

# Great Britain



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# MEET THE BRITISH

Forget stiff upper lips and posh 'British' accents: the people of this island are more diverse than the clichés suggest.

JOSEPH REANEY introduces his people.

**THERE ARE MANY** stereotypes about the British people. You've probably heard a few of them. The British are emotionally reserved and polite to the point of standoffishness. The British have a sarcastic and often inscrutable sense of humour. The British spend their time drinking (milky) tea, talking about the weather and forming orderly queues. While there are elements of truth to some of the old clichés, there's a fundamental flaw in the very idea of 'the British'. This is an island with a shared history and language but real diversity across geography and generations. Speak to an eight-year-old in London and an 80-year-old in Shetland and it becomes clear that you can only begin to understand the British by travelling across Britain.

Take the accent. The common concept of a 'British' accent is RP (Received Pronunciation), thanks to the 20th-century influence of the BBC. However, the number of people who speak this way today is vanishingly low, even in the southeast of England (where the less clipped Estuary English dominates). Travel around the country and you'll find an abundance of other strong regional accents, from the melodious vowels of Birmingham to the nasal consonants of Liverpool, the dropped Hs of Cardiff to the rolling Rs of Glasgow. Those in

urban centres in the north of England and Scotland tend to swear more liberally than those in the south of England and Wales, often turning what appear to be extreme insults into terms of affection.

As a general rule, people get friendlier the further north you go. That's certainly the case in England, where southerners can come across as a little chilly. Yet this apparent rudeness can actually be a form of politeness, as locals don't want to impose themselves on strangers by striking up a conversation. If you're willing to make the first move, you may find people are happy to chat. Except in London: you can usually take the rudeness at face value there.

Of course, things are constantly changing. The birth-rate in Great Britain is at a historical low (although it had a slight bounce in 2021, the year of Covid-19 lockdowns), but net migration is at a record high, which means the demographic makeup of the country is always evolving. This is reflected in religion, with Christianity on the wane but Islam, Hinduism and Sikhism on the rise – along with the number of people who don't subscribe to any religion. In this way, the Britain of today is a vastly different place to the Britain of 50 years ago. So park the clichés and come with an open mind to discover an island that's more diverse than you might expect. And don't forget: always join the back of the queue.

## Who Makes Britain?

While Britain's population is majority white British (around 80%), the country is increasingly ethnically diverse, with large and growing minorities of Asian British and black British people. In October 2022, Rishi Sunak became the UK's first Asian British prime minister.



## I'M BRITISH, NOT ENGLISH

For many Britons, their identity is specific to their country, their region or even their city. For me, it's more general than that. Raised in the southeast of England, I have spent my adult life living throughout the UK and Europe. In my experience, regularly meeting expats of other nationalities who are curious about your country

means you are forced to reflect on your own specific culture and identity. The conclusion I have come to is this: I am British, not English.

Everything I love and loathe about my country, from its unparalleled pubs, its multicultural makeup and its self-effacing sense of humour to its

colonial history, its binge-drinking culture and its trouble-making travelling football fans, isn't unique to a single member nation. These are things that every British person has in common, like it or not. Now, as a father to a young son born in Prague, I'm fascinated to see how he will relate to Great Britain as he gets older.