

Article

International consumer card spending, UK and abroad: 2019 to 2023

Analysis of consumer card spending habits covering where international cardholders are spending money in the UK and which countries UK cardholders spend in.

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Table of contents

1. [Main points](#)
2. [Overview of spending data](#)
3. [International spend into the UK](#)
4. [Geographic distribution of international spend](#)
5. [UK spend abroad](#)
6. [Glossary](#)
7. [Data sources and quality](#)
8. [Related links](#)
9. [Cite this article](#)

1 . Main points

- Spending by international visitors in August, the traditional UK high season, has largely recovered since the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, and in some cases, has increased.
- Places in the UK with the highest concentration of seasonal spend by international tourists in the summer months are in South West England, western Wales, and the Scottish Highlands and Islands.
- Up to a quarter of total annual spend occurred in August 2023 for areas with a high amount of seasonal spend from international travellers visiting the UK.
- Spend in European countries peaked strongly in the summer months for UK cardholders abroad, while spending in the USA was at a more consistent level across the year.
- Spain and France were particularly popular destinations for cardholders, with broadly a north-south split on which country cardholders from Great Britain spent the most money in during summer 2023.

2 . Overview of spending data

We, at the Office for National Statistics (ONS), have entered into an agreement with Visa to receive aggregated and anonymised data on UK card payments. This data source offers new opportunities to understand UK consumer spending through its extensive coverage and novel breakdowns.

This article explores spending habits for inbound and outbound international tourism for England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. In this article, “spend” or “spending” refers to spending by UK residents with bank cards issued by Visa, as well as spending at UK merchants by consumers with Visa bank cards issued by non-UK countries, according to the context. All spending referred to in this article occurred in-person (rather than online).

This article refers to, and is consistent with, our recent [Travel trends: 2023 article](#).

This is the third in a series of analytical articles that provide new and granular insights for users. The first, our [Regional consumer card spending, UK: 2019 to 2023 article](#), discusses overall consumer spending habits. The second, our [Consumer card spending, flow of spending across the UK: 2019 to 2023 article](#), explains where UK cardholders spend money face-to-face in comparison with their home postal district, postal area or International Territorial Level (ITL) region.

The analysis in this article covers credit and debit card spending, which is part of the UK spending landscape but is not exhaustive. Consumers may also use cash, direct debit, faster payments, or standing orders. For more information on card usage see [Section 7: Data sources and quality](#), and our [Regional consumer card spending trends quality and methodology information \(QMI\) report](#).

3 . International spend into the UK

The following two sections explore spend at merchants in the UK by consumers with Visa cards issued internationally. Please note that care needs to be taken when looking at spend across different countries, including with the UK, because Visa card usage varies internationally. Additionally, the data may be influenced by international students or other migrants using a bank card, or bank cards, from their home country, particularly in university areas.

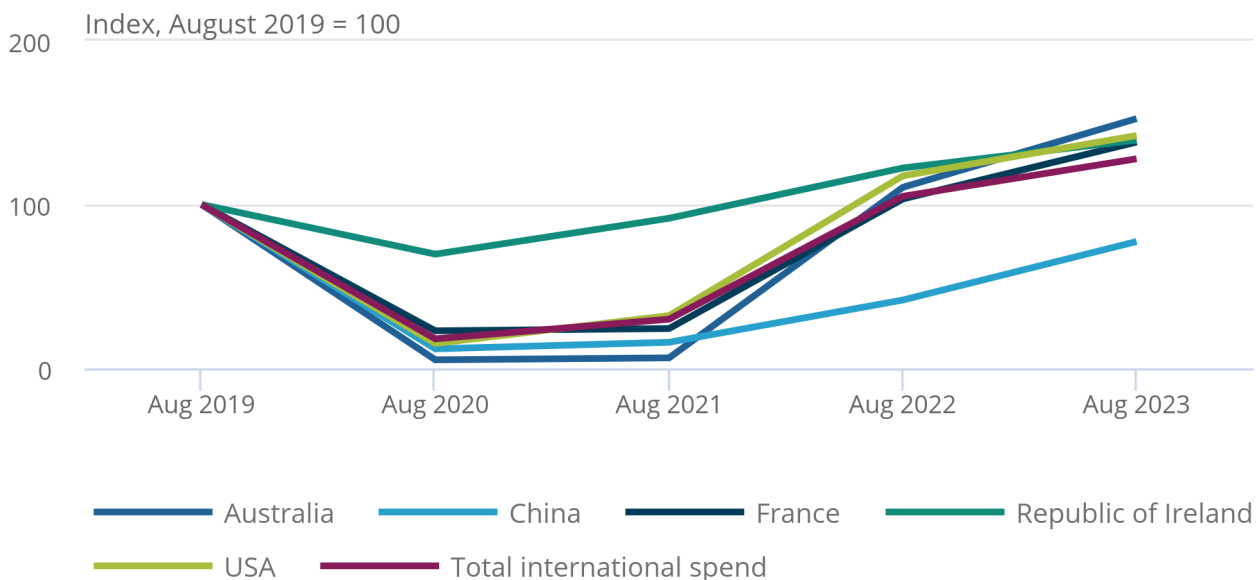
To understand the effect of international tourism, we can first examine spend in August 2023 as a proxy for the summer holidays and the peak tourism period.

