UK TRAVEL PLANNING PODCAST

Episode 163. Discover North East England with Alex Iles: From Roman Ruins to Coastal Castles

With Tracy Collins and Alex Iles, founder of Iles Tours

Guide and archaeologist Alex Iles shares how storytelling, archaeology and family history shape his tours of North East England, from Hadrian's Wall and Bamburgh to Holy Island and Durham, plus how his tours work, the best time to visit, what to pack for the wind, and his top tip for planning a first trip.

TRACY
Thinking about exploring North East England? In this episode, I'm joined by Alex Iles of Iles Tours to share why this beautiful and historic region, including the stunning Northumberland coast where I grew up, is such a fantastic place to visit. And don't miss the special announcement for podcast listeners at the very end.

INTRO
Welcome to the UK Travel Planning Podcast. Your host is the founder of the UK Travel Planning website, Tracy Collins. In this podcast, Tracy shares destination guides, travel tips and itinerary ideas, as well as interviews with a variety of guests who share their knowledge and experience of UK travel to help you plan your perfect UK vacation. Join us as we explore the UK, from cosmopolitan cities to quaint villages, from historic castles to beautiful islands, and from the picturesque countryside to seaside towns.

TRACY
Hi, and welcome back to the UK Travel Planning Podcast. This week's episode is all about a region that is especially close to my heart, North East England, where I grew up in a small village on the beautiful Northumberland coast. It's a part of the country filled with dramatic scenery, centuries of history, friendly locals (myself included) and so many special places to explore. I love sharing this area with our listeners, and today's guest is just as passionate about helping people discover what makes it so unique.

TRACY
If you listened to our recent episode with Deb Harsen, you might recall her fantastic day tour to Bamburgh and Lindisfarne, which she said was a true highlight of her trip. That tour was led by Alex Iles, founder of Iles Tours. With a lifelong love of storytelling, Alex brings the North East's past to life, from Roman forts and medieval monasteries to coastal castles and cultural legends. His tours cover Newcastle, Durham, Northumberland, Hadrian's Wall and Holy Island, and offer a rich and immersive experience for curious travellers. In this conversation, you'll hear how Alex got started, what makes his tours different, and why North East England should absolutely be on your itinerary. And be sure to listen to the end, because Alex has a special announcement just for UK Travel Planning Podcast listeners. So let's get started.

Meet Alex Iles

TRACY
Let's start with your story, Alex. Where are you from originally, and what brought you to the North East of England?

ALEX
It's funny that you ask, because I'm actually a British Scot. I was born just outside Edinburgh, in a place called Livingston, but from a young age my family travelled a lot. We went to Canada, then back to Edinburgh, then Liverpool, then Cambridge. I went to an international school in Scotland from the age of nine, and then at 17 I moved to Newcastle. My mum's family is from the North East, from an area called Teesside, which was part of North Yorkshire but is also its own area within the North East. My father was born down near London. But I always grew up in Scotland and the north, and that always felt more like home.

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ALEX
When I went to university, I thought I was going to go to a Scottish one and ended up at Newcastle. A lot of students in Newcastle end up in an area called Jesmond, which becomes its own little region within a region, with lots of students all around each other. I was fortunate that I didn't end up there, and lots of my friends were locals, so I was immersed in North East culture and saw the North East without just having the student experience. That really helped, because I fell in love with the area, its history and its people, and I wanted to make it home. It felt like my extended family in many ways.

ALEX
Sometimes I'll be in a taxi and get asked, "Where are you actually from?" I used to jokingly say, "Oh, I'm a plastic Geordie," until one taxi driver turned around and said, "Does that mean you're harmful for the environment?" So I changed it to "I'm an adopted Geordie," because I'm definitely not harmful to the environment!

TRACY
That's so funny. To be honest, I can hear a little North East twang, so you have picked it up. I'm from Northumberland. I was born in Hexham and brought up in the North East until I was 14, and I've lived back there for parts of my life as well. But when I go back, I get told I sound like a very posh Geordie. So you're a plastic Geordie, and I'm a posh Geordie!

ALEX
Definitely adopted! It's good fun.

History as storytelling

TRACY
You mentioned your love of history, and on your website, which we'll link to in the show notes, you talk about a passion for storytelling. I think that's really important. I was a history teacher, and I taught history to the kids through stories, because some things can be quite boring if you don't teach them that way. So how have storytelling and your love of history shaped what you do now?

