

GETTING AROUND

Street Layout

European streets on the whole are not laid out very sensibly. There are several downsides to having quaint, rustic old buildings dotted around the town centre. One of them is that when they were built they were often in the middle of a vast space of land that is now covered in other buildings. The streets that weave between these great old buildings therefore wind around the place in a somewhat unpredictable fashion, and have over time become larger in order to accommodate motor traffic. The end result of this tends to be a city centre “with character.” A city centre with character means one in which a drunk tourist will rarely be able to find his hotel without hailing a taxi.

American streets run north–south, and east–west. If you can stomach the somewhat dull cityscape this creates, this is a great idea. European streets do not follow this logic. As a result, Americans are born with an ingrained notion of which direction they are facing. Europeans are not. Europeans find American signs saying things like “no parking north of here” as confusing as a sign that said “no parking nearer Dave’s house than here.” Americans often use numbered streets in one direction, and named streets in the other. This is also an excellent idea, but would be a waste of time for Europeans, as no street runs particularly in any constant direction. Americans streets are split into blocks of approximately equal sizes. European streets are not.

I think the difference in town planning is best illustrated by an example of each. Here’s an American tourist asking for directions in New York:

Tourist: *Hello there!*

Local: *Not interested, buddy.*

Tourist: *Uh, I just need directions, man.*

Local: *Oh sorry, I thought you were asking for money.*

Tourist: *Jesus! What is wrong with people these days?*

Local: *Where d’you want to go? I’m in a hurry.*

Tourist: *Can you tell me how to get to Whole Foods?*

Local: *Sure. Go north about five blocks, then east onto Madison. It’s two or three blocks down on the right.*

And now let’s look at a British tourist asking for directions in London.

Tourist: *Hello there!*

Local: *Not interested, mate.*

Tourist: *Erm, hello! I wonder if I can ask you for directions?*

Local: *Oh sorry, I thought you were scrounging.*

Tourist: *Goodness me, what has the world come to?*

Local: *Where d’you want to go? I’m in a hurry.*

Tourist: *I wonder if you could tell me the way to Marks and Spencer?*

Local: *It’s just by the Bush Monument.*

Tourist: *Hmm...I’m afraid I don’t know where that is, I’m just on holiday here.*

Local: *Crumbs...well, if you head down to the river, then —*

Tourist: *Where’s the river?*

Local: *It’s just down past the Fox and Hounds on the one-way cobbled bit.*

Tourist: *Which direction?*

Local: *Over there. Well, you can’t see it very easily for those trees.*

Tourist: *But there’s a car park over there.*

Local: *The road sort of curves to the left around the car park, then goes around this corner with a fork in it — the left fork just goes into a housing estate but the right one goes towards the Fox and Hounds.*

Tourist: *So just straight down there?*

Local: *Yeah, until you see a McDonald’s. Or is it a Burger King. Then you turn right at the next light.*

Tourist: *I turn after the McDonald’s or just when I see it?*

Local: *Are you sure you don’t know the Bush Monument?*

Tourist: *Yes, I’m positive, I only arrived this morning.*

Local: *OK, well, the river is just after that turning. You might want to write this down, to be honest.*

Tourist: *No, no, it’s fine; I’ll remember it.*

Local: *Well once you hit the river you’ll want to head towards the mosque. Don’t cross the river.*

Tourist: *What mosque?*

Local: *The mosque! I don’t know how to describe it. It’s a mosque. It’ll be perfectly obvious.*

Tourist: *It’ll be ahead of me when I reach the river?*

Local: *Well, sort of. There’s a cobbled bit as you get down to the river itself. You might have to try and see the mosque earlier if you can.*

Tourist: *OK thank you ... and then I’ll get to the Bush Monument?*

Local: *No. They didn’t put the Bush Monument very near the mosque.*

[Tourist and local laugh heartily]

Local: *Basically head for the mosque until you see Cardinal Street. In fact, now I think about it, those general instructions work fine from here too. Head for the mosque until you see Cardinal Street. Except the river's in the way, obviously.*

Tourist: *Splendid — and the Bush Monument is on Cardinal Street?*

Local: *It's right there; you couldn't miss it.*

Tourist: *Thank you very much.*

Local: *To be honest if I was you I might get a minicab.*

Tourist: *Is there a minicab office near here?*

Local: *There's one by the old dental hospital.*

Inside Buildings

The terminology for floor numbering is different between the U.K. and the U.S. In the U.K. (and on the European continent), the first level of a building is called the “ground floor” — the one on the ground. The next one up is the first floor. In the U.S., the level you walk into off the street is the first floor.

This conjures up the image of an American high-powered executive, hungry and listless, trapped forever on the first floor of a British office looking for the exit. Well, it does for me. Some new American buildings are adopting the British floor-numbering system, renaming the first floor “ground” but keeping the second one as “2.” I have to admit (I'm not putting it in writing, mind) that I thought the Americans had the right idea here originally.

My wild conjecture as to how this might have ended up happening is that it stems from a time when buildings only had one floor and nobody ever thought about what to label further floors. When one of the smarter peasants in the village discovered that he could extend his hut upwards, he perhaps labelled his new addition the “first floor” to denote that it was the first extra floor, on top of the existing one that all buildings clearly have to have. All of the other peasants were even more impressed when he installed the world's first elevator, and just went along with his naming scheme for the buttons even if they didn't think it made a heap of sense. He was very much the golden boy of the dark ages, and as such people would probably have been burned for saying anything uncomplimentary about him.

He died penniless, as there was no money then.