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Rough Guide warns tourists: the English are impossible to understand, and they don't even understand themselves...

"England is a querulous, quarrelsome country - it always has been", says the new Rough Guide to England.

A nation "obsessed with toffs and C-list celebs", the guide goes on to say that political debate, on issues such as immigration, Islamic terrorism, and street crime, is "served up with liberal dollops of celebrity chit-chat."

"Even the world's most remote communities are on first-name terms with its princes, footballers and pop stars."

The Rough Guide also warns tourists that "the English are the most contradictory people imaginable and however long you spend in the country you'll never figure them out." That the nation has long been debating the nature of its "Englishness", the guide warns that the resulting picture "might suggest something akin to a national identity crisis."

On the other hand, in a country where "queuing remains a national pastime" the Rough Guide says there's one thing that unites the nation: "their sense of humour".

"The English are devoted to sarcasm on a gigantic scale."

Often mistaken as coldness or hostility, the guide reassures tourists that "the warmth [of the English] is in the humour, a sort of national solidarity that is bred in the bone."

Also proud of its multiculturalism, the Rough Guide states that England isn't just one place but a "product of multiple identities adapting and somehow fitting together."

The guide suggests a possible national motto of: "Make Tea, not War"

"The only certainty for visitors is that however long you spend in England and however much you see, it still won't be enough to understand the place."

The most fascinating Rough Guide?

The new Rough Guide to England states: "Of the two hundred-plus destinations across the world that Rough Guides covers, there is none so fascinating, beautiful and culturally diverse, yet as insular, self-important and irritating, as England."

Architectural beauties championed by the guide (best buildings from last 100 years):

Anglican Cathedral, Liverpool, 1904-78
Senate House, Bloomsbury, London, 1932
De La Warr Pavilion, Bexhill-on-Sea, East Sussex, 1935
Tate Modern, London, 1948-63 & 2000
Coventry Cathedral, 1951-59
Shri Swaminarayan Mandir, Neasden, London, 1995
Eden Project, Cornwall, 2001
Imperial War Museum North, Manchester, 2002
30 St Mary Axe, London ("The Gherkin"), 2004
The Sage Gateshead, 2004

What the Rough Guide to England says about:

Bath: "graceful, honey-toned terraces of Georgian bath combine with the city's beautifully preserved Roman baths and a vivacious cultural scene to make an unmissable stop on any itinerary"

Birmingham: "boasts a thoroughly multiracial population that makes this one of Britain's most cosmopolitan cities."

Blackpool: "shamelessly brash...is the archetypal British seaside resort."

Bournemouth: "the nucleus of a vast and mainly monotonous conurbation stretching between Lymington and Poole harbour."

Bury St Edmunds: "can boast not just the ruins of its once-prestigious abbey, but also some fine Georgian architecture on its grid-plan streets,

Canterbury: 'one of England's most venerable cities...offers a rich slice through two thousand years of history"

Cheltenham: "an appealing regency spa town famous for its horse racing"

Chester: "the county town...with its complete circuit of town walls and partly Tudor centre, is as alluring as any of the country's northern towns"

Colchester: "a likeable sort of place with an imposing castle"

Derby: "sadly the city is an unexciting place, though its workaday centre has been recently spruced up"

Durham: "a handsome university city dominated by its magnificent twelfth-century cathedral"

Essex: "whose proximity to London has turned much of the county into an unappetizing commuter strip."

Glastonbury: "steeped in Christian lore and Arthurian legend, and popular with New-Age mystics."

Grasmere: "consists of an intimate cluster of grey-stone houses on the old packhorse road that runs beside the babbling River Rothay."

Great Tew: "one of the most beautiful of all the Cotswold villages"

Hay-on-Wye: "Deep in the countryside, this dinky little town has more second-hand bookshops than anywhere else in the world."

Leeds: "there's still a true northern grit to its character...but the grime has been removed from the impressive Victorian buildings and the city is revelling in its renaissance as a booming financial, commercial and cultural centre"

Lizard Point, Cornwall: "This unspoilt headland is the starting point for some inspiring walks"

Ludlow: "a postcard-pretty country town with half-timbered houses and a sprawling castle."

Manchester: "from engine of the Industrial Revolution to test-bed of contemporary urban design, the city has no realistic English rival outside of London"

Newcastle: "distinguished by some fine Victorian buildings, the revitalized Quayside, and a vibrant cultural scene and nightlife"

Norfolk: "one of the most sparsely populated and tranquil counties in England, a remarkable turnaround from the days when it was an economic and political powerhouse"

Oxford: "with its superb architecture, museums and lively student population, is the region's star turn"

Plymouth: "A predominantly bland and modern face belies its great historic role as a naval base."

