

Episode 217. Autumn in the Far North of Scotland and London: Northern Lights, Autumn Colour and Early Christmas Sparkle

With Tracy Collins, Sally-Ann from North Coast Explorer Tours, and Charley and Becki from Walks and Devour Tours

Part two of a two part autumn special. Sally-Ann shares what autumn brings to the far north of Scotland, from rainbows, dark skies and the Northern Lights to the red deer rut and quieter, cheaper touring, then Charley and Becki explain why autumn suits London so well, covering autumn colour in the parks, cosy pubs, quieter landmarks and the moment the Christmas lights switch on.

TRACY

What are your real chances of seeing the Northern Lights in Scotland this autumn? And when do London's Christmas lights actually switch on? In part two of our autumn special, Sally-Ann from North Coast Explorer Tours shares the magic of the far north of Scotland, and Charley and Becki from Walks and Devour Tours reveal why autumn might be the best time of all to visit London.

TRACY

Hi everybody, and welcome to this week's edition of the UK Travel Planning Podcast. This is part two of our autumn special. Last week, three local experts took us through autumn in the Lake District, the Cotswolds and Devon, so if you missed that one, don't forget to check it out. This week we're completing the journey with two very different destinations. First, we're heading to the very top of the country, to the far north of Scotland, where Sally-Ann from North Coast Explorer Tours shares quieter roads, spectacular skies and some very good news about autumn hotel prices. Then we're finishing in London with Charley and Becki from Walks and Devour Tours, talking autumn colour in the parks, cosy pubs, quieter landmarks and the moment the city starts to sparkle for Christmas.

TRACY

If you're finding these seasonal episodes helpful, a quick review on your favourite podcast app is a lovely way to say so, and it helps other travellers planning their UK trips to find us too. Right, let's get into this week's episode.

The far north of Scotland with Sally-Ann from North Coast Explorer Tours

TRACY

We're now heading all the way up to the far north of Scotland to chat to Sally-Ann from North Coast Explorer Tours, who's going to tell us what it's like to live in the far north and explore it during the autumn. Sally-Ann, it's fantastic to have you join us again.

SALLY-ANN

Thank you very much, Tracy. It's always good to be able to catch up with you.

TRACY

It's one of my favourite parts of the world, so I'm always happy to talk about the far north of Scotland. It's our favourite part of the UK as well.

SALLY-ANN

Which is what we love, of course.

TRACY

So let's talk about autumn. What does the far north feel like once the summer season winds down, and what would you want a first time visitor to know before they book an autumn trip?

SALLY-ANN

The first thing to say is that autumn is, and always has been, Robert's favourite time of year. Even when we were down south he would say that, but especially up here. From a visitor's point of view it's the ideal season for very scenic drives and cosy nights by the fire, particularly as you get into the latter days of October and into November. We don't have the trees up here like you do further south, but you can still feel autumn. You feel it in the changes in the landscape, in the strata of colour you get at different heights across the mountain ranges. And the big thing for us up here in autumn is the rainbows. Because of the weather, and we get a lot of weather up here, we get a lot of rainbows too.

SALLY-ANN

You chase them. I remember a tour last year where they just saw rainbow after rainbow after rainbow. And because of the big vistas you have, you get full rainbows. These aren't little partial ones, these are big rainbows. So I think the weather actually enhances the whole experience in autumn, and with the clarity of the air we have up here as well, it's just a beautiful place to be.

TRACY

Wonderful. Is there anything else you'd want a first time visitor to know before they book? We've got beautiful rainbows and beautiful scenery, but is there a particular tip?

SALLY-ANN

It's an interesting time. Obviously the roads get quieter. Not that they're really busy in the summer, but they definitely get quieter, so there's a more relaxed feel to touring up here. You'll often find that as you get into late October and November the hotels can be a lot cheaper, so it can be quite a good time to come from that point of view. Not everywhere will be open as the autumn moves on, so you do need to be aware of that and plan appropriately. Planning is important. But generally everybody up here is quite relaxed. They've survived the summer season, they're winding down a bit, and it's a relaxed atmosphere. From that point of view it's a nice time to come and visit.

