

[00:00:00.180] - 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.

[00:00:38.020] - Tracy

Hello and welcome to Episode 39 of the UK Travel Planning Podcast. In this episode, I chat with Mark of Northumberland Tours, who shares some of his favourite destinations and experiences in Northumberland. This includes castles, islands, walks, and of course, Hadrian's Wall. This is the area of the UK that I actually come from, so it was great to talk to Marc, and I started the podcast off by asking Marc to introduce himself.

[00:01:03.220] - Marc

I'm originally from South Tyneside, which is just south of Northumberland, and moved down to London at an early age with my parents and basically grew up in Chiswick, but I still have a lot of family in the North East. It was where I always considered home because every holiday I got from school when I was in London, I would be in the North East, I'd be exploring. And it was even though I was a Londoner, I still loved Newcastle and Northumberland. So I went into the army at a young age and I served for five years, came out and I became a driver trainer for UPS, basically teaching drivers how to drive advanced driving and how to do the job. I've done that for 16 years. London has changed a lot over the years. And I decided I'd come back to where I loved and then I moved back to South Tyneside originally. And then I met my wife, a Northumberland girl, and lived here ever since and not looked back. But I wanted more of Northumberland and I wanted to see. You see so many snippets on TV and you read so much. And I knew some of the history because my granddad used to tell stories, as granddads do.

[00:02:39.860] - Marc

My stepson's autistic and I look into ways to help him develop. I decided to start a small business working with young men with autism, which is a challenging job, but it's very rewarding. But you do have to think outside the box. It was trying to find something to do different every day to keep them stimulated, to keep them involved and help them develop. And basically, Northumberland opened the door for that. The places we go, the places we've seen, the things that most people generally don't know about, we've experienced together.

[00:03:21.560] - Marc

We do hiking, coastering. It's like I say, we found parts of Northumberland that you wouldn't find in any books. You probably see on TV some of them because obviously it's quite a popular place for the TV. And then I've done that for a lot of years now. And it's just, well, I think it's time to I still am involved with young autistic men because I still have a passion for helping them develop and turning to productive young men. But I want to share Northumberland. And it's just with the places we go, I'd like to share it with other people as well. People, if you say Northumberland, they'll know Alnwick Castle because of Harry Potter or various TV programs. And it's just like, well, Northumberland is so much more than that. And it's a beautiful place to come to. And that's basically why I started doing the tours. And here we are.

[00:04:28.480] - Tracy

That's great. And obviously, I'm from Northumberland originally. So I was born and raised in Seaton Delaval, which is on the Coast in Northumberland. And I'm always very keen to promote Northumberland because I don't like the term hidden gem because it... But it is. Northumberland is that really, even for British people, it's not necessarily that well known that people go there on holiday. I mean, actually, I remember quite a few Scottish people coming to visit actually, but for English people, not so much. I think it's become more popular in recent years, but certainly for people from overseas. I know when I talk to other Australians or Americans and I talk about Northumberland, let's just say a couple of things may come up. Alnwick comes up quite often because of its connection

with Harry Potter. Sometimes the Vera TV show comes up because obviously that's filmed on the North East Coast as well. So a lot of those places come up. And obviously, maybe sometimes Hadrian's Wall gets mentioned. But I go, Northumberland has got so much history, so much beauty. It's a beautiful county with the landscapes, the coastal route, it's fantastic to drive along the castles, the islands Holy Island of Lindisfarne. And till I was in my 30s, I just thought it was actually called Holy Island because that's what my grandmother called it. And then I was like, is that the same as Lindisfarne? And the history, obviously, I come from coal miners on one side. My grandfather was a coalminer. His family originally came from Cornwall, actually, from the tin mines. But yeah, so there's just so much history. There's so much beauty in Northumberland itself. So I know my favourite things to do when I come up is I always go to do drive the coastal route because I absolutely love that route. And it's somewhere I used to go with my dad when I was a kid to Seahouses and Bamburgh Castle and then on the Holy Island. Mark, I'd love to know some of the places that you really enjoy, that are your favourite places in Northumberland.

