

# London: General Tips and Advice

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# 1 Travel and Transport

## 1.1 Flying, Airports, International Travel

London has a bunch of airports (at least 3-4 that you'll use frequently). They vary by size, destination, and servicing airlines. Some things to keep in mind:

- Each airport will have a train link that goes to a different station in central London—e.g. Heathrow leads to Paddington Station, Luton to Liverpool Station, and Gatwick to Victoria.
- The rail links may be express links (only airport to station), local rail (stops along the way), or even Tube connections (like Paddington). Oftentimes, there will be a mix of these with buses too. So check prices and see which you prefer.
- For your first time in, a private car might be good with a lot of luggage and since you won't be as familiar with the transport.

## 1.2 Traveling within London

Three main ways of transport: the Tube (or Underground), bus, cab. Avoid cab when possible, using it only as a last resort. Here's some of the main stuff:

### 1.2.1 Oyster Card

An extra 5 pounds or so, but 100% worth it. Here's some features.

- Like NYC's MetroCard. Preload an amount onto the card or buy a daily/weekly/monthly pass. (See how often you ride before you buy passes.)
- On the bus, you swipe once before you get on. On the Tube, you swipe in and out, so they can keep track of how far you traveled (i.e. if you changed zones, see below).
- If you make a certain amount of trips via bus or subway and would have been better off buying the pass but didn't, your Oyster card will automatically buy a daily pass for you, and additional trips that day cost nothing. (Don't think it works for weekly/monthly)
- You CANNOT reload at bus stops if I remember right, only in Tube stations. So make a point to do so if you plan to take the bus.

### 1.2.2 The Tube and its Zones

The zones are concentric circles around London's sprawl representing different fares. If you change zones during the course of your Tube ride, they deduct more. You will mostly stay within Zone 1 (Central London). Camden might be the only time you venture into a different zone.

### 1.2.3 Local vs. Express on the Tube

Most lines have express trains and local trains running on the same tracks. Look for that on the train's front and side and take care if your stop is a local stop only. For your (what looked like) fairly lengthy trips from home to class or work, express vs. local will make a big time difference, especially during rush hour. So get a practice run or two in before you start.

### 1.2.4 The Tube vs. The Bus

Unless you have a really long trip, take the bus. A few reasons:

1. The subway has a lot of walking underground, especially for some transfers. Adding in the time to takes for the Tube train to arrive, the bus will be better for short trips.
2. Since a lot of bus routes cover the same tracks in Central London (only splitting off later, outside the center), buses will come more often.
3. So if you're simply going straight down a main thoroughfare or if you're traveling within a neighborhood or two, the bus will likely be quicker.
4. Sit on the second deck. This is a great way to see London and it's much, much better than scurrying around underground.

### 1.2.5 Bus Maps

The bus maps when you first see them are super confusing, took me a bit to figure them out. So check out <http://www.runcheaptravel.com/?p=33> for a site which explains everything how to read them. It's worth it. Now here's some important stuff:

- The main thing to understand is that there are general locations where a ton of different buses for different routes stop, like "Liverpool Street" or "Trafalgar Square." But these are huge, busy locations. So at these general locations there are individual stops for particular routes (since they don't want 20 bus routes to try to load people at a single stop).
- So to get from A to B via bus, you go roughly to A, find a map that shows the individual route stops/pickups and dropoffs within a minute or two walk from A. You then take the bus to one of the many stops for roughly location B.
- *Heritage Lines*: A few lines (the 9 and 15 being two examples) run old buses along them. These lines are typically major lines that you would take anyway. The old buses are the early and iconic double-deckers. Very cool, and worth waiting for at least once.

### 1.2.6 Night Bus

The tube shuts down at midnight, which is a real bummer. From there, you have two options: Cab or the Night Bus. Night buses don't stop as many places as regular buses and they don't come as often, but they hit all the major spots. Check the charts at the stops to get more info.

