

London, UK: An American Tourists Guide

by Sue Kulick, PassPorter Featured Columnist

My husband and I recently traveled to England for a week long holiday. It was a fabulous trip! It was the first time we had traveled out of the country (except for ports of call on cruises), and we weren't sure what to expect. It was a learning experience, and I'd like to share some of my insights with you.

We are seasoned stateside travelers. I can find discount airfare at 30 paces with my eyes closed. I have no fear of the unknown when it comes to traveling. And we are somewhat laid back about plans. While I generally book my Disney resort at the 11- or 7-month window (we are Disney Vacation Club owners), everything else sort of comes along in good time. We quickly found out that this strategy doesn't really work when traveling overseas.

Our first lesson was in regards to airfare. We debated whether to fly British Airways out of Philadelphia, or Virgin Airways out of Newark. I bookmarked both sites and checked and rechecked flight times, prices, and availability. Meanwhile, our hosts in the UK began to wonder if we were seriously going to make this journey. Now, I had no doubt. After all, I farewatch Southwest until the planes come home, and then wait even longer for a good fare. We have been known to book our airfare with less than 60 days till travel date. Well, not so when you are traveling overseas. While you can get cheaper fares if you decide on a last minute getaway, overseas airfares tend to do only one thing ... GO UP! So lesson one was this: When you see the fare you want, grab it. It's not going to go on sale anytime soon.

After we booked our airfare, we booked our resort. This was relatively painless for us, as we did a DVC exchange, but then we needed to book our final night at the airport. And so began lesson 2. When I googled "Heathrow Airport Hotels," I got 289,000 hits! So I decided to try a different approach. I picked a resort chain that we have had good luck with (Marriott), went to their web site, and typed in Heathrow Airport. Ah, that was much better, and they gave a AAA discount! Lesson two is this: If you are staying in a different country, give yourself a level of comfort by going with a hotel chain that you trust.

Lesson three had to do with keeping in touch with the folks back home. I am the sole caregiver for my elderly father, and while I have an extensive support network, I still needed to be in touch. A call to my cell

phone company confirmed that if I was traveling to the outer banks of Mongolia, I would have had coverage, but in the UK, I did not. I needed to rent a worldwide phone that would provide me with service while traveling. And, the fine print that I didn't read was that it needed to be activated with my cell number forwarded BEFORE WE LEFT THE STATES! That explained why I spent the entire trip from Heathrow to the hotel trying to contact our hosts without any success. Luckily, I was able to activate it at the hotel using the land line in the room. A rather frustrating (and expensive) lesson!

Lesson four has to do with finances. We had decided to do the bulk of our trip on one credit card, since they would give us the best exchange rate and we wouldn't have to carry too much cash. This is a two part lesson: First of all, call your credit card company before you go and tell them where you are traveling and for how long. They put a note on our account so that our cards would not be flagged.

Our trip would have been a mess if our credit cards had been frozen in a security measure while we were thousands of miles from home. And the second part of this lesson only applies if you live in a rural area like we do. It was almost impossible to exchange money. The post office didn't do it, none of the local banks did it, the one Wachovia that we have in town would have done it but I did not have an account there. Our local AAA didn't do it, and neither did our credit union. I finally decided to make a road trip to Lehigh Valley Airport (about an hour away) and on the way, remembered the AAA regional office. I stopped in, and YES! They did currency exchanges! If you are thinking about overseas travel, don't wait until the last minute to exchange your currency, as your options may be quite limited.

The last lesson had to do with the trip itself. I was a bit apprehensive about traveling in a foreign country, even one that shared the same language. But once the trip began, I began to relax and realize that this wasn't all that much different than stateside travel. There are lots of things to see and do, and you won't get to do them all in one trip. People in all countries react to you as you react to them. Be friendly, respectful and courteous, smile and say "Please" and "Thank you," and you will get it back in kind. So the lesson learned here is to treat the locals like you want to be treated in your hometown. Follow that advice, and you will have a great vacation!

Read all about our UK adventure in the PassPorter Message Board Globetrotting trip report forum.

About The Author: Sue Kulick is a resident of the Pocono Mountains and an avid Disney fan. She and her husband, Steve, live in a log home with their

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Golden Retrievers, Cody and Belle and their cat Tigger.

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