

[00:00:01.190] - Intro

Welcome to the UK Travel Planning Podcast. Your host is the founder of The UK Travel Planning website, Tracy Collins. In this podcast, Tracy shares destination guides, travel tips, and itinerary ideas, as well as interviews with a variety of guests who share their knowledge and experience of UK travel to help you plan your perfect UK vacation. Join us as we explore the UK from cosmopolitan cities, to quaint villages, from historic castles to beautiful islands and from the picturesque countryside to seaside towns.

[00:00:36.900] - Tracy

Hi, and welcome to Episode 52 of the UK Travel Planning podcast. This week, Doug and I are actually sitting in a hotel in York, England, because Doug has just joined me in York from a five day trip to Wales. So I thought it would be a good opportunity in this episode to talk to Doug all about his trip to North Wales. So Doug, would you like to introduce yourself?

[00:01:01.070] - Doug

Hello. Yeah, it's great to be on again. I'm so excited. I had a fantastic week in North Wales. Beautiful weather and lovely people. And the week has actually flown by. I've had the most fantastic week.

[00:01:16.140] - Tracy

So this is actually the first podcast episode that we've actually had a chance to talk about Wales. And I thought because Doug's just spent five days there exploring it, trying out lots of public transport and trying out lots of the trains and exploring it. Obviously, the logistics of planning it all took some time. It'd be a good chance to actually, just say, go through what he did, where he went, how he planned it, for those of you who are considering a trip to North Wales in your visit to the UK. So let's start off, I guess, basically, would you like to give everybody an overview of your trip and where you went and what you did?

[00:01:57.250] - Doug

Yeah. Okay. So first off, I went through our Facebook group and it seemed where comments or questions have been posted when people have asked questions about the many heritage railway lines in North Wales. So that seemed like a good starting place. So once I'd on myself with a list, I found myself a map of Wales and found out where all these heritage train lines run. And then naturally, what I thought was, where am I going to base myself? So I came to the decision I would stop in Bangor in Gwynedd, that's North Wales. Before going any further, I just need to point out my apologies for any Welsh speakers. My pronunciation is probably very poor and I do apologise, but I'll do my very best.

[00:02:45.980] - Tracy

It's better than mine, that's for sure.

[00:02:48.770] - Doug

Once I got myself with the services I wanted done, and that included the Snowdonia Mountain Railway and the Llangollen Railway routeway and the Ffestiniog Railway and Welsh Highland Railway. So once I found out where they were and when the service is run and whether it should have been diesel or steam, I'll come to that later on. It was a question of finding A, whether available that day, whether there were still spaces those days and how they all fit in together. So I wanted to do one area, then to another area, then to another area. So once I found those, it was a question of, well, can I then book them? And so we completed all that. We did that together. And then I thought, well, we're needing to find a hotel to stay in. So on this trip, I decided I was going to do all with public transport.

[00:03:45.510] - Tracy

Didn't I? Yeah, absolutely. That was a decision rather than hiring a car because obviously we just know the questions that we get in the Facebook group. And also we have done itinerary consults with people who have been intending to go to North Wales. And I know some people have asked us before about public transport. And because we do like to look into the use of public transport around the UK, like we did the Lake District last year, we based ourselves in Windermere to see about how you could get around. We felt that it would be a really useful thing to do for you to actually plan your trip using public transport only.

[00:04:24.240] - Doug

Yeah, that's right. And obviously it's slow because you then got to start looking at bus timetables and then in North Wales, I found different bus providers as well. So it was a question of finding which bus service covers which area. For example, I found the Gwynfor coaches, they provide their bus service to Snowdonia. So you have to find one to Llanberis, which is a little town there, a beautiful town. But once I found all the correct buses, then it was a question of finding the bus tickets. And I did find, and I was very impressed, I was telling you about, I was very impressed with ARIVA coaches or ARIVA buses. They had some very good day passes, day bus tickets. And they were incredibly helpful. The bus drivers, very friendly, very helpful. You get in off a bus who've never been somewhere before, and you ask them where the bus stop is for the return journey, and it's just over there, I'll point you down there. I was really impressed with them.