[00:06:43.220] - Marc

I love the coastal route as well. I mean, if you didn't know Northumberland, you'd probably get off your train or coach, probably at Alnwick. And by the time you get to Alnwick, you've missed Amble, you've missed Allenmouth, you've missed Allenmouth, the little village. It's a picture. It's beautiful. You'd miss Warkworth Castle, which is still owned by the Percy family, along with Alnwick. That's still the Percy family. I'd say from Morpeth, ideally, all the way to Bamburgh, you've got four castles, you've got hikes, you've got Rumbling Kern. It's a little cove that not a lot of people know about. It's the Earl Graye, he owns Craggside. Craggside, 70,000 acres, first hydroelectric powered building in the world. But he had his summer house down overlooking Rumbling Kern. And it's called the Bathhouse. And it's on the edge of a cliff. You're looking at it. And you don't get many tourists there. But it's absolutely beautiful. From there, you can walk up to Craster and walk along to Dunstonburgh, which is probably about three around trip. It's spectacular where it is because its main defence is the cliffs. But it's fell into ruin. It was used in the Second World War, refortified against the Germans. And then you can carry on, obviously, Alnwick, Bamburgh. But Bamburgh is the jewel in my eye. It's the oldest castle in Northumberland. If you're standing at Bamburgh, you can see Holy Islands from the castle. It was originally called Bebbanburh, when the Vikings tried to take it after they tried to take... After they tried to take it, after they ransacked Holy island. They never managed to capture Bamburgh. They did sack it, but it's just such an amazing castle. And everybody I've ever taken there and everybody who's been there. We've got a guy over here called Robson Green. He's just done a series and he was in Edinburgh. And it's all inspired... It's called the Windsor of the North. It's got a museum in there with artefacts from World War II and big huge rooms with the old... Well, just everything you'd imagine to see in a castle. It ticks all the boxes. You can see the Farn Islands, which you can get a boat over to. It really is amazing.

[00:09:53.490] - Tracy

I love Bamburgh. I remember going, even when I was at school, it was a school trip that we got to Bamburgh Castle. One thing I haven't done is actually go out to the Farn Islands. I'd like to go and see the puffins and see the birds on the Farn Islands. That's something that has been on my list for quite a while. Even when I was a child, it was something that you'd see the islands but never get to them. That was the thing. But yes, that would be something. So have you taken the boat out there, Marc?

[00:10:22.600] - Marc

It's one of the largest colonies of seabirds in Europe. The trips normally last about two hours. Sometimes you get to see dolphins. You generally see seals. When you're actually out on the boat, you can see Bamburgh, Dunstonburgh, Lindisfarne Castle. For somebody who knows the coastline so well, doing a boat trip is still always fine for me because I see it from land. So when I see it from the sea, it's completely different. But yeah, the trips last two hours. You can do extended ones that do go to Holy Island as well. But obviously in the North East, and it was in Northumberland, the tide does affect your day if you are planning to be on the water. I mean, you could sell from Amble to do a puffin tour out to Coquet Island, where you can see you'll always see seal, lots of birds. Like I say, for me, being on the water is completely different because I get a different perspective. But yeah, well worth a trip. It's still the same band. I should have said Lindisfarne Castle is my favourite because I was married there. But the wife's not in the room so I still get away with it.

[00:11:48.740] - Tracy

It's your second favourite, then, is it?

[00:11:51.460] - Marc

Yeah.

[00:11:51.080] - Tracy

You see, Holy Island of Lindisfarne comes up quite a lot as well. And I have to tell people all the time, really, if you really want to go to Holy Island, you've got to check the tides because it's a tidal island and you don't want to get stuck.

