

lonely planet

# Great Britain



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## Destination Great Britain

What is it that makes this damp little island moored off the northwest coast of Europe such a fascinating place to explore? For starters, Britain is a land for all seasons. Summer or winter, spring or autumn, there's always something to engage your imagination, be it the summer solstice at Stonehenge or the New Year street parties in Edinburgh.

There are over 5000 years of history to engage with, from the Stone Age village of Skara Brae to the space-age domes of the Eden Project, and from the stark simplicity of a Welsh chapel to the pomp and circumstance of Buckingham Palace. There are castles and cathedrals by the score, medieval monasteries and aristocratic mansions, and a roll-call of picturesque places with endearingly odd names, such as Lydiard Tregoze and Llanfairpwllgwyngyllgogerychwyrndrobwlllantysiliogogoch.

Britain has given the world Shakespeare and soccer, the Beatles, James Bond, Monty Python and the programmable computer, not forgetting traffic lights, milky tea and the world's least scary police. These cultural contributions are celebrated in a collection of fascinating museums and art galleries that range from world-class institutions like the Tate Britain and the Victoria & Albert Museum, to delightfully dotty local curiosities – where else but Britain would you find the Pencil Museum and a dog-collar museum?

Then there's a geography textbook's worth of scenic landscapes, such as the rolling hop fields of Kent with their conical oast houses; the honeyed stone cottages and hedgerow-lined country lanes of the Cotswold hills; the soaring, silver-grey sea cliffs of Pembrokeshire, scabbed with yellow lichen; and the jagged, rock-girt peaks of the Isle of Skye.

Whatever the weather, there's a diverse menu of adventure activities to choose from, including some of Europe's best surfing, scuba-diving, sailing and hiking; plus less-strenuous pastimes such as trainspotting at York's National Railway Museum and whale-watching off Scotland's west coast.

As you travel around the region, what are the issues of the day that you'll hear Britons chatting about in the pub, at the bus stop and on the train? The national obsession with the weather has always seemed baffling to outsiders, who have often found it difficult to discern any difference between the mild winters and soggy summers. But in recent years the normally benign British weather has turned savage. Is it climate change in action? People are talking about an increase in summer storms and torrential downpours, and how 2007 saw the wettest summer, and 2008 the dullest August, since records began. There have been tornadoes in London and Birmingham, and many parts of the country, notably Yorkshire, Lincolnshire, Gloucestershire and south Wales, have suffered devastating flooding. Instead of looking forward to the summer sun, many now fear the summer floods.

Napoleon famously described Britain as a nation of shopkeepers, but today it has

become a nation of homeowners. In the 1950s less than 40% of Britons owned their own homes; today the figure is more than 70%, and it's the ambition of many to get a foot on the property ladder as soon as they can afford it. Wherever two or more Brits are gathered together, the conversation will soon turn to the subject of house prices. Encouraged by the belief that prices can only go up, by banks offering loans for 125% of a house's value, and by TV channels clogged with 'property porn', thousands of Britons have sunk their savings into bricks and mortar.

But at the time of going to press, Britain was under a cloud in more ways than one, with recession looming on the horizon. The global credit crunch that began in late 2007 has seen interest rates rise, mortgages dry up and house prices tumble – possibly by as much as 30% by 2010. Those who bought into the get-rich-quick, property-owning dream in the last few years are feeling the clammy grip of negative equity, and tens of thousands of homes are being repossessed.

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## **FAST FACTS**

Population: 59 million

Area: 88,500 sq miles (230,000 sq km)

Inflation: 5.2% (October 2008)

Unemployment: 5.7% (August 2008)

Head of State: Queen Elizabeth II

Per capita GNP: approximately £23,500 (US\$41,000)

Average annual rainfall in southeast England: 550mm

Average annual rainfall in northwest Highlands: 3000mm

Male life expectancy (posh part of Glasgow): 82

Male life expectancy (poor part of Glasgow): 54

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The economic crisis has seen a backlash against the investment bankers, chief executives and hedge fund managers whose actions are seen by many as the cause of the credit crunch – ordinary people suffer while the 'fat cats' walk away with millions in their pockets. Financially speaking, Britain today is one of the most unequal societies in the developed world. Back in 1970 the average chief executive of a FTSE 100 company was paid around 10 times the earnings of the average employee; today

that multiple is well over 100 times, and the wealthiest 10% of the population get 40% of the income. The popular mood is now in favour of increased regulation of the financial sector.

