

Episode 84 - Exploring London's Walks Tours with Ground Operations Manager Charley Bennett

(AI generated transcript - please excuse any errors)

Intro [00:00:03]:

Welcome to the UK travel planning podcast. Your host is the founder of the UK travel planning website, Tracey Collins. In this podcast, Tracey 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 Tress Countryside to Seaside Towns.

Tracy Collins [00:00:42]:

Hi, and welcome to episode 84 of the UK Travel Planning Podcast. This week, I'm totally over the moon and really excited to be able to welcome guest, Charlie Bennett. Now, Charlie is the ground operations manager for walks tours in London. And as I'm sure you will know if you've listened to previous Podcast episodes. I'm a huge fan of Walk's Tours and I've been lucky to have been on lots of their tours in London and around the world And absolutely love them, which is why it is super exciting for me to have Charlie on the podcast this week to share all about walks tours in London. The first thing I asked Charlie to do was to introduce herself and tell us a little about her background.

Charley Bennett [00:01:25]:

Of course. Thanks for having me, Tracy. It's Pleasure to be here and to talk about walks and London and and what we've got coming up for finished year. So a little bit about my background, I Actually had the travel bug since a very, very young age. My mom and dad would always say I've got ants in my pants because I could never keep still, and I just wanted to go everywhere all the time. But I started very differently. I was actually a professional dancer for 18 years, and I traveled on cruise ships around the world for 10 years. So that kind of really got me into that whole love of travel and seeing new places and bringing places to life.

Charley Bennett [00:02:02]:

And I did a lot of the shore excursions on board, so I got to see how everything was being guided And all these magnificent places that sometimes you completely forget about when you actually go go to places. But my body decided to give up at me back back in 2014, and I needed a new venture, but I loved performing and I loved travel, so I needed to try and combine the 2 for myself. So I ended up becoming a tour guide myself, and I was leading groups of 40 around the British Isles on a small ship.

Tracy Collins [00:02:36]:

Oh, wow.

Charley Bennett [00:02:37]:

Which was fabulous. We we started down in Wales, and we went all the way to Tresco in the Isles of Scilly, up to Dublin, Northern Ireland, and then all around Scotland. And it was it was wonderful, and I did that for about 3 years. And then I've got itchy feet again, which is very much like me, and I wanted to push myself a little bit further. So I was offered the role of program services manager, with the same company, and I began hiring, training, and supporting New tour guides, and tour leaders on on the tours that we had around the UK. I did that for about 2 years and then progressed even further and became country manager. So I was then in charge of the whole operation of developing the tours, supporting program services managers in guide training, And making sure the overall quality of the tours was up to the power that we wanted. COVID hit, and then The company decided to move their office up to Glasgow, so for me, it was a little bit of a trek from from the southeast all the way up.

Charley Bennett [00:03:41]:

So I found a new venture and started with Walks in, July 2022, which was the best move I've ever made. I love working with this company. They really treat you as part of a family, and that that's what I love about it. You know? Everyone's always there from you. We're always sharing best practice, and it it really is a a fabulous company to work for.

Tracy Collins [00:04:07]:

That leads me into kinda interrupting a little bit there, Charlie, but, You know, I I love walks. I I love working with walks as well because I've been so lucky to be on so many of the tours. And I love working with everybody in company because they're they are fantastic. So professional, so friendly, so knowledgeable. So what is it that makes them so special For the people who are booking tours with walks.

Charley Bennett [00:04:31]:

I think one of the biggest things is is our philosophy, really. You know? You see so many of the coach tours, bus tours, etcetera. But for us, you know, the one thing we always say is the best way to travel is to walk. You see everything. You get to meet people. You can hear stories. You can take your time looking at things. You find those hidden gems that, you know, you wouldn't See if you were just driving around, and we do very carefully plan the itineraries that we put together.

Charley Bennett [00:05:00]:

I think one big thing as well is we we only We do small groups, so we only ever have a maximum group size of 20. We really try and make those extra special memories by giving an exclusive feel to our tours. So we really try and give special access to as many of the most iconic sites as we can. So That could be skip the line, which is where we we skip the public line, and we go in sort of round the back and and get in a lot quicker Before it gets too busy, beat the crowds. So, again, we go in at the same time, but we try and get to these the areas before all the crowds hit. And, of course, out of hours access is one of one of the the highlights, for for a lot of our tours.