[00:12:06.510] - Marc

It's a must. It is a must. It'll be a very long night if you do get stranded there because the hotels are generally fully booked. Yes, exactly. But it's definitely worth the trip. You've got the priory where the Vikings did attack. Lots of history there. It was Saint Aiden. You've got Saint Cuthbert's cave about five miles away where the monks carried Saint Aiden's relics to hide them from the Vikings. But that was the first place of Vikings landed. in the UK was on Holy Island.

[00:12:49.280] - Tracy

Oh, okay. I didn't know that.

[00:12:50.600] - Marc

Oh, yeah, it's 793. Wow. They've just opened a museum. It's new for this year. They've just opened the museum on Holy Island as well because there was an archaeological dig there last. The back end of last year, and they've got what they found out for display on there as well. But yeah, definitely worth a trip. But like you say, the tides is a must.

[00:13:14.820] - Tracy

Yeah, absolutely. Every time I come home, because obviously I'm from Northumberland and I usually come back and stay with my sister, and that's always an absolute must. I have to go over the Holy Island. I think it just reminds me so much of my grandparents and just trips when I was a child. And it's so beautiful to go there as well. It's an absolute. And so my father was actually from Wallsend, which obviously I tell the names of it. It was the end of the wall. So the end of Hadrian's Wall.

[00:13:48.500] - Marc

Yeah, definitely. There is a museum there as well. Segedinium, I think it's called.

[00:13:55.580] - Tracy

Yeah, Segedunum.

[00:13:56.640] - Marc

Yeah, that's it. Once you go across the Tyne, I think you're very rich in history with Romans.

[00:14:02.540] - Tracy

I love Vindolanda. I think Vindolanda is absolutely fantastic. And it's actually not on the wall because it was a fort that supplied the soldiers that were based on Hadrian's Wall. But it's not very far. And as you drive actually down the Vindolanda, you get a view of Sycamore Gap, which is very famous. It's a very famous sycamore tree, which is in the gap in the hills. And then you can go and park it, Steel Rigg car park and walk. And I didn't do the walk last year. I've got wonderful pictures of my husband and sister doing the walk. But I was like, I'll just watch it.

[00:14:36.720] - Marc

But that's a great place to go in. Steel Rigg car park to the wall. Probably, you could do a round trip in about an hour from the car park to Sycamore Gap, depending on how long you want to stay and photograph the tree and the scenery around you.

[00:14:54.590] - Tracy  
Yeah, absolutely.

[00:14:55.910] - Marc  
But House Steads as well. House Steads is the most complete Roman fort on the whole 73 miles of the wall. It is a popular place to visit.

[00:15:07.820] - Tracy  
I think House Steads will be on my itinerary this summer when I'm over. Last year, I went to Vindolanda, which I absolutely loved and actually took my sister there for the first time. And I think that's sometimes one of those things when you grow up in an area, you take it all for granted. What blew me away about when I went to Vindolanda was just the amount of shoes. There's so many shoes.

[00:15:30.520] - Marc  
Yeah, it's well known for its shoes.

[00:15:34.600] - Tracy  
Yeah, it's just hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of shoes. It was crazy. But fantastic. We had a really good day out there. So if you want to do that experience the wall, that's a great place to go and learn as well. The guide we had was so knowledgeable when we went into Vindolanda. So that was brilliant. Absolutely really good. So obviously, I was thinking about the most popular places because there's so much to do in Northumberland. So I was thinking that if you've got an interest in walks, what would you do?

[00:16:14.460] - Marc  
I'd say the walk from Craster to Dunstanburgh Castle is your parking, Craster, which is a little fishing harbour. And it's a one and a half mile walk through Dunstanburgh along the coastline. And then a walk around the castle. It's a beautiful walk. The castle is impressive. But I always say to people booking a tour, I have to ask the question, which I don't like asking is, are you physically fit. Because I can take you to... We have a number of waterfalls, Linhope Spout, Crammell Linn. There are a lot. But they're in the Cheviots, which, if you don't know, is like Dublin's little mountain range. I can be very physical, and the weather can change at a click of the hand. I got pulled out once and I left home. I was going to Linhope Spout, about, and it's probably a three to four more round trip. Linhope Spout's a waterfall with a plunge pool at the bottom. A lot of people swim there, which if that's your cup of tea, it's great. Not without a wet suit for me. But I left here and it was sun shining. And as soon as I got into the mountains, there was a blizzard and it was an eye opener. It was an eye opener for me and I know Northumberland really well. But for walks, you can't beat it. You go through the Ingram Valley into the Breamish Valley. That's basically a big valley following the river. And then up to the notes, it's amazing. So lots of walks, lots of different things, but everything dependent on your capabilities, really.

