

## On the Line

On the whole, British people tend to err on the polite side. If you are dragging a heavy suitcase through the tube system, complete strangers will help lift it up the stairs. If you trip on the pavement, someone is bound to help you up and make sure you are okay. If you drop a glove in the park, a friendly soul will pick it up and bring it to you. Everywhere you go doors are opened for you, people hold your place in the queue, and you will hear a heartfelt apology if someone inadvertently blocks your way as you walk down the street.

All that ends, however, on the tube. The tube is a law unto itself, from the minute you step within a 300 metre radius of the entry gates until the moment you exit at your terminus, despondent, angry and most likely sweating.

On a standard tube ride at a quiet time of day, there is little of concern. A warm male voice over the tannoy reminds you to "Mind the gap" and off you go on your merry little way, most likely seated. In the peak hours of the morning, however, the tube is a battle ground. If you are unlucky enough to need a new ticket, you will queue at the ticket machines as the tourists in front of you take precious minutes to figure out the multilingual, but far from obvious, ticketing system. At any other time of day, someone would patiently step forward to help. In the mornings, the only reason someone would step forward would be to tell you to move out of the way if you don't know what kind of ticket you want. The business commuters are a rushed bunch.

Once you have your ticket, you can join the crush at the ticket barriers. This will help you understand why it is called a barrier. In the evenings, it becomes a gate. In the morning, the crowd far exceeds the number of people that can be funnelled through the four readers at any one time. The jostling here is fairly light at the front, but at the back, the newcomers joining seem like they are wearing blinkers, unable to see the people patiently queuing in front of them as they cut into the side of line, maintaining an innocent

countenance as if to say "Who me? Oh sorry, I didn't see you standing there."

On exceptionally busy days, these barriers are shut to alleviate crowding on the platforms. The crowd then turns into a mob, punctuated by heavy sighs, muttering, and subtle elbow jabs to secure a prime position. The crush expands with every second until it blocks access through the entire station, leaving commuters on other lines trapped far back from their open access. The only option in this case is to square your shoulders, take a deep breath, and charge rugby style into the fray.

On the escalator you stand on the right, run on the left. God forbid you should stand on the left in error. I would not be surprised to see someone pushed down the escalator at speed should they dare to do so. The only exception to this is parents with prams. Despite disgruntled glares, they are given leeway in recognition that they have no other choice.

The platform is where full-scale warfare tactics are required. Mobs congregate around every doorway. As each train screeches in, the crowds push forwards, effectively blocking passengers attempting to alight. Every day there is a controller on the platform with a loudspeaker reminding those waiting to let people off the train first. On a good day, a tunnel opens up, approximately 30cms wide, and passengers squeeze their way through the tunnel, jostled on either side by the flanks pressing forward. Picture a rugby scrum with four times the number of players and you're getting close.

The open doorways fill to the meniscus point, with the outer layer in danger of being crushed between the closing doors. Luckily the bubble-shaped train exterior allows for a little breathing space once the doors slide closed. There is no need for Tokyo style white-gloved crowd pushers here to pack every available space. Londoners do it on their own. Just when you think the train is full, another three people will run from the back of the bustle and physically cram themselves into the doorway, skipping the disappointed mob that falls

back two inches to try and comply with the loudspeaker directions to stand behind the yellow line. The trains are anywhere from one to four minutes apart and for the more polite it can take up to five trains on a busy morning to secure a space. I highly recommend avoiding the central line on a Friday morning, while dragging a wheeled travel accessory. This is not fun for anyone.

Once on the train, at every stop the back row jostles forward to file out through the interior crowd, the front row jiggles backwards to fill the available space, and the exterior crowd presses forward to cram into the sardine tin. It is hot, it is sweaty, and there is no avoiding the output from a cough or sneeze. iPods blare loudly, perhaps to mute the muttered swearing of the crushed crowd.

On exiting the station and taking a deep breath of chilled morning air, the tension dissipates. Manners return, as do the calm, cool, exteriors of the commuting Brit, ready to tackle the day ahead with few visible scars from the morning battle.