Tracy Collins [00:05:47]:

Oh, yeah. Totally. Vouch for that for a couple of very special tours that I've done in London.

Charley Bennett [00:05:55]:

Yeah. It definitely it definitely makes a difference when you can go in the public there, without the crowds, and it's it makes makes the places come alive in my eyes.

Tracy Collins [00:06:07]:

Oh, no. A 100%. A 100%. I I have to say, and and everybody is listening to this podcast. That that's listened to episode 64 of the podcast where I talk about my My favorite experiences in London last year in June will know just how much I love the ceremony of the keys, and I know we're gonna talk about that, a little bit later. And everybody who's been on that Actually, the feedback that I've had and, note that you get is it is so special. Just having The Tower of London, basically, to yourself, a few other people, and having your own Neoman Warder as well, which is amazing, just makes that fantastic. And that that's what that, in a nutshell, is just so special, and Walks can offer you that.

Charley Bennett [00:06:48]:

Yep. Yep. And and that's why what we try and do with a lot of our tours. And we're very careful with the guides we choose as well. So we do use a lot of Blue Badge licensed guides, and they they've gone through a very rigorous training to become these guides. And the majority of our tours are are led by them Because they're not there to give a lecture, and it's not a scripted tour. You know? They they are educators. They are storytellers, and they just want to share their passion with with everyone that comes on the tours.

Charley Bennett [00:07:21]:

So we we really do carefully plan all all the itinerary and the guides that we that we use.

Tracy Collins [00:07:27]:

But it makes you guys stand out because it is a very competitive industry, isn't it?

Charley Bennett [00:07:32]:

Oh, very much so. I mean, at the moment, we're we're running in over 14 cities and counting. We're still growing, and we have with us over 600 guides Across the globe. It's wonderful to see that even after everything we've been through the last few years, everything is still growing, and we are Really, really hitting our feet.

Tracy Collins [00:07:52]:

That's great. So it's not only surviving, but it's thriving. You're thriving as well, which which actually kinda speaks for itself in terms of the The quality of the tours that you guys offer, really. So should we talk about some of the most popular tours in London?

Charley Bennett [00:08:06]:

Yes. Definitely. Well, when I started back in 22, we only had 4 tours. We were only running 4 tours in in the city, and it was It was me and the team that we we needed to bring London back. London needed to come back to life for for walks. And With a lot of redevelopment over the winter of 22, we're now running with 11 tours in London. So we've done a big jump from not having a lot to So now running, running our feet off. But, yes, there's the I mean, some of the most popular tours, we have, and I could recommend this to to any first timers that that come to London as well.

Charley Bennett [00:08:45]:

It's our full London in a day. It's it's a full tour. It is an 8 hour tour, but you really do get to see the most iconic sights of London. So It starts at 9 AM with a skip the line entrance into Westminster Abbey. You get about an hour and a half in the Abbey with blue badge guide. You then head up to see the most iconic building, Buckingham Palace, which is only an exterior view, but you get to watch the guard change happen, which happens 4 days a week. And then you'll head down to the horse guards parade where you'll see those the horsemen change over And then have, lunch in Trafalgar Square. And then my favorite part is you actually get to take a river cruise With city cruises up to the Tower of London, so you get to see more of the iconic sights as you're going up the river, And then you finish with a an hour and a half tour in the Tower of London.

Charley Bennett [00:09:46]:

So it's a good You do a good lot of walking, but for for a first timer in London, it's one of the best ways to see the whole of London in one day. It really is.

Tracy Collins [00:09:57]:

It's it sounds excellent. I actually haven't done that one. I have done Paris in a day, and I did Athens in a day as well. And I can vouch for the fact that it gives you a great taste for the main sites that everybody wants to see when you go. So, you know, Westminster Palace, you see the changing of the guard. Going on a on a a boat trip along the Thames is is to say it's a fantastic way to see Mhmm. London from a different perspective and then the Tower of London. So you really do Kinda cram all those main things into that day, so that's a a great way for somebody to spend a short time in the the capital or wanting to kinda hit all the main sites And kinda digest them in a day.