[00:05:25.350] - Tracy

Can I just rewind? I just want to rewind a bit actually, because I know you said when you were deciding on the places that you want to go to, there was the four different railway lines that you wanted to do, those heritage railway lines. But also what about actual destinations, as in places in North Wales that you wanted to go to and see? Because obviously, people talk to us about those railway lines, but there are other things to do in North Wales. So I guess they were included in your itinerary planning?

[00:05:53.370] - Doug

That's right. No visit to North Wales, but we were complete without looking at the castles. There's such a concentration of castles in North Wales. So I mixed the days up. I also wanted to do one particular tour that appealed to me, three castles tour, and is also visiting the Snowdonia National Park for a viewing point. The viewing point was absolutely spectacular. So I was really privileged to be on this tour as well at the same time. And we also went to Llandudno for the Great Orme, which I'd already done another day. Lots of information there. Let me go through my day, shall I? I first arrived into Bangor and the hotel I'd chosen, or we chose together, was a hotel called the Traxx Hotel, TRAXX. And that was literally across the road from the train station. And value for money, I was impressed with it. The lady who was running that, her name was Wendy, there's a few challenges along the way, but she was absolutely fantastic. I can't thank her for enough how kind she was to me. So that was perfect for me. And then believe it or not, the buses I needed to catch, I could also catch a second from there. So on the very first day I arrived, I also caught the train from Bangor to a place name. It's the second longest place name in the UK, the second in the world. I'm not going to try and say it, but it is known locally as Llanfair PG, and it's 58 letters long. And it's just an amazing place. So it's a photo opportunity.

[00:07:35.200] - Tracy

And you've got a photo with yourself at the sign. I did notice that. So we'll definitely put that in the show notes so everybody can see you standing at the sign of the second longest?

[00:07:45.010] - Doug

Uk place name. Uk place name. I think there's a place in New Zealand that I think it's the longest.

[00:07:50.390] - Tracy

So it's the longest in the UK, but second longest in the world. Right. Wow.

[00:07:53.820] - Doug

58 letters long. So I did that on the first day because that's only about six minutes on the train from Bangor, which was absolutely fantastic. And that's just across on the Isle of Anglesea.

[00:08:06.240] - Tracy

Okay.

[00:08:06.660] - Doug

So that was the first day. And then on the second day, I bought the early morning bus from Bangor to

Snowdonia. And I went up on the Snowdonia Mountain Railway on a beautiful, hot, sunny day. And the views are absolutely breathtaking.

[00:08:25.410] - Tracy

So I'll just say this was obviously the beginning of June that did this trip. And the weather in most of the UK has been absolutely fantastic over the last week. But particularly in the West Coast and in Wales was amazing. It was really lovely weather, which made it even better because I know the views were spectacular with beautiful blue skies.

[00:08:44.060] - Doug

It's more tall views you don't know where to look. And honestly, the photos and videos do not do the place justice. And it was wonderful. Unfortunately, the train, the Clogwyn it doesn't go all the way to the summit at the moment until 24th of June, I believe, because of, I think the work isn't completed from over winter, I think. So that was a good chunk of the day. And then I was going to catch the bus to a place called Bethesda. Again, apologies, I say that wrong. And then I was going to join the main train line to Ffestiniog, the old train station. But we'd already done that week before. So I returned by bus to Bangor and then caught the train again to Llandudno. And from there, I caught the tramway to the summit of the Great Orme, which is the headland of Llandudno. And there's a lot of history involved with that. There's a bronze mine there as well. And it's absolutely fascinating. Now, my plan was to go one way to the summit on the tramway and then return by the cable car. But unfortunately, that afternoon, the wind had increased in speed so unfortunately, the cable car was not running.

[00:10:02.160] - Tracy

So they don't run it when it gets too windy? I guess it's safety issue.

[00:10:05.600] - Doug

Yeah. So I was forced to come back down on the tram, which was an absolute hardship. It really was. It was awful.

[00:10:11.440] - Tracy

That's worth bearing in mind, I guess, if anybody's planning to do that is that obviously, bearing on the weather can impact on whether you can do the cable car.

