

Where Scotland is and Other Useful Tips

Bill Bryson

Recently I was on an American airline flight when I thumbed through the in-flight magazine and came across a quiz entitled ‘Your Cultural IQ’.

Interested to see whether I have one, I applied myself to the questions. The very first asked in which country it is in bad taste to enquire of a person ‘Where do you live?’ The answer, I learned to my surprise by turning to page 113, was England.

‘One’s home is a personal affair for the English,’ the magazine solemnly informed me.

I am mortified to think of all the times over the years I have said to an English person, ‘So where do you live, Clive?’ (or whatever, because of course they weren’t all named Clive), without for a moment suspecting that I was committing a serious social gaffe and that Clive (or whomever) was thinking: ‘Nosy American git.’ So of course I apologize now to all of you, especially Clive.

Then, a couple of days later, I came across an article on British politics in the Washington Post, which noted helpfully in passing that Scotland is ‘to the north of England’, a geographical distinction that I had always thought was common knowledge, and it dawned on me that perhaps it was not I who was under-informed, but — could this possibly be? — my entire nation.

I became curious to know just how much or little my fellow Americans know about the United Kingdom, but this is not easy. You can’t just go up to a person, even someone you know quite well, and say, ‘Do you have any idea what the Chancellor of the Exchequer does?’ or ‘Scotland is north of England. True or false?’ any more than you could go up to an English person and say, ‘Where do you live?’ It would be impolite and impertinent, and possibly embarrassing for the interviewee.

Then it occurred to me that I might more discreetly get some idea by going to the library and looking at American guidebooks to Britain. These would tell me what sort of information Americans require before they embark on a visit to the UK.

So I went to the library and had a look at the travel section. There were four books exclusively on Britain, plus another eight or so on Europe generally, with chapters on Britain. My favourite, at a glance, was *Rick Steves’ Europe 1996*. I had never heard of Rick, but according to the jacket blurb he spends several months each year ‘feeling the fjords and caressing the castles’, which sounds awfully diligent if a little pointless. I took all these books off to a table in the corner and spent the afternoon in fascinated study.

Well, I got my answer, which is that what Americans know about Britain is pretty nearly nothing, at least if these books are to be believed. According to the various texts, prospective American travellers to Britain require to be told that Glasgow ‘doesn’t rhyme with cow’, that sterling is accepted in Scotland and Wales ‘as freely as in England’, that the country has ‘well-trained doctors’ and ‘all the latest drugs’, and, yes, that Scotland is north of England. (Quite far north, in fact, so better plan a full day there.)

American travellers, it appears, are a pretty helpless lot. The books tell them not just what to expect in Britain — rain and thatched cottages mostly — but how to pack their bags, find their way to the airport, even proceed through Customs.

‘Be affable and cooperative, but don’t be overly conversational,’ advises Joseph Raff, author of Fielding’s *Britain 1996*, on going through British immigration. ‘Hold your passport casually in hand — don’t flaunt it!’ Perhaps it is none of my business, but if you need to be told how to clasp your passport, it seems to me you may not be quite ready to cross oceans.

My absolute favourite book was *The Best European Travel Tips* by one John Whitman. The book wasn’t specifically about Britain, but it was so good that I read it almost cover to cover.

It was full of grave advice on pickpockets, avaricious waiters, even how to sue your airline if you are bumped from your flight. Mr Whitman clearly expects things to go wrong. His first tip for dealing with the idiosyncrasies of European hotels is ‘Get the clerk’s name when you check in.’ With airline tickets he advises: ‘Read all materials closely so you know your rights.’

Among his many useful suggestions, he advises that you bring ‘a pen or two’, hang a Do Not Disturb sign outside your hotel room door if you do not wish to be disturbed (I am not making this

up; he even tells you to drape it over the knob) and notes sagely (for nothing gets past Mr Whitman's practised eye) that, with regard to lodging, Europe has 'a variety of places to stay'.

Elsewhere he warns: 'You'll find bidets in many European hotel rooms and WCs,' then adds warily, 'If you care to experiment with these toilet-shaped porcelain fixtures for your personal hygiene, do so.' Thanks for the permission, Mr Whitman, but to tell you the truth I've got my hands full with this Do Not Disturb sign!

Joseph Raff, meanwhile, provides a useful glossary for dealing with all those puzzling British terms like 'queue', 'flat', 'chips' and — here's one that's stumped me for years — 'motorcar'. Then he confidently asserts that a surname is one's first name and a Christian name is the last name, which would be useful information if it weren't completely wrong.

Errors rather abound in these books, I'm afraid. I learned that the beer you drink is called 'bitters', that the market in London is 'Covent Gardens', that when you go out you like to 'go to the cine', that the hill in the Lake District is 'Scarfell Pike', and — I particularly enjoyed this — that the Elizabethan architect was 'Indigo' Jones.

From Let's Go Europe '96 I learned that Cardiff is 'the only urban centre' in Wales, which must come as something of a shock to the people of Swansea, and from the Berkeley Budget Guide to Great Britain and Ireland I discovered that 'nearly every city, town, village, hamlet or cluster of houses in the middle of nowhere has a post office — be it in a butcher shop, liquor store ("off-licence") or pharmacy ("chemist").'

What I really learned is that what Americans need is new guidebooks. I'm thinking of producing one of my own, filled with advice like 'When dealing with a police officer, always call him "Mr Plod"', and 'To gain the attention of an elusive waiter, extend two fingers and wave your hand up and down vigorously several times. He will regard you as a native.' And finally, but obviously, 'Never ask a person named Clive where he lives.'