



The UK

The United Kingdom (UK) is a state located on the British Isles in the Atlantic Ocean, northwest of continental Europe. It is part of Europe but separated from France by the English Channel. The UK is made up of four countries, England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales.

Great Britain is the largest of the British Isles (1,000 km long, 480 km wide). Apart from it, the UK occupies part of the island of Ireland and numerous other small islands.

The north and north-west of the country are more mountainous, while the south and east have softer rolling hills and flat lands. The longest river is the River Severn, flowing through Wales and England, followed by the River Thames. The mild climate means that there are no real weather extremes.

The UK is a very populated country with over 60 million people. The main language spoken is English, but there are lots of regional dialects (accents) across the country. Gaelic is spoken in some areas of Scotland, and Welsh is the second language spoken in Wales.

The UK is a constitutional monarchy and has a parliamentary democracy, but the country is also ruled by a monarch (the head of the royal family), currently Queen Elizabeth II. The major political parties are the Conservative Party (right wing) and the Labour Party (left wing).

London is the capital and the biggest city. Other main cities are Manchester, Birmingham, Leeds, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Newcastle, Cardiff and Liverpool.

The UK has a lot of history. One of its oldest monuments is Stonehenge, a circle of stones which is 5,000 years old. The oldest human remains, found in Cheddar Gorge, are 9,000 years old.

Other famous places include the Scottish Highlands with Ben Nevis, the UK's highest mountain (1,344 m), and Loch Ness in Scotland, the basalt columns of the Giant's Causeway in Northern Ireland, the university towns of Oxford and Cambridge, Stratford-upon-Avon, where Shakespeare was born, and of course London.



Ireland

Ireland (Éire) is an island about 486 km long and 275 km wide, separated from Great Britain by the Irish Sea. It has an extremely mild climate and lots of rain – good for growing grass, which is why it is known as the Emerald Isle.

The island has had an interesting political history, struggling to gain independence from the UK, and since 1921 it has been divided politically into two parts.

The majority of the island, 26 counties (or administrative districts), are known as the Republic of Ireland and the population is 4.5 million. The remaining 6 counties in the north are called Northern Ireland, and remain part of the United Kingdom. Northern Ireland has a population of 2 million and its main city is Belfast.

Irish Gaelic is the official native language of the Republic of Ireland, but in reality English is used in everyday life.

Dublin is the capital city and is over 1,000 years old. It has a strong history of writers and poets like Oscar Wilde and James Joyce. Its main tourist attractions are Dublin Castle, St Patrick's Cathedral, O'Connell Street and the Guinness Brewery. The city has a lively Irish music and pub scene.

Other important towns are Cork, Limerick, Galway and Waterford. Top tourist sites include the Dingle Way Peninsula, the high Cliffs of Moher, the lakes of Killarney, Blarney Castle and other medieval castles and the Ring of Kerry (a tourist trail covering mountains, castles, rocky outcrops and bays).

Saint Patrick brought Christianity to Ireland in the year 430, and St Patrick's Day (or St Paddy's Day) is a big holiday for the Irish. It is celebrated on March 17. People dress up and there are street parades, fireworks, and lots of Guinness drinking.



USA

The United States of America was founded on July 4, 1776. A former British colony, it fought the Revolutionary War to earn freedom. Today there are 50 states and a federal district (Washington, D.C.). The US is bordered by Canada (in the north) and Mexico (in the south). Alaska (the largest state) and Hawaii are separated from the US mainland.

With an area of more than 9 million square kilometers, the US is the third largest country in the world, and the geography is very varied. The east coast has many cities, like New York City, Boston and the capital, Washington, D.C. The middle of the country is quite flat; this is where most of the farming occurs. The southern half is more tropical in the east and more desert-like in the west. The western half also has many mountains (the Rocky Mountains) and national parks. The longest US river is the Missouri River, followed by the Mississippi River. The highest mountain is Mount McKinley in Alaska (6,196 m).