Britain's unexpected success in the 2008 Olympics – taking fourth place in the medal table with 19 gold (the Paralympic team came in second place overall, with 42 gold) – prompted a surge of interest in cycling, rowing and sailing, and increased expectations for the London Olympics in 2012. The London Games will ensure the arrival of large numbers of overseas visitors (and their money), a raised profile for British tourism, new housing and sports facilities for the capital, plus increased fitness and improved health for the entire nation. Or so say supporters. Detractors claim that the billions of pounds being spent are unlikely to be recouped, and local groups protest that a nature reserve, garden allotments and even popular sports venues are being bulldozed to make way for the Olympic Park.

But before the Olympics take place, one of the government's most controversial policies will grind into action. In 2009 the government will begin issuing biometric ID cards to British citizens. Supporters claim the cards will help combat crime and illegal immigration, and will make it easier to prove your identity to banks, the police and government agencies. Anti-ID card campaigners say the policy is an infringement of personal privacy and civil liberties, and that the unified database underlying the scheme is an IT disaster waiting to happen. Whatever the outcome, Britain is already one of the most spied-upon societies in the world, with 4.2 million CCTV surveillance cameras – about one for every 15 people. Something to think about as you travel around the country – Big Brother is watching you!

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# Getting Started

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Here's a handy slogan to remember while you're planning your trip: travel in Britain is a breeze. Granted, it may not be totally effortless, but it's easy compared with many parts of the world. In this compact landscape you're never far from the next town, the next pub, the next national park or the next impressive castle on your hit list of highlights.

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## WHEN TO GO

Any visitor to Britain will soon understand the locals' obsession with the weather. Extremes of hot or cold are rare, but variability is a given. The key word is *changeable*: the weather can be bad one minute, great the next. It wouldn't be unusual in April, for example, for the morning to be warm enough for T-shirts, lunchtime to be cloudy, the afternoon see a downpour and drop in temperature, and the day polished off by an overnight dump of snow.

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For more weather facts and figures, see Climate Charts, [Click here](#).

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Despite apparent randomness, there is a seasonal pattern. Temperatures are higher in summer (June to August), and there's normally more sunshine, though July and August, along with the winter months, are often the rainiest months of the year. Conversely, winter (November to February) may enjoy fantastic clear spells between bouts of rain or snow, while spring (March to May) or autumn (September to October) can often produce the finest weather of the year. There are also north-south variations: southern England might be chilly, while northern Scotland enjoys a heatwave. Or vice versa. Be prepared for anything and you won't get a surprise.

With all that in mind, May to September is undoubtedly the best period to travel in Britain. July and August are busiest (it's school holiday time), especially in coastal towns, national parks, and historic cities like Oxford, Edinburgh and York. In April and October you take a chance on the weather but avoid the crowds, although some hotels and attractions close from mid-October to Easter, and tourist offices have limited hours.

Overall, the least hospitable months for visitors are November to February. It's cold in the south, very cold in the north, and daylight is short. In Scotland, north Wales and the hills of northern England, roads can sometimes be closed by snow. Reaching the islands off the Scottish mainland (and occasionally other parts of Britain) can also be a problem as high winds disrupt ferry services.

For winter visits, London and the big cities are an exception – they're busy all the time, with such a lot to see that the weather is immaterial. Besides, you're almost as likely to have a damp day in June as you are in January...