ALEX
That's a really good way of introducing it, because a lot of my customers had a very hard time with history at school, often because the education system is focused on exams rather than learning. The way I think about human history is that it's all stories. It's what's been passed down to us, memorised and recorded. Many good tour guides learn these stories so we can pass them on and help people understand where they fit into the human story, because all of us are looking to connect ourselves to that story and understand where we belong.

ALEX
As I learned the North East's history, I could see my own family connections. I'd paid for an ancestry membership at school and gone back through my family tree to find where all the different branches came from. When I started researching, I realised, oh, that's where one of my ancestors is from. There's a place in Northumberland called Chillingham, and I could trace a branch of my family there. Another branch was from the Scottish Borders, another from Ireland, and another lived in the south-east of England. So I could connect myself to these areas and understand them.

ALEX
That's what I want to bring across in the tours. So often you can be on a tour where someone says, "In 1842, such and such happened in this building." Well, where's the emotion in that? Who were these people, what were they feeling, and what were all the dominoes that fell around it, and how does it connect to today? I came into history through mythology. I loved the Norse myths, the Roman and Greek myths and the Egyptian myths. Among the native Britons, and in the wider world of Gaul, Britain and Ireland that some people call Celtic, there was a group of people called bards.

ALEX
The bards memorised stories, but they had a larger function too. They remembered the law by heart, they had a slight religious element, and they travelled around, a little like the druids. I always said I wanted to be a bard when I grew up, and funnily enough, I feel there's an overlap with tour guiding, because I'm memorising this history and sharing it so that you get that connection, and a little more of the puzzle of where you fit into the human story.

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TRACY
That's brilliant. We often speak to people who are tracing their family roots in the North East. You can do the research and find the names and the places, but when you actually visit and see where they lived, a street they might have walked down, or the view of the sea they would have seen at Seahouses or Bamburgh, or go to Holy Island, you can walk in the footsteps of your ancestors and learn what it was like to live in the North East 50, 100 or 200 years ago. I think that's a fantastic thing to do. And your love of history goes further back, because you're into archaeology as well, aren't you?

What archaeology adds

ALEX
That's right. To give some context, I started Iles Tours back in 2013, doing two-hour historical walking tours in and around Newcastle, then half-day walking tours, and then full-day tours. Last year I stopped doing the one and two-hour walking tours, so now the shortest tour I do is a half day, and I've really focused the business on full-day and multi-day tours, because that's my real passion and you can bring in a lot more nuance than you can in two hours.

ALEX
During COVID, I jokingly say my business became illegal, because you couldn't be in a car with people outside your own household. For nearly two years I had to really think about what I was doing, so I went back over all my scripts and reread and restudied all my old books. One thing I found was that a lot of the history books covered the same material, because historians have to go back to the same documents. So I started reading archaeology reports on excavations of sites throughout the North East, and I noticed that the story was slightly different.

ALEX
That's not to say the historians are wrong, but history is often the story of government, of kings and rulers, of the powerful. You don't get the story of the farmer sitting in the Northumberland hills as the Romans march through the land, or of the Anglo-Saxon communities migrating over the North Sea and settling here, intermarrying and interacting with the native Britons. You don't get the story of the medieval farmer whose life is fine until, through a domino effect, war breaks out between Edward I and Robert the Bruce. Through archaeology you can look at their households and what they left behind. Archaeologists have a running joke that "my career is in ruins"!

ALEX
So you take that very detailed data, read lots of reports so you get an idea of a region, and then you tell the story: historically we know this happened, and this was the direct effect on people like you, living normal lives. Not a lord sitting in his castle about to attack another very similar lord in another castle. The people on the ground were a lot more similar on both sides of the English-Scottish border than you'd think. Or take the Roman invasion. Land that people had been living on for thousands of years suddenly had a great big wall built through it. You couldn't visit your cousin who lived two miles across, because someone had built a wall through your land.

ALEX
There had been no distinction, no northern and southern Britain. There was Britain, or Britannia, as they would probably have called it. That wall broke the island in half for the first time and laid the foundations for what would eventually become a divide between the two areas. That's fascinating and really fun to bring to life on a tour.