Figure 1: International cardholder spending in August, the traditional UK high season, has largely recovered since the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic

Indexed spend, August 2019 = 100, August 2019 to August 2023

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Indexed spend, August 2019 = 100, August 2019 to August 2023



Source: Aggregated and anonymised data on UK card payments from Visa Europe Limited (2023)

Notes:

1. These data are not adjusted for inflation.

Figure 1 shows August spend for the five countries which had the highest spend within the UK in 2023, as well as spend from all international countries. As expected, spend into the UK from all countries decreased in August 2020 because of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. Spending in August from the Republic of Ireland recovered the quickest, likely because of the closeness between it and the UK, and the lack of restrictions under the arrangements of the Common Travel Area. Spending in August from China recovered the slowest and, as of August 2023, remains slightly below pre-pandemic spending. Spending from Australia was the most affected by the pandemic but has had the strongest recovery in August 2023.

Figure 2 further examines the top three countries' spending within the UK. The USA accounted for 24% of international spending within the UK at the start of the time series in 2019, while the Republic of Ireland and China accounted for 9% and 7%, respectively.

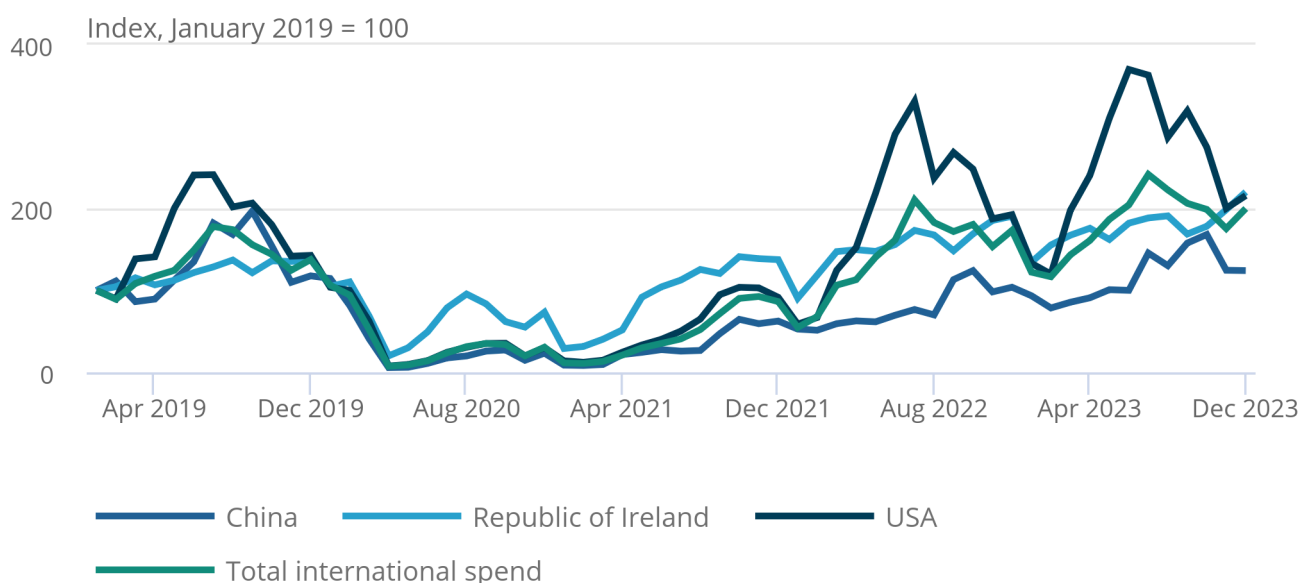
Inbound spend from China has peaked in different months than the other countries highlighted in Figure 1. As seen in Figure 2, Chinese spending peaks in October in the post-pandemic years (2022 and 2023).

