

Some advice for Foreign Visitors

Pub Basics

Q: What is a pub?

A: Pub is short for Public House. The publican opens part of his or her house to the public - a bit like giving a party in your own home every day! This is why the publican is often called the host. The home-like qualities of the British pub are perhaps why tourists often find our pubs more cosy and welcoming than bars and cafes in other parts of the world.

Q: How do I know its a pub?

A: This is not a silly question. In other parts of the world, cafes and bars often display the words cafe or bar in a prominent position on the facade or signage. You will rarely see the word pub anywhere on a British pub, and our traditional curtains and frosted windows mean you cannot see much from the outside, so how can the uninitiated first-time visitor tell that he or she is looking at a pub, rather than a restaurant, coffee shop or night-club? There is one important external feature which can tell you that it is a pub: the pub-sign. The pub-sign is mounted about 15 to 25 feet from the ground, either sticking out at right-angles to the building or swinging in a wooden frame at the top of a pole outside the building. The sign usually measures about 3 by 4 feet, and displays both the name of the pub and a pictorial representation of the name. For example, a pub called The White Horse will have a sign showing the name and a picture of a white horse. The name of the pub will usually be repeated in large letters on the front of the building itself.

Getting served

Official rules: Traditionally pubs Opened at 11am (noon on Sundays). and could not by law serve drinks after 11pm (10.30 on Sundays) - although you are allowed 20 minutes to finish any drinks already purchased. The law changed in 2006 and now allows licensed premises to remain open 24hrs/day although very few do so.

So much for the official rules and regulations. The unofficial, unwritten, unspoken rules of pub etiquette are far more complex - but just as important.

Rule number one: There is no waiter service in British pubs. You have to go up to the bar to buy your drinks, and carry them back to your table.

One of the saddest sights of the British summer (or the funniest, depending on your sense of humour) is the group of thirsty tourists sitting at a table in a pub, patiently waiting for someone to come and take their order. In most cases, a friendly native will put them out of

their misery by explaining rule number one, or they will figure it out for themselves, but in a busy pub it can be some time before the correct procedure becomes clear.

Social benefits

Once they are aware of the no-waiter-service rule in British pubs, most tourists recognise it as an advantage, rather than an inconvenience. Having to go up to the bar for your drinks ensures plenty of opportunities for social contact between customers.

In bars and cafes in other parts of the world, waiter service can isolate people at separate tables, which makes it more difficult to initiate contact with others. Perhaps many cultures are more naturally outgoing and sociable than the British, and do not require any assistance in striking up a conversation with those seated near them.

The British, however, are a somewhat reserved and inhibited people, and we need all the help we can get! It is much easier to drift casually into a spontaneous chat while waiting at the bar than deliberately to break into the conversation at another table. Like every other aspect of pub etiquette, the no-waiter-service system is designed to promote sociability.

This is very good news for tourists who wish to make contact with the natives. The bar counter in a pub is possibly the only site in the British Isles in which friendly conversation with strangers is considered entirely appropriate and normal behaviour.

Research findings: In observation-studies, we timed first-time tourists to find out exactly how long it would take them to discover the no-waiter-service rule. The fastest time just under two-and-a-half minutes was achieved by a sharp-eyed American couple. The slowest - over 45 minutes - involved a group of six young Italians. This group did not, however, seem particularly concerned about the apparent lack of service, being engrossed in a lively debate about football. Sympathy should go to the French couple who marched out of the pub, complaining bitterly to each other about the poor service and British manners in general, after a 24-minute wait.

Note: In Britain, the term bar can mean either the actual counter at which drinks are served, or any room in the pub which contains one of these counters. You may come across pubs with rooms marked Public Bar and Lounge Bar or Saloon Bar. The Public Bar usually has more modest and functional furnishings, and houses pub-games such as pool and darts, while the Lounge or Saloon Bar is more luxurious, comfortable and conducive to quiet conversation. Traditionally, both prices and social classes were lower in the Public Bar, but these distinctions no longer apply.

Rule number two: It is customary for one or two people, not the whole group, to go up to the bar to buy drinks.

Bar staff are generally very tolerant people, but large packs of tourists crowding the bar counter can try their patience. It is best if only one or at the most two members of the group approach the bar to purchase drinks for the group. Other members of the group should either stand back from the bar or go and sit down at a table.