[00:10:19.390] - Doug

And you can buy return ticket for that one if that's what you're planning on doing. But it's really nice. It's a very pleasant place. One interesting thing I found about Llandudno, which I didn't know at the time was the Llandudno was the birthplace of Lewis Carroll, the writer of Alice In Wonderland. So there's about 30 -40 wooden statues there. And there's also locally the starting of the free walking tour.

[00:10:47.350] - Tracy

All right. So what are the statues of?

[00:10:49.380] - Doug

All the characters in Alice in Wonderland, the rabbit. And Alice herself. And various places. So that was that first date. Absolutely fantastic day in Snowdonia. And then the second date, I went on the tour and that covered Conway Castle, Caernarfon Castle. But also went again to the Great Orme. Lots of all the little places to stay along the way. Absolutely fantastic.

[00:11:17.180] - Tracy

So with that tour, did you go and meet the tour at a particular place? How did that work?

[00:11:23.160] - Doug

Yeah, we met the tour just outside the train station at Llandudno. And then I think it was left about half past eight in the morning, we turned about half past five.

[00:11:34.300] - Tracy

Okay. I know that was with Adventure Tour Snowdonia. So we will put a link in and the show notes to that tour because I know you absolutely loved it. You were raving about it after that day just said how excellent it was.

[00:11:47.060] - Doug

I hope to get back to the young chaps. The tall guy was like, I call Freddie, who was absolutely awesome. His enthusiasm was... His warmth came across to everybody. It was absolutely marvellous. So including that was the Conway Castle, Dolbadarn Castle, probably saying that wrong as well, Caernarfon Castle, Plas Mawr, which is the grand hall in Conway, and the world's... Sorry, the smallest house in Great Britain, which is absolutely amazing. It was a tiny tiny little house. And can you believe it? It was a 6'3 fisherman who used to live in there.

[00:12:23.250] - Doug

Really? And I've seen the photos of how small it is. It's really tiny. Do you have to pay to get into that?

[00:12:27.710] - Doug

Yeah, it's about £1.50, but that is cash only.

[00:12:30.360] - Tracy

That one. Okay, all right. That's good to know.

[00:12:32.890] - Doug

So that was a whole day there. And then the following day, I went by train again to Ruaban, I think I said it's just outside Rexham. And then I caught the bus to Llangollen for the railway service from there. And that's 10.30 to about 12. And it absolutely amazing. Went the full length.

[00:12:54.450] - Tracy

So where does that go to?

[00:12:55.650] - Doug

I can't remember the name of the place. It's just open. Special word there for one of the conductor there, a gentleman by the name of Ross, who consented to a little video for myself. You're going to include that as well.

[00:13:10.370] - Tracy

Yeah, that was brilliant. I will include that in the show notes actually, because it gives to a little interview.

[00:13:15.340] - Doug

He was outstanding. Again, the face of the company, the first thing you walk in, he's welcoming, he was kind, considerate. And again, his energy was just abounding. Yeah.

[00:13:28.190] - Tracy

So good views on that with that train trip?

[00:13:30.490] - Doug

Yes, it was. Because I was going to say this later, I'll say it now, this day and the following day, there were scheduled on the timetable for steam train services. But because of the prolonged hot weather, the risk of line side fires is quite huge. And yet on the day before, there had been a little fire. So it was diesel trains running, but in no way did it dampen the experience. And that Ross was just his enthusiasm was abounding. So it was two heritage diesel units or DMUs, if you're in the know. And both out with journey and return, I sat just behind the driver. So I got lots of photos that I did share some on the group as well. But a wonderful day. Everything from start to finish, from walking in Llangollen Station to Leven, it was an absolute joy, particularly to a train person like myself. But again, the weather was absolutely beautiful. It really was. So I returned then by bus to Bangor that day. And then I had a walk round Bangor that night as well, down to the pier for some beautiful views of the Menai Strait and the Menai Bridge. And it was really a beautiful evening. But there's a lot of those

towns.

[00:14:53.120] - Tracy

And that's over to Anglesea, I should just say.