There are about 300 million people in the US. The country is often called a "melting pot" because it is made up of so many different ethnic groups. There are five major ones: White, Black, Hispanic, Asian and Native American.

The American political system is laid out in its Constitution. The government is divided into three branches: the executive, legislative and judicial. The executive branch is made up of the president and his cabinet, or advisors. The legislative branch is the section that makes the laws. It is made up of two houses, the Senate and the House of Representatives. Together they form the Congress. The judicial branch is the federal court system, which enforces and defines the laws made by Congress. The highest court in the country is called the Supreme Court.

There are a lot of natural attractions in the US, such as Yellowstone National Park with its geysers and Yosemite National Park with its rocks and waterfalls. The Grand Canyon is a spectacular canyon on the Colorado River. In Sequoia National Park you can find some of the largest living trees on Earth. Everglades National Park in Florida is a special wetland where you can see many animals including alligators.



Canada

Canada is the second largest country in the world (measured by area). It is located in North America – south of the Arctic and north of the United States. The border between Canada and USA is the longest in the world at 8,891 km.

Canada has one of the world's biggest islands – Baffin Island, which is twice the size of the UK. The country also has two of the biggest lakes in the world – Great Bear Lake and Great Slave Lake.

'Kanata' meaning 'village' or 'settlement' was the original name for the country. The French and British conquered the country, and now Canada is both French and English speaking.

Despite the amount of space, most of the 34 million people live close to the US border where the climate is milder. Consequently, Canada has vast tracks of land where you will find moose, grizzly bears, reindeer (caribou), beavers and wolves.

Canada is made up of 14 federal states. It is a constitutional monarchy. The monarch of the UK is the official head of state, but has little influence on Canadian politics and is represented by the Governor General, whose role is also symbolic. The everyday running of the country is carried out by the prime minister and his cabinet.

Ottawa is the capital; other important cities are Toronto, Montreal, Vancouver, Calgary, Edmonton and Quebec. The city of Toronto is known for its CN Tower, which used to be the highest tower in the world. Vancouver is famous for its outdoor sports and the 2010 winter Olympics took place here. Montreal in French-speaking Canada is a culturally interesting city (jazz festival, film festival...).

Other popular tourist attractions include the spectacular Niagara Falls and the Canadian Rockies (Rocky Mountains).

Canada has the second largest oil reserves in the world and is a leader in mining uranium.

Canada is also famous for its 'Mounties' or mounted police. They wear a red uniform and ride on horseback.



Australia

Australia is the smallest continent and the sixth largest country in the world. Located in the Southern Hemisphere, south of Asia, it is sometimes called 'Down Under' because it is under the equator.

Australia has only 22.5 million people and is one of the least densely populated countries. The first people to live there were Aborigines, who came over 40,000 years ago. They are known for their art, spiritual beliefs and music – played on a didgeridoo, a wind instrument. Today they make up a small proportion of the total population, and Australia is a country of migrants (people who have moved from other countries). Despite the size of the continent, most people live in cities along the coast.

Australia is a constitutional monarchy (the British monarch is the official head of state). It is made up of six states and two major territories, each of which has its own parliament. The federal parliament is found in Australia's capital, Canberra.

Canberra lies roughly half way between Australia's two largest cities, Sydney and Melbourne. Sydney is famous for the Sydney Opera House and Sydney Harbour Bridge. Melbourne is known for art and entertainment. Other important cities include Perth, Brisbane and Adelaide.

Queensland has amazing beaches and the Great Barrier Reef – a coral reef where you can go snorkelling or diving. In the interior of the country is the red Australian desert where visitors come to see Uluru (Ayers Rock). The west coast has a wine region and miles of unspoilt beaches. Tasmania, an island 240 km south of the mainland, is known for its unspoilt nature.

Australia is famous for its unique wildlife, which evolved to survive the difficult conditions. Some of the most famous animals include the kangaroo, koala and wombat. These animals are marsupials – their young develop in a pouch. The world's second largest bird, the emu, is native to Australia. The continent also has many reptiles such as crocodiles and snakes. 7 out of 10 of the most poisonous snakes in the world can be found in Australia.