TRACY

Lovely. This is also the time of year that people start asking about the Northern Lights. Realistically, what are the chances of actually seeing them in autumn, and what gives someone the best shot?

SALLY-ANN

The million dollar question, always. You're right, we do get to see the Northern Lights up here in the autumn, and it's possible any time from September onwards. As long as you've got a dark sky, or a darkish sky, you have the possibility of seeing them. But it's all down to weather conditions, so there are no guarantees, I'm afraid. We have seen them up here in September and October, particularly on the north and north east coast and also in the middle of the country. You can see them anywhere, but on the west coast you've got more mountains, and that blocks a little of the skyline unless you're right on the coast. The big vistas, particularly when you look north, are where you can often see them.

SALLY-ANN

Something I did want to point out is that it's not just the Northern Lights up here. The skies are spectacular. Even for somebody like me who's not particularly a stargazer, you can walk outside in the autumn, look up at the sky and be completely overwhelmed by it. The amount of stars, seeing the Milky Way. It's stunning, and it's because we have so little light pollution up here. You just get the benefit of that.

TRACY

So you get beautiful dark skies up there, and a chance to see the Milky Way.

SALLY-ANN

You do. And you get places like the Garvault, which we've talked about before on the podcast. It's a very remote hotel in the middle of the Flow Country, right in the middle of the country up here. They did a couple of dark skies nights last year over the winter, and they got an expert in with some really good telescopes. You couldn't be in a better place to see a good sky than out there, to be honest.

TRACY

That sounds amazing. Let's talk about autumn colour and the rut. Where would you send people for the colour, and what can visitors expect to see with the deer in the autumn?

SALLY-ANN

Autumn colours are very interesting up here. We don't have a lot of trees, so you don't get the traditional autumn colours of lots and lots of trees, but you do still get it across the landscape, and across the sea as well. Autumn colour tends to start from when the heather goes. You have the heather from late summer into the autumn, which is just stunningly beautiful up here. Then that starts to go and you get these different colours of browns and greens. We have quite a lot of evergreen up here too, but it's the mix, and the vastness of it, that makes it so special. You get variations of that anywhere around the north coast, depending on the landscape. One of the other things you get up here in the autumn are the early morning mists over the lochs and the rivers. They can be particularly spectacular, especially with a sunrise coming up. That's something quite magical.

SALLY-ANN

In terms of the rut, yes, we do have plenty of deer up here. You have the opportunity of seeing them anywhere around the route, although they're particularly prevalent as you go slightly inland, and you can sometimes see them on the sides of the roads. One thing I would say is that if you're driving up here in the autumn at dusk or into the evening, you must be very, very careful on the roads, because it's highly likely you might see one on the road. So please be very careful about that. But to see them in all their glory, we would always say go into the Flow Country. Robert often sees them when he's driving between two small places you'd have to look up on the map. One is called Kinbrace and one is called Syre, and there's a road that goes between the two.

SALLY-ANN

It's a small single track road, but if you drive along there and don't see deer at some point, we'd be really surprised. They could be on the road or in the distance, so make sure you have your binoculars with you. We've driven along there and I've seen them rutting, and I was blown away to see them in that vast natural landscape just doing what they do. It was absolutely stunning.

TRACY

I'd absolutely love to see that. That's a nice segue, because as we head into autumn and winter we know the days are going to shorten quite quickly up there. It's the opposite of summer, with those long, long days of daylight. So if someone's planning their driving and their days for October and November, how does that change? What would you say to do differently? And, because I can't ask just one question, does the book ahead advice still hold once the season starts to quieten?

SALLY-ANN

You're such a challenger, Tracy, with all your questions. In terms of driving, you're right, we do have shorter days. For people who don't know, in the middle of summer we can have basically 24 hours of daylight, and as we head towards late autumn and winter that significantly shortens. So you need a little planning. If you're here in the summer you might decide to leave early in the morning and arrive somewhere late at night. If you do that in the autumn you're going to be driving in the dark. Your days are going to be shorter and you need to be prepared for that. Not significantly so in October, but getting into November, yes.