Figure 2: Spending in the UK by USA cardholders peaked in summer, while spending by Republic of Ireland cardholders was more consistent across the year

Indexed spend, January 2019 = 100, January 2019 to December 2023

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Indexed spend, January 2019 = 100, January 2019 to December 2023



Source: Aggregated and anonymised data on UK card payments from Visa Europe Limited (2023)

Notes:

1. These data are not adjusted for inflation.

Pre-pandemic, cardholders from the USA had higher peaks in spending compared with those of international cardholders as a whole. Cardholders from the Republic of Ireland had a similar pattern of spending compared with all international cardholders. However, spending by cardholders from the USA decreased significantly during the pandemic, alongside spending by cardholders from China. Spending by cardholders from the Republic of Ireland was less affected by the pandemic than the total spend by international cardholders, likely because of the Common Travel Area. Post-pandemic, spending by USA cardholders has returned to the pattern of large peaks during the summer months. Spending by Chinese cardholders largely followed the international total spending at the start of the time series, but experienced smaller peaks than the international total in 2022 and 2023.

For cardholders from the USA, annual spend per card has increased between 2019 and 2023, from £72.43 to £83.60. Please note that these data are not adjusted for inflation. However, over the same period, annual spend per card has decreased slightly for cardholders from the Republic of Ireland, from £61.69 to £58.33, and more significantly for cardholders from China, from £120.42 to £107.13. The reduction over this period supports the suggestion that overall spending by Chinese cardholders has dropped because of a change in consumer behaviour, rather than notably fewer visitors from China to the UK.

4 . Geographic distribution of international spend

To assess how annual international spend at merchants in each postal district varies over the course of a year, Figure 3 shows what percentage of this spend occurs in each month of 2023 for each postal district. If spending was spread equally across the year for a given postal district, each month would contain roughly 8.3% of annual spending, and therefore be represented by the colour in the middle of the gradient. If a postal district receives a higher percentage of spending in the given month, it will be represented by a colour higher in the gradient scale.

Figure 3: The postal districts in Great Britain most affected by summer tourism are in South West England, western Wales, and the Scottish Highlands and Islands

Percentage of annual spend by international visitors which occurred in each month of 2023 for each postal district in Great Britain

Notes:

1. Data are not available for all postal districts.
2. Data for Northern Ireland does not appear in the above map. However, it is available in the attached data download.

As shown in Figure 3, merchants in postal districts in South West England, the Welsh west coast, the border between Scotland and England, and the Scottish Highlands and Islands received a majority of annual international spend in peak season (April to September). Of the 10 UK postal districts with the largest percentage of peak season spend in 2023, 8 were in Scotland and the remainder were in Cornwall. All 3 postal districts in the Orkney Islands featured in the top 10. These areas have smaller residential populations, and therefore a lower level of domestic spend. This means that they are more affected by seasonal fluctuations than an area with a higher level of domestic spend, such as central London.

The UK postal districts with the lowest percentage of annual international spend in peak season tended to be in English towns or cities. This may be caused by industry and businesses that are busier in the off-peak season (October to March).

