

## Episode 160 Day Trips from London - St Albans: History, Food & Hidden Gems

Tracy Collins [00:00:00]:

Just 20 minutes from London by train, St Albans offers Roman ruins, a stunning cathedral, medieval streets, bustling markets and one of the best foodie scenes outside the capital. It's the ideal day trip. Stay tuned to find out why it deserves a spot on your itinerary.

Intro [00:00:15]:

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 [00:00:56]:

Hi and welcome to this week's edition of the UK Travel Planning Podcast. This week I'm joined by Vivian Cannon, manager of Saint Albans city centre bid. Now, just 20 minutes by train from London, St Albans is the perfect day trip or even a relaxing base if you want to explore more of Hertfordshire. Vivienne is passionate about sharing all the reasons why this historic city is such a brilliant destination. From its rich Roman heritage and beautiful cathedral to its family friendly parks, foodie scene and vibrant year round events. Whether you are spending a few days in London or planning a longer UK adventure, St Albans is a destination well worth adding to your itinerary. And this episode is packed with ideas to help you make the most of it. I started by asking Vivian about her role at St Alban's City Centre Bid.

Vivian Cannon [00:01:42]:

Hello, I am the manager of St Alban City Centre Bid, which is a business improvement district and it's business led and business funded and it's not for profit and it's formed to just support the businesses within the city centre flourish and develop as a vibrant business community.

Vivian Cannon [00:02:17]:

If you're looking at the map of England and you look at London and you look up from London almost directly up, we're about 20 miles, which equates to 20 minutes or so on the train. So really easy access. If you're coming through that route or off the M1 or A1, we're very easy to get to, which is a nice difference if you've been in the City of London or somewhere else and you want a bit of green space around you. So time to relax. So it's a nice, it's a. You could call it a really large market town, although we have a city because of our cathedral. So we're surrounded by the Hertfordshire country site and we have a river going through and it's a nice chalk river which is known for its fresh cleanness and the, the river that would feed watercress farms.

Tracy Collins [00:03:11]:

I think this is, this is important to say about St. Albans, about just how historically interesting it is to visit. So if you're listening and you're visiting the UK and you think I've got such an interest in history, St. Albans is an absolutely fantastic destination. So let's, let's talk about some of the Roman history, I guess around St. Albans. Borrelanium, as it was called then and then kind of what is still left today. If I visit St.

Tracy Collins [00:03:36]:  
Albans, what can I see from that era?

Vivian Cannon [00:03:38]:  
Oh, we have a really lovely collection of mosaic hypocaust floors and murals and things like that. So the very crudest element of the Roman society that you can see is in our Veri Lamian park, beautiful green open space park and this part of the ancient wall of a villa or a building of Roman times. So we, we have an open air Roman theater of Verullanian built in the year A.D. 140. We think it would have been used for religious processes, dancing, armed combat and apparently wild beast shows. But this, you can still see it. You can step down into the theater and you can be in the theater. And what's really great about that and its survival is, is that we have a very renowned local theatre company who actually throughout the summer do a whole theatre festival.

Vivian Cannon [00:04:38]:  
So you can do as the Romans did, you can sit in their open air theatre and you can watch public shows. So you're literally doing what ancestors did of St. Albans. And then we have a fantastic Verulanian museum with all kinds of artifacts that have been found during archaeological digs. So I think if you're into Romans, there's lots of interactive activity in Verulanian museum and you can really kind of feed your interest and hunger to find out.

Tracy Collins [00:05:13]:  
And it's amazing. You don't have to go very far from Londinium to go and see a little bit more of Roman history if you're, if that's something that you're interested in. But of course there's medieval history as well in St. Albans.

Vivian Cannon [00:05:26]:  
Oh my goodness. We had the peasants revolt when they revolted about the church commanding what they did and when they did it. So they said, we don't like this. We're gonna, you know, we're gonna organize our own lives, thank you very much. We have. Previous to that, we have Boudicca coming to kill off the Romans. So that's obviously a bit earlier than medieval times. But I suppose the biggest thing that we can claim, which nobody really expects them and looks at us in question and say really is that we had the first battle of the War of the Roses.

