



## Public Transport In The UK

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For the full article: <https://virtually-fluent.com/public-transport-in-the-uk/>

Unlike most countries in the world, public transport in the United Kingdom is mostly privatised. There is some funding from the government, but most companies operate individually. Of course, this brings great advantages such as good customer service, flexibility in timetabling and independence from the political party leading the country. However, this also brings its disadvantages with increasing ticket prices and an ever competitive environment of companies trying to take you in as a customer.

The public transport system is vast in the UK and there is increasing investment in new transport projects. The most recent, although slightly controversial, project is HS2- a high-speed railway to connect northern cities to London. The most popular means of public transport in the UK is the train, but we also have an extensive bus and coach network, underground systems, trams, ferries, taxis and, of course, cars.

### TRAIN

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The UK has the oldest railway system in the world, with the first passenger steam train network opening on the Stockton and Darlington Railway in 1825. Since then, the network has evolved and lived through phases of being state-owned. But between 1996 and 1997, the entire British railway system was privatised and became known as *National Rail*.

*National Rail* is responsible for the ticketing, staffing and customer service of the railway system, but it is a different company, *Network Rail*, that actually owns the stations, signals, tracks and the network itself. *Network Rail* also creates and publishes the timetables.

However, the actual trains and rail services are provided by local train operating companies (TOCs). To date there are 28 TOCs and each one runs in a certain geographical area. For example, *Gatwick Express* exclusively runs in and out of Gatwick airport to local areas, *London North Eastern Railway* runs from London to the North East and *South Western Railway* runs in the South West of England.

These TOCs bid for routes and services from the UK Government's Department of Transport and Network Rail, so you may find different companies providing different services each year depending on the success of their bid. These franchises are awarded to each TOC based on how much they're willing to pay, how much they want in subsidy from the government and customer experience. This franchising process is audited and more recently has included public consultation too.

Most importantly, the sign of anything rail-related in Great Britain is the logo of the *National Rail*. Outside all train stations or offices, on most advertising material and also on printed tickets, you should see this symbol.



If you want to purchase a ticket, you can buy directly from each of the 28 TOCs on their websites or from a ticket office, which you can find at most train stations. However, the most popular method for buying tickets in the UK is through *Trainline*, which is an independent train ticket retailer. *Trainline* shows all the services offered by all TOCs and they offer good prices too. You can download their app or use their

website to purchase a ticket. Rail tickets are not cheap in the UK and even deciding which ticket you need can be complicated.

## BUS

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The bus network is also local in the UK, but there are five main bus companies that you will see around: *Arriva*, *FirstGroup*, *Go-Ahead Group*, *National Express* and *Stagecoach*. All of these companies have apps where you can purchase your tickets and scan them when you enter the bus. You can also pay cash on most buses to the bus driver and many buses now have contactless payment, so you simply scan your debit/credit card.

Getting tickets for the bus is a little bit simpler, it can either be a single ticket (in one direction) or a return ticket (in two directions). You can travel whenever you want and the timetables are displayed at the bus stop. On most apps, you have a live tracker of the buses, so you can see exactly when it will arrive.

If you're travelling a long distance from one end of the country to another, the vehicle is called a coach. Coaches normally offer more comfortable travelling services, with space to store baggage, toilets and sockets. If you purchase a coach ticket, this is normally for a set time and there is no flexibility, so don't miss it! The most common coach companies are *National Express* and *Megabus*.

## TAXI

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Taxis are a common means of transport in the UK, but they can be very expensive. In London, you have the typical black cab and in the rest of the UK, individual private taxi companies will run in a geographical area. The newest self-service taxi is *Uber*, which is available in the big cities in the UK, but not normally in smaller areas. Although, their licence has been revoked a few times in London, so don't always expect it to be easy to order an *Uber*.

## CAR

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Driving is, by far, the most popular means of transport in the UK. British cities and villages are all connected by a system of motorways, controlled by *Highways England* in England and by other companies in the devolved countries.

To drive in the UK you must have a driving licence, which you can get when you turn 17. The process of learning how to drive is very structured in the UK. First, you must apply for a provisional driving licence. You can do this from the age of 15 years and 9 months old. With this provisional licence you can get inside a car and learn how to drive it. You must have an experienced driver (at least 21 years of age and have had their driving licence for 3 years) with you at all times. Having a trained driving instructor with you is the best way to learn, but this can be very expensive, so many people learn from their family, using their parents' or siblings' cars.

To get your driving licence, you must complete two tests. First is a theory exam which tests your knowledge of the highway code and second is the practical exam, driving with an instructor. Only when you have passed these tests can you actually drive by yourself. You may see a "P" sign on the back of cars whose drivers have only recently passed their test and are new to the road. Unlike many other countries, there are no regular tests for driving until you reach the age of 70. At 70, you must renew your driving licence and then every 2 years after this.

If you're thinking about driving in the UK, remember that we drive on the left side of the road!

It's very easy to rent a car in the UK if you're travelling as a tourist and if you don't want to spend so much money on public transport, it can be a great alternative. You can normally rent a car at airports and large train stations.

To rent a car in the UK you will need a valid driving licence. If you are an EU citizen, you can bring your own driving licence from your country, but if you are non-EU, you must have an International Driving Permit (IDP). You can only get this within 3 months of your travel and there are a few forms to fill out to apply for this. If you are non-EU, you should bring both your driving licence and the IDP.

Most rental companies will ask for your passport, which you probably would have needed anyway to get into the UK! A lot of car rental companies will ask for proof of your address, such as a bill or a bank statement, so remember to bring this along too. A lot of rental companies will also ask for your flight/travel details and hotel/accommodation information and they may ask for information about any previous travel to the UK.