[00:18:17.190] - Tracy  
Walks along the coast, you've got a few more experienced hiker, there's certainly some brilliant and very famous... I mean, the Hiking Northumberland Coastal route is quite a famous walk that you can do. And obviously, Walkers got lots of things to do. If you're interested in history, we've already mentioned it, but Northumberland's got more castles than any other county in England.

[00:18:40.690] - Marc  
I think Bamburgh's over nine square acres. And the walk around the castle is... They were doing an archaeological dig there last year before. And where the sand dunes are now, they discovered loads of... It used to be a burial site for the castle. But that's a good because you can do Embleton Beach all the way up. You can walk castle to castle with Dunstanburgh to Bamburgh, like I say it really does depend on your fitness.

[00:19:20.980] - Tracy  
Yeah, absolutely. And if you don't want to, if you want to drive, obviously, you can book with yourself,

Marc, and do a tour. If somebody wants to book a tour with you, Marc, how does that look? How do you design, talk to them and then design it around what their interests are?

[00:19:35.820] - Marc

The best way to do it would be to have a rough idea of what you want to do. If you want a castle, if you want to walk, if you want both, or if you want to pager wall, just a slice of everything. Let me know. I'll have a look at it. I'll work it out and then I'll get back in touch with you and you tell me if that's what you want. But everything is... As long as we can fit it in a day, we can do it. But if we can't, obviously, I'll be very clear that, well, no that's not going to work.

[00:20:08.510] - Tracy

Yeah. And I think that's good because you have to be realistic because it's a huge county and there's so much to do. And you really have to pick what you're interested in. So that's absolutely true. So obviously, if people go out on a tour with you, it's great because they can sit back and enjoy the scenery because you're doing the drive and taking them around. So is there specific places that you prefer to pick people up at? Is it the train stations? I guess that would be more common at train stations.

[00:20:37.380] - Marc

I think if you want to do the coastal route, the best option is more of a train station, because basically it's a lovely little town and it's a good place to start because the next stop would be Alnmouth on the railway. And by the time you've done that, this town you've missed Amble, you've missed Warkworth Castle. So if you want to do the coastal, I would say Morpeth. If you want to do Hadrian's Wall, depending how you want to do it, because in Newcastle, we have a museum called the Hancock, and they have some of the best collections of Roman artifacts in the country. And so if that was your interest, I would start there. But if you want to get straight to the wall, as the one on Hadrian's Wall we've just organised, we started from Hexam, which is basically right, well, 10 minutes from the wall. So it's Hexam straight in sight, really. So it's either Morpeth Central Station or Hexham if you want to do more.

[00:21:53.100] - Tracy

Okay, that sounds good. And so if people want to book a tour with you, Mark, how do they... Obviously, I'll put links to your Facebook group in the show notes at the end anyway, so people will be able to do it. But it's just worth also just going through how people can get in touch with you.

[00:22:08.710] - Marc

Facebook is ideal. E mail, my phone number is on there, but I wouldn't bring that in, naturally. So probably Facebook or email would be ideal. Perfect. And I'll share that.

[00:22:23.980] - Marc

Yeah. A rough idea of what you would like to do. Let me have a look at it. And then I will get in touch with you and let you know if it would or it wouldn't work, or how we could change things, or if there was anything specific I could meet your needs to get it done.