Vivian Cannon [00:05:58]:  
And of course the War of the Roses is Lancastrian and Yorkshire fight. But that first battle started down here. The wars. The first battle of the wars. So we've got a real mix of history. So Tudor War of the Roses, we've got the lot.

Tracy Collins [00:06:17]:

You really have. And you've also got a medieval clock tower as well, because I know, I've seen it.

Vivian Cannon [00:06:22]:

So the clock tower was built in 1405 and is, as you say, the only surviving medieval town belfry in England. And over the centuries it's been a shop and a government telegraph station during the Napoleonic Wars. And Gabriel the Tower's original one ton bell remains in place and we still hear it, which is rather special. It would have also rung out an alarm in case of fire and fray, such as the Battle of St Albans in 1455. We're full of battles around here. I'm not sure that's wonderful, but we've all survived and it is a fantastic. You know, if you want to take a typical selfie of the clock tower, that's great. But just at the back, around the corner of the building is a little door and it says very quietly on the door, commit no nuisance.

Vivian Cannon [00:07:15]:

And it was a polite but forceful way of our ancestors to demand a high standard of behavior from passersby. And I have seen many children pushed by their parents in front of that door. To have that photograph taken, I think.

Tracy Collins [00:07:31]:

That's a must do. When you're in St Paul, it sounds like definite, definite. Go and take a picture before in front of that. I mean, how long, how that must hark back, I don't know, hundreds of years. That, that sign on the door.

Vivian Cannon [00:07:44]:

Absolutely. I, I don't know when it was first put there, but most people feel like it's been there forever and it's just one of those lovely kind of wagging your finger at the community.

Tracy Collins [00:07:58]:

I know, I think it's absolutely brilliant. So we've kind of covered a bit of the, the. We've got Roman history in Saint Albans, we've got medieval history. You can, you can see you're living in it. If you live in St Albans, you go and visit, you can go and experience it. Got to talk about St. Alban's Cathedral. We've talked a little bit about St.

Tracy Collins [00:08:15]:

Alban and that the, the, the ceremony every year, those, that tradition. But talk a little bit about the actual cathedral itself.

Vivian Cannon [00:08:23]:

Okay, I have some lovely facts and figures here for you. So the cathedral is the oldest site of continuous Christian worship in Britain. If you step inside, you'll find the shrine obviously of Saint Alban, which has been the focal point for visitors and pilgrims alike. And if you think that the Watlin Road, this is the Roman Watling Road and Ignild Way, come directly, you know, locally to St. Albans. So the Watlin Road, the ancient road, would come through St. Albans and pilgrims would be coming to visit that shrine. At 85 meters long, it has the longest nave of any cathedral in England and an extensive collection of medieval wall paintings.

Vivian Cannon [00:09:06]:

And you'll see some graffiti that people have scratched into the walls there as well. And you know, whilst you're here, it's not stuck in the past because the cathedral put on an array of all kinds of popular activities and events, from pop songs to the international Organ Festival to yoga under a floating moon that they had installed one year. So it's a vibrant used cathedral and there's some fantastic local residents who act as tour guides there and give you all the intricate little hidden details that unless you're with them, you don't tend to see.

Tracy Collins [00:09:42]:

Oh, that's really interesting. And tour guides, how do we get access to tour guides? Do we have to book those in advance?

Vivian Cannon [00:09:47]:

Yeah, you can, or you can whilst you're here. Just, just roll up and see what they're doing. I would. The, the guides in the cathedral are there for, for whenever you walk in. The local tour guides that will give you the history of St. Albans in. And it's Tudor glory, it's Victorian glory, just general history. And we'll walk around the town with you in small groups.

Vivian Cannon [00:10:09]:

I think it's about six pound to book a tour with them, but it's thorough and I hear lots of laughter and sometimes in the office where I'm based in the center, we're in a really old 17th century building here that used to be an old pub. I suddenly hear a whole lot of people underneath the window as a tour guide is telling them about, you know, the building and what it used to be. And I often want to be that person in the film that throws that bucket of water out the window into the street on them. But I, I dare do that because I really do want Visitors to come here.