New Zealand

New Zealand is about 2,000 km southeast of Australia, and it is one of the world's most remote nations. It is made up of two major islands, the North Island and the South Island, and a number of smaller islands.

New Zealand's natural beauty is evident in its huge mountains on the South Island and its volcanic activity on the North Island. It is the result of geological activities which also make the island prone to earthquakes.

The first inhabitants were the Maoris. In 1642 the first Europeans discovered the islands, and then they started settling in large numbers in the 19th century. Today, the total population is 4.3 million.

The Maori language is the official language of New Zealand, though English is by far more widely spoken and is used in all aspects of everyday life.

New Zealand is a constitutional monarchy, which means democratic decisions are made by the parliament, but the British monarch is still the head of state. Her representative is the Governor General. The effective head of the country is the prime minister, who sits in the House of Representatives, which is the only chamber of parliament.

The capital of New Zealand is Wellington, on the North Island; the other major city on the island is Auckland. Other important cities are Christchurch and Dunedin on the South Island.

New Zealand is known for its spectacular scenery – from the coastlines and beaches of the Bay of Plenty, to the lakes and national parks of Taupo and the fjords of Millford Sound. One of the country's top attractions is its glaciers, Franz Joseph and Fox Glacier, which visitors can hike up, or even fly over in a helicopter. Rotorua is popular especially with those who want to visit the Maori culture. It's also an area known for its volcanic activity, geysers, and steaming mud pools.

Everywhere you look there are sheep in New Zealand. In fact it's thought that for every one person there are nine sheep! The animal most associated with the country, though, is the native kiwi bird – it's become such a symbol that even New Zealanders themselves are known affectionately as 'Kiwis'.



The Czech Republic

The Czech Republic is located in Central Europe. It shares borders with Germany, Poland, Slovakia and Austria. It is a land-locked country, which means there is no border with the sea. The country is made up of three regions, Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia.

The Czech Republic contains mountains (mostly along the borders), valleys and rolling hills. Southern Bohemia is famous for its many man-made ponds. The longest river in the Czech Republic is the Vltava (430 km), which flows into the Elbe (Labe), a major Central European river. The country has a temperate climate, with warm summers that are sometimes hot, and cold winters with snow.

There are a little over 10 million people living in the Czech Republic and they are mainly Czech. The top three immigrant groups are Ukrainians, Slovaks and Vietnamese.

The Czech government is a parliamentary democracy with two houses: the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate. The president is the head of state and is in charge of appointing the prime minister, who is the head of government. The president serves a five-year term; deputies serve a four-year term. The president is elected by parliament, but that might change as some people believe the president should be chosen directly by the people.

The country's capital and largest city is Prague, located in Bohemia; the second largest city is Brno, located in Moravia. Other important cities include Ostrava, České Budějovice, Olomouc and Plzeň.

Popular places for tourists, besides Prague, include Český Krumlov, Kutná Hora, the spa town of Karlovy Vary, medieval castles like Karlštejn and the stalactite caves in the Moravian Karst. People like to go skiing in the Krkonoše Mountains (which include the highest Czech mountain, Sněžka, 1,602 m) and biking and hiking in the Šumava Mountains.

The Czech economy is primarily export-based, with industries like automotive, high-tech, glass and ceramic production, metal and electronics. Its main agricultural products are potatoes, wheat and hops.



Prague

Prague is the capital and largest city in the Czech Republic. It is located in central Bohemia, the western half of the country, on both banks of the Vltava River. About 1.2 million people live here and they come from all over the Czech Republic, as well as abroad.

Prague's history goes back 11 centuries. In the past, it used to be the seat of Czech kings and for some time even the capital of the Holy Roman Empire. Today it is still an important political, cultural and economic centre. There are many educational institutions in Prague, including Charles University, as well as international companies, the government and the parliament, and many tourist attractions.