Charley Bennett [00:10:35]:

Exactly. Exactly. And, you know, if if that isn't what you want to do, if you wanted to focus on 1, we have Amazing complete tower with with river cruise, which takes in the opening ceremony, which For me was when I first saw it, it kind of blew me away. I I never even knew it happened. So, you know, we go in before the crowds. So there's us, maybe 2 2 other tour groups as well, and it's just us stood Well, they actually take the keys and open the Tower of London. It's something quite amazing, and then you get first access to the crown jewels before the crowds, which if you've if you've been to the Tower of London and you've had to stand in the queues for the crown jewels, you know This is absolutely one of the most amazing experiences to have, the special access to get in before crowds.

Tracy Collins [00:11:29]:

Again, I can say a 100%. I've done that tour a couple of times as well. Love that. Love the fact that you're in the Tower of London before anybody else. And, also, I think the last time, Doug and I were the first 2 people were to walk in to see the crown jewels. And we we we went around that travel aid there and looked at the crown jewels a number of times. Now I've been the I've been the Tower of London loads of times, but You know what? It was great without the crowds busy, you know to do it. Yeah.

Tracy Collins [00:11:55]:

Yeah. I've been able to I'm gonna go around and have another look at this massive, massive diamonds and gorgeous Jules. Yeah. And no queue. And you know Yeah. When you you once everybody gets in the Tower of London, it just goes crazy busy.

Charley Bennett [00:12:07]:

And I think the nicest thing with this tour as well is, again, you've got your own blue badge guide. So as much as sometimes we are restricted on, You know, the areas blue badge guides can can guide in in the tower, they are the only people, apart from the Yoma Warders, that are allowed to. So you really do get a true insight, understanding of what the tower was. You know, it was a zoo at one point, which a lot of people don't know about, and the guides will really go into depth with these stories, which which will bring it to life for them.

Tracy Collins [00:12:41]:

Oh, yeah. 100%.

Charley Bennett [00:12:43]:

Another one that that I absolutely love is the Westminster Abbey and Diamond Jubilee Galleries. This one is one of my favorites. Obviously, her majesty passed last last year, the year before. Gosh. That's gone fast, isn't it? And the Diamond Jubilee Galleries were opened up after her death for public view. And a lot of people don't know that they're actually there, but they're right at the very top of the west wing of Westminster Abbey. And with this tour, the complete Westminster Abbey and Diamond Jubilee Galleries, You get a full tour of Westminster Abbey, and then you get a full 45 minutes to an hour upstairs in the galleries where you can find the wedding certificate of William and Kate, lots of all the clothing that that the queen used to wear, some of the models of the the Palace and the Abbey of how they they were deemed back in the days, and it really is an exclusive visit. It's it's unbelievable.

Tracy Collins [00:13:41]:

Oh, yeah. I did do that to last June as well, and I loved it. I've never been up there. I didn't even know what was up there. We had the guide. She was explaining, You know, lots of the different things that are up there. It was fascinating. It's like an Aladdin's cave up there.

Tracy Collins [00:13:55]:

Really, isn't it? Is. Yeah. It is. So, Yeah. You know, if you're planning to go at Westminster Abbey, do this church and also go to Jubilee Galleries because it is such a special experience.

Charley Bennett [00:14:06]:

And Churchill War Rooms. If you're really into your World War two history, we really do recommend this tour. We take you on a walk around some of Churchill's hidden gems. So we show you where he used to buy his his rompersuit. We take you where he buys his cigars and where he used to sort of hang out when he was younger. And it's a wonderful insight into his life and into how World War 2 really affected London and changed London, and you finish off with a tour inside the war rooms. Now this hasn't got any special access, unfortunately. The war rooms Don't don't tend to do this.

Charley Bennett [00:14:46]:

So, you know, we do get there at a decent time where we don't have to queue very long, and we we go in. You get your audio guide inside, but our guide will also be there to help with any questions and to to point you in the right directions. But it really is one of those tools that

Opens your eyes to things that maybe a lot of people don't know about Churchill and, of course, World War 2.