Rochester: "the most pleasant of the Medway towns"

Royal Tunbridge Wells: 'prosperous spa town, surrounded by gorgeous countryside, is an elegant and diverting place"

Rye: "wonderfully set hilltop town offering some of the best meals, accommodation and pubs in Sussex."

Salisbury: "Wiltshire's only city is designed on a pleasantly human scale, with no sprawling suburbs or high-rise buildings to challenge the supremacy of the cathedral's immense spire"

South Downs Way: "offers an expanse of rolling chalk uplands that, as much as anywhere in the crowded southeast, gets you away from it all"

Southwold, Suffolk: "a delightful seaside resort, elegant and relaxing in equal measure"

Stamford: "Lincolnshire's prettiest town, with narrow streets framed by old limestone houses."

Stratford-upon-Avon: "Is at heart an unassuming Market town with an unexceptional pedigree"

Suffolk: "boasts a string of extremely pretty, well-preserved little towns - Lavenham is the prime example"

The Isle of Man: "terrain almost as rewarding as the lakes but without the seasonal overcrowding."

The Lake District: "is England's most hyped scenic area, and for good reasons"

The Northeast: "In many ways a land apart from the rest of England - more remote, less affluent, its accents often impenetrable to outsiders"

Torquay: "Styles itself as the capital of the "English Riviera". St Tropez it ain't but there's no denying a certain glamour"

Wells: "a miniature cathedral city that has not significantly altered in eight hundred years"

Winchester: "a tranquil handsome market town, set amid docile hay-meadows and watercress beds"

The Rough Guide to England Introduction:

Of the two hundred-plus destinations across the world that Rough Guides covers, there is none so fascinating, beautiful and culturally diverse, yet as insular, self-important and irritating, as England. You may share the same language, and you might think you already know the country well (after all, even the world's most remote communities are on first-name terms with its princes, footballers and pop stars). But there's far more to England than its famous buildings, landscapes, history and monuments - more, in truth, than even a 1000-page guidebook can hope to cover in detail. We'll tell you what's worth seeing and why, but we won't pull our punches.

Just a few examples. There are English landmarks that every schoolchild knows - from the Houses of Parliament to Stonehenge - but to reach them you have to endure the country's overcrowded roads and risible public transport system. There are national parks, from the Lake District to Dartmoor, that are the equal in beauty of anything in Europe, yet the English countryside faces crisis on an almost annual basis. And while there are hundreds of atmospheric hotels and celebrated restaurants across the country, you may find yourself served with a sneer instead of a smile.

Should this stop you visiting? Not a chance, for England is also an endlessly surprising country. But the only certainty for visitors is that however long you spend in England and however much you see, it still won't be enough to understand the place.

Understanding the English:

The English are the most contradictory people imaginable, and however long you spend in the country you'll never figure them out. As a glance at the tabloid newspapers will confirm, England is a nation of overweight, binge-drinking reality TV addicts, obsessed with toffs and C-list celebs. But it's also a country of animal-loving, tea-drinking, charity donors, where queuing remains a national pastime and bastions of civilization, like Radio 4, are jealously protected. It's a country where accent and vocabulary can stamp a person's identity like a brand, but it's also a genuine haven for refugees, with immigrants from more than 100 ethnic backgrounds. It's a nation that prides itself on its patriotism - yet has a Scottish prime minister, an Italian football coach and a Greek royal consort. Ask any English person to comment on all of this and you'll get an entertaining range of views. Try to make sense of these, and the resulting picture might suggest something akin to a national identity crisis.

Perhaps the only thing that unites the English is their sense of humour. The English are devoted to sarcasm on a gigantic scale. Tell the average English person how well they dress or how much you value their friendship and, more often than not, you'll be confronted by a blank stare and forced half-smile. If pushed, expect a self-deprecating remark or a tongue-in-cheek response. They won't be offended, but they simply won't believe you and they'll wonder why on earth you said something that was best kept to yourself. Canny celebrities appreciate this need for diffidence very well, avoiding any hint of boastfulness at any cost and attributing their success to their mother, teacher, agent, cat....pretty much anyone will do in the flight from risibility. Visitors to England often take this reserve - and accompanying sarcasm - as coldness or even hostility, but in fact it very rarely is - it's just the way they are: the warmth is in the humour, a sort of national solidarity that is bred in the bone. If you are included in the banter, you have been accepted . . . but they certainly won't tell you that.

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Notes to Editors:

The Rough Guide to England; £15.99; ISBN: 1-85828-498-9
Available now from www.roughguides.com

For more information about the guide or to receive a review copy contact:
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