

BRITAIN ON A BUDGET

With the dollar taking a bloody beating, *Lawrence Magazine* travel writer Susan Kraus provides a timely guide to Britain that will help you live posh and save pence

Written and photographed by Susan Kraus

Can an article title be an oxymoron?

With a 2-to-1 dollar-to-pound exchange rate—and the dollar showing no signs of a quick rebound—most vacationers are looking beyond America's favorite foreign travel destination or staying home. For Britain-bound tourists, that's the downside.

But the upside is that Britain is still doable. You may have to pass on high tea at the Ritz Palm Court or a shopping spree at Harrods, but by practicing due diligence and following some of these tips, you can have a vacation to remember.

BOOK A PACKAGE (AT LEAST FOR LONDON)

I was tempted to write "Avoid London" as the first budget tip, but that felt like cheating. The challenge is how to make London affordable, starting with airfare and lodging. Booking in advance and with dollars may cut down on the "let's-just-wing-it" spirit of adventure, but it will save big. Fly on a Tuesday, Wednesday or Thursday (always cheaper than the weekend). Compare costs for airfare alone to airfare-with-hotel, especially packages offered by airlines. For example, as I am writing this article, Virgin Atlantic (one of my favorite trans-Atlantic lines) lists high season (July-August) round-trip flights for \$1,022 from Chicago to London. But the cost of its flight plus hotel package for three nights is \$1,089. Virgin will extend your return flight to whatever day you wish, so you can head for the countryside for another week or two at no extra flight charge.

The biggest way to stretch the dollars for London? Don't go in high season. Go in September or October and enjoy flights for \$743, with the same three-night London air-hotel packages from \$799 and six nights at \$939. And, as any Brit will tell you, those are the best months anyway.

Britain's Lake District still presents enchanting sights and a relatively affordable vacation, especially if travelers fly into the Manchester airport instead of taking a more expensive London-bound flight.

(Below) Of course you can splurge for High Tea, but you can also enjoy affordable delights such as "Mr. Sandwich" sandwich shop where the locals purchase custom-made lunches and converse with Mr. Sandwich himself.



Quaint British B&Bs surrounded by rolling hills and pastoral scenes can still be found—but save money and headaches by shopping around carefully on the internet before making your reservation.



DO THE FREEBIES FIRST!

Pick up a copy of *Time Out London* when you arrive and look for "freebies" under the listings. Many of the London museums and art galleries are free: the British Museum, National Gallery, Tate, Tate Modern, Science Museum, Imperial War Museum, Victoria and Albert Museum, Natural History Museum and more. Westminster Abbey has an entry fee, but not for Evensong services, where I heard the Westminster Choir in a free concert. Many museums that do charge admission have free days or times.

Every weekend, there are free concerts and street entertainments. Covent Garden has a kaleidoscope of jugglers, magicians, musicians and humor. Grab a picnic from Marks and Spencer (wraps for £2.50, chips 55 pence, a Shortcrust Bramley apple pie for £2.19) and spend Sunday morning at Speaker's Corner of Hyde Park. It's unique, interactive and entertaining. Once you do everything that is free, it could be time to come home.

MOVE AROUND WISELY

In London, get a tourist travel pass for as many days as you will be there (they are sold for periods of one, three or seven days) for less than £7 a day. This pass is good for the underground lines, bus system and light rail and covers the Tube to and from Heathrow Airport.

For moving throughout Britain, check out BritRail passes, which must be purchased direct from BritRail while still in the U.S. (Allow time for delivery—no last-minute decisions on this one.) A Flexipass is good for four days (\$329) or eight days (\$479) of nonsequential travel days over two months. (For example, go from London to northern Scotland in one day, then take three separate days to make your way south again with long stops and day trips between.) With a family pass, one child under 15 is free with each paid adult. So a family of four can travel on two adult passes. If you stay in England, there is an even cheaper Flexipass. Go to www.britrail.com and read about all options before making the decision that is best for you.