Before you can order at all, you must learn the correct bar-counter etiquette. You will notice that the bar counter of the pub is the only place in Britain in which anything is sold or served without the formation of a queue. Many visitors have observed that queuing is almost a national pastime for the British, who will automatically arrange themselves into an orderly line at bus stops, shop counters, ice-cream stalls, lifts, entrances, exits - and sometimes in the middle of nowhere for no apparent reason.

In the pub, by contrast, we gather haphazardly along the bar counter. This may appear contrary to all native instincts and customs, until you realise - and this is spooky - that the queue is still there, and the bar staff are aware of each persons position in the invisible queue.

Bar staff are remarkably skilled at identifying who is next in the invisible queue at the counter, but they are not infallible. You need to attract their attention to make them aware that you are waiting to be served.

The pantomime ritual

Rule number three: To get served, you must attract the attention of the bar staff without making any noise or resorting to the vulgarity of too-obvious gesticulation. This is much easier than it sounds!

There are strict rules of etiquette involved in attracting the attention of bar staff. The ritual procedure is best described as a sort of subtle pantomime - not the kind of childrens pantomime you see on stage at Christmas, more like an Ingmar Bergman film in which the twitch of an eyebrow speaks volumes.

The object is to catch the barmans eye. Eye contact is all that is necessary to ensure that you have been spotted and will be served in your turn. The following dos and donts will help you to achieve this without breaching the unwritten laws of pub etiquette and incurring the disapproval of the natives.

Don't ever try to jump the invisible queue. The people who reached the bar before you will be served before you. Everyone is well aware of his or her place in the queue, and any obvious attempt to get served out of turn will be ignored by bar staff and frowned upon by other customers.

Do start by trying to identify the best position at the bar counter. When the bar is busy, there are two positions which may be favourable for making eye-contact with bar staff. One is immediately opposite the till, as bar staff must return there after each sale. Skilled bar staff, however, are aware of the till-position-manoevre and may have perfected gaze-

avoidance techniques to prevent customers who adopt this strategy from jumping the queue. A more potentially effective strategy is to position yourself next to a person currently being served, as bar staff will find it hard to avoid eye-contact with you when they hand over drinks and take money from your immediate neighbour.

Don't call out to the bar staff, tap coins on the counter, snap your fingers, wave like a drowning swimmer, bang your hand on the counter, shout "service" or "barman" or wave money about. In fact, it is best to avoid all speech or obvious gesticulation.

Do let the bar staff know you are waiting to be served by holding money or your empty glass in your hand. You may tilt the empty glass, perhaps even turn it slowly in a circular motion (some say that this indicates the passing of time). If the wait continues, you may perch your elbow on the bar, with either money or empty glass in your raised hand - but never raise your whole arm and wave the notes or glass around.

Don't scowl, frown or glare at the bar staff, or make your impatience obvious by heavy sighing and angry muttering. The bar staff are doing their best to serve everyone in turn, and rudeness will not help your cause.

Do adopt an expectant, hopeful, even slightly anxious facial expression. If you look too contented and complacent, the bar staff may assume you are already being served.

Don't ring the bell. Some pubs have a large bell attached to the wall at one end of the bar. This is used by the publican or bar staff to signal last orders and time (see Chapter 5 for explanation). If you ring the bell, customers may interpret this as the last orders signal, and will all rush to the bar to buy their last drinks making it even more difficult for you to get served, and incurring the wrath of the publican!

Do stay alert and keep your eye on the bar staff at all times. This will increase your chances of making eye-contact.

Exceptions: If you hear people calling out "Get a move on!" or "I've been stood here since last Thursday!" or "Any chance of a drink sometime this week?" to the bar staff, do **not** imitate them. The only people permitted to make such remarks are established regulars, and the remarks are made in the context of the special etiquette governing relations between bar staff and regulars. (See Chapter 3, *Making Contact*, for tips on how to spot regulars and Chapter 9, *Going Native*, for further details of the privileges enjoyed by regulars.)

When you achieve your goal of making eye contact with the barman, a quick lift of the eyebrows and upwards jerk of the chin, accompanied by a hopeful smile, will let him know that you are waiting. In a busy bar, do not expect a verbal response. Bar staff will respond to your non-verbal signals with a smile or a nod, a raised finger or hand, perhaps

accompanied by a similar eyebrow-lift. This conveys that they have seen you waiting and will serve you as soon as possible.