Hadrian's Wall: more than a border

TRACY
I grew up beside Hadrian's Wall, and my dad was born in Wallsend, which is obviously the end of the wall. It's always been there my entire life, and I've never thought of it in those terms. It was just there. But thinking of people living in an area and the Romans turning up and building a great big wall right through it, between what's now England and Scotland, although obviously it wasn't then...

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ALEX
That's another fun one. People think Hadrian's Wall is the English-Scottish border, but if you did that you'd cut off almost all of Northumberland and Cumbria, and the people living there definitely feel English! I remember two lovely ladies from California. We did a tour of Bamburgh, the whole eight-hour day, and at the end of it one of them turned to me and asked, "So how long has this been part of Scotland?" I said there was a short period of about 40 years in the Middle Ages when it was part of Scotland, but generally it's been part of Northumbria, which has been seen as English. And if you want to get into the debate about when Englishness and Scottishness actually start, that's a whole other kettle of fish!

ALEX
We're talking about lines drawn on paper by people sitting in Stirling for the King of Scots and in London for the King of England. Those distinctions in international politics affect the daily lives of normal people, and that's what I love.

TRACY
So I'm going to ask you a question. I was born in Hexham, and the Roman wall is not very far from Hexham. If I'd been born in Hexham when the wall was built, which side of the wall would I have been on?

ALEX
On paper, you would be inside the Roman Empire. But the reality is that the Romans had a lot more influence than people realise, and this is where we get into fun stuff like science. There's something called isotopic analysis. Whatever you eat and drink while you're growing up leaves a signature in your teeth, so from human remains you can see where someone grew up from their baby teeth, and then from their adult teeth whether they migrated or moved.

ALEX
We can do the same with animals. They've analysed the bones of cattle on Hadrian's Wall, and over half of them came from the Scottish Highlands. So it isn't a case of the wall being built and everyone north of it being kept out. It's not like a modern, heavily militarised boundary. People were paying tribute or taxation to the Romans, and the Romans were sending large amounts of silver north to the tribal leaders in what is today Scotland, so there was trade and movement of goods. You can create all sorts of fun stories from that. Did the Romans get a heads-up that something was about to go wrong when the cattle shipment didn't turn up?

ALEX
In a lot of the native settlements in Northumberland and southern Scotland you find Roman pottery. The Romans were flooding the market with their seconds! And at the end of the Roman period there was a whole transformation, with people moving in from around the North Sea, mixing and bringing new ideas. So archaeology lets us understand the human story in a much more nuanced way. Archaeologists also like to poke fun at historians, saying historians are reading the gossip of ancient times and writing books about it, while archaeologists are looking at the daily lives of real people.

TRACY
It's absolutely fascinating. I could spend the next hour just talking about Hadrian's Wall. Bearing in mind I used to be a history teacher, I had this vision of a hard border built to stop the marauding hordes coming down from Scotland, but it sounds like everybody was far more integrated than I'd imagined.

ALEX
There was obviously conflict too. One study I was reading last year looks at different levels of conflict: high-intensity conflict, which is what we'd understand as war today, and low-intensity conflict, where you have long, unresolved problems. Many people argue that Hadrian's Wall may have been much more like a low-intensity conflict. A Roman patrol goes north of the wall, chats to a local farmer, has a drink of water, and comes back with information. That goes on for six months or a year, everyone smiling and chatting and swapping bits of Roman pottery, and then suddenly a patrol doesn't come back. Everyone seems friendly until they're not. That's one theory, but we don't have written records, so we have to look at the settlements and try to figure out what was happening in people's normal lives. That's the fun of it, and I hope I bring that across in my tours.

How Iles Tours began

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TRACY
You're certainly bringing it across on this podcast, Alex! So you started the tours in 2013 with walking tours in Newcastle, and you've grown since then. One thing I read on your website that fascinated me was that you started by reading every book in the local history section of the Newcastle library. That's some commitment.

ALEX
I jokingly say that one thing that helped my business was unemployment! I finished university in 2013, when the first wave of the global recession hit, and applying for jobs then was incredibly difficult. I wanted to be involved in business development and investment in the North East, showing the region off, but I just couldn't get a job in that area. It was a very hard time for a lot of people. I was having a bit of a moan to my family, saying, "I just want to have a job," and one of them said, "Well, why don't you start your own business then?"