Prague is known for its beautiful architecture with many styles. Gothic, Baroque, Art Nouveau, Cubism and more can all be found here. The seat of the Czech president is located in Prague Castle, the largest castle complex in the world, according to the Guinness Book of World Records. Also at Prague Castle is one of the country's most important churches, St. Vitus Cathedral, which holds the nation's crown jewels. The Czech national cemetery, where many of the country's most important cultural figures are buried, is at Vyšehrad. Other popular tourist attractions include Charles Bridge, the Old Town Square and the Astronomical Clock, the Lesser Quarter with its narrow streets, Wenceslas Square, and the Jewish Quarter with its old cemetery and synagogues. The Dancing House, built in the 1990s, is a fine example of modern architecture.

The city is very cultural. Some of the most important institutions for theatre, ballet and opera include the National Theatre, the State Opera House and the Estates Theatre. There are also many museums such as the National Museum, the Czech Museum of Music, the Mucha Museum and the Jewish Museum.

Sport is also popular in Prague, especially ice hockey and football.

You can get around the city using a dense network of public transport including the underground, buses, trams and even a funicular railway going up Petřín hill.



London

London is the capital city of the United Kingdom and, with a population of almost 8 million, it's one of Europe's largest and most cosmopolitan cities. A mix of people from all over the world have made it their home.

The city is 2,000 years old. In AD 50 the Romans chose to settle here and created the city of Londinium next to the River Thames. The River Thames was useful for merchant ships and trading, and today the river is still important for transport and tourism.

Some famous places not to miss include the Houses of Parliament, Big Ben, The Tower of London and Tower Bridge (which can raise to let ships pass through). There are several museums with large collections that are free to the public, such as the British Museum, the National Gallery and the Science Museum.

Tourists also come to London to see Buckingham Palace, one of the Royal Family's palaces, Westminster Abbey, St Paul's Cathedral, Trafalgar Square, The London Eye (the tallest observation wheel in the world), Greenwich (with the Prime Meridian) and other attractions. They come to shop along Oxford Street, Covent Garden or at Camden Market. Londoners and visitors enjoy the city's large green spaces, including Hyde Park and St James's Park.

The best way to get around the city is by public transport, either the underground train, known as 'the tube' (which was built in 1863 and is the world's first underground train system) or to take one of London's iconic red double-decker buses.

The city of London is an important business and finance centre, and London has a huge influence on fashion, culture, politics, entertainment, media and sport across the UK and Europe. The 2012 Summer Olympics are going to take place there.



American Cities

The most famous US city is probably New York City thanks to its museums, restaurants, Broadway shows and musicals, and shops. Other attractions include Liberty Island, with the Statue of Liberty, and the large Central Park. New York City is famous for its skyscrapers, such as the Chrysler Building and the Empire State Building. The latter is the tallest building in the city since the World Trade Center was destroyed in the 2001 terrorist attacks.

The capital of the US is Washington, D.C., named after the first US president, George Washington. In addition to the White House, where the president lives, and the Capitol Building, where Congress passes laws, there are many museums and memorial sites. The Mall (park) is a great place to visit many of these, like the Washington Monument, the Martin Luther King Memorial, the Vietnam War Memorial and the Lincoln Memorial.

The east coast has other popular cities for tourists, such as Boston, which is a historic city with a beautiful harbour.

On the west coast, in California, the most popular cities are Los Angeles and San Francisco. Los Angeles is best known for movies and movie stars. Visiting places like Hollywood, the beaches and doing lots of shopping is why people like L.A. San Francisco to the north is a diverse mix of people, history and culture. There is a large Asian population here and many of the city's historic points, like cable cars, still exist. The city's most famous landmark is the Golden Gate Bridge, which was built in the 1930s.

One of the country's liveliest cities is Miami, in Florida. Besides the beach, there is a large Cuban influence here as well as lots of design and artists.