HIT THE PUBS

Most high-end restaurants do not serve traditional British dishes but rather continental or fusion cuisine. It can be excellent, but you can eat for three days on what you'll pay for one meal. I think everyone who travels to England should taste the traditional staples, best done in a pub at midday when prices are lower. Try bangers and mash, shepherds pie, fish and chips, Cornish pasties, bubble and squeak, toad in a hole, crumpets, scones and clotted cream, and sticky toffee pudding. Many pubs have a Sunday fixed-price meal like a roast with mashed potatoes, Yorkshire pudding and mushy peas. (You don't have to finish the peas—just taste them to understand why so many Brits purse their lips.)

Once you've done your pub time, you can move on to the "hot" British food: ethnic. In the last 40 years, Britain has become a nation of immigrants. Go where the locals go: the curry shops, the pasta bistros, the Turkish "take-away" chickens. London is especially rich with ethnic neighborhoods, and every neighborhood has delightful, inexpensive cafes. Never been to Bangladesh? Here's your chance to experiment with that nation's cuisine. Don't be afraid to explore. Budget the equivalent of \$40 for each day and you can eat well. I've done it for \$25 (with a beer) and didn't feel deprived.

SLEEP SMART

While Britain is known for quaint bed-and-breakfasts, they are not the bargain they were in the '80s and even '90s. I recall shared baths, tubs rather than showers and tiny fourth-floor garret rooms. Although these can contribute to the "quaint" factor, they also can quickly sour your trip. Even worse, many have been updated, with prices to match. If you are set on a bed-and-breakfast, do some work before dropping in on them. Google "B&Bs in Britain" for dozens of websites to compare. Look for ones that include customer ratings before booking.



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Not to all states or with limits.

If you prefer predictability over quirky charm, I recommend the budget chain hotels. A British version of Travelodge has mushroomed, adding 107 hotels in the last five years with 40 more to open in 2008. The décor is less Victorian and more IKEA: clean Scandinavian lines, built-ins, king bed, private baths, good television and ample space. On the website, www.travelodge.co.uk, special “saver” rates can be locked in months ahead but with tight restrictions (no refund). I booked a room in October in Manchester for £19 (this is not a typo). Travelodge has many £29 and even £19 rates available.

My suggestion for cost-cutting on accommodation is to find the best rates for a hotel in a region you like and settle in and do day trips. If you’re only paying the equivalent of \$60 a night for lodging, you can afford to rent a car and toodle around the Lake District or go village to village by bus or rail.

BUDGET MONEY, NOT TIME

One of the best ways to budget—especially for Britain—is to slow down. This is a vacation, after all, not *The Amazing Race*. Watch the sun set over Grasmere lake as the children play soccer in their school uniforms and the swans swim on the pond. Dawdle in a town square with ordinary life unfolding around you. Savor the abundance of castles and cathedrals. (I particularly love the cathedral in Durham, the same one where the *Harry Potter* movies were filmed. I could spend days doing nothing in Durham.) Walk a portion of Hadrian’s Wall. Take a Turkish bath in Harrogate. Make time for tea every day.

I spent a few days in the medieval city of York and still recall an afternoon stroll through the twisty-turny streets of the Shambles where I came across a line of people, patiently waiting to get into a store so tiny two people could barely turn around. It was named Mr. Sandwich, and all the sandwiches were going for £1.

“How good can they be for one pound?” I thought. But then, there was that line, and not a tourist in sight. So I joined the queue. And everyone was quite helpful, full of suggestions as to their favorite sandwich of the dozens and dozens offered, each made to order, one by one (which was why there was a queue). And I got to the front and made friends with the owner and had a lovely picnic of roast beef with brie, chips, cookie and hot tea in the little square at the end of the street, along with the locals on their lunch break. The sky was blue and sunny, and the Brits all sat with their faces pointed upward. Then we fed our crumbs to the pigeons.

And I realized, for the zillionth time, that there are moments when feeling rich has little to do with money. •