SALLY-ANN

We did a tour in early November last year and it was getting dark between four and half past four, so we were trying to end our tours around that time. But the benefit is that you'll have quieter roads. It will be slightly easier to drive, and you'll have a better choice of viewing spots, and the solitude and the beauty of it all. So it's very much balanced. People who come up here in the autumn, as long as they're prepared for all eventualities, can have a really good time even without as much daylight as you'd have in the summer.

SALLY-ANN

Now, the second question. You asked about booking ahead. The reality is, and it's the way we work, that we would always advise booking ahead. But as the season quietens down, in theory it's maybe not quite as critical as it would be in the really key months. For us up here, May and September are actually the busiest months, generally speaking. So as you get into October and November it's a lot easier. However, what you do need to double check is what is open, because as you get into October, and particularly late October, some of the family run businesses and family run B&Bs who've been working hard all through the season will close, ready for the winter. But as we found last year when we did a tour in November, the higher priced hotels from the summer brought their prices down significantly. So you had the benefit of a nice hotel at a much cheaper price. Our guests last year thoroughly enjoyed it. They'd finish their day, go in, find a nice fire, have a wee dram and relax into that archetypal Scottish world.

SALLY-ANN

So yes, plan ahead. You need to be aware of what's open and what's not. If you book everything, great. If not, you'll probably get away with it, but you will need to keep one eye on what's ahead.

TRACY

Perfect. I'm going to put you on the spot with the question I like to throw out at the end of every segment. What would be your one piece of advice for making the most of the far north in autumn?

SALLY-ANN

Am I allowed two pieces?

TRACY

Yes, go for it, of course you can.

SALLY-ANN

Thank you. As I've alluded to, it's a different feel and a different offer up here in the autumn compared to the summer. So what we would say is be prepared to be flexible. In the autumn it's not the ticking boxes exercise you might have with your long list of places to see and experience in the summer. The weather can be unpredictable, there are shorter daylight hours, and the environment might be more challenging. You might have boggy ground, for example. So just be flexible, soak it all up, and don't worry about ticking all the boxes. That would be number one.

SALLY-ANN

And as a supplement to that, bring the right clothing. We say it about the whole year, but especially in autumn. If you want to enjoy it, you must expect some rain and showers, boggy ground, and wind up here as well. So bring a good waterproof coat. We'd suggest waterproof footwear, even if you're not planning on a hike, because it's still very valuable, and possibly a hat and even some gloves. I know that might put some people off, but believe me, if you're wrapped up warm you'll embrace it, and you'll really feel everything we've got to offer up here.

TRACY

Perfect. When you said hat and gloves, I thought about the last time I was on Orkney in May, and I had to go and buy a Fair Isle hat because it was so cold. So there you go, you never know what you're going to get.

SALLY-ANN

As a result of our experiences up here in earlier years of touring, we acquired some North Coast Explorer beanie hats that we always have in our vehicle, whatever the time of year, and they've been used by guests all through the year. So if you're on tour with us you don't need to worry, because we'll have hats, waterproof trousers and welly boots all available for you in the vehicle.

TRACY

Perfect. Thanks so much, Sally-Ann, for coming on and telling us all about autumn in the far north of Scotland. I'll be speaking to you again in a few months, when we're going to talk about the winter season, which I'm really excited about too. But thanks so much for filling us in on autumn, or fall, in the far north of Scotland.

SALLY-ANN

Absolutely. We hope everybody enjoys their autumn wherever they are, and maybe we'll see one or two of you up here as well. Thanks, Tracy. Enjoyed it, as always.

London with Charley and Becki from Walks and Devour Tours

TRACY

And now the part of this special we've saved until last. From the far north of Scotland, we're travelling the whole length of the country back down to London. Autumn in the capital means quieter landmarks, cosy pubs, gorgeous colour in the parks and the first twinkle of Christmas. And this time we're doubly spoilt, because we have two wonderful guests to share it all. I am so excited to welcome Charley and Becki from Walks and Devour Tours onto the podcast to talk all about autumn in London. You'll recognise Becki from previous episodes this year, because she talked all about spring and all about summer, and Charley is back this episode to chat about heading into the autumn season. So we're spoilt this episode because we've got both of you. Welcome back to the podcast.