[00:22:42.240] - Tracy

Yeah, that sounds great. Is there a maximum number of people that you can take out on a tour, Mark?

[00:22:48.720] - Marc

Four is four.

[00:22:51.620] - Tracy

Yeah. I'll be putting all information that... Everything we talked about, I'll go in the show notes for today's episode. So we'll make sure that we'll have links to your Facebook page and your email, Mark, so people can do that. There's one question I always ask, and this is a funny one actually for me talking about Northumberland, I always ask at the end of every episode. What would be the one tip you would give to anybody planning a trip to Northumberland for the first time.

[00:23:17.820] - Marc  
Bring waterproofs and some walking boots.

[00:23:21.390] - Tracy  
Yeah, that's true.

[00:23:22.540] - Marc  
Pack your shorts and t shirt, but make sure you've got waterproofs in your bag.

[00:23:28.360] - Tracy  
I have to say, I do. I love Northumberland, I love the Northeast, but I really don't miss the weather, I have to say. It's quite windy. But I remember telling my husband, actually, before we went up, even in the summer when it's really warm, you can have a sea fret come, which then just everything's really cold. And people don't believe it until you have sea threat. And then it's like, yes, it's freezing cold, which comes in from the sea.

[00:23:54.220] - Marc  
I was down at the Priory yesterday, North Shield, and there was a sea fret. Then we left here. It was lovely. Got down there and it was bitter.

[00:24:05.370] - Tracy  
Yeah. Absolutely.

[00:24:06.280] - Marc  
It was really, really fresh. But then again, last year, we had a really hot summer and the beaches were... You know, in Northumberland, the beaches, you can move. Even though they're busy, they're never full. Even on beautiful days, when you're heading to Northumberland, more so to the south, like Long Sands, North Shields and all that. But when you're heading up to Bamburgh, Embleton, the beaches are busy, but they're still bare if you know what I mean? They're not even.

[00:24:44.420] - Tracy  
Absolutely. I've got video actually. I just put something together for my Instagram the other day and I've got video because I walked over the Dunes from Bamburgh Castle and you just got the beautiful beach. And it was a lovely, warm July summer's day. And it just was hardly anybody on really compared to. And it was lovely. And you could see towards Holy Island and you could see the Farn Island. Castle behind you. Absolutely beautiful. I was like, oh, yes. I'm really looking forward to being back and getting back to, I guess, where I come from and practising my Geordie accent a little bit more when I get back. I keep getting told I sound very posh for a Geordie, but I was born and brought up in Northumberland.

[00:25:30.260] - Marc  
Well, I don't need to tell you to make sure you've got your waterproofs then.

[00:25:34.580] - Tracy  
I know that one. Make sure you've got your layers because you need it.

[00:25:40.820] - Marc  
Definitely. 100 %.

[00:25:43.740] - Tracy  
I just want to say, Mark, thanks so much on the podcast today and chatting about Northumberland. It's always a pleasure to talk about Northumberland. It's been great to chat to you and to talk about your tours. Obviously, people get in touch with Marc if you want to see Northumberland. Marc knows it really well. He can tailor make, he'll have a chat with you and see what works for you and what he can do. It'll be brilliant to have a really good time. Good day out. That's brilliant.

[00:26:10.220] - Marc

Thank you very much. Thanks. Thank you. I'll see you all soon.

[00:26:13.240] - Tracy

Yeah. Thank you. Once again, huge thank you to Marc for coming on to the podcast to talk all about Northumberland. It's lovely to talk about my home county. It brings back a lot of memories of my childhood and growing up there. Obviously, I'm always happy to talk about promoting such a beautiful, beautiful county. You can find links to all the places that we talked about in today's episode and also to Marc's company, Northumberland Tour. So you can book with Marc at [uktravelplaining.com/episode-39](http://uktravelplaining.com/episode-39). There are also lots of other resources to help you plan your trip to Northumberland on the website too. But for this week, that just leaves me to say to everybody, happy UK travel planning.