

Episode 86 - London Like a Local: Unmissable Black Cab Tours with Discover Real London

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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 picturesque countryside to seaside towns.

Tracy Collins [00:00:42]:

Hi, and welcome to episode 86 of the UK travel planning podcast. This week, I'm delighted to be chatting to Oliver from Discover Real London Tours, who offer tours exploring London in the comfort and style of an iconic black cab. Discover Real London tours aim to offer an experience like no other whilst visiting the UK, and this is a truly unique experience which enables you to see London's world class sites in an informative, engaging way. After experiencing a fantastic tour with head tour guide Ollie in December, we can personally vouch for how much fun it is to take a private black cab tour of the capital with Discover Real London. So I'm really excited to welcome Ollie onto the podcast. Hi, Ollie. It's great to have you on this week's episode of the podcast. So it'd be great if you could just introduce yourself and share a little bit about your background and why you started Discover Real London tours.

Ollie [00:01:37]:

Hey, Tracy. Yes. My name's Oliver, and I am the founder of Discover Cover Real London, and we are a private tour company that bases our tours around black cabs. So we do mainly city tours around all parts of London in our iconic vehicles, and you will if you come on one of our tours, you'll have your very own driver guide who will not only be, a legit London cab driver that study all the streets, but he's gonna be a qualified guy that will to give you all the history and info about what you're looking at as well.

Tracy Collins [00:02:11]:

I don't know. Doug and I were very lucky to go out with you, actually, Ollie, a few weeks ago, just before Christmas, actually, and we absolutely loved it. It was it was one of the total highlights of the time I've actually ever been at London. And I was saying before we started recording, you know, I've been to London millions of times. I lived in London, but it was just amazing going out with you in the black cab. So I guess I'm gonna gonna give you the floor to kinda say what makes a tour in a London black cab with you guys so special and so different from anyone else because you really are unique, and I kinda want you to kinda get that across to to everybody that's listening to this podcast.

Ollie [00:02:47]:

Oh, thank you so much for your kind comments, Tracy. It was great to meet yourself and Doug as well. I'm obviously a big fan of your page and all the great stuff you've done for clients that have come to London. So, Yeah. It's a privilege to have you on board, and I'm

so pleased you enjoyed it. Great question. So what makes us special and different? I guess the The fact that we come from a background of predominantly cab drivers. So we've spent, you know, sometimes years piling the streets of this city, Discovering and stumbling across every nook and cranny that the city has to offer.

Ollie [00:03:19]:

And the fact that we we know such a vast Area. We obviously know in the ins and outs of all the all the sort of popular sites that you'd expect to be visiting, but I think we've got a really wide spectrum of of knowledge that goes all across the city. So that's one of the things that makes us stand out when people come here. But I think because you're you're with someone that The you know, really a skin in the game of the city. When we when we get someone on board and we show them like, show them London through the eyes of a Londoner. The parts that you're not often gonna see on, you know, may maybe big tours and and the popular big selling tours, but show you The more hidden and intrepid side of the city through our eyes, really, and make our city feel like your city.

Tracy Collins [00:04:00]:

And it's kinda unique as well because Not only are you doing that with somebody who's a black cab driver like yourself. So and it'd be really good if you'd explain a little bit about the knowledge because that's something that Fascinates me, and it's I know that's something that Doug and I asked you, which makes, you know, London black cab drivers so unique, but also about the fact that the London black cab itself is so iconic. So, you know, you've got somebody like yourself who is a qualified black London cab driver, and we are actually in that Kind of iconic vehicle traveling around London. So I know there's loads of advantages about actually being in a London black cab, which which kinda blew my mind when I was traveling around with you that day. But I think can I talk about what it is that's so special about the the drivers, and then we can talk about what's so special about being an actual in a black cab itself?

Ollie [00:04:46]:

Great questions. Yeah. When you come to London, you're gonna see lots of icons, whether it be a red phone box, red bus, and also black cabs. And we're part of the fabric of the city. And our history goes back all the way actually to 17th century when it was horses and carriages. But the vehicle itself that we travel around here today It's very different to, an old horse and carriage in the 17th century. We've taken all the history and heritage of our trade. And today, we've got a 21st century electric vehicle, with a panoramic roof that really enhances the experience of being in the back of 1.

Ollie [00:05:17]:

So we're fully wheelchair accessible, 6 seats in the back, which are in a really nice social conference layout, so 3 forward, 3 backwards. So You can chat amongst yourselves while we're going around. We've got intercom, so you're always gonna hear the driver even though you're in your own space. And the fact that we can stop on red routes, use bus lanes, and that sort of stuff, the access that it gives us, not just that we know where we're going, but We can actually access specific roads that other people can't. We can stop for photos. And there's lots of of rest ranks and things like that where we can hop out, Stretch your legs. Go go for a walk around. A lot of people ask, actually, when they book a tour, they say, oh, do we get out? And we say, yeah.