CHARLEY

Thank you, Tracy. Hi, it's great to be here.

TRACY

First question, and I'm going straight into it. Charley, I think you're answering this one. What changes about the feel of London once the summer visitors head home, and what really comes into its own in autumn?

CHARLEY

Autumn is one of my favourite seasons in the entire year. I just love it. And for London it's quite magical, because the entire rhythm shifts completely from summer. You get a much more relaxed and authentic atmosphere in London, more of a local feel. It's as if the locals have got their city back, if that makes sense. Through the summer you're overrun with tourists and it gets so busy. Even the locals struggle to get up and down the streets because it's so packed.

CHARLEY

So the dense crowds we see through summer really recede, especially at some of the iconic sites and all the busy areas. And it's cosy. It feels so cosy in the city, because you get the darker evenings, they're crisp, they're cooler, and you've got dimly lit lanterns everywhere and lights in the windows. One of my favourite things is walking down the quieter streets with the glowing streetlights and the cosy fires you can see through the windows of the pubs and some of the houses as you walk by. Then there are the green spaces. I don't think people realise just how much green space there is in London, but it's about 40 per cent. Watching the trees change colour from green to gold to amber is one of my favourite parts.

CHARLEY

So for me the biggest change is the vibe, from that crazy busyness we feel in summer to those cosy, warm, dimly lit, crisp evenings and daytimes. There's more interaction everywhere. And cruising down the Thames, I have to say, is magical in autumn and winter. Even though you're cold, seeing all the iconic buildings lit up, especially around late November and December, is magical. It really is.

TRACY

It becomes very atmospheric. The darker nights, the shorter days, the change in the weather, the whole atmosphere of London changes. You touched on autumn colour and the leaves changing, and Becki, I know you're going to talk about this, because I think autumn colour in London is quite underrated. There are some beautiful places to go for those gorgeous autumn leaf experiences and pictures. So where would you send people, and when do you think it usually looks at its best?

BECKI

That's a great question, Tracy. I think October is a really nice time to see the impact of that colour change in full force. We also sometimes get what you'd call an Indian summer, that later in the year warmer weather where it feels a little balmy but you still get that nip in the air. In terms of where to go, one underrated spot a little north of the centre is Hampstead Heath. You really get to see the colour change in full force from the trees, and you also get some lovely views of the city skyline from a more elevated perspective. Primrose Hill too. People were really enjoying that over the summer, especially when we had the partial eclipse a couple of weeks ago. But to really see it come into its own in the autumn, stay a little longer so that the shorter day closes into night and you can watch the city light up around you. It's wonderful.

BECKI

Then there are the central London royal parks, if you're not up for getting on the Northern line and travelling up to North London. There are so many clustered together in the City of Westminster. You've got St James's Park, right opposite St James's Palace and near Buckingham Palace, which we cover on many of our tours. The Kensington Palace tour and the London in a Day tour both take that in nicely. St James's Park is a small park, but it's so beautifully planted, and they change the planting of the flower beds seasonally, so you get wonderful autumn colours that match the changing colours of the leaves on the trees.

BECKI

If you go to St James's Park now or into autumn, you'll also get to see how the pelican chicks are growing up. Chicks have hatched there for the only time in the pelicans' 350 year history in the park. I've been following their progress and taking our guests to follow it too. They're growing really quickly, so they might not be chicks by the time we get to October, but you will get to see a fuller brood of pelicans, which is fantastic. Then there's Kensington Gardens, which we cover on a new Express tour, a shortened version of our Kensington Palace tour where we really focus on the gardens. In October, if you walk down to the Italianate Gardens, a beautiful little paved formal garden created by Prince Albert as a present for Queen Victoria, there's some romance there as well.

BECKI

So if you're a couple and you want a nice romantic walk, you can head through those lovely tree lined avenues to the Italianate Gardens. Walk down to the end and you get this beautiful view across the water, with fountains either side of you, and a full riot of colour. It fills you with that wonderful feeling of being in nature, while marvelling at just how beautiful London is. It's fantastic.