ALEX
So I sat down with close family and brainstormed what I could do, and the idea for Iles Tours came out of that: walking tours where I could be outdoors, meet people from all over the world, show them the region I loved, and use my skills, because I've always been able to take huge amounts of information and convey it with nuance. If anyone listening has started a business, you'll know the feeling. I was one of those terrible people who'd buy one coffee and nurse it for six or eight hours, because I was very much bootstrapping in those early days. I'd go to the library, get a pile of books, sit down with my notebook, read a chapter and write it up, and take notes even if I didn't understand something.

ALEX
A really good example, and if you're from the North East you'll know about this, was a group of people in early modern Newcastle called the keelmen. The keelmen kept being mentioned, their uniforms, the way they dressed, their culture, but no book ever explained what a keelman was, because all the local historians presumed the reader would know. Eventually one of my friends from Sunderland explained it. One of the greatest strengths and weaknesses of the North East is that we're very tribal, but Sunderland had keelmen too!

ALEX
A keel was a flat-bottomed boat that could carry up to about 50 tons of coal. The North East was a huge coal mining area from around the time of Elizabeth I right through to the 1970s or so, with the last Northumbrian coal mine closing in 2008. At the height of the Victorian period, the North East was producing 19 per cent of Britain's coal, which is a huge amount. A lot of international travellers have heard the expression "carrying coals to Newcastle", which means a pointless exercise, because no one would need to sell coal to people in Newcastle!

ALEX
Across in Gateshead, on the south bank of the Tyne opposite Newcastle, people were even digging their own illegal coal mines. They would take up the floorboards of their houses and dig what's called a bell pit, a shaft that opens out underneath like a big church bell. They'd extract the coal, fill the hole back in with the family's rubbish, and sell the excess to local people. Coal mining in the region goes back to at least the 1200s, so sometimes when people build, they find unrecorded mines that aren't on any map. A friend of mine who's a civil engineer found one when he was working on a house!

ALEX
The keelmen transported the coal up and down the river, past the medieval bridges that the big ships couldn't get past. They took it from the staithes, the wooden structures that brought the coal down from the hills to the riverside. The keelmen regularly came into conflict with the civil authorities and went on strike, so they were a big part of the history of the Quayside and the industrial heritage of the North East.

TRACY
Really interesting. I'm a coal miner's granddaughter. My mum's side of the family has a strong coal mining background, and I'm sure most of us from the North East have relatives who were down the mines.

The tours today

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TRACY
I want to talk about how your business has grown, because we're now 12 years on. We had the COVID years, but in the last few years you've grown and started doing half-day and multi-day tours. Should we talk about the tours you offer now and how they differ from the traditional idea of a walking tour?

ALEX
I've moved away from walking tours, and guided full-day tours are the core of my business. I collect my customers on the morning of the tour, either from their accommodation or from one of the train stations, and we travel out. Each tour is themed around an area of the North East. There's my Hadrian's Wall tour, where I show people the Roman frontier and how the Romans interacted with the natives, with all the nuances of that.

ALEX
I also have a Bamburgh and Lindisfarne tour. Bamburgh was one of the capitals of the kings of Northumbria, the Anglo-Saxon kings who mixed and interacted with the native British. Then there's the famous story of the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons to Christianity, recorded in Bede's Ecclesiastical History. Bede was one of the first English historians and another North East figure. I also offer an Anglo-Saxon Northumbria tour, covering the heritage and history of the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Northumbria.

ALEX
People hear that there's a modern county called Northumberland, the border county that runs from Newcastle up to the Scottish border. But Northumbria included parts of the Scottish Borders, Northumberland, Cumbria, County Durham, Yorkshire and parts of Lancashire, right down to where Liverpool is today. Some archaeologists call it the kingdom of central Britain. It gets its name from the River Humber, because Northumbria was the kingdom of all the peoples who lived north of the Humber. That's how large and significant it was.