Ollie [00:05:58]:

A 100% we get out. One of the The great thing is that it's very much a stop start tour. We jump out, immerse our surfing in that area, in that part of London, then we hop back in. We'll be going a few kilometers up the road. So I think, yeah, it's an icon to look at, but I think with the panoramic roof, the sustainable elements, and the access, You know, for mobility, maybe users and things like that, it really makes us a a really, really inclusive vehicle as well as being an icon.

Tracy Collins [00:06:24]:

Oh, absolutely. And I'll mention again that day that myself and Duncan went out with you is the fact there's a couple of things that we we couldn't get over is the fact that you could drop us off at Buckingham Palace, Which was fantastic. So I honestly you know, I felt like royalty. Hopping out the black cab, then Doug and I went and took some photos, and then and then you came back and picked us up Few minutes later at agreed time and picked us up from the same spot. So that was fantastic. And then also being able to park near Westminster Abby and and take a stroll with you and kinda have a look at the sites there and have a chat. Knowing that it was only just a short walk back To get to the cab was was fantastic.

Ollie [00:07:03]:

Yeah. It's I mean, today is actually a great example. We've had a slight little Tiny, tiny dusting of snow today. Nothing's settled, but that's reminds us of times where you don't necessarily wanna be out on the streets in London for 3 or 4 hours at a time Without a bit of shelter because it can be a bit cold. I mean, it was a bit unusual today, but, in the summer, you know, we've got the ice cold AC. In the winter, we've got the heat. So It's nice to, break up the tour with with in and out. And, yeah, it's it's nice to have that shelf, so, you know, if you wanna leave Drinks and stuff in there if you wanna you know, maybe you got your suitcase.

Ollie [00:07:37]:

Maybe you're coming straight from the airport. I mean, we do tours that start straight from Heathrow. You hit the ground running Straight into town. So, you've got that that area that's yours, and you can use it to put stuff in as well.

Tracy Collins [00:07:48]:

Yeah. And it's so comfortable. I mean, been in a black cab Well, it's it's incredibly comfortable, way to travel around London as well. And as you say, I've been able to go down the bus lanes and park in some places that Other people can't. It just gives you access to to some fantastic places. So, you know, if you have got mobility issues as well, you don't have very far to walk. You can kinda drop people Just basically outside. Let's say that we were 2 minutes walk from around the corner from Buckingham Palace.

Tracy Collins [00:08:14]:

So it was easy to get out and have a look and then get back in the cab. So, again, that's That's really important, I guess, for, you know, people who are traveling maybe with elderly parents who still wanna see those sites and may wanna get out and have the photo opportunity, but don't wanna spend sort of half an hour or an hour, you know, strolling around to get to some of these places.

Ollie [00:08:33]:

Yep. 100%. I agree. We do a lot of multigenerational tours where people are maybe traveling with parents, and it's, you know, sometimes a dream trip to come to England or maybe revisit somewhere where they might have studied or worked at one point. So, Yeah. It certainly works for for for people like that. And also, you know, on the under other end of the spectrum, you know, having young kids doesn't stop travel if you're willing to do a bit of research And think outside the box. So we have lots and lots of families that have got, you know, younger children.

Ollie [00:09:00]:

And, again, they know their attention span and The sort of distances they can walk and things like that, that makes it more accessible for them as well.

Tracy Collins [00:09:08]:

Yeah. Absolutely. So I'm gonna I'm gonna swing the conversation back around to what is so special about your driver guides, and I'm gonna I'm gonna ask you again about the knowledge because I think that's a really important thing. Because I don't I don't know if anywhere in The world and any other city, tax drivers have to do something like The Knowledge. In particular, in London, it's fascinating because it it takes a long time for you to to actually study for that. So do you wanna kind of explain what what that is?

Ollie [00:09:34]:

Yeah. Great question. So this blows quite a lot of people's mind, Tracy. I'm sure some of your listened Listeners will be completely bowled over with what we have to do. But in London, to be a taxi driver, you have to study, for an average between 3 4 years. And what do we study? We study the streets. And this study that we're doing is purely logistics. So It lends itself really well to doing the tours that we do, but the primary focus is for candidates that aspire to become cab drivers To prove that they can navigate their round their way around the city successfully.

