Great Britain, also known as Britain, is an island situated off the north-western coast of continental Europe. It is the ninth largest island in the world and the largest island in Europe. With a population of about 62 million people in mid-2010, it is the third most populous island in the world, after Java (Indonesia) and Honshū (Japan). It is surrounded by over 1,000 smaller islands and islets. The island of Ireland lies to its west. Politically, Great Britain also refers to the island itself together with a number of surrounding islands, which constitute the territory of England, Scotland and Wales.

The entire island is territory of the sovereign state of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and most of the United Kingdom's territory is in Great Britain. Most of England, Scotland and Wales are on the island of Great Britain, as are their respective capital cities: London, Edinburgh and Cardiff.

The Kingdom of Great Britain resulted from the union of the kingdoms of England and Scotland in 1707. In 1801, the kingdoms of Great Britain and Ireland merged to form the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. In 1922 the Irish Free State succeeded the United Kingdom; leading to the state being renamed the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Great Britain is the largest island of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Politically, Great Britain refers to England, Scotland and Wales in combination, but not Northern Ireland; it includes a number of islands off England, Scotland and Wales such as the Isle of Wight, Anglesey, the Isles of Scilly, the Hebrides and the island groups of Orkney and Shetland. It does not include the Isle of Man and the Channel Islands which are not part of the United Kingdom, instead being self-governing dependent territories with their own legislative and taxation systems.

The political union that joined the kingdoms of England and Scotland happened in 1707 when the Acts of Union ratified the 1706 Treaty of Union and merged the parliaments of the two nations, forming the Kingdom of Great Britain, which covered the entire island. Prior to this, a personal union had existed between these two countries since the 1603 Union of the Crowns under James VI of Scotland and I of England.

Great Britain lies on the European continental shelf and to the northwest of Continental Europe and east of Ireland. It is separated from the continent by the North Sea and by the English Channel, which narrows to 34 kilometres (21 mi) at the Straits of Dover. It stretches over about ten degrees of latitude on its longer, north-south axis and occupies an area of 209,331 km2 (80,823 sq mi), excluding the smaller surrounding islands. The North Channel, Irish Sea, St George's Channel and Celtic Sea separate the island from the island of Ireland to its west. The island is physically connected with continental Europe via the Channel Tunnel, the longest undersea rail tunnel in the world, completed in 1993. The island is marked by low, rolling countryside in the east and south, while hills and mountains predominate in the western and northern regions. It is surrounded by over 1,000 smaller islands and islets.

The island was first inhabited by people who crossed over the land bridge from the European mainland. Traces of early humans have been found at Boxgrove Quarry, Sussex from some 500,000 years ago and modern humans from about 30,000 years ago. Until about 10,000 years ago, Great Britain was joined to Ireland, and as recently as 8,000 years ago it was joined to the continent by a strip of low marsh to what are now Denmark and the Netherlands. In Cheddar Gorge, near Bristol, the remains of animal species native to mainland Europe such as antelopes, brown bears, and wild horses have been found alongside a human skeleton, 'Cheddar Man', dated to about 7150 BC. Thus, animals and humans must have moved between mainland Europe and Great Britain via a crossing. Great Britain became an island at the end of the Pleistocene ice age when sea levels rose due to isostatic depression of the crust and the melting of glaciers.

Great Britain's Iron Age inhabitants are known as the Britons, a group speaking a Celtic language. The Romans conquered most of the island (up to Hadrian's Wall, in northern England) and this became the Ancient Roman province of Britannia. For 500 years after the Roman Empire fell, the Britons of the south and east of the island were assimilated or displaced by invading Germanic tribes (Angles, Saxons, and Jutes, often referred to collectively as Anglo-Saxons). At about the same time, Gaelic tribes from Ireland invaded the north-west, absorbing both the Picts and Britons of northern Britain, eventually forming the Kingdom of Scotland in the 9th century. The south-east of Scotland was colonised by the Angles and formed, until 1018, a part of the Kingdom of Northumbria. Ultimately, the population of south-east Britain came to be referred to, after the Angles, as the English people.

Germanic speakers referred to Britons as Welsh. This term eventually came to be applied exclusively to the inhabitants of what is now Wales, but it also survives in names such as Wallace and in the second syllable of Cornwall. Cymry, a name the Britons used to describe themselves, is similarly restricted in modern Welsh to people from Wales, but also survives in English in the place name of Cumbria. The Britons living in the areas now known as Wales, Cumbria and Cornwall were not assimilated by the Germanic tribes, a fact reflected in the survival of Celtic languages in these areas into more recent times. At the time of the Germanic invasion of Southern Britain, many Britons emigrated to the area now known as Brittany, where Breton, a Celtic language closely related to Welsh and Cornish and descended from the language of the emigrants, is still spoken. In the 9th century, a series of Danish assaults on northern English kingdoms led to them coming under Danish control (an area known as the Danelaw). In the 10th century, however, all the English kingdoms were unified under one ruler as the kingdom of England when the last constituent kingdom, Northumbria, submitted to Edgar in 959. In 1066, England was conquered by the Normans, who introduced a French ruling élite that was eventually assimilated. Wales came under Anglo-Norman control in 1282, and was officially annexed to England in the 16th century.

