



THE LOVE LONDON GUIDE N. 006

The Great British Queue

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In September 2022, a line of mourners stretched some ten miles along the south bank of the Thames, moved through the night at a shuffle, generated its own livestream, and was promptly nicknamed "The Queue" with a capital Q - a piece of national theatre that surprised no one who lives here. Britain did not invent standing in line, but it has spent a couple of centuries turning it into an unwritten social contract with real rules and real consequences for breaking them. This is Guide 006 in The Love London Guide series.

Where the Habit Came From

The word itself is a borrowing: "queue" comes from the French for "tail", and English adopted it in the sense of a line of people only in the nineteenth century. Historians tend to trace the modern British devotion to orderly lines to the upheavals of the twentieth century - the shortages of the First World War and, above all, the rationing overseen by the Ministry of Food during and after the Second World War, when waiting your

turn for scarce goods became both a daily reality and a point of collective pride. Standing in line was reframed as fair play under pressure, and the habit outlived the shortages that created it.

How the Rules Actually Work

The system is entirely unwritten, which is precisely why it is enforced so firmly. First come, first served is the governing principle; you join at the back, you keep a polite gap, and you hold the position of anyone who briefly steps away if they asked first. The gravest offence is not impatience but "queue-jumping" - cutting in - which reliably produces the most feared British sanctions: the tut, the raised eyebrow, and a pointed "Excuse me, there is a queue." The etiquette guide [Debrett's](#) still publishes guidance on the subject, treating the line as a genuine matter of manners rather than a joke.

The Underground Has Its Own Version

Queuing culture bleeds into how London moves. On escalators across the network, [Transport for London](#) asks passengers to stand on the right so that anyone in a hurry can walk up the left, and the convention is followed with near-religious consistency. Interestingly, TfL trials at Holborn station found that asking everyone to stand on both sides could actually move more people during the busiest crushes - evidence that ran straight into the wall of habit, because Londoners largely refused to abandon the walk-on-the-left rule even when told it was slower.

The Queue as an Event in Itself

Some queues are practically institutions. The most famous is The Queue at [Wimbledon](#), where thousands camp overnight in a designated park to buy limited same-day tickets for the tennis; organisers issue a numbered Queue Card to fix your place and publish a formal code of conduct covering everything from tent sizes to when you may leave to use the facilities. Retail has its own set-pieces too: the winter and summer sales at Harrods and Selfridges have historically drawn dedicated queuers to the doors before opening, and the annual first-night lottery for standing "Promming" tickets at the [BBC Proms](#), held at the [Royal Albert Hall](#), is a summer ritual of its own.

Studied, Not Just Stereotyped

The British relationship with the line has been genuinely researched. The social-research organisation [Mass Observation](#) recorded ordinary queuing behaviour from the late 1930s onward, and the anthropologist Kate Fox devoted a well-known section of her book "Watching the English" to the elaborate unspoken signals people use to police a line without ever openly confronting anyone. The recurring finding is that the queue works less because Britons love waiting and more because they are acutely sensitive to fairness and deeply reluctant to make a scene - a combination that makes the orderly line the path of least social discomfort.

Myths Worth Retiring

Myth: Queuing is uniquely British and unknown elsewhere. Plenty of countries queue in an orderly way; what is distinctive here is the intensity of the social disapproval attached to jumping and the way the line becomes a small moral drama rather than mere logistics.

Myth: The Wimbledon Queue is a free-for-all where you just turn up. It is a structured system with a numbered Queue Card, stewards, and a published code of conduct; abandoning your spot or trying to save places for large groups can get you removed.

Myth: Britons never complain in a queue. They complain constantly - just rarely to the person responsible. The muttering, sighing, and eye-contact-seeking are the complaint; direct confrontation is the last resort, not the first.

Frequently Asked Questions

What happens if I accidentally jump a queue?

Usually nothing dramatic - a corrective "The queue starts back there" and a firm point of the finger. The best response is a quick apology and to walk to the back; arguing your case is what actually causes offence.

Which side do I stand on when using an Underground escalator?

Stand on the right and leave the left clear for people walking up or down. It is the single most important unwritten rule of moving around London, and blocking the left will earn you immediate, silent disapproval.

Do I really need to camp overnight to queue for Wimbledon tickets?

For guaranteed same-day Show Court tickets, many people do camp the night before, though grounds passes for the outer courts often need far less waiting. Check the official Wimbledon guidance before you go, as the arrangements and any advance-booking ballots can change from year to year.

Official websites mentioned

Debrett's: [debretts.com](https://www.debretts.com)

Transport for London: tfl.gov.uk

Wimbledon: [wimbledon.com](https://www.wimbledon.com)

BBC Proms: bbc.co.uk/proms

Royal Albert Hall: royalalberthall.com

Mass Observation: massobs.org.uk