Tracy Collins [00:10:43]:

That would be an authentic medieval experience though, wouldn't it Vivian?

Vivian Cannon [00:10:47]:

Well, yeah, I mean you could pay me for it. That would be great. Absolutely.

Tracy Collins [00:10:52]:

And now there's also a really good market. I think it's, it's award winning. Is that right? The market in Saint Albans, best large.

Vivian Cannon [00:11:00]:

Outdoor market in Britain, 2024. And it's maintaining that quality. It's got great variety as you would expect a market of your everyday weekly shopping needs. But at the same time it has some fantastic gifts, souvenirs, that kind of stuff. And on Saturday it is heaving. It's a very lovely and a good experience if you're not used to, you know, English markets.

Tracy Collins [00:11:26]:

And now. So if I, if I arrive at St. Albans, say if I get the train into St. Albans from London, is it, is St. Albans a walkable city?

Vivian Cannon [00:11:36]:

It is. I would, I would give you a heads up that the first thing you do as you enter coming off the train is a bit of a hill. There's a. Not steep but an incline and it's 10 to 15 minutes to walk. But once you're in the St. Albans, the first big building you come up to is the St. Albans Museum and Gallery which has your toilets. It has a coffee shop in there and the coffee shop is in the old converted courtroom.

Vivian Cannon [00:12:04]:

So you can go into the dock and you can go into the prisoner cells underneath you. It's quite a tea room experience. And obviously they've got museum and exhibitions there, so that's, you know, you've arrived when you see that. And everything I believe is, is easily navigable and within walking distance. And even if you decide to go down into the park to Verillanium park, it's just a short walk through the park to the Verolanium Museum. So yes, you can do it all from, from one hotel, from one one day visit. It's nice.

Tracy Collins [00:12:40]:

That's perfect. So if, if I'm visiting with, you know, I'm just thinking about family service in the UK and they want to get out of London and, and think St Albans would be a perfect place to visit. What sort of activities are the, that you would recommend for families with children?

Vivian Cannon [00:12:58]:

Well, they can always run around and stretch their feet, sit in Verulanium park and there's a nice. If you come prepared and you're staying and it's a hot day, you've got the splash park and all of that kind of stuff. But the museum and gallery do a lot of activities for children, interactive, just like Verulanium, the Cathedral have some interactive activities too. And quite often during summer months, like for this, this year, for instance, we've got a mini beach just set up in the town, where we will have a mini beach set up in the town centre. So there'll be some trails to do and follow and some activities like that. And for older people who will like museums and galleries, and maybe not the children's interactive bit, but the general interactivity of learning, there's lots to stimulate them. And as we just discussed, there are eras all through history. And then for those who want to pay homage to people of our past, we have a blue plaque trail that highlights some famous people that have lived here or spent time here.

Vivian Cannon [00:14:05]:

So if they're into their golf and they want to pay homage to the Ryder cup, this is where the originator of the Ryder cup lived and did business, Samuel Ryder. So there's lots of things to pique people's interest. And obviously, if you want to see our shops, we have a good collection of shops. We would say a premier selection of shops in Hertfordshire. You'll get those in St Albans, definitely.

Tracy Collins [00:14:33]:

And I've heard there's an Art Deco cinema as well, which really interests me because I love Art Deco. So that. What sort of shows does that have on? Is that just kind of regular, Regular shows that are on circuit?

Vivian Cannon [00:14:46]:

It will catch a regular. So you'll get your Willy Wonkas and all that kind of stuff, but they'll do foreign language films, they'll do the retro films that have such a high following. They have a

really good diverse kind of film show menu. And there'll always be something on to attract the different ages. And the thing about that Art deco cinema, you know, is the local community that invested millions of pounds themselves donating it to the restoration of that cinema. So it's quite special. It's in the heart of people and you. And it's not like rows and rows of seats.