TRACY

Lovely. Doug took some beautiful pictures of Little Venice last September and October, and they are gorgeous. A lovely little canal, and the leaves were beautiful. Now, this is the season when everybody starts to head back indoors. It's getting darker and colder. So Charley, a couple of questions for you. What's happening in London with museums, galleries and theatre heading into autumn, and which of your tours are at their very best at this time of year?

CHARLEY

There's so much happening. I think it's underrated. People think summer is the time to head in when everything's happening, but it isn't. It's actually the autumn and winter months. With the theatres, you can imagine the darker afternoons entice everyone to go in and watch more shows, so the West End comes to life more throughout the autumn and winter. That's due to a lot of new shows opening and the switching of casts. They normally switch casts through October and November, to then run for another year, so this is the best time to see a brand new cast doing a show, or any new shows coming out in the West End. And we might have a special tour next year that includes one of the oldest West End theatres, so that's one to look out for. I'll tell you more about that later.

CHARLEY

The Tower and the Abbey, the two most iconic sites, lose those crazy, overwhelming lines you have to queue in to get in. Thankfully, with our tours we do have exclusive access, but there's a lot more appreciation because you can spend more time in each area. It's more atmospheric and definitely less busy, so you can really appreciate the history these iconic buildings have. Culturally, the museums jump. Although they are busy through the summer, they are really the place to be through the winter. You've got the National Gallery, the new London Museum opening, the British Museum, which is another potential offering for us next year, and the Tate Modern. Through the autumn and winter they all start bringing out their big blockbuster exhibitions for the year ahead, so it's a really good time to go.

CHARLEY

As for our tours, for me the best tour for this season is the pubs tour we run through the City of London. Through the summer people want to sit outside in the sun, so the interiors of the pubs are very quiet. In the City of London especially, you can't walk down the street without having to step into the road because people are standing outside the pubs. It's a lovely atmosphere, but the pub culture completely changes in autumn and winter. People want to be inside, curled up in front of the fire, cosy and warm. On our tour you hear stories of Fleet Street and Dickens, which really captures British pub culture at its best, while trying traditional ales and little British pub bites in tiny, cosy corners of dimly lit taverns. So for me, the pubs tour really comes to life through the winter.

CHARLEY

I'd also say our Tower tours. At the Tower of London we have the Opening Ceremony, and we have Tracy's favourite tour, the Ceremony of the Keys, which is the closing ceremony. Imagine being inside that Tower, just you and 20 other people, as dusk falls around the fortress. Everything changes dramatically, and you really get that true feeling of what it was like in there, with the cooler feel, and then watching the Ceremony of the Keys or the Opening Ceremony. It's something quite magical. Then the Abbey tour, Westminster Abbey. We offer quite a few different options through the winter, as well as private tours. The majority of our tours now have private options. But this is the quintessential rainy day indoor experience. On a rainy day you could spend two or two and a half hours in Westminster Abbey quite happily, and we offer it as a private tour so you have your own guide and really understand the history and background of this magical place. And Becki touched on it, the Kensington Palace Express tour. It's a two and a half hour tour that takes in the majestic gardens and then the palace itself. For me, those are the tours that really come to life through the autumn and winter.

TRACY

Perfect. You've mentioned my favourite, the Ceremony of the Keys, which I absolutely love, but I also love Taste, Tales and Traditional Ales, the pub tour. It's so brilliant, because it's not just the food. You're also learning about the history and the culture. It's Britain in one little tour. British culture in a nutshell. I think I've done it maybe three times now, and if you asked me to go on it again, I would. What's even better is that I've been on it with some of our clients and some of our listeners, and getting to share it with them is really magical too. Now I'm going to turn to Becki. We know the evenings are going to get darker earlier and there's a cosier feel as we head through the autumn. So how do you spend an autumn evening in London, Becki, and what would you recommend to visitors?