Texas, America's second largest state, has many big cities, like Houston (where you can visit the Space Center), Austin, San Antonio and Dallas.



American and British Holidays

Due to their shared history, Great Britain and the United States celebrate a lot of similar holidays.

Christmas is the annual holiday to commemorate the day Jesus Christ was born, celebrated on December 25. Father Christmas (in the UK) or Santa Claus (in the US) brings gifts for children in the morning, and families traditionally eat a roast turkey meal. Boxing Day (December 26) is also a public holiday in the UK.

Easter is in March or April and commemorates the death of Jesus Christ and the start of spring. It is another big family holiday, and children often paint and decorate eggs, and eat chocolate eggs.

Halloween, on October 31, is another shared holiday. Although it started in the UK, it became more popular in America. Typically people dress up in scary costumes like ghosts, devils and witches, and go 'trick or treating' – knocking on doors and asking for sweets. They also carve pumpkins to create jack-o'-lanterns and decorate their houses.

Guy Fawkes Night or Bonfire Night is a uniquely British celebration held on November 5 to commemorate the failed plot by the Catholic rebel Guy Fawkes to blow up parliament in 1605. It is celebrated with fireworks, bonfires and parties.

Thanksgiving is a special American holiday, always on the fourth Thursday in November. Originally the first Pilgrims gave thanks to God with a feast to celebrate their successful first harvest. Now it is an important family holiday with a roast turkey meal.

Independence Day, or the Fourth of July, is an important day for the USA. It is the anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, the day the country announced its independence from Great Britain in 1776. Today it is celebrated with fireworks, parades, barbecues, picnics and family get-togethers.

On November 11 (the date when WWI ended in 1918) soldiers who have died in wars and war veterans are remembered. In the UK, it is called **Remembrance Day** and in the US **Veterans Day**.



Holidays in the Czech Republic

There are 12 public holidays in the Czech Republic.

January 1, besides being **New Year's Day**, is also the date the independent Czech Republic was founded in 1993, after the break-up of Czechoslovakia.

Easter is celebrated in either March or April, and is full of traditions. Popular folk customs include hand-painting eggs and lashing girls with pussy-willow sticks.

There are two holidays in May. May 1 is **Labour Day (May Day)**, which is also celebrated in many other countries. It commemorates an 1886 strike by workers in Chicago who demanded an eight-hour workday. May 8 is **Liberation Day** and recalls the end of World War II.

In July there are two public holidays. On July 5, we remember **Saints Cyril and Methodius**, who brought Christianity to Great Moravia in the 9th century. July 6 is **Jan Hus Day**. This is the day the church reformer Jan Hus was burned at the stake in 1415.

St. Wenceslas Day is celebrated on September 28 (the day when St. Wenceslas was murdered) and is also called Czech Statehood Day.

One month later, on October 28, is **Independent Czechoslovak State Day**. We remember the day Czechoslovakia was created in 1918.

November 17 is the **Struggle for Freedom and Democracy Day**. This commemorates the student protests against the Nazis in 1938 and the demonstration in 1989 that started the Velvet Revolution.

In December, the holidays are all about **Christmas**. We celebrate Christmas with our families and friends on December 24, with a nice dinner (usually carp and potato salad) and open gifts. December 25 and 26 are two other Christmas holidays.

There are also some holidays we observe that aren't public holidays. We celebrate St. Nicholas on December 5 in the evening before his feast day. Children get sweets from a person dressed like St. Nicholas, who is often accompanied by a devil and an angel. On May 5 we remember the date of the Czech uprising against the Germans in 1945.



William Shakespeare

Shakespeare is one of Britain's most famous writers. His plays and sonnets (a type of poem) have been translated and read all over the world.

He was born in Stratford-upon-Avon in 1564, where he grew up. He married Anne Hathaway and they had three children, but he left his family behind and travelled to London to become a playwright.

In London, Shakespeare started a very successful career as an actor and writer. He was also part owner of a 'playing company' (company of actors) called the Lord Chamberlain's Men (later called the King's Men). The company built their own open-air theatre on the south bank of the River Thames – the Globe.