Vivian Cannon [00:15:25]:

You can. You can do that if you're on the balcony, your standard rows of seats, but if you go down to the stalls, there are tables and it's just like cocktail hour in a nightclub. You have your seats very comfortable, you can have a bit of a food thing and then the. Quite often the team will come and give you a bit of an explanation about the director or something, if you're a real film buff, if that's your thing. So you're. You're really engaging with the film industry, which is rife around here.

Tracy Collins [00:15:57]:

Yeah, I think there's lots of movies and TV series filmed in that area, aren't there? So yeah, that's really cool. So are there any other, any names that you can drop of anybody that would look for before on that trail, apart from the, the Mr. Ryder who set up the golf?

Vivian Cannon [00:16:13]:

There are some names. So Stephen Hawking, who we know as the physicist, he went to school in Saint Albans before he then moved on to Oxford. We have Frederick Saunder, who was known as the Orchid King and he used to supply Queen Victoria with her orchids and he would travel the world creating that. I have to name some, some women because obviously we're proud of our female history here. And we had the very first woman to be appointed as a town clerk in England, Betty Entwistle, which is a bit of a Yorkshire up north sound. So that family obviously came down here and Sarah Churchill of six of the 1600s to the 1700s was a Duchess of Marlborough and she in her own right had a lot of power. So we have a real mix of people that were here.

Tracy Collins [00:17:11]:

Oh, you absolutely do. Well, I mean the history is, is, is. There's just so much of it kind of embedded in the entire area of, you know, right from pre history, Roman history, medieval history up to the present day, you've absolutely got everything in St Albans. Now what you do also have is a lot of very good food and drink options as well. And I believe you've got a reputation as Mini London for foodies. So let's have a chat about some of the fantastic food and drink options we've got as well.

Vivian Cannon [00:17:44]:

The Thompson Restaurant with head chef Phil Thompson, who also will attend the food and drink Pub in the park festival that comes to Verolanium park in the summers and he's accomplished three AA Rosette status. So if you like really high, high class eating, they're the ones to go to. But as I say, we have Dylan's in George street, we have the Cock in St Albans, who all come with high calibre food reputations and having eaten in some of them, I would support that.

Tracy Collins [00:18:20]:

What about pubs, Viv? Because we can't miss out pubs when we visit in St Albans.

Vivian Cannon [00:18:27]:

Well, we claim to have the once celebrated England's oldest pub in St Albans, the old Fighting Cocks. And it should be on your agenda. The original structure had been dated as far back as 793 AD and it was originally a pigeon coop used by the monks. So it's had a good change of use there.

Tracy Collins [00:18:52]:

Yeah, interesting change of use.

Vivian Cannon [00:18:55]:

Yes. It's the edge of Verolanium Park. So it's. And it's serving award winning food as well. They've won a lot of awards there and then. But right in the heart you've got a pub like the Boot, which is directly next to the Clock Tower. You're not going to miss it. And it's rumored that the War of the Roses started outside the door of that pub in marketplace.

Vivian Cannon [00:19:16]:

So I don't know whether it was just a row between a couple of people that caused whole war. But, but needless to say, it's got that reputation. It has excellent real ales. And St. Albans is the birthplace of an organization called Camera, which is a campaign for Real Ale. Real ales. Thank you. You know it, it's the campaign for Real ales.

Vivian Cannon [00:19:41]:

So that started here too. So you can imagine when you go in the pubs, there's a variety of homemade ales and good tasting.

Tracy Collins [00:19:50]:

And what's really nice is I'm thinking about our listeners here and if you're, if you're visiting the UK and want to go to, you know, have that genuine English pub experience, these are the sort of places that we recommend that you seek out. So if you go to St. Albans, you can go and experience a proper traditional English pub with some good ales and good food.

Vivian Cannon [00:20:13]:

And good food. And they're independently running, so that's the crux of the matter as well. They're independently run. All our pubs are pubs. You know, we have that in English tradition. But the ones we've just mentioned are uniquely independently runs, which is really lovely with the amount that we have around here.

