
England / London

London has been an important centre of commerce and trade for more than 2000 years. Today it is one of the world's most popular and accessible cities with a varied and exciting cosmopolitan culture, making it the ideal place to live and visit.

With a population of 7.5 million people, London now extends over 600 square miles and is divided into 33 Boroughs. It has been the capital since William the Conqueror invaded England in 1066. Since then London has been a powerful magnet to people from all over the world.

Today's London has many interesting districts. Central London in fact consists of two cities: in the east is the City of London, the famous 'Square Mile' London's commercial and financial district; and on the west side is the City of Westminster, the political center; and which includes the "West End", the district for shopping and entertainment.

Greater London can best be understood as a conglomeration of villages each with its own special atmosphere. Even though this is one of the largest and most crowded cities in Europe, it is one of its greenest cities with a surprisingly large number of parks and garden squares.

Telephone and time difference

Access code to USA 010: USA direct 0800-89-0011 (a special AT&T service). To phone England: 44; Time difference (Eastern Daylight) plus 5 hours.

Climate

As a warm temperate climate daily temperatures average in the 70 - 80s F (about 20 - 25°C) in summer and hover around 40°F (6°C) in December, January and February. Winter is somewhat wetter than summer, with 15 to 16 rainy days as opposed to summers 12 or 13. An umbrella might come in handy. The seasons are well defined but not extreme. However, English weather is very variable and heat waves and blizzards do occur, sometimes taking people by surprise.

Museums and Sights

Most people will want to go and see the 'changing of the guards'. This colourful ceremony takes place daily at three locations from April to August (alternate days in winter) in the Buckingham Palace forecourt, at Horse Guards Parade and at Windsor Castle, incidentally one of the Queens favourite homes.

Sir Christopher Wren's 17c architectural masterpiece St. Paul's Cathedral is a 'must see' for lots of visitors; the reward for climbing the 600 steps to the top of the enormous dome is the best 360° panoramic view of London.

Another place not to be missed, is Trafalgar Square. Here the statue of Lord Nelson the hero of the battle of Trafalgar (1805) looks down on an enormous square of majestic fountains and monuments, a favorite meeting place of both tourists and Londoners alike, to sit and ponder. Among the beautiful buildings flanking this square are the National Gallery (an internationally famous Museum, housing some of the worlds greatest art masterpieces) and the 18th century church of St Martins in the Fields.

Theatre and Nightlife

London has about 50 theatres regularly putting on plays so there is no excuse for getting bored in the evenings. Reservations can usually be made by telephone. The West End Theatre Society kiosk in Leicester Square sells remaining tickets at half price on the day of performance.

Although pubs still close at 11.00 pm, London has a very lively nightlife; including night-clubs, jazz clubs and casinos. However, perhaps the best areas to go to are Covent Garden and Chelsea, especially along Kings Road and Fulham Road.

Shopping

Shops are generally open from 9 to 5.30 pm daily and 10 – 4pm on Sundays. Large department stores and some other shops open on a specific night of the week, depending on the area. Departments stores: Harrods, Brompton Rd, Knightsbridge, claims to have everything and is quite expensive.

Ridge's, Oxford St., W1., has a large collection of crystal and China.

Fortnum and Mason's; is a shop you should not miss, for all kinds of food delicacies. You may not want to buy anything, but the atmosphere in this shop should be experienced.

Excursions

City tour: Make an easy walking tour around the famous sights such as: The Houses of Parliament, Trafalgar Square, Piccadilly Circus, Hyde Parks Speakers Corner, St. Paul's Cathedral, Buckingham Palace and St. James' Park. Leaving from the 'London Eye', the tallest Ferris wheel in Europe, a boat cruise along the Thames gives an unexpected glimpse of 2000 years of London's development along the river, before disembarking at the Tower of London, built by William the Conqueror in 1066.

Windsor Castle: This castle, an hours drive from London, has been the home of the British monarchs ever since William the Conqueror took up residence there. The Round Tower and St. George's Chapel (where the knights of the garter are installed) are two of the magnets within. Afterwards, walk down the hill to visit the Victorian town of Windsor, or the nearby town of Eton dating back to medieval times and home to the famous public school.

Oxford: A 2 ½ hr drive from London is the famous university town . There is now a marked contrast between the " dreaming spires" and secluded courtyards of the colleges and the congested streets of the city, where shops and offices, businessmen and tourists abound. Being a student town, Oxford has many cheap restaurants and cafes.

Canterbury: For hundreds of years the most heavily travelled road in England was the one between London and Canterbury. This was the pilgrimage route to the shrine of Thomas à Becket as described in Chaucer's "Canterbury Tales". The Cathedral in which the bishop was murdered by the king's misguided knights is a magnificent building and, with its surrounding grounds, still the towns main attraction. The rest of the town-center is also very attractive with many small shops and monuments of religious orders.