



LONDON NOTES

BY PETER COX : RE THE LBF 2010 : FOR YOU



London is weirder than ever, says Peter Cox

I'm delighted to introduce our LONDON NOTES for the London Book Fair - a survival guide to dear old Blighty that's intended to provide visitors, particularly from the USA, with some essential information and basic street-smarts. Please do circulate it amongst your colleagues as widely as possible.

What's the London vibe at the moment? There's an impending general election on May 6th, so politics is in the air... a bit. However, most of us are so hacked off with politicians that we'd be lethargic... if only we could summon up the enthusiasm.

I'd say that for the most part, Londoners are in cocoon-mode. Eccentricity is the new norm, solipsism the newest virtue. When Tory party boss David Cameron claims that Jedward is his favorite band, you just know there's something in the water. So you do your thing, I'll do mine... while *they* monitor us with over 10,000 surveillance cameras, the bastards. Time for another Peasant's Revolt? Maybe - after we've watched this week's *X Factor*.

Enjoy your Fair - and don't forget to tune in to [Radio Litopia](#), where you might just hear your humble agent presenting *Litopia After Dark*, the net's most popular show for writers - two years running!

My best,
Peter Cox



When In London

Things to do, places to see, and numbers for your iPhone

Arriving

When you arrive in the UK, you'll have to go through customs. Most UK ports and airports have three customs exits or "channels", while some have only one exit, with a red-point phone for declaring goods. HM Revenue & Customs [produce a guide](#) that you should check out before you arrive.

Getting To Town

The main airlines fly to either Heathrow or Gatwick, both of which have excellent, very fast train connections to central London. Book online for the [Heathrow Express](#) or get a ticket at a ticket machine, but don't buy it on board the train - it's more expensive. The semi-secret [Heathrow Connect](#) seems to be used only by Londoners, but it's less than half the price of the Heathrow Express! Similarly, a regular return on the [Gatwick Express](#) is £28.70, whereas a ticket on a lesser-known carrier will be substantially cheaper - check prices at [thetrainline.com](#). Getting a taxi from the airport may be tempting, but if you want to economize, don't do it unless there are two or more of you, or of course if you have mountains of luggage - taxis charge by both time and distance, and Heathrow to city

centre will cost between £43 - £75 and may take an hour or so.

London Taxis

Once you've arrived at the station (Paddington for Heathrow, Victoria for Gatwick), you'll need to get to your hotel - take a taxi (black cab) rather than battle with luggage on an eccentric, and far from cheap, public transport system. Only use black cabs. No respectable taxi solicits passengers in the street, avoid any that do. Many US visitors grossly over-tip in London. This is how to pay and tip a taxi - when you've arrived, first check what the taxi meter says. Then get out of the taxi first before you pay, and go to the driver's window. Whatever the fare is, round it up to the nearest pound. So if the meter says £5.20, give them £6 and say "keep the change". If it says £11, give them £12 - that's generous enough. Don't forget to ask for a receipt for your expenses!

Public Transport

The best way to use public transport is to get yourself an Oyster card or Travelcard, [details here](#). When travelling by bus, train or tube, you must touch your Oyster card on the yellow reader at the beginning and end of each journey you make. Check for a green light to ensure your Oyster card has been validated. Remember that it may take you much longer to get around London than in other cities. This is an ancient city, we have no

discernible grid pattern to the streets, and little logic to our road works, so give yourself plenty of time.

U.S. Embassy

Embassy operating hours are Monday to Friday, 8:30 am to 5:30 pm. Security is extremely tight - don't bring cellphones or any electronic devices - not even a flashy new iPad! Lost your passport? Twenty-four hour assistance is available for genuine emergencies on the above number.

24 Grosvenor Square

London

W1A 1AE

Main tel: +44 (0)20 7499 9000

Nearest [tube](#) station: Marble Arch

Staying Safe in Town

London is a comparatively safe city. The murder rate here is barely one third that of New York, robbery is even lower. Reduce your risk still further by following these tips:

- Know where you're going before you start your journey: there are lots of free maps, or check the [Transport for London website](#).
- Don't give money to street beggars, nor to people with clipboards doing a "survey" (we call them "chuggers"). You may see a magazine called [The Big Issue](#) being

sold on the streets - this is a very legit and admirable operation - buy a copy by all means, the proceeds go directly to help the homeless, and you won't be funding a lethal drug habit.

- Don't leave your bag unattended anywhere in London: we'll assume you're a terrorist and blow it up!
- When using an ATM, try to use machines located inside banks rather than on the street.



Medical Services

In a genuine medical emergency call 999 (this is the main emergency number for the police, ambulance or fire) or dial 112 - the European-wide standard number that will connect you to emergency services wherever you are in Europe.

For non-urgent medical treatment, take a look at the Visit London [medical services page](#) for more information.

Reporting Homophobic Incidents

The police definition of homophobic/transphobic crime is any incident which is perceived to be homophobic by the victim or any other person. This means any incident (not necessarily a crime) which appears to be related to an individual's actual or perceived sexuality.

