

Americans House Hunting In London – Information Sheet

I own and manage a portfolio of flats, shops and houses which I rent long term, with tenants often staying for many years. I am a property expert and broadcaster but I don't work as a lettings or search agent and in that sense I don't have a public facing realtor operation. So I'm afraid I'm not able to help you directly with house hunting or accommodation issues.

However I have put together an information sheet here for you. Whilst I provide this in good faith, you must of course do your own research. I'm afraid I can't recommend a realtor - London has a population of 9 million, there are thousands of them, so you will need to find ones that operate in the area that you are looking in, I explain how to do this below.

A. Initial Decisions

You will need to decide:

- Number of beds and bathrooms
- Whether you need outdoor space or to be close to a park
- If you are looking for a quiet residential area, or one with pubs and restaurants, how you feel about being on a busy road etc.
- If you have a pet your choice will be extremely limited, as few landlords accept them (go to www.letswithpets.org.uk for advice)
- Whether you are looking for a period or modern property
- Where you need to get to for work or study and which transport links you will need
- Your maximum budget
- Deal breakers and what you can be flexible about

B. General Information About London For Americans Moving Here

Some key points or differences for you to bear in mind when moving to London are:

1. Transport Zones & Budget

London is divided into 9 transport zones radiating out from the centre. Generally Zone 1 will be every expensive and then accommodation gets cheaper the further from the centre you go. Some areas are prime and expensive regardless of which zone they are in: for example Hampstead, Kew, Barnes, Chiswick. Good compromise areas that are not too far from the centre and are not so expensive are around Stratford, Lewisham, Wood Green, Harlesden. Cheapest areas are outer East, North East and South East London.

Some tube lines and transport corridors are faster than others and can make areas more desirable. Victoria, Central and Jubilee Lines are the fastest, Piccadilly and Bakerloo are OK and the District line runs like a snail. Be savvy and look at interchanges – so Plaistow is on the district line but has a fast interchange with the central line at Mile End. New trains can lift an area – London Overground has helped improve links in Dalston and South East London and Crossrail is about to improve links across swathes of East and West London. Much of South London has no tubes and this has kept some areas cheaper. Research transport zones and links at www.tfl.gov.uk

Consider house sharing. A one bed flat might cost you £1100 per month in Lewisham in Zone 2. You might get a 2 bed flat for £1300 and find a friend or lodger to share it with. Or 3 people could share a 3 bed house for £1600.

2. Types of housing

Unless you have a very high budget you will generally be looking at:

- Victorian terraced houses either whole or converted into flats. These often have period features, but will typically have small rooms unless they have been knocked through to create a more open plan feel. They often get carved up into separate apartments with separate entrances and can end up feeling quite cramped and boxy.
- Houses built in the 1930s or more recently built terraces or townhouses. These tend to be in outer areas: zone 3 or beyond
- Recently built apartment blocks – lots have gone up recently aimed at the luxury market so you will pay a premium
- ex Local authority apartments. These are social housing projects where previous tenants have bought flats from the state and now rent them out. They can be more spacious than other houses as regulations in the 1960s prompted larger room sizes.

3. Home amenities

These can be much more basic than in America. Fridges are much smaller, the washing machine will be in the kitchen and we rarely have washer dryers. Be ready to dry your clothes on a clothes airer inside the house. Land is at such a premium, allowing space for a utility or drying room – or an extra bathroom is usually a luxury too far. Because of the housing shortage in London, poor quality accommodation still finds its way onto the market, so you may have to see quite a lot of properties before you find one that works for you. Ensuite bathrooms are most likely to be found in new build apartments. Happily there are an incredible number of parks across the city so finding a property that is close to a park shouldn't be too difficult. Areas close to large greens spaces tend can be more expensive, for example Richmond, Barnes, Clapham, Balham, Blackheath, Hampstead. Some outer areas like Wanstead, Clapton or Plumstead can be a good cheaper compromise.

4. Letting Agents

Letting agents are not regulated in the UK and overseas house hunters can fall prey to illegal practices. Always use agents who are members of professional bodies: ARLA, UKALA, NALS, RICS. They have to keep any money you give them in a separate client account and this is protected by insurance, so if they go bust or you feel you need to complain about them you will have proper redress. Letting agents are paid by commission from their landlord clients, their focus is on the let and they are often less interested in the paperwork and management. I'm afraid the service is very variable and they have a poor reputation in the UK, so set your expectations quite low - you may well need to manage your agent. Many tenants prefer properties that are managed directly by the landlord, ideally one who is accredited by the National Landlords Association or London Landlords Accreditation Scheme. However these landlords do usually use agents to find tenants and then they manage the properties themselves. You could ask the agent to show you properties that are managed by the landlord. Agents earn less money from properties managed by landlords so some may be reluctant to do so.

C: Searching For Properties

Once you have decided on an area, look on www.rightmove.co.uk and get a feel for budget and types of properties in the area. Work out which of the agents are members of professional bodies and then call them for advice. Call at least three and ask lots of questions so you can build up a picture of the area.

Some people rent a room first of all to check they like an area and then go on to rent something more permanent. If this is your approach, try www.spareroom.co.uk

Be very wary of using social media websites like gumtree. It has a reputation for scams, particularly for overseas people looking for flats in London. Other scams include fake landlords: people who pretend to own properties and take your deposit – it then turns out that the property doesn't exist or they don't really own it. The best rule is not to part with money until you have actually visited the property. If you are unsure who owns the property, check for £2 at www.landregistry.gov.uk

If you are a student ask for advice from your college or university accommodation service. They will let their own properties and give advice to students who are house hunting. They may have approved landlords on their books or be able to advise on areas or agents where their students have looked before and had success.

There are a few search agents in London but they tend to be for high net worth individuals looking to buy. If that is you, please contact www.home-fusion.co.uk otherwise all I can suggest is googling London Property Search Agents.

You will usually be asked to pay a returnable deposit of 4-6 weeks which must be registered with a deposit scheme and one month's rent in advance. Most agencies also ask tenants to pay an admin fee. Contracts are generally for 12 months in London. If you want to find out more about how the law works for renters in the UK, please go to www.shelter.org.uk

Good luck with your house hunt!

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