Tracy Collins [00:15:10]:

I haven't done that one. I need to I need to do that one, I think, darling. I think you do. I think there's a few

Charley Bennett [00:15:15]:

you need to do now.

Tracy Collins [00:15:17]:

Absolutely. I'm gonna say 1 I will mention that you haven't brought up yet, but you're probably about to, so I probably preempted you. It's the Westminster Abbey with the houses of parliament. So it's a really interesting tour, that one. We were absolutely fascinated because we'd seen the House of Commons, the House of Lords on the TV, but actually To stand in those rooms was quite incredible.

Charley Bennett [00:15:36]:

It's it is a lovely tour, and it really it kind of it links 2 very, very iconic buildings In in one area, you know, people talk about Parliament Square, and they think, you know, it's just Westminster Abbey, but there's so much more to it. And Having your licensed guide around Westminster Abbey, and you get a lovely hour and a half in the Abbey, then you get taken into parliament, and We we switch the guides over, so you actually get a proper house of the parliament tour guide. And he or she will just bring parliament to life. But to see the areas of parliament that you only see on TV, To stand there and actually really understand how things work and what everything means in there is it really is something quite quite magnificent.

Tracy Collins [00:16:27]:

Definitely. Definitely. And I I don't know if you're saving the best to last or my favorite to last.

Charley Bennett [00:16:34]:

I think I am. The ceremony of the keys. Of Of course. I haven't got to mention this one. This one is my absolute favorite tour that that we have, and it is a real exclusive for walks. Not many tour companies, in fact, very few tour companies are able to do this, but we have our ceremony of the keys, which is our after hours tour at the Tower of London. It starts at 8:30 PM, and the most amazing thing about it is there is not one other group from the public In the Tower of London, which is I don't think you ever thought you would get. You're led by Yeoman Warder themselves.

Charley Bennett [00:17:18]:

So it could be a yeoman warden or it could be the Ravenmaster, which we've had on few occasions, But they will really take you around the exterior of the Tower of London. So you won't go into any of the towers, But they will give you a real insight into, one, what life is like as a yeoman warder, but what life is like living in the Tower of London. You get exclusive access into the chapel, which I know for you, Tracy, was was a big, big highlight.

Tracy Collins [00:17:49]:

Huge. Huge for me. Absolutely loved that. It was incredible. Absolutely incredible. I never thought I'd have the opportunity to do that. And, also, Just having the stories from the yeoman waters and telling us the history and so much more. They said they could tell us so much more than, obviously, they can when they do the The the free tours during the day when there's you could there's so many people that they could actually answer our individual questions, point different things out to us.

Tracy Collins [00:18:17]:

It was Absolutely fantastic. And the last show that I did, actually, it I know I'm sure people will will maybe have heard that there's a new kitten in the Tower of London. Well, it The the new kitten belongs to him, and he was telling us some stories about about her and what she was getting up to, which was really cool. But it's it just felt so much more personal as well. I've been to Travel London so many times, but but I feel like I know some of the Yowman Warders really well now.

Charley Bennett [00:18:42]:

It that's exactly it. And it's it's hard to imagine that this ceremony has been taking place for 700 years now, every single night without fail. And to be there and to witness this and to have your name put on a book to say that you were there to witness The ceremony of the keys is I mean, it's priceless. It really is. So a 100% recommend this tour to anyone.

Tracy Collins [00:19:10]:

Absolutely. And I I I'd say I tell everybody about it because I just loved it. I'd I'd go every night if I could. I'd I'd love to. I kinda I'd like to aim to meet every human water.

Charley Bennett [00:19:19]:

That would that would be good. That would be on there you go. There's your bucket list for 2024.

Tracy Collins [00:19:23]:

Absolutely. Go meet every single one because they're just Fascinated to talk to, and they're all all different. They all have a different perspective. They all come from a different background. And it's Just great. And I know every well, because I've done the tour twice now. I've been really lucky to have done the tour twice. And I know everybody that has done those tours have absolutely loved it.

Charley Bennett [00:19:44]:

Good. Now, hopefully, this will encourage more people to come and and and join these tours and and really get that exclusive and unique experience that we offer.