On October 20, 1604 King James, who had succeeded separately to the two thrones of England and Scotland, proclaimed himself as "King of Great Brittaine, France and Ireland". When James died in 1625 and the Privy Council were drafting a proclamation, Thomas Erskine, 1st Earl of Kellie insisted that it use the phrase King of Great Britain which James had preferred rather than King of Scotland and England or vice-versa. While that title was also used by many of his successors, England and Scotland each remained legally in existence as separate countries with their own parliaments until 1707, when each parliament passed an Act of Union to ratify the Treaty of Union that had been agreed the previous year. This had the effect of creating a united kingdom, with a single, united parliament, from 1 May 1707. Though the Treaty of Union referred to the new all-island state as the "United Kingdom of Great Britain", many regard the term 'United Kingdom' as being descriptive of the union rather than part of its formal name (which the Treaty stated was to be 'Great Britain' without further qualification.) Most reference books, therefore, describe the all-island kingdom that existed between 1707 and 1800 as the "Kingdom of Great Britain".

Brythonic languages were probably spoken prior to the Roman invasion at least in the majority of Great Britain south of the rivers Forth and Clyde, though the Isle of Man later had a Goidelic language, Manx. Northern Scotland mainly spoke Pritennic, which became Pictish that may have been a Brythonic language.

During the period of the Roman occupation of Southern Britain (AD 43 to c. 410), Common Brythonic borrowed a large stock of Latin words. Approximately 800 of these Latin loan-words have survived in the three modern Brythonic languages. Romano-British is the name for the Latinised form of the language used by Roman authors.

The earliest known name of Great Britain is Albion (Ἀλβίων) or insula Albionum, from either the Latin albus meaning white (referring to the white cliffs of Dover, the first view of Britain from the continent) or the "island of the Albiones", first mentioned in the Massaliote Periplus in the sixth century BC, and by Pytheas.

The name Britain descends from the Latin name for Britain, Britannia or Brittānia, the land of the Britons. Old French Bretaigne (whence also Modern French Bretagne) and Middle English Bretayne, авBreteyne. The French form replaced the Old English Breoton, Breoten, Bryten, Breten (also Breoton-lond, Breten-lond). Britannia was used by the Romans from the 1st century BC for the British Isles taken together. It is derived from the travel writings of the ancient Greek Pytheas around 320 BC, which described various islands in the North Atlantic as far north as Thule (probably Norway).

The peoples of these islands of Prettanike were called the Πρεττανοί, Priteni or Pretani. Priteni is the source of the Welsh language term Prydain, Britain, which has the same source as the Goidelic term Cruithne used to refer to the early Brythonic speaking inhabitants of Ireland. The latter were later called Picts or Caledonians by the Romans.

After the Anglo-Saxon period, Britain was used as a historical term only. Geoffrey of Monmouth in his pseudohistorical Historia Regum Britanniae (c. 1136) refers to the island of Great Britain as Britannia major ("Greater Britain"), to distinguish it from Britannia minor ("Lesser Britain"), the continental region which approximates to modern Brittany. The term Great Britain was first used officially in 1474, in the instrument drawing up the proposal for a marriage between Cecily the daughter of Edward IV of England, and James the son of James III of Scotland, which described it as "this Nobill Isle, callit Gret Britanee." As noted above it was used again in 1604, when King James VI and I styled himself "King of Great Brittaine, France and Ireland."

The term Great Britain refers to the largest island within the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. It is also used to refer to England, Scotland and Wales as a unit (including many smaller islands which "have administrative ties with the mainland"). It does not include Northern Ireland.

The term Britain, as opposed to Great Britain, has been used to mean the United Kingdom, for example in official government yearbooks between 1975 and 2001. Since 2002, however, the yearbooks have only used the term "United Kingdom".

The variety of [fauna](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fauna) and [flora](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flora) is limited in comparison to continental Europe due to the island's size and the fact that wildlife has had little time to develop since the [last glacial period](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Last_glacial_period). For [fungi](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fungi) there is not sufficient information available for meaningful comparisons to be made. The high level of [urbanisation](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Urbanization) on the island has contributed to a species extinction rate that is about 100 times greater than the background species extinction rate.

Animal diversity is modest, as a result of factors including the island's small land area, the relatively recent age of the habitats developed since the last Ice Age and the island's physical separation from continental Europe, and the effects of seasonal variability. Great Britain also experienced early industrialisation and is subject to continuing urbanisation, which have contributed towards the overall loss of species. A DEFRA (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs) study from 2006 suggested that 100 species have become extinct in the UK during the 20th century, about 100 times the background extinction rate. However, some species, such as the brown rat, red fox, and introduced grey squirrel, are well adapted to urban areas.