BECKI

I'm a big walker, so I love long, meandering walks in a variety of places. If you head towards the Grand Union Canal, either in the north or the east of the city, it starts getting beautifully lit. As Charley touched on, in some places there's a real quality to the light when the night is closing in and you get the lovely glow of the street lamps. It feels really romantic. And because I'm a bit of a nerd, I like anywhere with a lovely traditional gas lamp glowing, because it gives you that extra romantic, glowy feel. You can find those in quite a few places in the City of London and the City of Westminster. If you go a little off the beaten track from Fleet Street and head to the Inner and Middle Temples, where legal London is, you'll find cosy, quiet little streets beautifully lit with gas lamps. You'll find them around Buckingham Palace as well, and in St James's Park and Green Park you'll find that lovely glow.

BECKI

A cosy pub with a book is a must. Find a quiet little corner, preferably by a fire if there's a chill in the air. And one of the benefits of being in London is that in certain areas the shops are open later into the evening. Around Oxford Street, Piccadilly, the Seven Dials area, Covent Garden and Soho you can pop into a cosy little bookshop, and there's something special about browsing and picking out something to take to your quiet corner to read. So a little retail therapy, a little wellbeing with the walking and the downtime, and maybe a tipple or two as well.

TRACY

That sounds really good. Thinking about a little retail therapy, we're heading towards the Christmas season and that festive feel around London, really from the middle of November. So Charley, when do the lights and markets actually appear, and is late November a good time to visit for a hint of Christmas without the December crowds? Because we all know how busy it can get in December.

CHARLEY

Yes, 100 per cent. December is insane in London, especially around the markets and the main streets. But late November is probably the best kept secret for visiting London. You get all that magnificent festive cheer without the crowds, which can become wall to wall in some places. We do roll out Christmas early in London. By the second week of November all the major displays and markets are fully operational. Oxford Street and Regent Street are the most famous Christmas lights to be switched on, and they always happen in the first week of November. Then there's the Covent Garden area, where they have the huge Christmas tree. If you love Christmas trees, like Kevin from Home Alone, Covent Garden is the place to go, because I think that one is the biggest in London, and that's normally up from mid November.

CHARLEY

The markets will all be up and running by mid November too. There's one along the South Bank, Leicester Square, Trafalgar Square, and then there's the amazing, huge Christmas fair in Hyde Park, Winter Wonderland, which happens every single year. If you've never been to London and you want the full festive experience, Hyde Park Winter Wonderland is definitely the place to go. So late November gives you all the cheer and half the crowds, as we say. The schools haven't broken up by then, so there are fewer kids too, and there's a lot more availability on tours because the corporate parties haven't started booking. One more tip: it's better value for travel. If you're looking at hotel and flight rates, they're lower through the end of November than they will be come December. But the atmosphere is just as festive as December. It just starts a wee bit earlier in London.

TRACY

It does. I don't know if we should be sharing this, Charley, because that's my personal favourite time of year to visit London. I love November in London, because it's not as insane as December, when trying to actually see any of the Christmas lights can get difficult because of the sheer number of people. But you still get that lovely cosy feeling because of the darker nights. A lovely time of year to visit. So thank you both for coming on and talking about autumn. Charley, you're going to be back a few more times, and you'll both be back at the beginning of December to talk about winter, that December, January, February period. December is obviously very different from January and February, but we'll talk about the winter season in London and how things change for Walks and Devour and which tours are available over that season. Otherwise, thanks so much for joining me for this episode.

CHARLEY

Thank you, it's our pleasure. It's lovely to chat again.

BECKI

Thanks, Tracy, always fun.

Wrapping up

TRACY

So there we have it, autumn across the UK through the eyes of five people who know their regions better than anyone. Thanks so much to Sally-Ann from North Coast Explorer Tours and to Charley and Becki from Walks and Devour Tours this week, and to Bryony, Lisa and Alex for part one. From rainbows, dark skies and the deer rut in the far north of Scotland to gaslit evenings and the first Christmas lights in London, there really is something special about the UK in autumn.

TRACY

I'll link to this week's guests' websites in the show notes at uktravelplanning.com/episode217. If autumn is in your plans, we'd love to hear where you're heading, so do send us a message via SpeakPipe. You'll find the link in the show notes. And if you've enjoyed this two part special, please share it with someone who's planning their own UK trip. As always, that just leaves me to say, until next week, happy UK travel planning.

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