



The United Kingdom consists of England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. Situated off of the northwest coast of Europe, these islands extend between 50° and 60°N. The climate of Britain is notoriously variable and changeable from day to day. Weather is generally cool to mild with frequent cloud and rain, but occasional settled spells of weather occur in all seasons.

Visitors to Britain are often surprised by the long summer days, which are a consequence of the northerly latitude; in the north of Scotland in midsummer the day is eighteen hours long and twilight lasts all night. Conversely, winter days are short.

The frequent changes of weather affect all parts of the country in very much the same way; there are no great differences from one part of the country to another.

While the south is usually a little warmer than the north and the west wetter than the east, the continual changes of British weather mean that, on occasions, these differences may be reversed. Extremes of weather are rare in Britain but they do occur.

For example, in December 1981 and January 1982, parts of southern and central England experienced for a few days lower temperatures than central Europe and Moscow! During the long spells of hot, sunny weather in the summers of 1975 and 1976 parts of Britain were drier and warmer than many places in the western Mediterranean.

The greatest extremes of weather and climate in Britain occur in the mountains of Scotland, Wales, and northern England. Here at altitudes exceeding 600 m/2,000 ft conditions are wet and cloudy for much of the year with annual rainfall exceeding 1,500mm/60in and in places reaching as much as 5,000mm/200in. These are among the wettest places in Europe. Winter conditions may be severe with very strong winds, driving rain, or snow blizzards.

In spite of occasional heavy snowfalls on the Scottish mountains, conditions are not really good for skiing and there has been only a limited development of winter sports resorts. Severe conditions can arise very suddenly on mountains, so walkers and climbers who go unprepared face the risk of exposure or even frostbite. Conditions may be vastly different from those suggested by the weather at lower levels.

Virtually all permanent settlement in Britain lies below 300 m/1,000 ft, and at these levels weather conditions are usually much more congenial. As a general rule the

western side of Britain is cloudier, wetter, and milder in winter, with cooler summers than the east eg **Aberystwyth**.

The eastern side of Britain is drier the year round, with a tendency for summer rain to be heavier than that of winter. The east is a little colder in winter and warmer in summer eg **York**,

Much of central England has very similar weather to that of the east and south of the country. The southwest of England shares the greater summer warmth of southern England but experiences rather milder and wetter winters than the east of the country.

The average number of hours of sunshine is greatest in the south and southeast of England and least in the north and west. Western Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland have rather less sunshine than most of England. In Britain daily sunshine hours range from between one and two in midwinter to between five and seven in midsummer.

Winter sunshine is much reduced in Britain because of frequent fogs and low cloud. This is a consequence of winds from the Atlantic and seas surrounding Britain, which bring high humidity. For the same reason British mountains are particularly cloudy and wet.

The chief differences of weather and climate in Britain can be summed up by saying that Scotland is rarely much colder than England despite its more northerly latitude. Summers in Scotland, however, are usually shorter and rather cooler. Wales, western Scotland, and Northern Ireland are wetter the year round than most of England. Northwestern England and the Lake District are, however, particularly wet and cloudy.

Snow may occur anywhere in Britain in winter or even spring but, except on the hills, it rarely lies for more than a few days. In some winters there may be very little snow, but every fifteen or twenty years it may lie for some weeks during a prolonged cold spell.

Visitors to Britain will rarely experience severe or unpleasant weather for long unless they venture on the hills. They should be prepared for rapid changes of weather at all seasons, however, and recognize that there is good reason for weather being a major talking point in Britain.