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Secrets Of The London Tube

By Sharon Jacobsen

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Although it's many years since I left my home in London I still occasionally use The Tube, as the London Underground is affectionately known.

Hold on. Affectionately? Does anybody actually hold any affection for the network of tunnels that run beneath the surface of our capital, or the rolling stock that runs through them?

They're over-crowded, far too warm and stuffy (the temperature in the tunnels is about 10 C higher than at ground level), and the views are pretty dire. In central London, all you're likely to see is the dark walls of the tunnels, although if you're lucky, you might just get a glimpse of another train passing in another tunnel through one of the gaps between them. Funnily enough, contrary to popular belief, the majority of The Tube is actually over ground. Not that there's much scenic stimulation along those stretches either. You might see some fascinating factories, some interesting piles of rubbish that have mysteriously grown along the sidings and a few back gardens, but nothing much else.

Anybody who's ever regularly used The Tube during peak hours will tell you that using this particular form of transport can take great courage and will power. The platforms are crowded to the point where those at the front, closest to the lines, can find themselves fearing for their lives. We're warned to stand behind the line, which is painted about three feet away from the platform edge, but with all those people behind you, all wanting to get forward and have a chance of getting on the next arriving train, the platform edge can quickly become dangerously close.

Having a position at the front doesn't necessarily guarantee you a place on the next train though. Oh, no. Whether or not you'll actually get on it will depend largely upon where on the platform you're positioned and whether or not the carriage doors will be in front of you when the train stops. If you happen to be standing between two doors, then you're very unlucky indeed. One way around this is to look at those 'stand behind' lines. As the rolling stock on each line of the underground are generally of the same type (the trains differ from line to line) and stop at more or less the same point (note: more or

less... this isn't an exact science), the 'stand behind' lines will be more worn where the doors are likely to be. Find those spots and you'll have a better change of boarding the next one, unless of course the lines are freshly painted, in which case, bad luck.

This next point should be obvious to everybody but unfortunately, my experience tells me that this isn't the case. When the train stops, even if you're lucky enough to be standing in front of the doors, **LET PASSENGERS OFF THE TRAIN FIRST!** Don't just push your way on, even if others are doing so. It's bad manners and can cause nasty accidents.

Once on the train, you'll no doubt have to stand as there are few seats compared with the amount of passengers being transported during peak hours. It's standard etiquette to offer your seat to elderly passengers and those carrying small children, whether still in the comfortable confines of the womb or otherwise. Anybody else will have little chance of finding a seat. The more experienced underground travellers have their strategies though; they'll target a seat. Those reading are unlikely to be travelling

just a few stops, and although they could have been travelling for ages already, they rarely make good targets. Study people's faces. If they look bored, they've probably already been there a while so maybe they'll be alighting soon? Mind you, people do get very bored very quickly on The Tube, so they could just as easily have joined the train at the station before yours.

When it comes to seats that are vacated during the journey, there's a general unwritten rule. Whoever is standing closest to a seat that becomes available has the greatest claim to the seat. He/she can choose to offer it to a fellow passenger, but it's against etiquette to make a dash for a seat where the privilege of sitting obviously belongs to another.

Speaking of unwritten rules, there are a few others that should be observed if you don't want to unduly annoy your fellow passengers. The one that's probably more annoying than any other, is the subject of occupying seats unnecessarily! Bags and other inanimate objects do not have the right to a seat. Sure, if the trains are relatively empty, by all means pile them on a seat, but don't imagine you can do this during peak times, even if you enter to train at its station of origin where seats are still aplenty. Rather than have a small child occupy a seat, you might consider holding your toddler on your lap, too. Mind you, the rush hour on The Tube isn't the best place for small children to be, so your best bet would be to wait a couple of hours before making your journey.