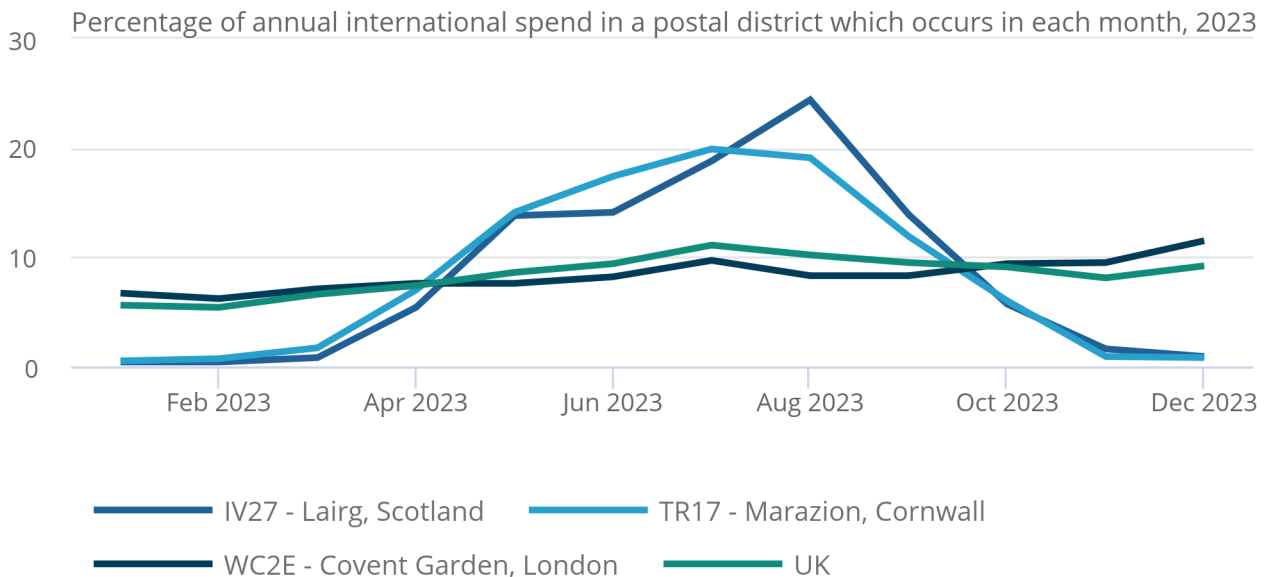
To further assess how seasonal international spending affected the places highlighted in Figure 3, the data can be examined on a monthly basis across the year. Figure 4 contrasts two of these places: IV27, the area around Lairg in the Highland Council local authority, Scotland, and TR17, Marazion, in the Cornwall Council local authority – with WC2E, Covent Garden in the City of London local authority, a place which has more consistent spending across the year.

Figure 4: Up to a quarter of total annual spend occurred in August for northern mainland Scotland, an area with high seasonal spend

Percentage of annual international spend in a postal district which occurs in each month, 2023

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Percentage of annual international spend in a postal district which occurs in each month, 2023



Source: Aggregated and anonymised data on UK card payments from Visa Europe Limited (2023)

Notes:

1. These data are not adjusted for inflation.

The percentage of annual international spend within the UK as a whole rose gradually in the months leading up to summer 2023, peaking in July. It then declined over the subsequent months, with an uptick in December.

For merchants in Covent Garden in central London, the percentage of international spend in 2023 broadly followed that of the UK, but with slightly less variation across the year. The highest percentage of annual spend occurred in December 2023; this is likely because of the Christmas market that takes place in this postal district. For places such as Covent Garden, multiple spending peaks occur across a year as international tourists visit them during peak and off-peak seasons.

For merchants in the Lairg area, which is located on one of the northernmost tips of mainland Scotland, the distribution of international spend across the months of 2023 varies much more. International spend spiked from May onwards, peaking in August when 24.4% of annual spend by international visitors occurred. It then dropped rapidly from October onwards. This aligns with findings from our [Travel trends: 2023 article](#), which found that Scotland had the highest proportion of overseas holiday visits compared with other regions of the UK.

For merchants in Marazion in Cornwall, where St Michael's Mount is located, the distribution of international spend also varied significantly over the months of 2023, peaking in the summer months. Both Lairg and Marazion experienced a similar pattern of spending in the off-peak season, which highlights how destinations can experience drastic changes between peak and off-peak tourist seasons.

