few rules:

- ✓ Never tip the barman in a pub – it simply is not done here and, to the locals, would look overly “flash” !
- ✓ If you eat in a *pub* and the person waiting on you is *particularly* attentive, *and* you only have one waiter / waitress then you might want to consider leaving something but it is not necessary. Hoped for, perhaps.....expected, *no!*
- ✓ In restaurants *moderate* tipping is customary - in some areas where there are a lot of tourists there may be references on the bill or on the menu about “gratuities”. Tips (or “service charge”) may be included on the bill, so look at it carefully. If it is not included, tips can be left on the table, or there is often a tip bowl at the register. Don't be afraid to ask about this as well. The American 15 or 20% is *excessive* in England. 10% is more normal unless it is really outstanding service or a service is performed beyond the norm.
- ✓ It is normal to tip a taxi driver but usually it's a question of “keep the change”
- ✓ Guides – again, tips are appreciated but not expected



What about Hotels?

Generally, hotels in the UK are more atmospheric and “unique” than in the USA, and also more expensive. At the same time it is possible to stay in the regular “American” chains like Holiday Inn, Marriot and Hilton but be aware that these hotels generally lack the character of *English* hotels but are still more expensive than you would pay in the USA. Our advice is to experience “the *difference*” of staying in a traditional hotel but be aware that many do not have elevators or air-conditioning, although there are probably no more than 40 days in a year when AC would be considered advantageous.



The cheaper hotel chains are www.travelodge.co.uk (rather like a Motel 6) and www.premierinn.com (perhaps comparable with a Super 8) where you can expect to pay from as little as £25 a night for a basic but usually comfortable room (by booking ahead) through to about £120 a night. More expensive hotels range from £150 - £500+ ! In the end you tend to get what you pay for. Breakfast is often included but not always.

In order to get the best deal, check on line and book ahead using a web site like www.booking.com. Guides like me can advise on hotel accommodation in the areas they are familiar with, so don't be afraid to ask.

And, if you come from the “capital of service” don't be disappointed if our service levels fall short in a few areas – we really are trying hard.

Eating out

In Britain, we carry a historic reputation for *bland* food that was possibly correct in post WW2 times but for many years we have become very much more cosmopolitan. I find that most visitors are amazed about the quality and variety of the food they are presented with and the value for money.

Although we do have US style “fast food” restaurants they are generally *literally* for people who want the fastest of food – McDonalds, KFC, Burger King, and the occasional Subway etc.

But that’s not why you’re coming here ! British food is certainly more varied than in the US – for a start we have more meat readily available than just beef and chicken! Pork, lamb and duck are favourites and vegetarians are properly catered

for too. It is also normal for vegetables to be served up – *not* just a few peas and some lettuce ! Where I think we could be more adventurous, particularly given we are an Island, is in the “fish” department. Fish n’ Chips is what we’re known for but if you are looking for fish prepared in a more *interesting* way then you often need to find a specialist restaurant. I think fish and shellfish is better and cheaper in the USA. Expect to pay £5.50 - £8.00 for a baguette at lunch time, £12 for a Steak and Ale Pie with chips (fries!) and in the evening say £25 for a steak; these are pub prices. If you want to grab something cheaper a sandwich from a national *chain* store like Tesco or Sainsburys is £4 - £4 and coke is 70p – £1.20 a can (depending on where you are). London is always more expensive.

Of course we are very well known for our *ethnic* restaurants – in particular *Indian* cuisine has *the* most tastiest of foods – we almost think of “curry” as being the *national* dish !

Finally on food – while not *totally* “taboo” it is *not* part of the British custom for the waiter to say “*do you want the rest in a box?*”. You *can* ask for a “doggy bag” but you might find you are met with some surprise by your host !

Americans find beer in the UK “interesting”. We have our “Bud” type beers, which are served chilled, but Britain is known for its “Ales”, often brewed in small local breweries, with very different tastes and strengths and, generally, served just a few degrees below the ambient temperature from the cellar under the bar. These beers are full of taste because they are *not* frozen and are generally *flat* – ie not full of gas. People always want to taste them then comment they are “too warm” but, if you like them, the taste and the fact they are flat may encourage you to consume copious amounts ! Our *chilled* “Bud” type beer is just that.....*chilled* not *frozen* ! Why...? Quite simply we like to taste our beer and don’t like it frozen !! A pint of beer costs from £4!