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## COSTS & MONEY

If you're a global traveller, whatever your budget you'll know that Britain is expensive compared with many other countries. But don't let that put you off. If funds are tight you'll still have a great trip with some forward planning, a bit of shopping around and a modicum of common sense. A lot of stuff is cheap or good value, and some is completely free. The following gives some guidelines; for more details see the [Directory](#) and [Transport](#) chapters.

For midrange travellers, basic hotels cost around £50 to £120 for a double room, except in London, where doubles in midrange hotels start at around £80, and around £150 in London gets you something pretty decent for the night, although you could easily spend more. When it comes to eating, a decent three-course meal with wine in a smart restaurant will set you back about £25 to £35 per person. In London this jumps to about £60, although if you choose carefully you can still get a great meal (with a glass or two of wine) for around £30. Of course, you can go wild at somewhere outrageously posh or trendy, and not get much change from £150.

Backpackers on a tight budget need £36 a day for bare survival in London, with dorm beds from £18, basic sustenance £12, and transport around £6 unless you prefer to hoof it.

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### HOW MUCH?

See also the Lonely Planet Index, inside front cover.

B&B £25 per person

CD £12

The *Guardian* (newspaper) 80p

Restaurant meal £25 per person

Large latte £2.30

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Whatever your bracket, extras in London might include clubbing (£6 to £12, up to £25 at weekends), a pint in a pub (£2.80 to £3.50) or admission to museums and galleries (£10 to £20 a day, though many places don't charge).

Out of London, costs drop; shoestringers need around £30 per day for hostels and food. Midrangers will be fine on £60 to £85 per day, allowing £25 to £35 per person for B&B accommodation, £12 to £18 for lunch, snacks and drinks, £15 to £25 for an evening meal. Admission fees are the same for everyone – work on around £10 per day for general admission costs.

Travel costs depend on transport choice. Trains can cost anything from £10 to £50 per 100 miles, depending when you buy your ticket. Long-distance buses (called coaches in Britain) cost about half the train fare for an equivalent journey. Car drivers should allow £12 per 100 miles for fuel, plus around £5 per day for parking. Rental costs £25 to £60 per day, depending on model and duration.

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## TRAVELLING RESPONSIBLY

Britons share their compact and increasingly crowded island with around 33 million cars, vans, buses and lorries – that’s more than one vehicle for every two people. Traffic congestion and carbon emissions are serious problems that are only now beginning to be tackled head-on.

In the past, the government’s response to overcrowded roads has been to build more of them; today, politicians have been forced to look at other approaches. While London has its congestion charge, Sustrans ([www.sustrans.org.uk](http://www.sustrans.org.uk)) – a group focused on sustainable transport – is busy creating a national network of cycle routes; and [Worcester](#), [Peterborough](#) and [Darlington](#) have been chosen as showcase sustainable transport towns, with government-funded projects to promote cycling, walking and public transport as realistic alternatives to car use.

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### COSTS FOR KIDS

Taking your children into museums and historic sites can be absolutely free, half-price, or just a bit cheaper than the adult cost, so we’ve detailed kids’ rates (as well as adult prices) throughout this book. At camp sites and self-catering hostels, children usually pay about 50% to 75% of the adult rate. At hotels, children aged between two and 12 years old usually get 50% to 75% discount. Kids under two usually stay free of charge, while over-12s (or over-16s at some places) attract the full rate, on the assumption that growing children need a bed and will probably eat as much as their parents.

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Although a car can be useful in some parts of the country, notably the Scottish Highlands, if you don’t want to contribute to – or get caught up in – British gridlock, then think about using public transport rather than hiring a car. And think twice before taking a domestic flight within Britain – remember it’s a relatively small geographical area. Taking the London to Edinburgh route as an example, if you add on travel time from the city centre to the airport (one hour in London, 15 minutes in Edinburgh), and check-in time (say one hour, minimum) to the flight time (one hour), then the 4½-hour train journey actually looks pretty good (and you don’t have to queue for check-in and security, either).

