

GOING OUT DRINKING

Drinking is an enormous part of U.K. culture. Brits require a couple of drinks in them to make business decisions, initiate sexual relationships or buy furniture. To facilitate commerce and encourage population growth, pubs are distributed liberally around the country. On the whole, British pubs are not very similar to American bars. Pubs tend to be reasonably child-friendly, at least during the day — many of the more rural ones style themselves as family eateries and sometimes have outdoor children's play areas or children's menus. Pubs are social hubs, not so much places to go and get hammered. Getting hammered is just a fringe benefit.

The legal drinking age in the U.K. is eighteen — in reality, the law is not very strictly upheld and many people start drinking long before that. There's some sort of law that says you can drink wine with a meal when you're sixteen, and only when accompanied by someone twice your age with grey hair, or some such. Anyway, it doesn't matter much because if you look much more than sixteen you're unlikely ever to be asked for ID in a pub, unless that pub was formerly a hotbed of under-age drinking and has been threatened with closure several times.

Pubs

You will never get table service in a pub for drinks. Well, let's not say never. You will get table service in the occasional snooty London wine bar. Suffice to say that if you don't look at the drinks menu and think, "are these prices for bottles or glasses?" then you're not getting table service. You're also unlikely to find a drinks menu on your table — to find out which drinks they have you generally need to go to the bar and look at the beer taps. They may also have some sort of board on the wall showing beer and wine. On the up side you will never be expected to tip for drinks. Don't even try it — they won't know what's going on. If you're desperate to ask the bartender for a date or apologise for the vomit they're going to discover in a urinal shortly, the best way to tip them is to offer to buy them a drink. In city bars this will probably just result in them chalking one up in the till to buy later; in country pubs they'll more than likely drink it there and then.

Once you've decided what you and your party want to drink, someone will have to go to the bar and buy the round.

Rules for Buying Rounds

Brits always buy drinks in rounds. Even if they're with people they don't know, they will buy drinks in rounds. This system, whilst clearly open to abuse, has worked for several hundred years due to a tacit agreement by the entire population concerning certain rules. If drinking with Brits, you must adhere to these rules.

Beer is to be bought in pints only. Do not buy a half-pint of beer (unless you are a woman) or a bottle of beer (which are reserved for nancy-boys and Londoners). Drivers or people who are clearly already drunk will occasionally be permitted half-pints. Spirits are for women only when served with mixers.

Do not try to pay anyone back for a round of drinks. Even if there is not a chance in hell of you having another one that night, you shouldn't feel guilty about not being able to get a round in. On most evenings, someone will end up slightly out of pocket. Perhaps you'll be with the same people drinking every night; perhaps the guy who just bought two rounds in a row will be someone you never see again. The assumption is that over a lifetime these will balance out such that nobody really ends up out of pocket. Don't feel bad about accepting drinks from strangers, and don't feel bad about buying them. Of course, there will always be people who are unusually extravagant with rounds and there will be people who are somewhat miserly — the former tend to be regarded as a little showy, and the latter will find themselves out of drinking buddies within a fairly short space of time.

Do not try to opt out of the system. The only valid reason anyone may opt out of buying rounds is if they're driving. Even then, they may be required to nominally take part in the system with an unwritten agreement that their round won't come up as often as anyone else's. If you're intending only having one drink for reasons other than driving (a practice known in the U.K. as "being a poof") then you must still buy rounds for everyone else. This is your penalty for not drinking. Don't moan and whine about it, as the minute you've buggered off home the entire conversation will be about what a boring git you are, and tight-fisted to boot.

Never offer to pay if someone else goes to the bar. Even if you can find a willing co-conspirator, this sort of behaviour is bang out of order. No matter how rich you are, an important part of buying a round involves trying to remember the drinks everyone wanted, squeezing your way to the bar, shouting vainly at the barman, collecting your dripping-wet change, trying to squeeze in between the barflies to collect your drinks and then attempting to carry six beers back to the table via some ferrying system without crashing into anyone and without spilling them.

Some Tips

Once you are familiar with the rules, you might find these tips useful.