[00:14:55.140] - Doug

Yes, that's right. It goes to Anglesea. And the little island there called Puffin Island. All right. You can get the boats out too. So that was that day. And then the following day, I had a very long day this day, I caught the bus to Caernarfon for the best in their own Welsh Highland's Railway. Again, this should have been a steam train. It was timetable as a steam train, but unfortunately it wasn't. And again, a special mention to the conductor on that train. A young lady by the name of Beccy, who was, again, such warmth and helpfulness toward jumping down the train, answering questions. Just wonderful. I also sat next to a family, actually very engaging in a lovely family day out, and it was just so friendly. So then after that, I caught the bus back to Caernarfon and had another quick look around, Bangor. And that was.

[00:15:53.010] - Tracy

That really. Yeah. So obviously, you've done it. You did the four railways and they were really exciting and you enjoyed all of those. Obviously, met some fantastic people on the trains and the staff were in the trains. So that was great. I know you visited some of the castles, so I just want to talk about how did you feel about some of the castles that you visited? What did you have a favourite?

[00:16:14.590] - Doug

I probably preferred Conway Castle because the town has such a lot to offer as well. There's not a lot to choose between Conway and Caernarfon Castle. They've got a fine history and a lot of story to tell on their own. But probably Conway just does it for me as a town. I also went, I have missed that entirely, I went to Anglesea one evening and it was a bit late because the Castle was already closed at Beaumaris or Boomeris. I'm not sure the pronunciation of that. That's across that Anglesea itself. That's overlooks basically the Menai Street and Bangor, Puffin Island. And it could just see because it was getting a bit hazy, it was the Llandudno in the distance. But Beaumaris is absolutely lovely little place as well. You can catch ferries across there, Puffin Island, and also boat trips through the Menai Street, the bridges and things like that as well. And then that's the most marvellous fish and chips there as well.

[00:17:14.990] - Tracy

I was going to ask you about food. Actually, that was something I was going to ask because I know that's something we have been asked before about recommended places to eat. So what did you do for food for those days away?

[00:17:25.790] - Doug

It wasn't exactly the healthiest. I had two lots of fish and chips on recommendation.

[00:17:29.430] - Tracy

Wow, but the fish and chips were good.

[00:17:31.390] - Doug

I ate in a couple of cafes as well. But the fish and chips at Beaumaris were absolutely delicious. Now, one of the places I didn't try, apparently in Llandudno, instead of fish and chips, it's going to Chish and Fips or something of that nature. And that has been recommended as well by the family I was on the train with on the Gelert Explorer on the Welsh Highlands Railway. So some lovely food.

[00:18:00.340] - Tracy

Yeah. And so I know you had bacon sandwiches in the morning before because I know. You had...

[00:18:04.950] - Doug

I did. I put a picture on, didn't I? On Bangor Station, there's a travel cafe there called the Snowden Cafe. And I had this bacon sandwich and a cup of tea or cup of... And it was absolutely delicious. I did

put a picture. On, didn't I?

[00:18:19.090] - Tracy

Yeah, you did. And I will share those again. Okay, so you're giving us a good overall view of how you went and how your days were. How did you find it logistically? Because obviously you planned this with the buses. And how did it work?

[00:18:34.390] - Doug

Yeah, the buses. I was very impressed with the ARIVA buses. What I did before I went on the trip was I looked at all the different buses and what would have been the best tickets? Because I did find you can pay by cash or card on the buses. But what I opted to do was buy two M tickets as mobile tickets and you activate them on the day that you use them and then you're just scanning the QR code on the bus. But I was relying on WiFi on the buses. So at the time, I was having to wait until I was on the bus to be able to access the QR code. But the drivers, every driver was absolutely outstanding and really helpful. And patience as well, to be fair.

[00:19:15.970] - Tracy

Yeah, that's good to know. So have you got anybody, any tips that you could give to anybody that would consider in this trip?

[00:19:22.970] - Doug

I would. Firstly, I have to have written this up as a post on the website, I use that as a good guide. But I would point out that the railways themselves do take up a big chunk of the day and you've got logistics to get there. And I did see some of the car parks get quite full. So if you are driving, you've got to allow yourself plenty of time to park your car.

[00:19:47.710] - Tracy

Right. That's good.