Tracy Collins [00:19:53]:

Well, I hope so. And I will be putting a link to all the tours in the show notes. So if you listen to this thinking, I wanna get booked on. And, honestly, I would say the ceremony of the keys. If you wanna do the ceremony of the keys, Go and check that link and get booked because it is so popular, and it is so exclusive, and it's so VIP that everybody wants to do it.

Charley Bennett [00:20:12]:

Perfect. Well, one thing a couple that I do want to mention, Tracy, and I know you're probably gonna get on to it, is we've got some amazing new experiences for 2024. The first one being, which we're extremely proud of, is the brand new Harry Potter and Warner Studios tour. It's Been a while to get this and to get partnership with Warner Studios, but we finally did it. And 2024, we're running Every single day from January 20th, you get an exclusive walking tour in London of some of the the most Fantastic film locations, with an avid Potter guide, an avid fanatic, And then you get a private coach out to the Warner Studios where you'll get 3 hours to discover the experience itself, and then a coach will take you back into Central London. It's an incredible tour, and we're thrilled to be able to get this up for this year.

Tracy Collins [00:21:10]:

Alright. It sounds amazing. I know that one is gonna be so popular. So many people wanna go to Harry Potter Studios, so this is a fantastic way to do it. Get the studios, and you also get the tour. And the transportation, so fantastic. So have you got any other new tours up your please.

Charley Bennett [00:21:26]:

Well, we have actually. Funnily used to say that. We have just managed to get partnership with Royal Collection Trust, which includes Buckingham Palace. So for 24, we are launching a brand new Buckingham Palace tour. So the staterooms, They're only open 3 months of the year. However, we are gonna be running from March, but we're going to be offering the Royal Mews whilst the staterooms are closed. So we it'll be a little bit of a switch. So, obviously, just be prepared when when people are booking.

Charley Bennett [00:22:00]:

But, yeah, it's gonna be a fabulous tour. We're gonna be running a morning and afternoon tour 5 days a week. So hopefully, Fingers crossed. This should this should be a really popular one this year as well.

Tracy Collins [00:22:12]:

Oh, brilliant. And is that launching in March for bookings?

Charley Bennett [00:22:14]:

It should be launching in March. Yes.

Tracy Collins [00:22:16]:

Okay. Perfect. So everybody keep an eye out for that one.

Charley Bennett [00:22:19]:

An eye out for that one.

Tracy Collins [00:22:20]:

Brilliant. Excellent. So, I'm just gonna ask One more question because you've done a brilliant, brilliant job of explaining about walks and and the amazing tours that they've got. But I always end the podcast. Whoever I talk to Always end with the same question. So what is the one tip that you would share with somebody visiting London for the first time, Charley?

Charley Bennett [00:22:40]:

Oh, gosh. Plan your days well. And the one tip I would give anybody is don't book any tours For hours after you land. We've had many, many people on tours that have Contacted us saying our flight's delayed. We can't make the tour. Give yourself that 1st day to just relax, orientate yourself, get yourself settled, And book those tours for the next day. 1, so you can enjoy them as much as the guides enjoy and tell you all the stories. But 2, it just eases you into the city.

Charley Bennett [00:23:19]:

It's it's a busy city, and it can be very overwhelming if you come straight in and rush out to do everything. So just pace yourself, give yourself time, and always book in advance because high season, we always seem to get full up quite quickly. So Book yourself in advance and and come and join us at Walks in London.

Tracy Collins [00:23:39]:

Brilliant. Thanks so much, Charlie, for coming on to the podcast this week. It's been great to chat to you.

Charley Bennett [00:23:43]:

It's been an absolute pleasure. Thank you for having me.

Tracy Collins [00:23:46]:

Thanks again to Charlie for this fantastic episode of the podcast. You can find links Jupyuk Walks Tours in the show notes for this episode, which are [uktravelplanning.com/forward/episode 84](http://uktravelplanning.com/forward/episode84). Next week in episode 85, you can hear myself and Doug chat about our experiences of 4 of the walksters that we've talked about in this episode, Which we absolutely loved. So do tune in next week for that kind of reflection of walksters from our own personal experience. And that just leaves me to say, as always, every week, happy UK travel planning.