Going to the theatre became very popular in the 1600s and Shakespeare became a very well-known playwright. Even Queen Elizabeth I was a big fan of his plays. When he eventually retired and moved back to Stratford he was a rich and successful man. He died aged 52 (in 1616) and is buried in Stratford.

Shakespeare wrote 38 plays and 157 sonnets. One of his most famous plays is *Romeo and Juliet*, which is a tragic love story about two lovers from feuding families. *Hamlet* is thought to be his best play and is about a prince who gets revenge on his uncle for the murder of the king (the prince's father).

Shakespeare's plays are often classified as being either tragedies, like *King Lear* or *Macbeth*, comedies, like *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or *The Taming of the Shrew*, or they are historical, like *Henry IV* or *King John*.

Today, the Royal Shakespeare Company in Stratford puts on many of his plays in the town, and his house has become a famous tourist destination. The original Globe theatre was demolished, but a replica now stands near its original spot. It is a popular tourist attraction in London.



The European Union

The European Union is thought to have begun in 1951 when France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg signed the Treaty of Paris and created the European Coal and Steel Community. The basic aim of this community was to make war among the members impossible.

The next step was the formation of the EEC (the European Economic Community). This organization set out a common economic and agricultural policy. The UK, Ireland and Denmark joined in 1973. In 1981 Portugal and Spain joined. During this period, in 1979, the first direct elections to the European Parliament occurred.

The European Union as we know it today dates from 1993 with the signing of the Maastricht Treaty. Gradually, more countries joined, and today the EU has 27 members. The Czech Republic and Slovakia joined in 2004.

To be allowed to join the EU, a state must meet certain rules, called the Copenhagen criteria, such as having a democratic government, a functioning market economy, and guaranteeing human rights.

The members of the European Parliament are directly elected by citizens of the EU states every five years. The parliament meets in Strasbourg, France, and Brussels, Belgium. Brussels is home to many other EU institutions as well (the European Council, the European Commission...), so it is something like the EU capital.

In 1999 the Euro, the common currency for the European Union, was established. The first notes were printed in 2002. Countries which use the Euro (currently there are 17 of them) are said to belong to the Eurozone.

Another policy of the European Union is the idea of the free movement of people. To promote this the Schengen Agreement was adopted in 1985 between five nations. This agreement was then expanded in 1997 and again in 2007 to include most continental European nations. There are no border controls within the Schengen Agreement area, so EU citizens can freely travel from one country to another without a passport. Not all EU members are part of the Schengen Agreement (e.g. the UK and Ireland did not sign it) and not all Schengen States are in the EU (e.g. Switzerland and Norway).



Education in the UK

The education system of the United Kingdom is governed by each of the four countries: England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

In England education is divided into four levels: nursery (ages 3–4), primary education (ages 5–11), secondary education (ages 12–18) and tertiary education (ages 18+). Education is compulsory for all children aged between five and 16. Children start in the year they turn five.

The school year in England usually begins on September 1. The students have a number of holidays throughout the year. There are the autumn, spring and summer half-terms holidays in October, February and June respectively. They last a week. Students also have two weeks over Christmas and five weeks from the end of July to the end of August.

All students must study English, maths and science from ages five to 16. Other subjects are compulsory only at certain stages. The vast majority of secondary schools in Britain today are comprehensive and state-run. This means the school does not select in advance what type of student can attend and education is free.

A small number of grammar schools continue to exist. The term can be used either for a state-run selective school, which requires the student to pass a test, or a privately-run independent school. These schools are also called 'public schools'. They are not state run and the students' parents pay for tuition.

Assessment in the UK starts with the GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education). These exams take place in year 11 (when students are 16 years old). If the students have satisfactory grades they can then study for their A levels. Results from A levels are used to determine if students can qualify to get into universities. Students pay for their university studies although there are ways of getting government support.

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