Ollie [00:10:07]:

So the area that we learn is a 6 mile radius Of the center of London, which visitors to London may or may not know that's Trafalgar Square. If you've been here before, the chance are you definitely been through that, that junction. And, there's approximately 25,000 streets in that area, which we don't I have to say, we don't actually normally set out to learn them all. However, we can be asked any of those streets on our exams. So we have to have, you know, a a really good knowledge of all areas. I would probably lean towards saying we end up Properly learning the exact characteristics in between maybe 10 to 12000 streets. If you're at home thinking, how on earth would you even do that? You act the only way to actually, you know, digest this city is to, ride the streets. You can Most people do it on a mo motorbike or a scooter.

Ollie [00:10:57]:

I I've heard of people doing it on push bikes and cars before, but I think that's obviously very, very difficult. But, Yeah. It's it's broken down by, Transport for London who run the, the knowledge now into 320. Routes routes are about a mile mile or so long, and they're laid out to go to every single part of London. If you learn them routes, You know, from one place to

another, you learn the straightest legal way to travel, then that jigsaw will come together to stitch this city together.

Tracy Collins [00:11:27]:

Wow. Honestly, I just find it incredible. The thought of studying studying that for 3 to 4 years is just incredible, and that's what makes You guys are special as well. But even more so, not only do you have a black cab driver, taxi driver taking the tours, but, obviously, also, Your drivers are also qualified to take tours as well.

Ollie [00:11:48]:

Yes. So we've we've all obviously done the knowledge, We've got our medallions and and our badges, which is, you know, a a really endeavor to do. But on after that, Yeah. The the team that I work with, we've all completed a special guiding course that's specifically designed just for taxi drivers. It's based at the Museum of London, and it's run by the Worshipful Company of Hackney Carriage Drivers. And it's 2 month course that really Takes the knowledge that we know the city and supercharges that and, you know, really gives us the in-depth history of the city and and lots of different areas. And, from passing that course, you have proper written exams and and on-site walks and things like that and practical assessments. Once you pass that, you got your badge for that.

Ollie [00:12:31]:

And, Yeah. We think that that's what, you know, sort of turbocharges the, the experience of us that you get the best of both worlds. An expert navigator, an iconic vehicle With all the history to go with it.

Tracy Collins [00:12:43]:

Absolutely. It's just fantastic. Honestly, I can't I can't express to our listeners How much we loved this tour. Honestly, if you are coming to London, you really, really need to look at Discover Real London and and look at the tours that they offer, which kinda leads me into Sharing with our listeners the different tours that you do have because I'm I'm fairly confident and knowing a lot of people that listen to our podcasts, and There's quite a few thousand. I know they're gonna be looking thinking, okay. Really keen on this. Really like the idea of this. So so what tours do you offer, Ollie? What sort of things can people look at booking?

Ollie [00:13:15]:

So we've got a variety of tours that are listed on our website. Our best seller is the Discover Real London tour. So so good we named it after our company, And that is a tour that focuses on the main site. So if you're here maybe for a day or for a week and you wanna get your your get your vacation off to a a A really great start. This is super popular. It's a half day tour, so 4 hours. Most of our city tours or a lot of them are 4 4 hours. You can easily have them in the morning all the afternoon.

Ollie [00:13:45]:

And it as I say, it will focus around all the big sites you took in Buckingham Palace, the Tower of London, Tower Bridge, Saint Paul's Cathedral, Westminster Abbey, etcetera. Pick up and drop off from anywhere in Central London. So normally, if it's at your hotel or maybe out for lunch or you're shopping. It's up to the clients. We really work around you. This is our client's time, so we'll always, you know, try and suggest things that make life easier or Or more

convenient for them. And not only will it will it focus on the big big sites, but we'll try and shoehorn in, you You know, something extra if we can. If you like Harry Potter, we might showcase that.

Ollie [00:14:22]:

Maybe if you've, you know, you've got some people that have been to London before and some haven't, We'll try and throw in a hidden gem or two. Obviously, all the tours are quite dynamic because we're working in this, you know, very, very busy city, Which is what makes it great, but we we don't like to overpromise too much. But we try and give that little bit extra, but that's what that tour is. It focuses on the big sites. So if you've never been here Before and you wanna see the sites in the most effortless way, that is definitely the tour for you. One of the tours that we're really proud of is our secret city tour. We call it the London detour because it is the detour. You're not looking at the big sites.