Which brings me on to ice – when we have a pint of diet coke (usually because we are feeling guilty after a Big Mac!), we usually want the glass to contain full strength coke and not water from ice ! If the coke is chilled already why add ice? Americans often laugh when they see a couple of lumps floating in their G&T – we’d prefer both the G and the T to be chilled so you need minimal ice or none ! Its just a British thing like having masses of ice is an American thing !! Often in centres where there are a lot of Americans, if they hear the accent they’ll give you more ice automatically. Otherwise ask.

Paying for drinks in pubs – order at the bar and generally pay for the drinks as you buy them. If you are eating they may “run a tab” if you don’t look like the type to “do a runner” and leave without paying! It is normal for the bartender to ask to retain a credit card while a tab is being run – if you don’t like that, pay as you go. Pub meals should also be ordered at the bar or at the food order point and paid for in a similar way.

The legal age to drink alcohol in the UK is 18 and as a rule, if you look under 25 you are asked for ID.



Crime & Safety

Generally crime levels, particularly violent crime and homicides are much lower in the UK per head of population than in the USA.... less than one quarter the rate. Clearly in cities, don't walk in "dodgy" areas at night and, ideally, leave your jewellery at home!

Be careful to guard your PIN number at ATMs and beware of pickpockets in crowds – avoid carrying a lot of cash, passports and credit cards in vulnerable places. If I know I am some place I need to be careful, I only bring one card and some cash notes and stick them in a bank bag down my sock !

Begging, sadly, is now an issue – my advice is don't respond but then its up to you !

Payment in British Currency

Firstly you need to **notify your credit and debit card company(s)** you will be in the UK thus avoiding any embarrassing and expensive phone calls when a card is refused.

We don't tend to have debit cards that are *also* credit cards here – we have one (or more) card(s) for debit and others for credit. All cards in Europe have a "chip and pin" so when we pay, we no longer sign but use a **four digit PIN**. US credit cards do not use the PIN and generally, your card will be accepted with the traditional signature. However, you should make sure you have sufficient funds in your account to use your *debit* card – these can be useful for buying things on-line in advance (like rail journeys, for instance) and where you have to put the card into a machine once you are here to recover the goods you bought – often these use the chip to verify who you are. **Make sure you know your PIN number before travelling !**

Don't bring too much in British pounds from America – a Visa Debit card with a four digit PIN is readily accepted in banks all over the UK so you don't end up changing more cash than you need then losing on the deal. You can use your cards almost anywhere

Travellers checks – I just don't see the point ?

Getting around

You may be joining a tour with someone like *me* or you may want to drive yourself. Alternatively you may want to use the railway – for instance I don't do pickups in London for *one* day trips – the driving time is too long....about twice the time it takes to get from London to where I live in the Cotswolds than if you go by railway train. But beware.....if you purchase tickets on the day, you'll pay up to *twice* as much than if you buy them in advance on-line. You might like to familiarise yourself with this site - www.thetrainline.com

Buses are another cheap way of getting around but can be infuriatingly slow and nasty!

Cheap flights are available between English airports and Glasgow / Edinburgh in Scotland, Dublin / Belfast in Ireland and mainland Europe – Paris, Rome etc – checkout www.ryanair.com and www.easyjet.com both of whom offer cheap flights if you book well in advance. Sometimes flights can be incredible value. But, again, beware these airlines are ruthlessly strict on size and weight of carry-on, checked luggage is extra and there are minimal refunds for cancelled flights. But for a cheap few days in Edinburgh, for instance, they are great value.



Driving in the UK

The US Department of State says “*While in a foreign country, U.S. citizens may encounter road conditions that differ significantly from those in the United States. Visitors uncomfortable with or intimidated by the prospect of driving on the left side of the road may wish to avail themselves of the United Kingdom’s extensive bus, rail, and air transport networks. Roads in the United Kingdom are generally excellent but are narrow and often congested in urban areas*”.



