

United Kingdom: Customs & Etiquette

The United Kingdom is a land of contrasts, largely due to its rich and complex history, and the individual cultures of its four constituent 'home nations' of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and even then customs tend to differ depending which part of the four home nations you are in. It is important to realise that the UK is a proud country and its people are proud to be proud. However, 'Brits' are very tolerant and not usually offended easily.

Talking

If you are travelling on the London Underground, it isn't usually customary to talk loudly or hold large conversations. It will not cause offence, but it will make you stand out from the locals. On other public transportation, quiet conversation usually takes place and if you want to, you can try to strike up a chat with people you're sitting near, to get recommendations on things to do, places to eat and the like, though a newspaper being read or an MP3 player being listened to are signs that someone doesn't want to be talked to (these are British anti-socialising defence mechanisms). If you are in some cities talking is much more common. In Glasgow, whilst sitting on a bus, you might have a local ask you something or at least comment on the weather - and it would be rude to ignore them.

If you are asked by a tour guide to be quiet when entering a building, it is best to observe this. Whether it be a church, an official building or a castle, it is best to observe these customs as you may be asked to leave if you don't.

Language

The UK is very multi-cultural so you will hear very many different languages, especially in the cities. In London, you can probably find every language in the world spoken at some point.

Given its relatively small size, accents vary a lot across the UK, with different accents spoken by the locals in different areas. Each city has its own accent. To the untrained ear these can sometimes be difficult to understand (even people within the UK can struggle with accents from some areas). If you haven't understood what somebody has said, just ask them to repeat it, but more slowly. In Wales there is a strong movement for use of the Welsh language, to the extent that place names, road signs, etc have both the English and Welsh versions under each other.

Whilst Welsh people may use the language amongst themselves, communication with others will always be in English.

In some places, you may hear bad language in the streets or in pubs. Depending on the situation, you can go have a quiet word with one of the party concerned and gently ask if they could tone down their language. Mostly, this will not cause offence, but judge the situation carefully, either let it wash over you, or move on. If you're in a pub and don't feel confident, speak with a member of the bar staff who will usually go over and get the offending persons to calm down. If you're with children, make sure you point this out, the language will usually subside and you may get an apology.

Racist and phobic language, in general, is not appreciated and will receive a stern rebuke. Harrassment and hate crime, including verbal abuse, is taken seriously by police.

Culture

The culture is quite varied across the UK. All major cities have theatres, music halls and museums to visit. Most other areas will have something on offer too; whether it's a rural show, well-dressing (yes, they actually dress wells) or a community hall dance. To get a real flavour of the people, visiting a pub is essential, as it is the social heart of most communities in the UK, though judge carefully!

Some establishments in suburban areas can be a bit 'locals only' and have very rudimentary facilities, but, in general, you should be fine in the centre (downtown) of main cities, around popular venues, tourist locations and in most rural pubs. If you are in doubt, ask around for recommendations.

Some "taboos"

Whilst not strictly taboo, it is best to avoid certain topics of conversation amongst any new acquaintances, as they can evoke strong and occasionally unpleasant reactions:

- Politics and religion, especially whilst in Northern Ireland
- Fox hunting, in rural and nonrural areas

Generally, people do not talk about their income and are probably not interested in yours.

The English are far more modest than some cultures (eg Americans) and tend not to talk about their achievements, and if they do it is often said quietly.

Tipping

This is entirely voluntary in the UK and people DO NOT expect tips, but like everywhere they are grateful if given one. As a rough guide: Taxi driver - 10% or round up the fare (if it £9.40 give £10); Hotel porter - £1 pound a bag; hotel chambermaid - less common, but some people leave £1.00 a day; Restaurants - if you are happy with the service no more than 10% . If paying cash then it is common to leave any change on the table but no one will bat an eye lid if you chose not to tip. It has become common in many restaurants for them to automatically add 10% or 12.5% to the bill - this is optional and you do not have to pay it. It is therefore worth checking the bill first (you may also want to ask your waiter/ress whether they get the money). It is sometimes better to leave cash rather than use your Credit Card for a tip as that way you can be sure your server gets the money. All staff should be on the statutory minimum wage and tips should be paid on top of this.

But what is the country called?

Another pointer is that although the UK is internationally recognised as a single country, the inhabitants of each of the four 'home nations' tend to be very conscious of their individual nationalities. Scots and Welsh people generally get irritated when foreigners (even the English themselves!) refer to the entire UK as 'England'. This is held to be a particular sin of some Americans and doing so will immediately mark you out as an ignorant tourist of the worst kind.

The relationship between terms like '[Great] Britain' and 'The UK' and so on can be bewildering, especially for visitors but even for locals, and these two terms are generally used interchangeably, even though they're not *technically* the same thing. For a full explanation of the terminology, check out [this Wikipedia article](#) (though it may just confuse you even more!) Very briefly - the large island on which England, Scotland and Wales sit are called '**Great Britain**', which is why the political entity which flies the 'Union Jack' (Union Flag) is '**The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland**' (Northern Ireland is on the island of Ireland, not the island of Great Britain).