

My summer vacation: London public transportation

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What ticket to get?

The two main forms of mass transit are the tube and buses. Passes are good for both systems, except where noted.

There aren't many options, which is good, because it makes decision-making easier. I'll start by focusing on tickets for zones 1 and 2, which is where the major tourist attractions are. Prices are as of summer 2019.

Ticket	Validity	Price	Notes
Travelcard	7 days	£35.10	
Oyster / contactless	7 days	£35.10	Must begin on Monday. Oyster is bus-only.
Oyster / contactless	1 day	£7.00	
Oyster / contactless	1 ride	£2.40	£1.50 for bus ride
Paper ticket	1 ride	£4.90	Tube-only

Children under age 11 travel free with a paying adult. You'll probably find the accessible fare gate most convenient for entering and exiting with a child.

Travelers from ages 11 to 15 can obtain a temporary half-price concession (discount) on their Oyster card.¹ Adult fares start at age 16.

Paper tickets are inferior to Oyster and contactless along every monetary axis, so let's ignore them.

If you pay by Oyster or contactless, then the system caps your daily fare to £7.00 and your weekly fare to £35.10. Just travel like normal, and the system will automatically convert you to the equivalent of a daily or weekly pass. Weekly caps are calculated based on a Monday, and if you pay by Oyster, only bus fares count toward the weekly cap.

Therefore, if you aren't angling for the weekly cap, then Oyster and contactless are equivalent.

The only real decision scenario occurs when you are staying for a week and don't arrive on a Monday. In that case, your choice is between contactless or a 7-day Travelcard, and the decision depends on whether you think you'll travel enough that the £35.10 Travelcard will be cheaper than a bunch of £7.00 daily caps. (Or less, if you make fewer than three tube trips a day.)

Do note that tube stations are rather close together in the central part of London. If your destination is only one or two stations away, consider just walking there instead of taking transit. And of course if you walk around, you get to see more of London!

How to pay

You can buy an Oyster card for £5 at the machines at the station. The machines are also where you top up your card. There are lots of machines, so the wait in line is not usually that long.

If you have a supported contactless credit card or mobile device, you can scan your card or device directly on the fare gate, just like it was an Oyster card.

Oyster and contactless payment follow the same fare structure (except for the lack of a weekly tube cap on Oyster), so the issue is one of convenience.

Oyster	Contactless
Scan quickly on the fare gate.	Can take a few seconds to scan.
Buy at the machine for £5.	You already have it.
Use machine to add funds.	Funds come from your account.
No surcharge.	May incur foreign transaction fee.
Must register to access online features.	Auto-registered by credit card number.
Can add concessions.	Always charges adult fare.
Can add Travelcard.	Cannot add anything.
Can end vacation with unused funds. ²	Withdraws exact amount needed.
Can reuse on next vacation.	

Whichever you choose, be consistent, so that the system can apply the daily and weekly caps. Contactless payments are tracked by credit card number, so if you have multiple cards with the same number, only one person in your group can use it for contactless payment. Conversely, if you have multiple cards with different numbers, pick one of them for all of your travels so they become eligible for the cap.

When you beep through the fare gate, make sure you have only one payment method near the sensor. Otherwise, the payment method you use to beep into the system may not match the one you beep out on,³ and you will end up being charged for two maximum fares.

Buses do not charge based on distance traveled, so you beep only when boarding.

Unregistered Oyster cards are transferable, provided they do not have a Travelcard or concession loaded onto them.

Registering your Oyster card gives you the ability to perform account activities online, such as viewing the card balance, adding funds, or reporting a lost card (and recovering the unused balance). However, a registered Oyster card is non-transferable.

We brought our Oyster cards back home with us, and put them in the drawer with all of our other foreign travel stuff, like our Paris Navigo cards. If you're traveling to London, and you decide to go for the Oyster rather than contactless, you could ask your friends if anybody has an unregistered Oyster card sitting in a drawer that you could borrow.

Traveling outside central London

If you want to explore outside central London, things get more complicated, because you now have to deal with regional trains.

I never did figure out how to take the regional trains. Even the fares are confusing.

For example, if you go to the TfL single fare finder and ask to go from Earl's Court Underground Station to Hampton Court Rail Station, it says that an off-peak trip is £3.00, but doesn't say how you should get there.

If you go to TfL's Plan a journey page, it tells you that you should take the tube to Wimbledon, then change to a South Western Railway train, but doesn't tell you how much it will cost.

If you go to the South Western Railway web site and ask for trains from Wimbledon to Hampton Court, the one-way fare is £4.50.

The math doesn't add up.

For this trip to London, we also considered a day trip to Oxford, but the travel options were confusing. For example, one option was given as “Inter-city rail GWR”. Is that the same as “BritRail Inter-City train”? They both have the National Rail logo. Do I have to buy tickets in advance for a specific seat, or can I buy tickets just-in-time? (Maybe reserve seats are required only for peak travel times?) Are there concessions for children?

My conclusion was to skip the train entirely and take the Oxford Tube, which is really a bus service between London and Oxford. Tickets on the Oxford Tube do not need to be purchased in advance, and unless there’s some special event going on in London or Oxford, the buses are rarely full.

But it turns out we didn’t go to Oxford at all. Tickets to visit Christ Church college need to be obtained in advance (and I forgot to get them), and guided tours are not offered during the summer. The Harry-Potter-famous Bodleian Library does not permit visitors under age 12, which is understandable since it is a research library, not a tourist attraction.

¹ You could obtain an 11-15 Zip Oyster card, which permits free travel on buses. You have to order it in advance, you still have to pay half price on the tube, and it costs £15, so it’s almost certainly not worth it for a tourist.

² If you have less than £10 on your card, you can get a refund at a machine. It’s not entirely clear to me from reading the site whether this includes the £5 for the card itself. As I noted in the article, we kept our cards, so we never found out what happens.

³ There is also the obscure mid-trip beep, which you as a tourist will never need. This is for people who travel across London but not through Zone 1, to prove that they did not travel through the city center.

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