Report these to the police. You can find the relevant local contacts on the [Metropolitan Police website](#).

Reporting Crime

To report non-urgent crime, contact your [local police station](#). For Central London this is West End Central Police station on +44 (0)20 7437 1212.

April's Weather

It's been a great month so far!

- Average High: 57°F (14°C)
- Average Low: 42°F (6°C)

[Weather from the BBC here.](#)

Communications

If you have a tri-band phone (and you probably do) you first need to check with your airtime provider that you have international calling unblocked. Then you can use it in London just as you would at home – but, of course, the roaming charges are likely to be substantial. Even receiving calls may cost quite a bit – worth checking. Hiring a phone is possible at all the airports, but expensive and a nuisance to cope with a temporary number for just a few days. If you're likely to be back here from time to time, I would simply buy a pay-as-you-go phone from any number of high street outlets (such as Vodafone) for about £20, and charge it with £25 of airtime: that should cope with most domestic calls for a few days. For calling internationally, here's a

suggestion: sign up with a cheap call provider such as [Planet Talk](#). Put £25 on the account – they will give you a range of local London numbers that you can assign to international numbers. This is simpler than it sounds – for example, you call 020-7000-0000 from your cellphone, and automatically, you are connected back home to your office or house. The call costs are far lower than dialling internationally from your regular cell – also, you can share the phone with other colleagues when they visit London.

Getting Online

There is WiFi access within the International Rights Centre for use by all table holders, and your hotel will almost certainly offer slow, expensive wired internet, too. NB – if you forget your power adaptor, you'll find one at the airport on arrival. Don't use unsecured WiFi signals you may find, they're more than likely to be evil.

Etiquette

London is one of the most cosmopolitan cities in the world, one of the key reasons why I live here. More than 270 nationalities make up the fabric of the city, and at least 232 languages are spoken here! Londoners are therefore pretty tolerant of most foreigners – for all we know, you might have lived longer here than we have! Be more courteous than you would be back home, use “please” and “thank you” constantly, and smile a lot – it will open more doors here than any amount of street attitude.

Having Fun

It makes no sense to come all the way here without planning to enjoy some of the pleasures that are unique to London. So here's my list for this year:



The [Grace Kelly: Style Icon](#) exhibition from Apr 17 at the Victoria & Albert Museum; take the [Hidden Gardens of the City](#) walk every Wednesday at 1:30pm; be escorted round the magical [Dennis Severs' House](#) in Spitalfields; [Alternative Fashion Week](#), April 19th - 23rd, again in Spitalfields; and if you've still got some energy, and a bit of extra time, why not take the [Eurostar](#) to Paris - leave Waterloo at 8am and be in Paris in time for lunch! Also... if you're a golf punk, there's the London Golf Show - hundreds of exhibitors showcasing the latest golf gear from hot new equipment and to the coolest fairway fashions. From 20th April onwards, see the [Official Website](#) for full information. If you're thinking about shopping, the exchange rate means that there are no real bargains, I'm afraid. The best window shopping-locations are Covent Garden, Kings Road, Knightsbridge / Sloane Street, Piccadilly / St James / Bond Street. Although popular, avoid Oxford Street, Tottenham Court Road and Camden Town - they're all scudzy.

Dining Out

There's nothing decent in the vicinity of the Fair, but luckily, you're not far from the town center. For posh entertaining, it is essential to book ahead at [The Wolseley](#), just next to the Ritz on Piccadilly. Run by the team behind the overcrowded [Ivy](#), The Wolseley is a media watering-hole - stay there long enough and you'll meet

everyone you need to meet. For something much more contemporary, go to [SAF](#) in ultra-happening Shoreditch. It's amazing. [Wahaca](#) provides cheap and cheerful Mexican market eating. For celeb spotting, try [Yauatcha](#), and for classic Indian food, with prices and attitude to match, try the oldest surviving Indian restaurant in the UK, [Veraswamy](#).

When tipping in a restaurant, first check to see whether a service charge has been added to the bill. If it has, there is no need to tip anything further, unless you really have had spectacular attention, in which case give some cash to the person concerned - they'll remember you (at least for a few hours). If there is no service charge on the bill, give 10-15%.

Toilets

London's public toilets are pretty disgraceful - if you can find one. If you're out shopping and really have to go, then your best options are either a major department store or failing that, any branch of McDonalds. Most coffee houses (e.g. Costa, Starbucks) have toilets but only for the use of customers.

Good Cause

Ruthless property developers continue to destroy the very heritage that makes London so special. Victorian and Edwardian

buildings are irreplaceable, cherished, diverse, beautiful, familiar and part of our everyday life - and constantly being demolished to make a fast buck for greedy speculators. If you like London, consider joining the [Victorian Society](#) - they're the good guys.

And Finally...



Visit [Redhammer's website here](#). If we don't yet know each other - we should!

We support the web's oldest and most distinguished community for writers - [Litopia Writers' Colony](#) - home to some amazing initiatives, such as [Radio Litopia](#) and our new magazine, MUSE. If you want to see the future in action, Litopia's where it's at.

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