Ollie [00:14:56]:

You're going off the beaten track a bit, and you're really Digging down and showing people the secrets of this city. So, that's a very, very popular tour for more intrepid sort of travelers that really wanna scratch beneath the surface of of places, but also people that may be returning for their 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th time. They wanna see something different. You know? They've done The walking tours they've done, they've been inside the the the big top attractions, which they've really enjoyed, but they wanna see a different dimension of London now. So, All all the tours are a little bit different, but we focus and I don't wanna get give away too many surprises here, but we focus on a whole variety of things, and also for any any requests. So, typically, it'll be things like maybe some Roman history, a bit of medieval history. We'll look at maybe some street art, and look at maybe the darker side Of the city as well because it is new new to nearly 2000 years to unpack, so we've got a lot to choose from. But the sort of thing that people need to remember is is Is it away from the big sites, and you're showing you know, seeing London through the eyes of a Londoner on that?

Tracy Collins [00:15:59]:

Absolutely. And I know the time that we spent with you, we saw we saw 3 things that we we'd never seen For 1 was the street which had bomb damage from World War 2. We saw a bomb shelter from World War 2, and we saw the blue as a blue post box for the NHS.

Ollie [00:16:14]:

Yes. Well remembered. Yep. And that was sort of that wasn't even something that I'd normally focus on. But as we're going past, you sometimes end up commenting on such, You know, little oddities, which people Yeah. That's the exciting thing you've remembered that.

Tracy Collins [00:16:28]:

Yeah. Absolutely. Absolutely. Because I never I did never seen that before. I've never kinda clocked it before, or even I might have walked down the street and not realized that that, you know, down that street, there was the bomb shelters. I didn't know until we looked at the The actual notice on on the wall when you pointed it out because there's so much to London that even as I say, I mean, I've I've lived in London, but in the time that we spent, were so many things that you're pointing out that, you know, I didn't know. I was like, wow. But so it as you say, it goes beneath the surface.

Tracy Collins [00:16:56]:

And we are often asked by people who are returning To London for the 2nd or 3rd time. So now we've done all of those main sites. We want something different. And I think, you know, the this this tour that you do certainly offers an ability to actually say go a little bit deeper.

Ollie [00:17:11]:

Yeah. We really enjoy it, and our guides enjoy it as well because it challenges us a bit more because some people say to us, you know, just to warn you, we've been to London 3 or 4 times. You know, we've seen we've we've we've seen probably most of it, and we're like, okay. Cool. Well, let let's see how we get on. And we really like to have it as a as a personal challenge to really, really showcase a different side of London that people just haven't seen before.

Tracy Collins [00:17:31]:

That's perfect. And you've got you've got quite a few other tours as well. So I will be linking linking to those in the show notes, and I will point, people towards your website as well. But can I just to kinda talk about a few of the logistics of, you know, people are thinking, oh, I really wanna book is, You know, how many how many people can you actually fit in a cab? I guess that's a kind of first question to ask.

Ollie [00:17:52]:

Yeah. Great question. So We can fit 6 people in the back of our taxi, and, yeah, you know, it's pretty spacious. So we've never had any issues with with 6 So that was obviously if you guys are on a rugby tour and, you know, you know, you're all pretty big chaps, then you might wanna drop us an email first and see if we can what what what else we might be able to do. But, yeah, They're nice and spacious in the back, so 6 is is certainly what we take, and it's always always normally fine.

Tracy Collins [00:18:18]:

And you can accommodate some luggage as well?

Ollie [00:18:21]:

Yeah. We can accommodate a bit of luggage in the front, so it's completely out your way. So normally, 2 medium sized suitcase we can squeeze in the front. And when I'm talking about the front, if people are scratching their heads in a in a in a taxi, there's no front seat. So if you if, like, you want someone to ride shotgun, they can't. It's a void specifically for luggage, a stroller, and maybe a travel wheelchair, stuff like that. Also in the back, The rear facing streets are flipped down seats. So if you imagine what what you're you're coming to land in, yeah, hostess on the way into London Heathrow, They flipped down their seat.

Ollie [00:18:55]:

It's a bit similar to that, but what that means is you could tuck a bit of luggage or something under it. So you might have a little bit in the back with you if you've got quite a few cases, but it's never normally We're gonna really intrude on on your space.

Tracy Collins [00:19:06]:

Oh, that's brilliant. So what can people, expect when they book? So if they go onto the website and they choose a tour, How does it work from that point? Do you then do they actually book, the turn and give you the date, or do they contact you?

Ollie [00:19:19]:

No. They can book straight away. So unless it's within, a few days' time, when it gets very busy, like, London's such a popular place. In the summer, it's it's very, very fast moving. So we don't take automatic bookings for the for the next few days from now. But if you wanted to book, You know, a tour for a week or so time, you can book it straight away online. You can go through it. You can make the payment.