ALEX
Then I have tours of Durham and Durham Cathedral, with the story of St Cuthbert, a really important Northumbrian bishop in the Anglo-Saxon period. After his death he became a saint, and his relics were used to found Durham Cathedral. The Prince Bishops of Durham were some of the most influential religious figures in England, and they basically had their own kingdom within England, a Palatinate, with independence from the monarchy. They controlled huge amounts of land throughout County Durham and Northumberland. Bishop Antony Bek was one of Edward I's generals and led battles against Robert the Bruce. In the simplest terms, a third of the bishops were religious figures, a third were basically military men, and a third probably shouldn't have been bishops!

ALEX
I also do prehistoric tours of Northumberland, showing people stone circles, Bronze Age burial mounds and hill forts. That's more specialist, because when you're dealing with something from 9,000 BC, about 11,000 years ago, there are no structures above ground. But you can take someone to where the excavations happened and say, the Stone Age Britons lived right here, this was their community and their landscape. Then you go through the Neolithic, the New Stone Age, when farming arrived, and into the Bronze Age, with the first metalworkers. Those Bronze Age people eventually became the Iron Age Britons, who had very interesting interactions with the Romans, so you get the precursor to the Roman story.

ALEX
I also do specialist tours covering the two powerful groups in County Durham, the Neville family, who owned Raby Castle, and the bishops of Durham with their palace at Bishop Auckland. There are more, but those are the core full-day tours. Then there are multi-day tours for people with a specialist interest, from three to five days long. I've done tours based around faith, going from prehistoric and Roman beliefs through to the dawn of Christianity, visiting churches and ancient sites. There's a specialist Roman tour that goes really in depth, visiting Roman sites from York up to the Scottish Borders. And I do castles too, a more medieval tour digging into the Anglo-Scottish wars and the rivalries between the kings of England and the kings of Scots, and how those wars created the landscape you see today when you travel through Northumberland and County Durham.

Northumberland's castles and the border wars

TRACY
I'm always very proud of the fact that Northumberland has the most castles of any county in England.

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ALEX
Yes, and unfortunately that's a side effect of what you could describe as 300 years of warfare. You go to the Midlands and there are lots of medium to large towns and cities. In the North East, Newcastle, Sunderland and Durham are the cities, and as you go further north there are small to medium-sized towns, like Morpeth, Hexham and Berwick-upon-Tweed, and smaller towns such as Wooler, Corbridge, Prudhoe and Amble. The towns never got the chance to grow because of that long-term conflict, and you'll find the same in the Scottish Borders.

ALEX
People talk about the heroes of the Scottish wars of independence, like William Wallace and Robert the Bruce, but in Northumberland they are not our heroes at all! Northumberland had a population of around 120,000 before the Anglo-Scottish wars, and at the end it had around 18,000, with many people driven out, and Bruce harried the area. I want to be clear, I'm not saying Edward I was a saint or the good guy. He did things to Scotland that were just as horrific. But I do sometimes wince when people say Wallace was this pure-hearted, amazing guy like you see in Braveheart. Neither he nor Bruce was. They were opportunists who saw a way to power, just as Edward I did, and they carved out kingdoms, lands and wealth and inflicted horrible things on normal people.

TRACY
I was just about to say, the everyday people are stuck in the middle while all these power games go on, and we do forget that ordinary people were trying to live their lives through these periods. You're passionate about all these eras, the Romans, the Anglo-Saxons, the medieval period. Do you have a favourite?

ALEX
It's really hard. Some people ask me whether I ever get bored delivering the same tours, but what I love is making a tour personal to the people on it. I've had medical professionals who want to know about medicine in the past. Some people are interested in family history, others in the Anglo-Scottish wars. So every tour is different because of who's on it, and it's about connecting their life experiences with how things were in the past and what that means for us today.

ALEX
My favourite periods are the tumultuous ones. The end of Roman Britain, from around 350 AD through to around the 700s, is a period we don't know much about, but we're getting a better picture as science and archaeology advance, and I find it fascinating. I love the period from the Norman Conquest in 1066 to about 1200 in the same way, which was very conflicted. And the Roman invasion of Northumberland, or the Bronze Age migration, when a new population arrived in the British Isles around 2500 BC. Those periods of pioneering, mixing, change and transformation are what get me really excited, because we can learn a lot about the human experience as people create new stories in those times.

Group sizes, ages and accessibility

TRACY
Let's move on to some practical tour information. If you're listening and thinking you want to go on a half-day, full-day or multi-day tour with Alex, and why wouldn't you? I tell you what, when I'm back I'm going to book a tour with you, Alex, because I grew up in the area and there are things I'd never thought about before. So if people want to book a tour, how many people can you cater for?