Natives perform the pantomime instinctively, without being aware that they are following a rigid etiquette, and without ever questioning the extraordinary handicaps - no speaking, no waving, no noise, constant alertness to subtle non-verbal signals, etc. - imposed by this etiquette.

In fact, the pantomime ritual is much less difficult than it sounds, and you will soon get used to it. After only a few pub-visits, you will realise that good bar staff are exceptionally acute readers of body language, sensitive to very small signals in the posture and expression of their customers. You will see that there is no need to shout and wave at these expert observers, who ensure that everyone does get served, usually in the right order, and without undue fuss, noise or loss of temper.

Ordering etiquette

Rule number four: If you wish to pay for your drinks individually, then order individually; if you order as a group, the bar staff will total the cost and expect a single payment.

A common sight during the tourist season is the large group of tourists monopolising the entire bar counter, trying to order drinks collectively and pay individually, confusing the bar staff and annoying the regulars. If the bar is busy, individual orders and payments will waste your time and the bar staffs, so it is best to elect a spokesperson to order and pay for the drinks.

Research findings: If you find this ritual baffling, you are not alone: most of the tourists we interviewed found it utterly incredible. A Dutch visitor expressed the views of many when he said: *"I cannot understand how the British ever manage to buy themselves a drink"*.

Rule number five: In most British pubs, you pay for your drinks in cash, immediately when you order them.

In terms of financial transactions, the ordinary British local is not a 20th-century business. Although you will find some exceptions, the majority of local pubs do not take credit cards for drinks, and you will have to ask if you want a receipt. You should also expect to pay for each drink or round of drinks when you order it. Credit cards are becoming more widely accepted when ordering meals, but ask before relying on them.

Ordering beer: the basics

Simply asking for "a beer" in a British pub is a bit like asking for "a wine" in a French restaurant. There are hundreds of different varieties of beer available, each with its own distinctive taste and characteristics. Pubs often have a range of around 20 different beers behind the bar, many of them on draught (on tap), some in bottles and a few in cans. They range

from dark stouts, through mild ales and bitter to lager - a light, gold-coloured beer. (You would normally get lager if you just asked for a beer in most other countries, including Europe, the United States and Australia.)

Dont worry - you dont have to become a connoisseur to enjoy British beer. At a basic level, the bar staff just need to know whether you want bitter, lager or another sort of beer, and whether you want a pint, a half, or one of the wide variety of imported and domestic beers sold by the bottle (look at the glass-fronted coolers and shelves behind the bar to see what bottled beers are available).

A pint is 0.568 litres (i.e. quite a big drink). A half means a half-pint. The pint element is silent. When ordering, you just say "*A half of lager, please*" or "*A half of bitter, please*". This is very often shortened to "*Half a lager, please*" and so on. The please is important.

If you are interested, there is a lot more to find out about the endless different varieties of traditional British beers. Some publicans and bar staff are very knowledgeable, and will be happy - when they are not too busy serving the stuff - to explain it all to you. Some natives are also extremely well-informed on this subject, and will probably tell you much more than you could ever wish to know about the merits of different beers.

The "*And one for yourself*" ritual

Rule number six: It is not customary to tip the publican or bar staff in British pubs. Instead, if you wish, the common practice is to buy them a drink.

To understand this particular element of pub etiquette, you need to understand both the British attitude towards money, and the social structure of the pub. The British tend to be rather squeamish and embarrassed about money. Any sign of excessive interest in money is considered vulgar, and obvious displays of wealth are viewed with contempt rather than admiration. The publican and bar staff may be providing you with a service in exchange for money, but it is not appropriate to emphasise this aspect of the relationship. The social structure of the pub is egalitarian: those serving behind the bar are in no way inferior to the customers - indeed, the publican often commands great respect. To give them a tip would be a reminder of their service role, whereas to offer a drink is to treat them as equals.

Buying the person who serves you a drink is not quite the equivalent of giving a tip - it is by no means automatic or expected, in the way tips are more or less automatic in many countries. Offering a drink is a genuinely personal and friendly gesture.