Tracy Collins [00:20:31]:

Yeah, that's really good. So they're worth popping into. What about. I know you've mentioned that you've got some seasonal highlights and things that go on like foodie type festivals, but what sort of things have you got over the year? Because I'm thinking like from month to month, if people are planning, it'd be good to know kind of what sort of things that you have throughout the year.

Vivian Cannon [00:20:49]:

So yes, so I would always keep an eye on. Enjoy Saint Albans because that's got a whole what's on page and you'll see all the festivals coming up and it would kick start with

something amazing happening in the cathedral. So we know they're going to have giant whales being floated in the cathedral at some point. So keep an eye on what's going on there. And we have the, the spring festival which just takes up the whole of the city center. And that would happen around the May period. We have the foodie festival and that's great. It's got live bands, a feasting tent, artisan market that's usually end of May, beginning of June and lots of kids activities there as well.

Vivian Cannon [00:21:29]:

Pub in the park, which we've mentioned earlier and which obviously is just a huge enjoyment of food and drinks. So we have, and our local restaurants are invited to attend that because of their caliber as well. As we've mentioned camera, we've got the St. Albans Beer and Cider Festival that happens in autumn. We usually have something happening for Halloween and we have the Gin and Jazz festival which focuses on a very old part of Saint Albans in George Street. And all the shops will open up for late night shopping and you're invited to have lots of lovely gin whilst you're there. One of the festivals that we really enjoy and is truly celebrates who we are and what we are is the Auburn Day pilgrimage and festival. So from the cathedral's perspective they are celebrating Saint Alban, the first saint of Britain.

Vivian Cannon [00:22:21]:

And they have a pilgrimage procession that starts at one end of the town and walks through to the cathedral. And we have giant 12 foot puppets who are all characters that play a role in the story of the making of Saint Alban himself. And we have also giant puppets of peregrine falcons that are combed on the top on the roof of the cathedral who have just laid four chicks that everyone's celebrating. So it's a really lovely mix. And because it's a pilgrimage festival or the procession is and they are literally inviting all of their all people who want to walk that small walk to pay to take a pilgrimage and they go into the the cathedral and they give thanks. And whilst they go and do that, the festival starts the cathedral and in the the city center which we were just organizing this past weekend. So it always happens in late June, around about the 20th, 21st, 22nd. And we celebrate our history.

Vivian Cannon [00:23:22]:

So we celebrate the Romans and we have Roman reenactments and we have the modern day gladiators that you see on telly who are trying to knock each other off with big giant blow up sticks. And then you have the gladiator reenactments. Then we had a female gladiator telling everybody about fights in Roman times this year and we had a man who would create pilgrim badges. So when you do your pill, your pilgrimages, you have a pilgrim passport and you'd often get a stamp or take a memento. And we have very few remaining old pewter pilgrim badges. So he was remaking those badges. So as you can see we kind of celebrate all of the eras through our history on the same day because St. Albans has given us the name.

Vivian Cannon [00:24:08]:

He, he was aan. We are now St. Albans and that day is full of fun for families. So we've got the mature people wanting to understand the history of the buildings and who used to live here and obviously the Roman and the medieval history. And then we have the kids who just want to make a mosaic or stamp something or you know, so it's all linked to our history but it's something to keep everybody busy. So that's a really lovely time to come because that's when we celebrate the true St. Albans.

Tracy Collins [00:24:38]:

And it sounds like so much fun. I have to say Vivian really sounds like a lot of fun. So after put that in my diary for next year. Fortunately I've missed it this year. But if you're listening and you're thinking, yeah, I'm going to add St. Albans into my visit, when I visit the UK we mentioned before, it's very easy to get to from London and it's very, very easy to get to by train. So if I was staying in London, which is the easiest way by train to actually get into St. Albans because I know once I get there it's easy enough to walk into St.

Tracy Collins [00:25:05]:

Albans itself. But how do I actually get it get from London to St. Albans?

Vivian Cannon [00:25:10]:

It's a super quick and easy train ride from St Pancras and it's just 20 minutes almost into the heart of St. Albans.