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### DON’T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

Travel in Britain is not like crossing the Sahara or exploring the Amazon. Anything can be bought as you go. Our advice is to take only what you absolutely need, which may include the following:

- rain jacket
  - comfortable shoes
  - small day-pack (for carrying that rain jacket when the sun shines)
  - a taste for beer that isn't icy cold
  - listening skills and a sense of humour
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## READING UP

There's nothing like a good book to set the mood for your own trip. The choice of books about Britain can be daunting, so here's a list of our favourites to add an extra dimension to your planning or help you penetrate that famous British reserve a little while you're on the road.

- *Notes from a Small Island* by Bill Bryson, although based on travels in the 1970s, is still incisive. This American author really captures the spirit of Britain three-and-a-half decades ago. When he pokes fun he's spot on, so the locals don't mind.
- *The English: A Portrait of a People* by Jeremy Paxman examines the evolution of English national identity in recent years, through the sharp and often cynical eyes of Britain's favourite blunt Yorkshireman and TV news presenter.
- *Coasting* by Jonathan Raban records a journey around Britain in an old sailing yacht, and is a brilliant and very readable meditation on the people and culture of this island nation.
- *London: The Biography* by Peter Ackroyd is the definitive description of Britain's biggest city as a living, breathing organism.
- *The Thistle and the Rose: Six Centuries of Love and Hate Between the Scots and the English*, by Allan Massie, takes a historical perspective on the often stormy relationship between Britain's two largest countries.
- *Adrift in Caledonia* by Nick Thorpe is an entertaining and insightful tale of travelling around Scotland by hitching rides on a variety of vessels, from canal barge and rowing boat to steam puffer and square-rigged sailing ship.
- *On Borrow's Trail* by Hugh Oliff retraces the journeys through Wales made by 19th-century writer George Borrow, combining a rich synopsis of the original observations with modern photos and colour illustrations.
- *Two Degrees West* by Nicholas Crane describes a walk in a perfectly straight line (two degrees west of the Greenwich meridian) across Britain, wading rivers, cutting through towns, sleeping in fields and meeting an astounding selection of people along the way.
- *Great British Bus Journeys* by David McKie is a wry and witty travelogue showing that 'unknown' towns and villages can be just as fascinating as tourist hot spots.

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## TOP 10



## MUST-SEE MOVIES

Predeparture planning is no chore if it includes a trip to the cinema or a night on the sofa with a DVD. Our parameters for a 'British' film? Anything about Britain. Anything that gives a taste of history, scenery or peculiar cultural traits. For more info on some of these and other titles, [Click here](#).

1. *Brief Encounter* (1945) Director: David Lean
2. *Whisky Galore* (1949) Director: Alexander Mackendrick
3. *Under Milk Wood* (1972) Director: Andrew Sinclair
4. *Educating Rita* (1983) Director: Lewis Gilbert
5. *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985) Director: Stephen Frears
6. *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994) Director: Mike Newell
7. *Trainspotting* (1996) Director: Danny Boyle
8. *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002) Director: Gurinder Chadha
9. *Atonement* (2007) Director: Joe Wright
10. *Hot Fuzz* (2007) Director: Edgar Wright

## RAVE READS

Travel broadens the mind. Especially if you read before you go. For a taste of life in Britain through the ages, try a few of these novels – from past classics to contemporary milestones. For more details on some of these (and other great books), [Click here](#).

1. *Oliver Twist* (1837) Charles Dickens
2. *Wuthering Heights* (1847) Emily Brontë
3. *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891) Thomas Hardy
4. *The Rainbow* (1915) DH Lawrence
5. *How Green Was My Valley* (1939) Richard Llewellyn
6. *Greenvoe* (1972) George Mackay Brown
7. *Behind the Scenes at the Museum* (1995) Kate Atkinson
8. *Last Orders* (1996) Graham Swift
9. *White Teeth* (2000) Zadie Smith
10. *The Falls* (2003) Ian Rankin

## TOP OF THE POPS

British popular music is probably the most popular in the world. Britain has produced hundreds of internationally famous bands and artists from the Beatles and the Rolling Stones to the Kaiser Chiefs and the Arctic Monkeys. Here's a lucky dip of typically British chart-topping pop and rock from 1960 onward.