ALEX
My own vehicle is a six-seater, so I can take groups of up to six at a time, which can be a mix of twos or threes. I've also done solo tours, taking people out by themselves. It depends on the day and who's booked. I've organised larger groups too, where a group has already booked its coach, or wants me to act as an intermediary. I've done groups of 70, 80 or 90, a group of 160 for a Dutch university, and last year a group of 540, where I brought in my freelance guides and we did it over three days. I don't know if your listeners will have a group of 540, but if they do, a bit of a heads-up would help!

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ALEX
I like to keep group sizes smaller, but even a group of up to 80 can feel intimate if I bring in two or three of the guides I work with. They're professional archaeologists or have experience in history and storytelling, and I think they're absolutely amazing. Or if there are just a few of you and you want to go out together, it will be me or one of my freelancers, normally with a group of three to six, depending on the vehicle. As the business grows, I'd love to expand with small buses while keeping the high-end, bespoke nature of the tours, so that groups are comfortable and enjoy the route.

TRACY
It sounds brilliant. And are the tours suitable for all ages and fitness levels?

ALEX
I'm good at working with kids, and a lot of my guides have experience in historical education or have worked in museums and schools. But with the amount of information and the length of the day, I find age 10 and up is a good rule of thumb, because younger children can find it tiring, especially after a few busy days. There's no upper age limit. Even on a Hadrian's Wall tour, there are areas of the wall that are accessible. If you type Hadrian's Wall into Google, you'll see very dramatic cliff faces with the wall along the top, but it's not all like that, and you can make the tour bespoke.

ALEX
I always want customers to have the best experience. About four years ago I came away buzzing from a tour that was a challenge but really good fun. It was a walking tour of Newcastle for a visually impaired group. They didn't tell me until the tour started, because they'd had experiences of tours being cancelled on them. So suddenly you have to change the whole tour, because you can't say "look over there". Instead you say, "What you're standing in front of now is a Georgian building in Newcastle. Feel the sandstone. It's a golden yellow colour, quite a strong sandstone." And you explain that the city was black with coal soot from all that industrial heritage, and that it's been cleaned since the 1990s with Heritage Lottery money. You paint the picture in someone's mind with description, touch and the other senses.

ALEX
So if a group tells me someone has mobility issues, we'll do our best to modify the tour. If you wanted something like an off-road wheelchair tour of Hadrian's Wall, I might say another provider would be better suited. But just this week a lady contacted me to say her foot was in a boot because she'd broken it, and could we go at a different pace and make it more comfortable, and I was able to modify the tour for her. I don't want anyone to think they can't do a tour for some reason. We'll work the tour around it, because my guides and I know and love our region.

ALEX
For example, on Hadrian's Wall there's a fort called Housesteads, one of my favourites. Housesteads is on a hill slope. Its Roman name, Vercovicium, is often translated as the settlement on a hillside, so for some people with impairments it isn't suitable. But there are sites that are much flatter, so you can still take people to a Roman fort and tell the same story through the archaeology of that place. I have my standard tours, but that doesn't mean they can't be changed to give your group the best experience possible.

TRACY
So people just have to contact you and let you know what they're after, and then you can have that conversation.

ALEX
If you tell me something on the morning of the tour I can make small changes, but it's best to know in advance. I know that's not always possible. Earlier this year I had a lady who'd been in York the day before and stepped off a kerb and hurt her foot. A month later she messaged me with a lovely review and said she'd actually broken it, and she'd been limping around the whole region thinking it was sprained! We did modify that tour to make it more comfortable, but that's someone's whole vacation.

When to book, and what to pack

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TRACY
I've got a friend who does that every time she goes on holiday. She's done it three times now, so the joke is none of us want to go on a trip with her! How far in advance do people need to book with you? I'm guessing it's busier in the summer months. And I'll put a link to your website in the show notes. But if somebody wanted a tour in the next month or two, is it too late?