Tracy Collins [00:25:19]:

Well that's perfect then I'm going to end the podcast with a bit of a quick fire round because I know you know the area really well so I want to ask you what, what are your, some of your favourites if this is all right. So what is your favourite pub in St. Albans?

Vivian Cannon [00:25:33]:

Well, my personal favourite is the Cock Inn on the main St Peter's Street. It's a 17th century pub and it's got beamed ceilings and wooden floors and a lovely log fire and it's a perfect all round place because it's got a nice heated garden as well. And the chef there was recently on a TV program called Master Chef the Professionals. So you know you're going to get good food.

Tracy Collins [00:25:59]:

Ah, perfect. Okay, add that one in. What about your favorite cafe? Or go to spot for a bite to eat.

Vivian Cannon [00:26:05]:

Oh, I can't, I can't give you one, I have to give you two. So I have Cafe Roma which is at one end of the city and you can sit outside on the pavement and watch the world go by. And then I have Gale's which is at the opposite end near the clock tower. And I just like the variety of food that they offer.

Tracy Collins [00:26:25]:

Now what about one hidden gem that you love in St. Albans?

Vivian Cannon [00:26:30]:

Well, this is a lot of our buildings have modern day businesses operating in them. So you can go in a pub and you go to the cashier to pay for what you want and all of a sudden to the left hand side you see this really old door and it turns out that it's the old door to the women's jail. So these things are hidden in the buildings. So that's what makes us special. I'm really proud of our businesses because, you know, they adapt to how they present their goods and

wares whilst dealing with the historic buildings and preserving them. Which is why we have such a lovely pretty city.

Tracy Collins [00:27:10]:

And it definitely is now because I always end the podcast with the same question. But if anybody's visiting for the first time, what would be the one tip you would give them?

Vivian Cannon [00:27:18]:

Always look at Enjoy St. Albans because it gives you all of the how to get here, where to go, how to plan your day, what's on. And if you want a quick read of the history of St. Albans, I would go to the museum and gallery and read our wall of firsts.

Tracy Collins [00:27:35]:

Okay, well we'll put links to the website in the show notes for this episode and also you've got socials as well, I guess Instagram.

Vivian Cannon [00:27:43]:

Yes, we have Instagram and Facebook, we have Enjoy St. Albans and we also have Shop St. Albans. If you want to know if you're coming for the shopping experience, you can see what deals and who's doing what.

Tracy Collins [00:27:55]:

Perfect. Well I will link to those in the show notes for this episode which is [@uktravelplanning.com](mailto:uktravelplanning.com) Episode 160160 I can't believe it. Thank you so much for joining us Viv. It's been lovely to talk to you. It's been lovely to talk about St. Albans. I really love showing you showcasing destinations which may not be on people's first list of places to come up when they think about doing day trips from London. So it's really lovely to highlight somewhere else that we can put on the radar for visitors to the UK that equally they're going to love just as much as some of the other well known places and they'll find the history, they're going to have great food and drink opportunities there and just a really fun day out.

Tracy Collins [00:28:38]:

So thanks so much for joining us for this episode, Viv.

Vivian Cannon [00:28:41]:

Thank you very much. And I look forward to seeing everybody when they come.

Tracy Collins [00:28:45]:

Thanks once again to Vivienne for coming onto the show this week. I hope you enjoyed learning all about St. Albans and why it's such a great addition to any London and UK itinerary. You'll find all the details mentioned today, including links to the Enjoy St. Albans website and upcoming events in the show notes [@uktravelplanet.com](mailto:uktravelplanet.com) forward/episode 160 if you love this episode, please consider leaving a review on your favorite podcast app. It really helps others discover the show. But as usual, until next time, Happy UK Travel Planning thank you for tuning in to this week's episode of the UK Travel Planning Podcast. As always, Show Notes can be found [@uktravelplanning.com](mailto:uktravelplanning.com) if you've enjoyed the show, why not leave us feedback via text or a review on your favorite podcast app? We love to hear from you and

you never know, you may receive a shout out in a future episode, but as always, that just leaves me to say until next week, Happy UK Travel Planning.