London Travel Notes

PLAN LONDON LIKE YOU'VE BEEN BEFORE

FREE GUIDE

BEFORE YOU GO & ON THE GROUND

London Essentials Guide

Entry rules, money, weather, safety, opening hours, what to book ahead and the unwritten rules: everything first-time visitors wish they'd known.



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Everything you need to know before London

The practical side of a London trip, in one place. Read it once before you travel and you'll avoid the small mistakes that cost first-time visitors time and money.

CURRENCY	PLUGS	EMERGENCY	NON-URGENT MEDICAL
Pound sterling (£, GBP)	Type G, 230V	999 (or 112)	NHS 111

1. Entry: the UK ETA — Do this first
2. Money, cards & tipping — Cashless London
3. Weather & what to pack — Season by season
4. Opening hours & booking ahead — Avoid disappointment
5. Free London — The best things cost nothing
6. Staying safe & healthy — Simple precautions
7. Local etiquette — Pubs, queues & escalators
8. Pre-trip checklist — Tick it off

PART 1

Entry: the UK Electronic Travel Authorisation (ETA)

Since **25 February 2026**, visitors who don't need a visa (including travellers from the EU, the US, Canada and Australia) must have an **ETA** before they travel to the UK. Without one, your airline, ferry or train operator will refuse to let you board.

COST	VALID FOR	APPLY VIA
£20 per person (since 8 April 2026)	**2 years, or until your passport expires**	**The official "UK ETA" app or GOV.UK**

- Every traveller needs their own ETA, **including children and babies**.
- Apply at least **3 working days** before you travel. Many decisions come much faster.
- Use only the official app or GOV.UK. Third-party websites charge extra fees.
- British and Irish passport holders don't need one.
- Travellers transiting through UK passport control also need one.

> ♛ **GUIDE GUARD'S NOTE**
>
> Apply for your ETA when you book your flights, not the week before. It costs the same, it's valid for two years, and it removes one last-minute worry. Entry rules can change, so always check GOV.UK for the latest requirements for your nationality.

PART 2

Money, cards & tipping

London is one of the most cashless cities in the world. Contactless cards and phone payments are accepted almost everywhere, from buses (which don't take cash at all) to market stalls. Carry a little cash for emergencies, but you may not use it.

Cards

- Visa and Mastercard work everywhere. Amex works in most places.
- When asked, always pay in **pounds, not your home currency**. It's almost always cheaper.
- Check your bank's foreign transaction fees before you go.

Prices

- VAT (sales tax) is **already included** in shop prices.
- Hotel prices may or may not include breakfast, so check.
- Many museums are free, but special exhibitions charge.

Tipping guide

WHERE	WHAT'S NORMAL
Restaurants (table service)	10–12.5%. Check the bill first: a "discretionary service charge" is often already added.
Pubs & bars (ordering at the bar)	No tip expected
Cafés & takeaways	Optional; round up or use the tip jar
Taxis & black cabs	Round up, or about 10%
Hotel porters & housekeeping	Optional, £1–£2 a bag or a few pounds for the stay

PART 3

Weather & what to pack

London's weather is mild but changeable. Rain is rarely heavy but often comes and goes, so dress in layers whatever the season.

SEASON	WHAT TO EXPECT	PACK
Spring (Mar–May)	Cool to mild, blossom in the parks, showers	Light jacket, layers, umbrella
Summer (Jun–Aug)	Warm, long days (light until about 21:00), busiest season	Light clothes, a jumper for evenings, sun cream
Autumn (Sep–Nov)	Mild then cool, golden parks, fewer crowds	Waterproof jacket, warm layer
Winter (Dec–Feb)	Cold and damp rather than snowy; dark by about 16:00; Christmas lights	Warm coat, scarf, waterproof shoes

Don't forget

- [ ] UK plug adapter (Type G, three rectangular pins)
- [ ] Comfortable, waterproof walking shoes
- [ ] A compact umbrella or hooded rain jacket
- [ ] A reusable water bottle
- [ ] A power bank (maps and payments use a lot of battery)

♛ GUIDE GUARD'S NOTE

Many older buildings, Tube carriages and museums get warm inside even in winter. Wear layers you can take off, not one heavy jumper.

