



The British Isles

The British Isles form a group of about 5,000 islands and islets of which Great Britain and Ireland are the largest. They are surrounded by the Atlantic Ocean to the west and north-west and by the North Sea to the east, and are separated from France by the English Channel.

The British coast to the north and north-west of Scotland is fringed by a number of archipelagos: the Hebrides, the Orkneys and the Shetlands. Only thirty miles off the coast of Normandy lie the Channel Islands, which present a mixture of British and Continental characteristics. Common to all these islands are little ports, picturesque small towns and villages, sandy beaches and fine rocky scenery.

The two major islands, Great Britain and Ireland, are irregularly shaped, and have a deeply indented coastline. Especially in Scotland, the coast is so deeply penetrated by long fiords, called firths, that very little of the country is more than forty miles from the sea. In the south-west the coast provides spectacular harbours, while the south of England offers a grand scenery of steep white cliffs. Elsewhere there are small bays or the long, wide estuaries of the Humber, the Thames, the Severn and other rivers.

The British highlands contain many deep valleys filled with ribbon-shaped lakes. These create regions of great natural beauty, such as the Lake District in north-west England. Scotland is also rich in beautiful and peaceful stretches of water, called lochs, of which the most famous is Loch Lomond.

Except for the Cumbrian Mountains in the Lake District, and the Pennine Chain, the so-called “backbone” of the country, England is mostly low-lying. By contrast the western and northern parts of Britain, as well as Ireland, are mountainous, though the mountains are not very high. Ben Nevis, the highest peak in the Highlands of Scotland, is only 1,343 metres high, and Mount Snowdon, in the Cambrian Mountains, hardly reaches 1,100 metres.

The British Isles lie in the path of the Gulf Stream and the south-west winds, which accounts for the mildness and dampness of their climate. But the main feature of the English weather is its variability. You never know what it is going to be like in a few hours, and that is why the English seldom go out without carrying an umbrella. This damp climate is mostly responsible for the greenness of the English landscape.

Comprehension questions

1. What do we mean by the British Isles?
2. What are the seas surrounding them?
3. What are the most important groups of smaller islands?
4. Which are the two major islands?



5. Can you name some of the most important rivers in Britain?
6. Where is the Lake District?
7. What is the Pennine Chain called?
8. What is the British climate like?
9. Why is the British landscape so green?

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Answer Key

1. By the British Isles we mean a group of about 5,000 islands and islets.
2. The seas surrounding the British Isles are the Atlantic Ocean, the North Sea and the English Channel.
3. The most important groups of smaller islands are the Hebrides, the Orkneys, the Shetlands and the Channel Islands.
4. The two major islands are Great Britain and Ireland.
5. Some of the most important rivers in Britain are the Humber, the Thames and the Severn.
6. The Lake District is in north-west England.
7. The Pennine Chain is called the “backbone” of England.
8. The British climate is mild and damp.
9. Because of the damp climate.