ALEX
I'd say anywhere between one and three months ahead at the start of a season is a good rule of thumb. It gets it in the diary, and it gives me time to plan a more bespoke route if you want one. If you contact me in the week of the date you want, I can probably still get you on a tour or contact one of my guides. But you might be a little disappointed, because the routes will already be set. I might have four Bamburgh and Lindisfarne tours and one Raby and Bishop Auckland tour running, and if you'd like Hadrian's Wall I might not be able to fit you in. What I can do is tell you what I have running, so maybe you could join the Tuesday tour, where there are two spaces. The closer you get to the date, the less bespoke the tour can be. But give me plenty of time and I'll work things out for you and your group.

ALEX
I work throughout the year. I take Christmas and Easter off, and occasionally some time in the summer. I've had people come in December, January and February, and that works just as well, but always prepare for any sort of weather. We do sometimes get nice long summers, but the one thing that always takes people by surprise is that the region can be quite windy. A lot of international travellers think of rain when they think of the British Isles, and that's been heavily shaped by the Atlantic side of the country, the west of Scotland, the Lake District, Devon and Cornwall. The east coast of Britain is actually remarkably dry, but we get a lot of wind.

ALEX
So it could be a lovely warm day, but there's always a wind in the background. I always suggest you pack layers, and also something to protect you from the wind, because people don't always think about that. At the start of this week I had some ladies from Florida, who are used to much warmer temperatures. It was a warm day in my opinion, around 24 degrees Celsius, somewhere in the 70s Fahrenheit, I think. I was in a T-shirt having a great time, and they felt they needed their jumpers on, which did make me chuckle! But I understand the North East isn't Florida or Texas or the south of France.

TRACY
Well, as you know, I was born and brought up in Northumberland, but the one thing that drove me away from Northumberland was, I'm afraid, the weather and the wind! I don't miss the cool weather, because I live in Brisbane now, where it's much warmer, so I probably would have found it a bit chilly this week too. But one thing I do miss is those long summer days of daylight, which give you far longer to get out and explore. You really have the county on a plate, because you have so much time to enjoy it.

ALEX
At the moment, in July, it's light from around five in the morning until ten at night, so even after your tour you can go back to your hotel, sit outside, go to a restaurant, and it's still light. Base yourself in places like Newcastle, Alnwick or Hexham. Since COVID we've moved much more towards outdoor dining in summer, and most hotels and restaurants with outdoor seating provide blankets. So if you do feel the chill, you can have a blanket and still enjoy your glass of wine or beer in the evening. It's proper class!

TRACY
You're making me homesick now, because I can just see myself on Holy Island, sitting in the pub garden there with a drink, enjoying the summer sunshine. Maybe I'll get to do that in a few weeks!

Favourite moments

TRACY
You've guided people from all over the world over the last 12 or 13 years, Alex. Are there any standout stories or moments from your tours?

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ALEX
I think each tour has its own moments, which is really lovely. Over the past 13 years I've met so many different people, and what's lovely for me is seeing their response to different parts of Northumberland or places in County Durham. Just last month I did a tour for a confirmation group from North America. As part of the Anglican Communion, you can do a course before your confirmation, and they came across for it. We were at Lindisfarne, and they stood where the shrine of St Cuthbert had been and had 20 minutes of silent prayer in Lindisfarne Priory. It was a wonderful, beautiful, spiritual moment.

ALEX
For other customers it's travelling through the landscape. They love going off the main road onto the smaller A and B roads of Northumberland to see the hills, and that becomes their special place. There's an idea you find a lot in Scottish and Irish culture called a thin place, where heaven touches earth, somewhere you feel close to heaven. I love helping people experience their own thin place during their vacation.

ALEX
Sometimes it's coming over the hills and seeing the Cheviots for the first time, with the Milfield valley, a lovely fertile valley surrounded by big hills on either side, and people just say, "Wow." Or going inside Durham Cathedral and saying, this amazing cathedral was built in 40 years, and it's three times older than the United States. Or showing people where some of the first human settlers lived on the coastline, or going inside Newcastle's castle and saying, this is the castle that gave the city its name. Each of those is really special in its own way, so it's hard to pick out one. And there have been plenty of funny moments too!

Future plans

TRACY
I was going to ask what your favourite thing is about being a guide, but you can hear it in your voice when you talk about it, the passion and the love for what you do and for showcasing North East England. It's lovely to hear. What about future plans, Alex? Have you got ideas for new tours, or places you're hoping to expand to?