The first round is a good one to buy. There's a good chance you're all standing around the bar, so you won't have to carry fourteen drinks across the place, and whilst everyone will remember who bought the first round it's a little debatable as to who will recall who bought the fifth.

If you have more beers to buy than you possess arms, it's permissible to ask your friends for some help in carrying beers back to the table. However it is also permissible for your friends to simply ignore this request, in which case you'll have to make several trips back and forth to bring them to the table. The request should be phrased in such a way as to give someone the opportunity to volunteer, rather than make anyone feel obliged: "Any of you fuckers want to give me a hand?" or some such. An alternate tactic is to try to signal from the bar that the drinks are ready and perhaps someone would like to come and grab a couple of them. Often this will elicit a more favourable response as it doesn't involve any waiting around and will enable your volunteer to speed up the delivery of his own beer.

You will get Manly Kudos for carrying three pints of beer at once. Note that Manly Kudos in the U.K. accrues in a silent fashion, and is not accompanied by whooping or cheering. Carrying four beers at once will normally cause some nods of appreciation. These are the British equivalent of taking your shirt off and running around the bar, punching the air and shouting "U-S-A! U-S-A!" If four beers are carried by a tourist, they will be talked about for decades afterwards by the local barflies.

The easiest way to carry four beers is to grasp one in each hand between your thumb and index finger, and then piggy-back a second one further away from you between your index finger and middle finger. The remaining fingers can be curled under the second glass to provide some vertical support. It's impossible to actually pick up two beers in one hand like this. Carrying four pints in such a fashion is only made possible by the fact that you can grasp two in each hand and then push the four glasses together in order to lift the set. The stability of the finished structure is reliant on glass-on-glass friction which, although stronger than one might expect, is still very near zero. Once lifted from the bar the entire configuration is a volatile one — any large slippage between the glasses horizontally or vertically will likely lead to catastrophe. As a certain amount of slippage will normally occur in transit, you may find that you have to enlist some helpers to dismantle the structure upon arrival. You will likely find a number of willing volunteers, not only because they yearn for some vicarious glory but also because if they don't help you're likely to throw half a gallon of beer over the assembled party and probably cause their ejection from the drinking establishment. Helpers will often stand up. This is because they only have one change of clothes with them.

Do not buy a round of drinks with a credit card. Whilst credit card transactions are the norm in bars in the U.S., they are not in the U.K. If they are even able to take credit cards (which in rural pubs is almost guaranteed not to be the case), the transaction will probably involve the bar-person tut-tutting and then going into the back room to try and find the credit card machine. As they fumble around under the bar looking for a pen, all the other customers will glare at you like a love child at a funeral.

Service is an art. Customers waiting at the bar are rarely served in the order in which they arrived. The most reliable method for being served promptly is to stand close to the bar (perhaps leaning gently on it, but not right over it) and smile as often as possible at a barperson of your choice. Things that will get you served faster than average are:

- Being attractive, and of the opposite sex to the bar person
- Being tall
- Knowing the bar person

Things that will get you served slower than average are:

- Shouting or whistling
- Waving money
- Leaning right over the bar
- Being noticeably drunk (unless also attractive, in which case this may be a positive feature)
- Being small
- Being clearly a part of an enormous group and therefore about to try and buy seventeen drinks, a third of which you've forgotten already and another third of which you're going to have to shout back to your friends to find out what they want
- Being English (in Scotland)
- Being Scottish (in England)
- Being French (universal)

The key to drinking in the U.K. is really just accepting it as substantially different to drinking in the U.S. There's a lot more waiting around. Customer service is quite simply not something that's involved in the process. You'll no doubt drip beer all down your second-best suit whilst trying to carry the three goddamned beers you just paid for back to some bunch of idiots that you only just met. But hey, no tips! And as time goes on, you will develop a warm, comfortable feeling about people in general — sure, you just bought a drink for that guy with the funny hair who turned out not to be your colleague's boyfriend after all. But some day, from someone, you'll get it back. Maybe you'll even fall in love and stuff.