Rodents make up 40% of the total number of mammal species in Great Britain. These include squirrels, mice, voles, rats and the recently reintroduced European beaver. There is also an abundance of rabbits, hares, hedgehogs, shrews, moles and several species of bat. Carnivorous mammals include the fox, badger, otter, weasel, stoat and elusive wildcat. Various species of seal, whale and dolphin are found on or around British shores and coastlines. The largest land-based wild animals today are deer. The red deer is the largest species, with roe deer and fallow deer also prominent; the latter was introduced by the Normans. Sika deer and two more species of smaller deer, muntjac and Chinese water deer, have been introduced, muntjac becoming widespread in England and parts of Wales while Chinese water deer are restricted mainly to East Anglia. Habitat loss has affected many species. Extinct large mammals include the brown bear, grey wolf and wild boar; the latter has had a limited reintroduction in recent times.

There is a wealth of birdlife in Britain, 583 species in total, of which 258 breed on the island or remain during winter. Because of its mild winters for its latitude, Great Britain hosts important numbers of many wintering species, particularly ducks, geese and swans. Other well known bird species include the golden eagle, grey heron, kingfisher, pigeon, sparrow, pheasant, partridge, and various species of crow, finch, gull, auk, grouse, owl and falcon. There are six species of reptile on the island; three snakes and three lizards including the legless slow worm. One snake, the adder, is venomous but rarely deadly. Amphibians present are frogs, toads and newts.

In a similar sense to fauna, and for similar reasons, the flora of Great Britain is impoverished compared to that of continental Europe. Great Britain's flora comprises 3,354 vascular plant species, of which 2,297 are native and 1,057 have been introduced into the island.The island has a wide variety of trees, including native species of birch, beech, ash, hawthorn, elm, oak, yew, pine, cherry and apple. Other trees have been naturalised, introduced especially from other parts of Europe (particularly Norway) and North America. Introduced trees include several varieties of pine, chestnut, maple, spruce, sycamore and fir, as well as cherry plum and pear trees. The tallest species are the Douglas firs; two specimens have been recorded measuring 65 metres or 212 feet. The Fortingall Yew in Perthshire is the oldest tree in Europe.

Christianity is the largest religion on the island and has been since the Early Middle Ages, its existence on the island dating back to the Roman introduction in antiquity and continued through Early Insular Christianity. According to tradition, Christianity arrived in Britain in the 1st or 2nd century. The largest form practised is Anglicanism (known as Episcopalism in Scotland). Dating from the 16th century Reformation, it regards itself as both Catholic and Reformed. The Head of the Church is the monarch of the United Kingdom, as the Supreme Governor. It has the status of established church in England. There are just over 26 million adherents to Anglicanism in Britain today, although only around one million regularly attend services. The second largest Christian practice is the Latin Rite of the Roman Catholic Church, which traces its history to the 6th century with Augustine's mission and was the main religion for around a thousand years. There are over 5 million adherents today, 4.5 million in England and Wales and 750,000 in Scotland, although less than a million Catholics regularly attend mass.

The Church of Scotland, a form of Protestantism with a Presbyterian system of ecclesiastical polity, is the third most numerous on the island with around 2.1 million members. Introduced in Scotland by clergyman John Knox, it has the status of national church in Scotland. The monarch of the United Kingdom is represented by a Lord High Commissioner. Methodism is the fourth largest and grew out of Anglicanism through John Wesley. It gained popularity in the old mill towns of Lancashire and Yorkshire, also amongst tin miners in Cornwall. The Presbyterian Church of Wales, which follows Calvinistic Methodism, is the largest denomination in Wales. There are other non-conformist minorities, such as Baptists, Quakers, the United Reformed Church (a union of Congregationalists and English Presbyterians), Unitarians and more. The first patron saint of Great Britain was Saint Alban. He was the first Christian martyr dating from the Romano-British period, condemned to death for his faith and was sacrificed to the pagan gods. In more recent times, some have suggested the adoption of St Aidan as another patron saint of Britain. From Ireland, he worked at Iona amongst the Dál Riata and then Lindisfarne where he restored Christianity to Northumbria.

The three constituent countries of the United Kingdom have patron saints: Saint George and Saint Andrew are represented in the flags of England and Scotland respectively. These two flags combined to form the basis of the Great Britain royal flag of 1604. Saint David is the patron saint of Wales. There are many other British saints. Some of the best known are Cuthbert, Columba, Patrick, Margaret, Edward the Confessor, Mungo, Thomas More, Petroc, Bede and Thomas Becket.

Numerous non-Christian religions are practised. The Jews have been on the island as a small minority since 1070. The Jews were expelled from England in 1290 but allowed to return in 1656. Their history in Scotland is quite obscure until later migrations from Lithuania. Especially since the 1950s religions from the former colonies have become more prevalent; Islam is the most common of these with around 1.5 million adherents. More than 1 million people practise Hinduism, Sikhism or Buddhism, religions introduced from India and South East Asia.