Getting back to those bags, another point worth thinking about is what to do with large bags if you have to stand. Do as seasoned tube travellers do, and put them between your legs. No, I don't mean stuff it up your jacksy, I mean place your bag on the floor and straddle it, one foot on either side. It'll take far less room this way than if you stood beside it, because your feet still won't be much further apart than the width of your torso. Standing with your legs apart also makes balancing easier, and when those trains are dashing through winding tunnels, swaying from side to side, you'll need all the balance you can get. An added advantage is that should anybody decide to steal your bags, having body contact with it means you'll be more likely to feel it being moved.

Body contact. Yes, that's another subject. I wish I knew how many times I'd felt a 'lump' being pushed against my backside on a crowded tube. Please...if anybody who's guilty of this is reading, is it really

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necessary? I understand that the jiggling motion of the train whilst pressed closed to the body of a member of the opposite sex might cause a sensation that could lead to embarrassment, but it surely isn't necessary to make a show of it?

On some lines, and at certain stations, a voice will tell you to "mind the gap". The posh female voice is known as Sonia, because she "gets on ya nerves" and "the gap" is a terrifyingly wide opening between the platform and the train door. Being of voluptuous proportions, I've never had a fear of disappearing down the gap, but the thought of getting my leg stuck down there has been pretty scary. For goodness sake pick up small children and carry them.

The deepest part of the system is at Hampstead Heath (Northern Line), where the rails are approximately 220 feet below the surface. Being the deepest part of any line, you'd expect to find the longest escalator here wouldn't you? But you'd be wrong, because of all the 409 escalators, the longest is actually at Angel station, where the escalator is 197 feet long with a vertical rise of 90 feet. That's one awesome escalator!

Whilst on the subject of moving stairways, I have to tell you that sometimes they don't work and you have to walk up them, like it or not. There's nothing quite like getting off a crowded tube train, feeling hot and sweaty and probably in need of murdering somebody, only to be presented with an

out-of-order escalator that appears to be several miles long. Unless you're ultra fit, it just isn't funny. If they are moving, please remember to stand on the right hand side allowing those who want to walk up or down access to the left. You'll find that passengers often feel the need to run down escalators, causing danger to not only themselves but others travelling the escalator with them. It's a bad habit that you shouldn't indulge in.

Despite being uncomfortable at times, The Tube's a relatively safe means of travelling around London. The most famous accident must surely be the Moorgate disaster, back in 1975, when 43 people were killed. The second disaster was in 1987 at King's Cross, when a fire killed 31 people. There have been no other major disasters. There have been a few bombs placed on tube trains over the years, but none have actually exploded on packed trains. The 253 miles of railway is, however, renowned for its suicides. Jumping in front of a tube train seems to have been a fashionable way of killing oneself for quite some time now.

Using the tube is relatively inexpensive with a trip for an adult costing anything from £1.00 to £3.60, depending on the length of the journey. This is measured by zones, with zone 1 being within central London. The more zones you travel through, the more they'll charge you. Logical really. Child fares are available for those under 15, under five's travel free.

If you need to know which zone you'll be starting from or how many zones you'll be travelling through, 'TubePlanner' is a useful site to visit (www.tubepanner.com). The journey planner here is actually easier to use than the one on the official London Underground site (www.thetube.com), although don't tell them I said so. You'll be able to access information such as quickest route, journey time and the fare. You can also look up tourist attractions and find out exactly how to get to them.

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Those who use the tube often will always complain about it, but the truth is, without it, London would come to a stand still. The streets of London are already chock-a-block with traffic as it is so any attempt at transporting 900 million passengers over ground each year would lead to nothing less than chaos.

It may not be perfect, but it's by far the quickest and most convenient way of travelling through London. And hey.... even the map's easy to understand!

Sharon grew up in East London but moved to Norway at the age of 19, returning to England in 1998. She now lives in Cheshire with her partner and two of her three children. Besides writing, she is currently studying Social Science with The Open University, runs a web site where women in the UK can meet other women for platonic friendship (

), potters in her garden, knits

and reads everything she comes over.

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