[00:19:48.830] - Doug

Some of them were not all card or cash, but a mixture. But there's one I think it was at Snowden and it was said it was card only.

[00:19:59.580] - Tracy

Oh. Okay.

[00:20:00.640] - Doug

But the other thing is, if the train depart, say at 10.30 and a couple of them, you have to arrive 30 minutes before to collect your tickets. Even if you've bought online, you've got to go and present it 30 minutes before the train departs. It's just for logistics to get everybody on board.

[00:20:17.640] - Tracy

Okay, so then when it comes to actually... Do these sell out so you can't just turn up on the day you have to book ahead?

[00:20:23.370] - Doug

Some you do. The Snowden Railway one is only a small one or two coach long, so you have specific seats booked on there as well. So they do get booked up. I was on the first one of the day and it was full. There's no standing room allowed because they have to have a view. Right. There's a climb, in a sense. But no, the ticket only. I think there was on the and I think there was some tickets available.

[00:20:55.680] - Tracy

Okay, so that's good to know.

[00:20:57.230] - Doug

And the other thing, I would always arrive as much time as you can, particularly if it is a steam train or you want to take photos of the coaches or the locos. It's worth it.

[00:21:07.540] - Tracy

Is there any other tips that you could share with anybody that's considering, as I say, this trip to North Wales?

[00:21:13.980] - Doug

I would definitely do the one of the tours as well. Public transport works, but it pays to do your homework first and be sure and clear which buses you want to catch. Because I did find, and I did talk to this on another couple on Anglesea, that some of the online bus times don't always marry with the bus stop times because there's electronic displays and some paper and some printed timetables, but they don't always marry up. So I was looking at both, but I was always arriving 10 minutes before buses just to be double sure I was going to catch them, particularly on the Sunday when there was obviously going to be less buses travelling.

[00:21:56.700] - Tracy

Okay, now that.

[00:21:57.350] - Doug

Sounds good. The ARIVA bus is also very good on board WiFi.

[00:22:01.650] - Tracy

Okay, so that's good to know so that people can use that as well. Yeah. So I think obviously you're going to write up your itinerary from the last week. So your entire itinerary, including the bus times that you took, the trains that you took, will actually be available in a blog post on the website. I'm not sure if it will be ready by the time this podcast episode gets out, but we'll be working on it. And as soon as it's sorted, you're going to yeah, we're going to work on that. So have you got any final tip that you'd share with our listeners?

[00:22:38.110] - Doug

I would say public transport is doable, but shop around for the best deals for the bus tickets and be sure of what you're paying because I did find that there's also the bus tickets for the one bus ticket and that covers a lot of all the different operators in Wales. I did not know about that. I did not read about it anywhere, but that was one of the drivers that told me that. So it pays to shop around, make sure you get the right bus tickets.

[00:23:05.980] - Tracy

Okay, great. Well, thanks for chatting to us this week about your trip to Wales. Obviously, it's the first time I've seen you for five days since we were in Edinburgh. So it's good to chat with you about what you've been up to in Wales for the last few days as well.

[00:23:18.790] - Doug

I've got so much I need to say about it. I'm sorry it's a bit disjointed, everybody listening to that. There's just so much I want to say about it.

[00:23:25.180] - Tracy

Well, obviously, if anybody's got questions that they want to ask Doug about this, his trip around Wales, please join the Facebook group and you can come in there and ask Doug questions about the logistics, about what he enjoyed about this trip. But as I say, this is going to be written up as a blog post and it will be available on the website.

[00:23:42.170] - Doug

One thing I will find, few times I had to be a little bit more flexible in my times and buses and keep checking and that thing. So it's about flexibility with the itinerary. So I always happen to talk to anybody about trains, particularly North Wales. And finally, thank you, everybody, I came into contact with through my trip in North Wales. Everybody was so friendly and helpful.

[00:24:05.210] - Tracy

Thank you. That's great to know. So you can find everywhere that Doug visited and more information, obviously, a link to the upcoming post about his trip to Wales on the website at uktravelplanning.Com/episode-52. But all that leaves us to say for this week is, as always, Happy UK Travel Planning.