Ollie [00:19:43]:

You'll get the confirmation e email. And what will happen is that goes into a date, our data base in our system. Obviously, if you've got any questions, you'll be free Say, hey. I booked this just to let you know x or y or this request or whatever. But then the guide will contact you the day before your tour. So we've got a whole team of passionate, Yeah. Ambassadors of this city that are part of our Discovery London team, and we allocate the tours normally about 48 hours before. So you'll get a a message via WhatsApp or SMS from your guide the day before.

Ollie [00:20:15]:

Just checking in, introducing himself, reconfirming the pickup that the client selected and, obviously, letting them know that they're super excited to to be hosting you the next day. So, yeah, that's exactly how the, the process works.

Tracy Collins [00:20:28]:

Okay. Brilliant. And, just wanna share the URL for your website as well at this point, Holly.

Ollie [00:20:34]:

Yeah. So if you any more information, guys, on our website, You can find it real london.com.

Tracy Collins [00:20:41]:

Brilliant. And, I will just say that if you book, just mention that you heard about it heard about Discover Real to us through the podcast or through the website or through the Facebook group because that's really cool for us that all you know is that you came via any of Yeah. UK travel planning kind of methods. And I will put a link in the show notes as well. So don't worry if you didn't get a chance to write that down because in the show notes of the episode, there will be a link and more information as well so you know how you can book that way. So, Ollie, it's been great to have you on, but I just 1 question that I always ask to everybody at the end of every podcast. So you you are not immune. You also get the question, except I'm gonna focus it on London.

Tracy Collins [00:21:19]:

So what would be the number one tip that you would share, Ollie, for somebody visiting London for the first Time.

Ollie [00:21:26]:

Great question, Tracy. Do you know what? I'm not gonna go with a place. I'm gonna go with, with a with a sort of Word if you like. I'm gonna go with preparation because London is such, an incredible variety of things to do. And some of them, a bit more this expensive end. A lot of it, actually, if you know where to look, is it the super affordable end, but it takes a bit of prep. So when I talk about preparation, I'm talking about things like the ceremony of the keys. So you know very well, Tracy.

Ollie [00:21:59]:

That's one of my favorite things to do. If someone reaches out to me after they booked a tour and it's in 6 months' time, and they say, Ollie, what what you know, is there anything I should know that's I'm miserable? I say that, You know, if you if you're Harry Potter fans, for example, you need to book the Warner Brothers Studio super early. Okay? That is gonna get sold out. If you wanna if you're thinking about going to the Tower of London, if you wanna see one of the most intimate and and incredible, You know, experiences, you need to get on board with the ceremony of the keys, but you need to be organized. And things that are completely free. The Sky Garden, I know you would have been up there, and I'm sure loads of times, Tracy. How good is the sky garden?

Tracy Collins [00:22:34]:

Absolutely. It's fantastic, and it's free.

Ollie [00:22:37]:

Exactly. But if you're turning up at Heathrow and thinking, what what should I do today? You're not gonna be able to do that. Yes. I know you it is possible sometimes to queue up, but it you know, if you got that ticket in your back pocket, you know for a fact next Wednesday, You're up there. So, again, with a little bit of preparation, you can you can turn what's a fantastic boat vacation into A completely unforgettable experience in London with that little bit of planning and preparation. So that would be my top tip for everyone. If you listen to this and you're on Either UK travel and Facebook page and stuff, then you're 1 step ahead already of everyone. So I'm sure you're gonna be very prepared, and you're gonna really, really have an incredible time in our city.

Tracy Collins [00:23:16]:

Brilliant. Ollie, it's been fantastic talking to you today. We went out with you guys before Christmas, and we absolutely loved it. As I say, Doug and I are still talking about it, and it's funny. It's those things that you remember. And and I know, like, the ceremony of the keys is another one of our favorite experiences in London. And, honestly, going out with Discover Real London was was absolute highlight for us. So I wanna say a huge thank you for myself and Doug for having the opportunity to do that, and thanks so much for coming on the podcast.

Ollie [00:23:41]:

Oh, thanks so much, Tracy. Well, it's been an absolute pleasure. And, yeah, we will certainly look forward to welcoming lots of your lovely listeners and followers To London.

Tracy Collins [00:23:50]:

Oh, thanks again to Ollie for coming on to this week's episode of the podcast. It was absolutely fantastic to talk about Discover Real London Tours. You can find a link to the

website in this week's show notes, which are [uktravelplanning.comforward/episo 86](http://uktravelplanning.comforward/episo86). Please don't forget to mention that you heard about Discover Realtors through the podcast, through our Facebook group, or through our website, please. And that just leaves me to say until next week. Happy UK travel planning.