1. *You Don't Have to Say You Love Me* by Dusty Springfield (1966)

2. *Honky Tonk Women* by the Rolling Stones (1969)
  3. *Won't Get Fooled Again* by The Who (1971)
  4. *Anarchy in the UK* by the Sex Pistols (1976)
  5. *Love Will Tear Us Apart* by Joy Division (1980)
  6. *House of Fun* by Madness (1982)
  7. *Wonderwall* by Oasis (1995)
  8. *Wannabe* by the Spice Girls (1996)
  9. *If You Tolerate This Your Children Will Be Next* by the Manic Street Preachers (2000)
  10. *The Dark of the Matinee* by Franz Ferdinand (2004)
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## INTERNET RESOURCES

The internet is a wonderful planning tool for travellers, and there are millions of sites about Britain. Before plunging into the cybermaze, try these for starters:

- **A Nice Cup of Tea...** ([www.nicecupofteaandasaditdown.com](http://www.nicecupofteaandasaditdown.com)) Light-hearted look at a quintessentially British pastime.
- **Backpax Magazine** ([www.backpaxmag.com](http://www.backpaxmag.com)) Cheerful info on cheap travel, visas, activities and work.
- **BAFA** (British Arts Festivals Association; [www.artsfestivals.co.uk](http://www.artsfestivals.co.uk)) Listing over 100 festivals around Britain: opera, theatre, literature, comedy, classical, folk, jazz and more.
- **BBC** ([www.bbc.co.uk](http://www.bbc.co.uk)) Immense and invaluable site from the world's best broadcaster.
- **DirectGov** ([www.direct.gov.uk/en/DisabledPeople](http://www.direct.gov.uk/en/DisabledPeople)) Information and advice for travellers with disabilities, including interactive map showing wheelchair-accessible toilets, parking etc in 100 towns around Britain.
- **eFestivals** ([www.efestivals.co.uk](http://www.efestivals.co.uk)) News, confirmed (and rumoured) artists, tickets and updates from the lively world of rock, pop, dance and world music gatherings.
- **Lonely Planet** ([www.lonelyplanet.com](http://www.lonelyplanet.com)) Loads of travel news, features, accommodation reviews, and the legendary Thorn Tree bulletin board.
- **UK Student Life** ([www.ukstudentlife.com](http://www.ukstudentlife.com)) Language courses, and where to go outside study time.
- **Visit Britain** ([www.visitbritain.com](http://www.visitbritain.com)) The nation's official tourism website; accommodation, attractions, events and much more.

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# Events Calendar

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Countless festivals and events are held around the country throughout the year. Below is a selection of biggies that are worth tying in with your travels, and some of the smaller – and, frankly, more bizarre – events that are also worth catching. In addition, many towns have annual fairs or fêtes; many of these are listed in the regional chapters.

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# JANUARY

**UP HELLY AA** last Tue of Jan

[Shetland Islanders](#) honour their Nordic heritage by dressing up as Vikings and burning a longship.

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## **FEBRUARY**

### **JORVIK VIKING FESTIVAL mid-Feb**

Horned helmets galore, plus mock invaders and Viking longship races in [York](#).

### **SHROVETIDE FOOTBALL Shrove Tue**

It's football, Jim, but not as we know it: day-long match, 3-mile pitch, hundreds of players, very few rules. [Click here](#) for details.

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## **MARCH**

### **CRUFTS DOG SHOW    early/mid-Mar**

Highlight of the canine year. Top dogs abound in Birmingham. [Click here](#) for details.

### **UNIVERSITY BOAT RACE    late Mar/early Apr**

Traditional rowing contest [Click here](#) on the River Thames, between the teams of Oxford and Cambridge Universities.

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