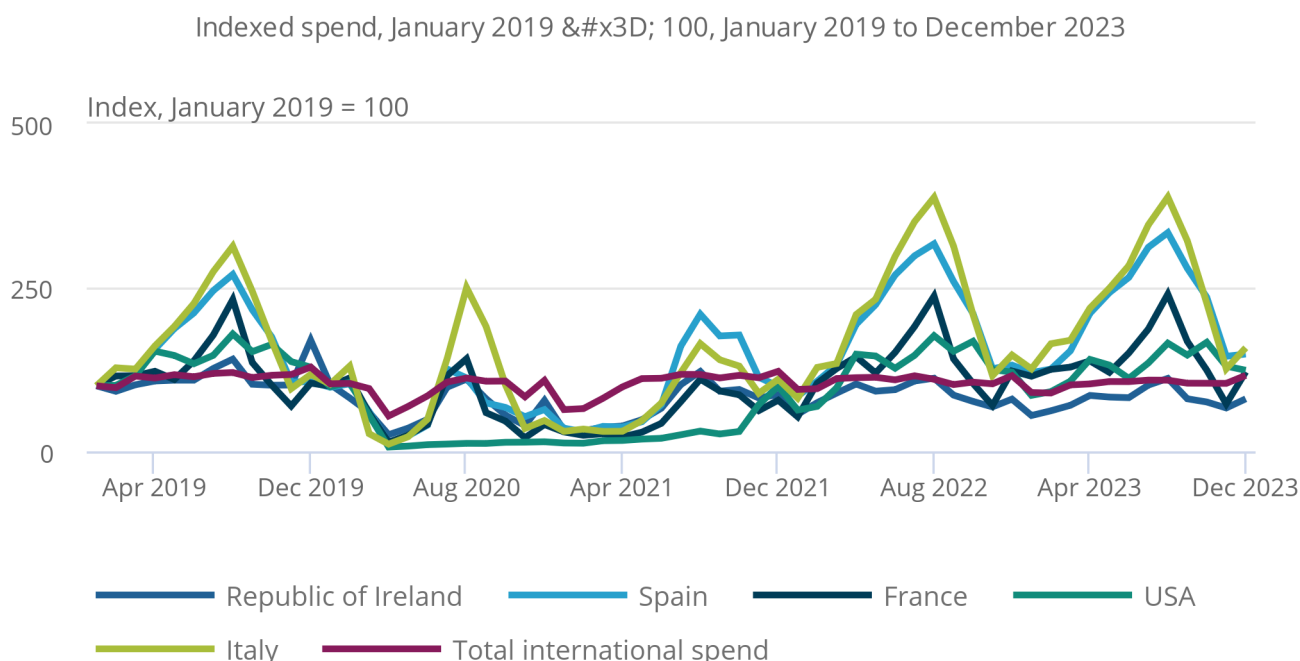
5 . UK spend abroad

This section explores spending by UK cardholders in other countries. Please note, people may use differing spending methods when they are abroad and may purchase different types of goods and services to their usual purchases. This may vary depending on which country they are visiting. For example, they may be more likely to use cash, or a different bank account to their usual one.

Figure 5: Spending in continental European countries peaked strongly between 2019 and 2023 in the summer months, while spending in the USA was at a more consistent level across the year

Indexed spend, January 2019 = 100, January 2019 to December 2023

Figure 5: Spending in continental European countries peaked strongly between 2019 and 2023 in the summer months, while spending in the USA was at a more consistent level across the year



Source: Aggregated and anonymised data on UK card payments from Visa Europe Limited (2023)

Notes:

1. These data are not adjusted for inflation.

Figure 5 shows indexed spend by UK cardholders across the time series for the five countries with the highest levels of spend, as well as indexed spend for total spend abroad. As expected, indexed spend peaks in the summer months, particularly for Italy and Spain.

Indexed spend decreased during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic for all highlighted countries, but particularly for spend in the USA. The UK government made use of selected routes, or “travel corridors”, during the pandemic, as described in this [Written statement to Parliament](#). From 10 July 2020, passengers using these selected routes did not need to self-isolate upon arriving to the UK. While originally included, Spain was removed from the list on 26 July 2020, and France was removed on 15 August 2020. Italy was removed on 18 October 2020. In the months following the introduction of these restrictions, the indexed spend in these countries dropped by more percentage points than it did in more typical years. Various other European countries were added and removed from the list at differing times. However, there was no travel corridor between the UK and the USA, resulting in the sustained low levels of spending in the USA seen throughout the pandemic.