ALEX
I'm working on a Scottish Borders tour at the moment, developing the history and heritage of the wider area of Northumbria, the old kingdom of the Anglo-Saxons, and also the Anglo-Scottish borders. While I've had some downtime, I've been researching that in a lot of depth, and I'm really enjoying it. Over the next few years I'm hoping to work with other guides who are also archaeologists, in places like the Lake District, Yorkshire and the rest of Scotland, so I can take what I've learned and develop tours for those regions and branch Iles Tours out. That takes time and partnerships, so it's not something I'll be launching in the next month or two, but my long-term goal is to grow Iles Tours across northern Britain and tell the stories that bring each region to life.

Alex's top tip

TRACY
It sounds very exciting. Now, I know you've got an announcement to make in a moment, so if you're thinking about booking with Alex, hang on, because he's got some exciting news to share. But first, there's always one question I ask at the end of the podcast. What would be the number one tip you'd share with anybody visiting the North East for the first time?

ALEX
My tip would be to choose a theme for your first visit. In the North East we have beautiful coastlines, so you could choose coasts, or market towns. You could choose hill walking in the North Pennines or the Cheviots, or city life in Newcastle and Durham. Then build your visit around that theme, because if you come here and try to do everything at once, you'll get overwhelmed. It's like visiting any other region. Be quite specific on your first visit and do what you love.

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ALEX
Even if you don't work with me as your guide, there are so many amazing guides, attractions and things to do in this region that I think you'll have a great time whatever you choose. I can't take you on a nature walk, but there are companies that do nature photography in the region. There are people who take you out by boat, like Billy Shiel's boats, where you can see seals and puffins around the coast. You can do a pub tour or a food tour of the North East with some amazing guides. Those are things I don't do, but if you choose a theme for your visit, I don't think you'll be disappointed.

ALEX
So my advice to anyone who wants to visit is to figure out what you love and focus on that, and you're going to have the best time, because the people here are open, welcoming, friendly and communal, and the landscape, the history and the culture all bring it together. I don't like it when people say we're an undiscovered gem, because we're here! We're just not on the main beaten track. One of my dreams is to help change that, but in a way that's sustainable and builds a love for the region, rather than it being a tacky souvenir you pick up in a corner shop. I want it to be something you cherish for the rest of your life.

TRACY
There's a huge amount of depth here, and I'm going to chip in on this one, Alex, because I'm proudly from Northumberland. If you're listening and you're planning to travel from London to York and then head up to Edinburgh, which many of you may do, please, please do not just go from York to Edinburgh. There's a massive amount of beautiful countryside, history and culture to experience in the North East of England. So do me a favour and promise me you'll stop off and spend some time exploring the beautiful North East. And with Alex as your guide would be absolutely perfect.

A special offer for listeners

TRACY
So, Alex, you have a surprise for our listeners. Would you like to share what that is?

ALEX
Yes. I'd like to offer listeners of the UK Travel Planning Podcast a 10 per cent discount on a direct booking with me. When you contact Iles Tours, either email me directly and quote the discount code UKTP10, or book directly on my website, www.ilestours.co.uk. That's Iles spelt I-L-E-S. One of my ancestors lived on land that belonged to a Norman knight, which is why we have the French spelling of the word isles, and it causes a great deal of confusion! So that's www.ilestours.co.uk, and the discount code is UKTP10. Quote it through the Contact Us page if you'd like something more bespoke, or if you'd like to book one of the tours on the website, put it in the promotional code section when you book, and you'll get 10 per cent off your tour.

TRACY
And that's valid for tours booked in 2025.

ALEX
That's right.

TRACY
Alex, it's been absolutely fantastic to talk to you this week. It's always a joy to talk to somebody about Northumberland, and your love and passion for it shine through, and your tours sound amazing. I'm so pleased we've been able to work together and have you on the podcast today. Thanks very much.

ALEX
Thank you so much for having me. It's been an absolute pleasure, and I look forward to hopefully speaking again in the future, and to hosting some of your listeners.

Closing

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TRACY

Thank you for tuning in to this week's episode of the UK Travel Planning Podcast. As always, show notes can be found at uktravelplanning.com. If you've enjoyed the show, why not leave us feedback via text or a review on your favourite 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.

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