The correct etiquette for offering a drink to the publican or bar staff is to say "*and one for yourself?*", or "*and will you have one yourself?*" at the end of your order. (If you are not ordering drinks at the time, you may

ask "*Will you have a drink?*", but the first procedure is better, as it implies that you are having a drink together.) Make your offer a question, not an instruction, and do not bellow it out as though determined that the entire pub should be aware of your generosity. If you want to be impeccably British about it, avoid using the word buy. To say "*Can I buy you a drink?*" is acceptable, but it does suggest that money is involved. The natives are quite aware that money is involved, but prefer not to draw attention to the fact.

Research findings: American visitors experienced particular language-barrier problems with two drinks: Cider and Martini. Please note that Cider, in Britain, is an alcoholic drink, of about the same strength as beer. If you order "*A Martini*", you will not get a cocktail: you will get a glass of Martini (vermouth) - no gin or vodka, and no olive.

If your "*and one for yourself*" offer is accepted, the publican or bar staff will say "*Thank you, Ill have a half (or whatever)*" and add the price of their chosen drink to the total cost of your order. They will state the new total clearly - "*Thatll be four pounds twenty then, please*". In this way, they can let you know the price of the drink you have just bought them, without directly mentioning the amount. The amount will not be large, as etiquette requires publicans and bar staff to chose a relatively inexpensive beverage when a customer offers them a drink. By stating the revised total, they are also, in an indirect fashion, making you aware of their abstemious choice.

This may initially seem like an unnecessarily convoluted and tortuous way of giving someone a tip. Most visitors, however, find the "*and one for yourself*" ritual a refreshingly friendly alternative to the impersonal handing over of coins.

Feel free to offer a drink even when the bar is busy and the publican or member of staff will not have time to consume it immediately, or even to join you at all. It is quite appropriate for them to accept your offer, add the price of their drink to your order, and enjoy it later when the bar is less crowded. On pouring the drink, even several hours later, the recipient will try to catch your eye, and raise the glass to you in acknowledgement with a nod and a smile, perhaps saying "*cheers*" or "*thanks*" if you are within earshot.

Ordering food

There is no single, correct way to order a meal or snack in a pub. Different pubs have different systems for ordering food: some take meal orders at the bar, others have separate counters for food. Some pubs have menus on the tables, others have menus on the bar counter or chalked on blackboards - or both.

Wherever and however food is served, drinks must almost always be purchased at the bar, so the best strategy is to go up to the bar first, order your drinks and ask the bar staff what the procedure is for ordering food.

Even if your food is brought to you at your table, the no-waiter-service rule will probably still apply to drinks, so do not expect the staff who bring your food to take orders for drinks as well. You may find this custom irritating, but try to appreciate the opportunities it gives you for friendly chats with the bar staff and other natives. Pubs are not just about food and drink: pubs are about sociability, and every trip to the bar to buy drinks is another chance to make contact.

Some bar staffs pet hates:

O "*People who keep everyone waiting while they decide what they want to drink.*"

"*People who cant remember their order, and have to keep running back and forth or shouting over to their friends.*"

Z "*People who order the Guinness last.*" (Guinness and other stouts such as Beamish, Murphys and Gillespies take a while to pour and settle. Always order these drinks first, so that the bar staff can allow them to settle while preparing the rest of the round.)

"*People who try to get rid of their old coins when Ive got a queue of customers waiting.*" (Counting out pennies causes delay and will annoy waiting customers as well as busy bar staff.)

"*People who hog the bar counter when the pub is very busy, blocking the way so other people cant get served.*" (By all means stand or sit at the bar when the pub is relatively quiet, as this is the best way to meet people - see Chapter 3, *Making Contact* but move away from the counter when the bar is crowded.)

"*Tourists who come in the pub just to use the toilets - someone should tell them the difference between a Public House and a Public Convenience!*" (Public Convenience is the British euphemism for public toilets. Toilets in pubs are for the use of customers, not the general public. Speaking of euphemisms, toilets in pubs are called The Ladies or The Gents and the signs on the toilet doors say Ladies and Gentlemen.)

Tourist mistake: A Japanese couple looked at the bar snacks menu and ordered five dishes each, thinking that a bar snack must be the British equivalent of a tiny sushi-bar portion. In British pubs, a bar snack is a simple, one-item meal - such as a sandwich, a hamburger, a pizza, a pork pie, etc. - but it is still a meal, not a nibble! In a small, quiet pub, the bar staff would have realised that the order must be a mistake, but this unfortunate couple happened to be in a very large, busy pub, where the staff assumed that they were ordering for a group of ten.

Enjoy your visit.