Spending by UK cardholders in the Republic of Ireland has remained more consistent across the time series, likely because of the large amounts of cross-border travel between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, as well as the relative lack of restrictions during the pandemic.

Figure 6: Spain and France were popular destinations, with a North-South split on which country cardholders from Great Britain spent the most money in during summer 2023

International country in which residents from each postal district in Great Britain spent the most money, Quarter 3 (July to Sept) 2023

Notes:

1. Data is not available for all postal districts.
2. Data for Northern Ireland does not appear in the above map. However, it is available in the attached data download.

Figure 6 shows the single country where cardholders from each postal district in Great Britain spent the most money in Quarter 3 (July to Sept), when spending abroad peaks each year. Most postal districts had the highest spend in European countries. Many cardholders from Scotland, the north of England, and Wales spent the most money in Spain. This aligns with findings from our [Travel trends: 2023 article](#), which found that UK residents visited Spain the most in 2023, accounting for 21% of all visits abroad.

Consumers based in postal districts in the south of Great Britain spent the most money in France. This may be because of the relative ease of travelling there; it is more accessible to drive there, by ferry or tunnel. This also supports findings from our Travel trends article, which found that France was the second most popular country visited by UK residents. This north-south divide is broadly consistent in the pre- and post-pandemic years in our dataset.

For Northern Ireland, cardholders from every postal district spent the most money in the Republic of Ireland in Quarter 3 2023.

Figure 7: UK consumers spent more money on fuel in neighbouring countries and more on eating out in Spain and the USA, compared with typical spending abroad

Difference in percentage points from typical international spending pattern, 2023

Notes:

1. The financial transactions data in this article only capture in-person spend. Therefore, spending on certain categories such as lodging, where many consumers pay in advance online, may be higher than reflected in this data.
2. "Other" consists of all spending in the remaining available categories.

The amount of money consumers spent on common goods and services varied based on which country they visited. Figure 7 shows how spending by UK cardholders in each highlighted country varies from the pattern of spending by UK cardholders across all international countries.

The percentage of money spent on fuel was higher for visitors to France than the percentage across all international countries. This may be caused by consumers taking their personal vehicles to France by ferry or tunnel, or by hiring vehicles once they arrive. Visitors to the Republic of Ireland also spent a higher percentage of spend on fuel than the percentage across all international countries. However, this may be because of a large amount of day-to-day traffic across the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, rather than tourist activities.

Consumers from the UK spent a lower percentage of their money on food and groceries while visiting the USA compared with all international spend, but spent a higher percentage in restaurants. These visitors also spent relatively less on fuel than the percentage for visitors to all international countries, though this may be caused by fuel being relatively cheaper in the USA than in other countries, rather than lower usage.

Compared with how people spent their money in all international countries, UK visitors to Spain spent a much higher percentage of money on restaurants.

6 . Glossary

Cardholder location

For spending by cardholders from the UK, cardholder postal sector, district or area is inferred by Visa. Visa analyse cardholder spending patterns, along with merchant location, to form a predictive view of a cardholder's likely home location. This is a predicted data attribute only, so a cardholder's exact home address cannot be determined. Data are aggregated so it is not possible to identify any single individual.

For spending by international cardholders, cardholder location is presented at country level. These data are not inferred, but are based on cards issued in a given country. Because Visa card usage varies internationally, we do not encourage comparisons across different countries, including with the UK.

Debit and credit card transactions

Debit and credit cards facilitate the transfer of money for goods and services rendered without the usage of cash. These transactions occur both in-person, through contactless and chip and pin, and online, through mail order or e-commerce. All card data that we receive are anonymised and aggregated to protect against disclosure of individuals' consumer data.

Financial payment system

Debit and credit cards are provided by card issuers that enable consumers to make payment transactions. Card issuers are financial institutions responsible for providing a customer with a card. Card schemes, of which Visa is one, are payment networks that provide a range of services. For consumer payments, card schemes provide secure connectivity for merchants to transact with cardholders, either face-to-face or online, and ensure those merchants safely receive their funds from the cardholder's bank.

