

The Beautiful Game

Every year all over Britain in the first week of August a huge sigh of relief can be heard. From Aberdeen in the far north of Scotland to Portsmouth in the south of England and in every major town or city in between, football (we never say soccer) fans will emerge from three months of painful hibernation to prepare for the start of the new football season. It's a ritual that has been reenacted for more than a hundred years but while the teams, the competitions and the rules of the game have stayed more or less the same for several generations now almost everything else about 'the beautiful game' has changed beyond recognition in recent years.

For most of the 20th century football remained a sport for the working classes but in the early 1990s this began to change with vast amounts of money entering the sport from sponsorship and satellite television. The added wealth allowed clubs to attract some of the biggest foreign stars to the UK. Today, many of the top players earn in excess of 100,000 pounds a week (21,000,000 yen).

Even though football has gone up market in recent times, a visit to a UK football match is still a great chance to experience the passionate atmosphere. Constant singing, chanting and shouts of encouragement by fans are a great chance to hear natural English expressions. Some of the most exciting matches are the 'local derby' games between rival teams from the same cities such as Arsenal v Tottenham in London, Liverpool FC v Everton in Liverpool and Celtic v Rangers in Glasgow.

As well as going to watch a match, it is also possible to go on a tour of some of the most famous grounds. You can visit the newly opened Wembley stadium and feel what it is like to run out onto the pitch and walk up the steps to lift the cup

<http://www.thestadiumtour.com/Home.aspx> Other popular tours include the Scottish Football Museum at Hampden Park <http://www.scottishfootballmuseum.org.uk/> where you can take a peak at the Kirin cup which Scotland cheekily won in Tokyo in 2005.

While in Glasgow why not take the opportunity to catch a Celtic game and watch Japan's own Shunsuke Nakamura whose sublime skills and fantastic goals have made him a hero with the fans, even if the commentators do have trouble pronouncing his first name (he is usually called 'Shunsookie').

An indication of the importance of football in everyday life is the amount of expressions from the game that have passed into everyday use with different meanings:

'Move the goalposts'	=	make unfair changes without warning
'Give it your best shot'	=	make a big effort
'Score an own goal'	=	make a problem for yourself
'Play away from home'	=	have an affair

In the 1960s, the Liverpool manager Bill Shankly was quoted as saying "Some people think football is a matter of life and death. I assure you, it's much more serious than that." Although Shankly was probably only half serious when he uttered those words, they do capture the passion that the 'beautiful game' generates in the UK. For many, growing up on the terraces of their local team is an education in loyalty, togetherness and the highs and lows of life. Come and experience the excitement! Just don't call it 'soccer'!