PART 4

Opening hours & booking ahead

PLACE	TYPICAL HOURS
Museums & galleries	About 10:00–17:30, with late openings on some Fridays
Shops (Mon–Sat)	About 10:00–19:00; later on Oxford Street and in the West End
Shops (Sunday)	Large shops open for 6 hours, usually about 12:00–18:00
Pubs	Usually until 23:00, later on weekends; food often stops around 21:00–22:00
Restaurants	Lunch about 12:00–15:00, dinner from 17:30; book at weekends

Book before you travel

- [ ] **West End shows:** best seats and prices sell first
- [ ] **Tower of London & Westminster Abbey:** timed tickets; online is usually cheaper
- [ ] **Sky Garden:** free, but tickets are released in advance and go quickly
- [ ] **London Eye:** choose a time slot; sunset slots are popular
- [ ] **Popular restaurants:** especially on Friday and Saturday nights
- [ ] **Afternoon tea:** the famous hotels book up weeks ahead

> ♛ **GUIDE GUARD'S NOTE**
>
> Public holidays ("bank holidays"), Christmas Day and Boxing Day change opening times a lot. Many attractions close on 24–26 December, and on Christmas Day the Tube and buses don't run at all.

PART 5

Free London

Some of London's best experiences cost nothing at all.

Free museums & galleries

- British Museum
- National Gallery & National Portrait Gallery
- Tate Modern & Tate Britain
- Natural History Museum, V&A, Science Museum
- National Maritime Museum, Greenwich
- The Wallace Collection

Special exhibitions are usually ticketed. A donation is welcome.

Free views, walks & sights

- Sky Garden (book ahead)
- Primrose Hill and Greenwich Park viewpoints
- The South Bank and Thames Path
- The Royal Parks: Hyde, St James's, Regent's, Green Park
- Changing of the Guard (check the schedule)
- Markets: Borough, Camden, Portobello, Columbia Road

PART 6

Staying safe & healthy

London is generally safe for visitors. A few simple habits help:

- **Watch for pickpockets** in crowded places: Oxford Street, the Tube at rush hour, Covent Garden, and around big sights.
- Keep your phone in your hand and away from the kerb. Phone snatching from bikes and e-scooters happens in busy areas.
- Only use **licensed black cabs** or pre-booked minicabs and ride apps. Never get into an unbooked minicab offered on the street.
- Be careful when crossing roads: traffic drives on the **left**. Read the "Look right" and "Look left" markings on the road.

SITUATION	WHAT TO DO
Emergency (police, fire, ambulance)	Call **999** (112 also works)
Urgent but not life-threatening medical help	Call **NHS 111** or use 111.nhs.uk
Minor illness	Pharmacies can advise and sell many medicines
Lost property on public transport	Contact TfL Lost Property
Lost passport	Contact your embassy or consulate in London

GUIDE GUARD'S NOTE

Make sure you have travel insurance with medical cover. Visitors may have to pay for NHS hospital treatment.

PART 7

Local etiquette

In the pub

- Order and pay **at the bar**. There's usually no table service.
- Pay for each round as you order.
- Buying "rounds" for your group is a friendly tradition.
- Many pubs serve good food. A Sunday roast is a must.

Out and about

- **Queue** politely. Queue-jumping is the ultimate faux pas.
- **Stand on the right** on escalators.
- Say "sorry" and "cheers" often, and you'll fit right in.
- Keep your voice down on the Tube.

A little London vocabulary

YOU'LL HEAR	IT MEANS
Cheers	Thanks (and goodbye, and of course a toast)
The Tube / the Underground	The metro
Loo	Toilet
Quid	Pound(s)
Mind the gap	Watch the space between the train and the platform
Takeaway	Food to go

PART 8

Your pre-trip checklist

- [ ] Passport valid for the whole trip
- [ ] UK ETA approved (or visa, if you need one)
- [ ] Travel insurance with medical cover
- [ ] Bank card checked for contactless and foreign fees
- [ ] Phone plan or eSIM for UK data
- [ ] Airport transfer chosen (see *Transport Made Easy*)
- [ ] Key attractions, shows and restaurants booked
- [ ] UK plug adapter packed
- [ ] Comfortable shoes and a rain layer packed
- [ ] TfL Go or Citymapper downloaded
- [ ] Offline maps saved
- [ ] Your hotel's nearest Tube station saved

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Entry rules, prices and opening hours change. Always check official sources such as GOV.UK, tfl.gov.uk and attraction websites. Information was checked in November 2026. London Travel Notes is an independent guide.