## 2 General Food Tips

Aside from specific food places that I'll give you, here's some general tips:

1. **Yelp:** In addition to the places below, use Yelp extensively to find good places.
2. If you're going out to dinner, never eat in the same place twice. There's so many food options, try as much as you can.
3. If you recognize a restaurant, chain, or brand from the US, AVOID IT. It will almost certainly be overpriced and crappier than what you'd get here. Plus, it's no fun.
4. *Eating Cheap:* Try the student union building. Also, go to Tesco's and Sainsbury's for their 3 pound lunch specials where you get a sandwich, chips, and drink.
5. *Coffee:* If you're a coffee drinker, local coffee shop  $\geq$  Café Nero » Starbucks. (Starbucks, like most American brands in London, is way overpriced. They swap \$ for £ without changing the numbers.)
6. *Groceries:* In decreasing order of price: Sainsbury's, Tesco, Iceland.
7. *Food markets:* If you're going to cook, go to them for fresh bread, meat, fruit, and vegetables. There's many all over town.
8. **Food Festivals:** THE BEST THING. They happen sporadically in major locations like South Bank, Hyde Park, Trafalgar Square, etc. Really keep an eye out for them. In Covent Garden, there's also food stands set up every week specializing in different cuisine.
9. *Eat Internationally:* London's one of the most international cities out there, so it has every type of food. Use that to try dishes and cuisine's you haven't had before. It's likely to be better here than most other places.

## 3 Money

Just a few things:

- Use your credit card if you can to get the best conversion rate.
- Have a debit card that onto which you can load money online (for you or your parents to do). Then go to ATMs to withdraw cash from this card. That way, it's not tied to your account (so no fraud issues) and it gives a reasonable exchange rate. I used AAA for this. They have a travel card like that.
- If you're going abroad, this system should work well too.

## 4 Walking Around

Get a map, wander, and get lost. The non-grid streets mean you'll find awesome stuff in unexpected places. Learn a few main thoroughfares and long stretches of the same street to help orient yourself. That way, if you get lost, you can find that street and find your way North, South, East or West.

## 5 Lingo, Conventions, and Blending In

1. STAND ON THE RIGHT. This is perhaps the most important thing I write. On escalators, don't stand on the lefthand side—it's for passing and walking purposes only—especially in Tube stations. People will get British-upset with you, where they mutter under their breath and get annoyed to themselves. (This differs from New York upset, where people will directly tell you about it.)
2. "Quid" means "pounds." Took me a few days to realize.
3. "Leicester" is pronounced "Lester." Any word/name with that kind of spelling is also said the same way. It's one way not to stick out as a newb.
4. If you wear a baseball cap and/or sweatpants, people will assume you are an American. Just a note if you're going somewhere that you don't want to stick out (like Southern Europe where there might be pickpockets).
5. If you see a friend or someone from the US doing something embarrassing, offensive, or stupid, the magic words are "He's from Canada."

## 6 Phones

Some places to look are Carphone Warehouse and Phones4U, which have multiple service providers for you to compare plans. Ask lots of questions about the services and plans because the employees might be pretty useless and might not be very forthcoming.

## 7 Electronics

Electronics are simple if you know the difference between converters and adapters. I didn't and fried some stuff, so hopefully I can prevent that for you.

### 7.1 Adapters

This is the simplest type of widget. All it does is change the prongs. Since the US prongs don't fit in a British or European socket, you need an adapter. You plug your us cord into the adapter then the adapter into the wall.

### 7.2 Converters

Here's where things get a bit tricky. But the good news is, for most electronics like laptops and phones, you don't need one. You just need an adapter. Anyway, here's more specifics:

1. The electricity that comes out of non-US sockets is typically 120 volts. For non-US countries, it's typically 220 or 240 volts. That means you need to convert the voltage so that you don't fry your electronics.
2. A converter will dial down the input voltage and so that you can use US power cords that don't accept 220 or 240 volts while there.
3. Note, sometimes a converter and adapter will be bundled in one, so it can get jumbled. But keep the two purposes separate in your mind.
4. Now, to determine whether you need one, pick up a laptop or phone power cord. Look at the little tape wrapped around the cord or at the really tiny lettering that talks about watts and voltage.
5. For a lot of major electronics, laptop chargers and smartphone chargers, you'll see "Input: 120-240V." That means the charger accepts *any* voltage in that range, and congrats—you *don't* need a converter, just an adapter. (Also, if your power cord doesn't need it, definitely don't run your cord through a converter. That's also bad, and I learned that the hard way before I figured out all this stuff.)
6. For some other electronics, you might just see "Input: 120V" If that's the case, you need a converter.

## 8 Studying in London

- LSE is part of the broader University of London (UL), so you have access to LSE resources, shared UL-wide resources, and resources of *any* UL member university (King's, UCL, etc.).
- The main UL stuff is up by the British Museum. Use their library for books that you don't want to buy (they have plenty) and to study. The library's gorgeous.
- Waterstones is like Barnes and Noble. If you're buying books, the Waterstones on Gower Street is the main one for UL students, it's massive, and it's quite nice.