Merchant category

A merchant category code (MCC) is a four-digit number assigned to describe a merchant's primary business, based on annual sales volume measured in local currency. Where a merchant is engaged in more than one type of business, the merchant can either use the MCC that reflects the highest annual sales volume or use different MCCs for different lines of business. In addition, some MCCs identify a specific merchant or type of transaction. In the dataset provided by Visa, card spending data are aggregated where a specific MCC would disclose an individual business's activity. A merchant category group (MCG) is assigned to define an industry using a set of MCCs.

Merchant location

Merchant location is gathered from the merchant's register. The merchant acquirer (the bank or financial institution that processes card payments for a merchant) is responsible for providing the card network with the correct location of each merchant outlet, as set out in Visa's [Merchant Data Standards Manual \(PDF, 1.498MB\)](#). For in-store transactions with a fixed location, the merchant location will be where the transaction took place. For merchants that do not have a fixed location, the location can either be where the transaction took place or the merchant's principal place of business.

Online and face-to-face spending

This article only refers to face-to-face spending. Face-to-face transactions are defined as those where the credit or debit card is present for the transaction. This is where a consumer buys something in-store and uses a payment card, including contactless payments. Online transactions are defined as transactions where the payment card is not present. This includes where a purchase is made over the internet, telephone, or an app is used to take payment.

7 . Data sources and quality

Card spending data

Analysis in this article is based on aggregated and anonymised data on UK card payments provided by Visa Europe Limited. Visa operate a card scheme that is used by a variety of card issuers, including debit and credit card providers. Visa operates one of the world's largest payment networks, and respecting privacy is crucial. Visa has a Global Privacy Program to ensure proper safeguards are applied to personal information that they collect, use and share. Visa aggregate and anonymise data before sharing to remove information that would allow us to identify the activity of an individual or business within the dataset.

Card spending covers part of UK spending habits and is not exhaustive. It will not cover cash transactions or direct debit payments. In 2022, 59% of payment transactions in the UK were made using cards, 14% using cash, and 10% using direct debit according to [UK Finance's Payment markets summary \(PDF, 436KB\)](#). These figures reflect the number of transactions made and would differ if looking at the value of payments. The value spent on cards is lower as a percentage of these types of transaction because of large value payments such as salaries, mortgages, and bills usually being paid through direct debit and faster payments. Overall, UK credit and debit card holders made 2.5 billion purchase transactions in June 2023, totalling £84 billion, as explained in [UK Finance's Card spending update for June 2023 \(PDF, 226KB\)](#).

These data, although not adjusted for inflation, can be used to give an indication of spending habits. Our [Regional consumer card spending trends quality and methodology information \(QMI\)](#) about the Visa data covers the strengths and limitations of the data.

Excluded categories

Spending in some merchant categories is deemed as sensitive by Visa for legal reasons. This spending is excluded from the data published in this article. The following types of spending are excluded:

- betting and gambling
- insurance, money, and financial institutions
- religious and political organisations
- legal services
- funeral services

8 . Related links

[Travel trends: 2023](#)

Article | Released 17 May 2024

Annual estimates of completed international visits to and from the UK, and earnings and expenditure associated with these visits.

[Short-term lets through online collaborative economy platforms, UK: Quarter 4 2023](#)

Bulletin | Released 30 May 2024

The number of guest nights, nights, and stays for short-term lets offered via online collaborative economy platforms (Airbnb, Booking.com and Expedia Group).

[Regional consumer card spending, UK: 2019 to 2023](#)

Article | Released 6 November 2023

Analysis of consumer card spending trends covering what UK cardholders are spending money on and how this varies across the UK.

[Consumer card spending, flow of spending across the UK: 2019 to 2023](#)

Article | Released 25 March 2024

Analysis of consumer card spending trends covering where UK cardholders are spending money. This analysis shows consumer spending habits on a local level, by publishing a dataset showing where consumers originated from for merchants at every postal district across the UK.

9 . Cite this article

Office for National Statistics (ONS), released 17 June 2024, ONS website, article, [International consumer card spending, UK and abroad: 2019 to 2023](#)