If you want to drive, a couple of essentials:

- ✓ Bring your own GPS after acquiring UK mapping - renting a GPS from the car rental company can be more expensive
- ✓ Make sure you reserve a vehicle with an automatic transmission unless you are confident with a stick / standard (and even then remember you’ll be changing with your *left* hand!).
- ✓ Cars in the UK have smaller more efficient engines than those in the US – most are 4 cylinder petrol (gas) or more likely diesel. Two litre European cars are as lively as their 3 litre equivalents in the US gets dramatically more mileage. Diesel engines are *not* sluggish and get the best mileage – 45+mpg. Although fuel is currently about \$8 a gallon here and you *will* find travelling more expensive than in the US, you will not find it as bad as you think because of the much better mileage.

And I’ll give you a tip – we don’t have any rules like *overtaking a school bus* that landed me in trouble the first time I went to the US but here you are *not* allowed to turn *left* on **RED** – so watch out !

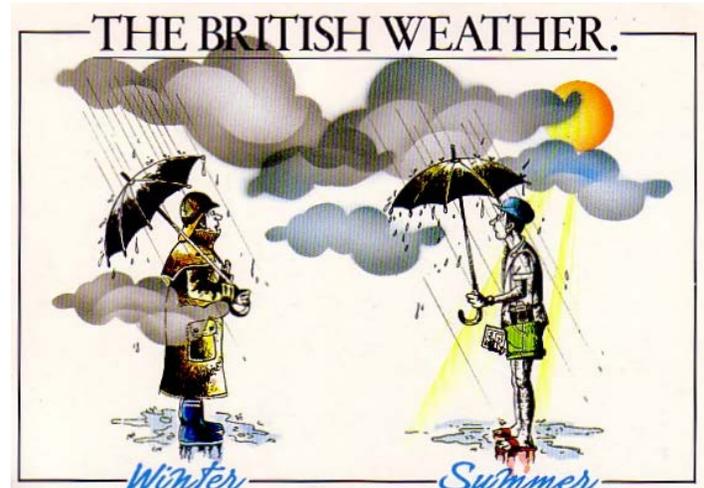
Weather

The British weather is much joked about and is far less extreme than in the US ranging from an average of 48F in winter to the low 70s in summer. That said it could be the mid 50s at Christmas *and* the same in June on a bad day! Officially, we only ever got to 100F twice – in August 2003 and July 2019 !

Unpredictable is the best way to describe our weather – a beautiful clear day can turn into nasty rain and gusting wind in less than an hour but, if I look back at this past season of work between late April and then beginning of October, only *one* day was a total wash-out!

August is supposed to be the hottest month but the past few years have been disappointing. If you were going to place a bet, May and September tend to be more *stable* and early May is a simply gorgeous month to see all the wild flowers blooming in the hedgerows.

Assuming you are visiting between April and October, it might be wise to pack a light waterproof and umbrella, just in case.



Medical Insurance

While medical services are widely available, free care under the National Health Service (NHS) is allowed *only* for UK residents and certain EU nationals. Tourists and short-term visitors will be charged for medical treatment in the United Kingdom.

The US Department of State strongly urges US citizens to consult their medical insurance company prior to travelling abroad to determine if the policy applies overseas and if it covers emergency expenses such as a medical evacuation.



Keeping in touch

We have excellent coverage for cell phones here but you will find it expensive to use your US phone, roaming in the UK and data rates can be extortionate! Options are to have your phone “unlocked” and buy a SIM card at the airport or in some other store.

If you are going to use your US phone, **make sure the bar has been lifted for roaming in Europe and to avoid high data charges**, switch off the email *push* so the phone is not constantly searching for new emails – maybe just check once or twice a day. Free WiFi is available all over the place!



If you are travelling with me **you are welcome to make as many calls to the US using my cell phone FREE OF CHARGE !**

Photography....

.....of course you’ll want to take photos to remember your trip ! I only mention this as I am an enthusiast. If you want good pictures:

- ✓ Make sure you have a decent camera that you are confident with *and* have used for a while at home. Ideally bring more than one camera.
- ✓ Don’t put hundreds of photos on one card – if the card becomes corrupted, you’ve lost the lot!
- ✓ If you have a mini hard disk device to copy precious photos to, bring it with you !
- ✓ Take your photos on maximum quality – you can always buy a new card but if you take a fantastic photo at low quality, it will be unprintable and probably unrepeatable (as will your language)!



Well....that’s it.....what are you waiting for ?

Rob Little

Driver / Guide

www.LetsTourEngland.com

Toll Free (USA & Canada): 800 774 3968