

# q travel: with BARRIE MAHONEY

'Tweeters from the Atlantic'

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## No Smiling Please, We're British!

**I'm sure that we have all heard of the British 'Stiff Upper Lip', but until recent experiences when attempting to renew my passport I was always unclear as to what this expression really meant. Have you tried practicing one in front of the mirror recently? It really is very difficult.**

Over the years, I have received emails from expats telling me of some of their experiences and problems when renewing British passports. It all used to be relatively easy for expats. Usually, popping into the local Consulate office, handing over the usual batch of forms, a couple of photos and the fee, and the passports were either processed internally, sent to the British Embassy or to the UK for processing. It usually didn't take too long and there was often very little fuss and bother. The system worked, although it sometimes creaked a little during seasonal peaks of heavy demand.

Then there was terrorism, requirements for additional security, biometric passports...and then there was Belfast. Now, don't get me wrong, I am sure that the staff in the Belfast passport office are a splendid bunch of people, and I am sure that they don't mind a spot of good natured criticism from time to time. Frankly, it seems there are a few staff tucked away in the bowels of the Belfast office who could be best described as 'Jobsworths'. According to several of my correspondents, passport applications and renewals have been delayed, returned or refused simply because "your photo did not meet requirements".

We all know that getting a passport photo can be a life or death situation - we just have to get it right, don't we? What do I wear? Is the hair ok? What about the smile? Am I slouching on the kiosk stool? Which is my best side? After all, the passport photo will live with us for around ten years and will determine whether or not we will be treated decently as one of Her Majesty's esteemed subjects or thrown into a grubby jail in a foreign country. The passport and accompanying photo are essential and valuable, and make us real people if we wish to travel.

Last week, it was my turn. Instead of popping my passport renewal application into the local Consulate office for it to be processed and returned from Madrid, I am now told that in the interests of customer service and increased security it will now be quicker and simpler for me to apply online, and then send the application to Belfast for it to be returned by courier four weeks later, if I am fortunate. All this for the princely sum of £102 with an incredible range of valuable consular services thrown in as well. What's not to like? Bargain at half the price.

Several correspondents have told me that passport applicants should be very careful not to use the passport photo kiosks that are readily available in most of Spain, because they do not provide photos of the size specified by the UK's passport office. It was with this warning in mind that I called into a photographic shop to ask if they could provide me with a set of passport photos. The very helpful lady in the shop immediately asked if it was for a British passport. If so, I would have to be very careful as smiling is strictly forbidden. Apparently, applicants from France, Spain, Germany and Ireland are free to smile like Cheshire cats if they wish, but British applicants must look stony-faced into the camera.

It took the photographer four attempts before she was satisfied that my photo would be acceptable. Apparently, I looked far too cheerful, and so for the final attempt I used my best 'cross face', which I usually reserved for naughty children behaving badly in the playground. Eventually, the photographer was content that my photos would pass the UK test and I was sent on my way.

I have now completed my application form and it is ready to post. Whether or not the Passport Office in Belfast will let me have a new passport after reading this article remains to be seen. I also have a hideous passport photo that will only ever be shown to the poor souls checking me in at airport security. My best advice for fellow passport applicants? Just aim for the British 'Stiff Upper Lip', and you will be fine.

*If you enjoyed this article, take a look at Barrie's websites: <http://barriemahoney.com> and <http://thecanaryislander.com> or read his latest book, 'Footprints in the Sand' (ISBN: 9780995602717). Available in paperback, as well as Kindle editions.*